

Florida State University Libraries

Electronic Theses, Treatises and Dissertations

The Graduate School

2004

The Wheels of Heaven

Stephen Blodgett Armstrong



THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

THE WHEELS OF HEAVEN

by

STEPHEN BLODGETT ARMSTRONG

A dissertation submitted to the
Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Degree Awarded:
Fall Semester, 2004

The members of the Committee approve the dissertation of Stephen Blodgett Armstrong defended on October 13, 2004.

Virgil Suarez
Professor Directing Dissertation

Ernest Rehder
Outside Committee Member

Deborah Coxwell Teague
Committee Member

Douglas Fowler
Committee Member

Approved:

Bruce Boehrer, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of English

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
1. CHAPTER ONE	1
2. CHAPTER TWO	10
3. CHAPTER THREE	19
4. CHAPTER FOUR	26
5. CHAPTER FIVE	34
6. CHAPTER SIX	42
7. CHAPTER SEVEN	52
8. CHAPTER EIGHT	62
9. CHAPTER NINE	75
10. CHAPTER TEN	82
11. CHAPTER ELEVEN	93
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	104

ABSTRACT

The Wheels of Heaven, a noir fable, chronicles the adventures of a man after he loses the one thing he cares about most, his wife. Combining the determinism of a Fritz Lang movie with the revenge themes found in samurai stories, it affirms the idea that good prevails. Sooner or later, no matter the odds, good always prevails.

CHAPTER 1

The road was empty and I made good time, speeding past the churches and the low rent shopping centers that scarred the city's fringes. Once I got downtown, though, it seemed that every light was set to slow traffic down instead of speeding it up. So I turned onto the parkway and sped out to the truck route that circles Tallahassee like a noose. But there the traffic grew thick again and I landed up stuck between a Greyhound bus and a Mayflower moving truck. For the next five minutes, the only thing I had to look at was the federal prison, sprawling in the green grass to my right. Under the hard morning light, its walls were the color of gingerbread. The razor wire on the fences glittered like tinsel. Then the phone rang.

"Sweetheart?" It was Keith Ann, my wife. We'd been married less than a year. Fourteen hours later she would be dead. "I was right, honey. Those Beaumonts are a bunch of bluebloods."

"You talked to Trudy?"

Before we moved down to the coast, Keith Ann had worked in Hairport, a salon in the mall where local celebrities liked to go, including the governor's nieces and the ex-wife of Tony Santos, who used to play short stop for the Braves. Trudy Lindquist was one of these semi-big shots and she had been one of Keith Ann's regulars. Trudy wrote a society column for the *Register*, Tallahassee's daily paper.

"Yup. And you won't believe where their money comes from."

"I probably won't."

"Cremation ovens. Trudy says there are three of them, three heirs to the family fortune."

"The one I talked to said his name was Boone."

Forty-five minutes earlier, I'd been sitting in our kitchen, poking at a plate of scrambled eggs and rye toast, when Boone Beaumont called. He'd told me that his brother was missing, but he'd been stingy with the details.

"He's the oldest. The middle one's a girl."

"What's her name?"

"Antonia. The baby's name is Ernie, honey and apparently there's some notoriety attached him."

"What for?"

"Some disgrace. Some scandal. Something about gangsters. It ring a bell?"

"It sounds a little familiar, maybe. She didn't have anything else?"

"No. That's all. She had to get to a tennis match."

"Well, thanks, doll."

"You're welcome. Think you'll be home tonight?"

"I can't say."

"You promised you'd make dinner, you know." She didn't sound angry. She wasn't an angry person.

"I'm sorry, angel."

She clicked her tongue against her teeth. "You'll call as soon as you know what's happening, right?"

"If you don't call first."

"Love you," she said.

I glanced at the directions Boone Beaumont had given me. Then I drove another fifteen minutes or so and took a right off the truck route onto a road that still had some trees on it, some old live oaks that rose up from the shoulders. Their branches, stretching overhead, blocked out the sun. I rolled down the window and the manure-scented air that raced in was almost cool. I passed a pair of shacks that squatted in the weeds like enormous bugs. Outside one of them, a cat was sitting on the roof of an old tractor. In front of the other, a boy, standing on the hood of a Monte Carlo, raised his hand. I waved back. A mile or two later, the trees gave way to pasture.

Beaumont had told me to watch for this. I slowed the truck and looked for a sign with the words LEAFY ACRES painted on it. I found it a minute later, springing up to my left, perched at the mouth of a gravel driveway. The Beaumonts' house, looking fat and white and old, squatted at the driveway's other end.

I parked in the shade of a pecan tree, next to a steel gray Porsche. Almost instantly, a layer of sweat coated my face, and I wiped it away with a bandana Keith Ann had bought for me at Wal-Mart. As I walked toward the front porch, the mid-morning sun bore into my eyes, so I pulled the visor of my cap forward. A lawn jockey with a brown face stood beside one of the columns on the front porch, grinning at the crepe myrtles and bougainvilleas that were growing on the lawn. When I reached the top step of the porch's stoop, the door bolted open.

"Who are you?" A youngish woman with long brown hair and fierce eyes glared at me from behind the screen door.

"Private investigator?"

"What's your name?"

"Winthrop."

"Mr. Beaumont's busy and Miss Antonia's not here. You're going to have to wait."

"Outside?" The beard on my chin was thick with sweat. It felt nasty, like a wet scouring pad. "Can you give me a glass of water?"

She went inside and came back a moment later with a bottle of water. I drank it quickly and set it down on a rattan table near the door. With her hand on her hip, the woman squinted at something past me and the column I was leaning against. "There's Miss Antonia," she said.

From the end of the driveway came a violent, grinding noise. A black sports scar, a Corvette with a white stripe up the middle, rushed toward the house, kicking up a cloud of dust. The car swung into the space next to my truck, and a slim woman in a black and white dress stepped out. She walked along the rocks cautiously, as if they were ice. Inside the pink purse that dropped from her wrist, a phone began to ring, playing the melody from Pachibel's Canon, the same song they used to use in the AA commercials. Instead of answering it, however, the woman pointed at me.

"Who are you?"

"He's a detective," piped the nurse.

The woman softened. She climbed the steps and shook my hand. "Well, I'm glad," she said. "We were hesitant, you realize. Boone must have decided after I left. Let him in, Hilary."

In the hallway, the house's dark coolness wrapped itself around my overheated body. I stood for a second on one of the Persian rugs in the hall. Ahead of me, near the

staircase, there was a full-length mirror. I looked at my reflection in it and told myself to go on a diet. I didn't like how my belly pushed out my shirt. Antonia stepped around me. She smelled like a bundle of grocery store carnations.

"Take him to the sitting room, Hilary. I'll get Mr. Beaumont. Is he out riding?"

"Yes."

The nurse led me to a glass door in the rear of the house. As she turned the knob with one hand, she stroked her cheek with the other. The sitting room was small, with a high ceiling and bay windows that looked out at a stable and an enormous fenced pasture. The scent of furniture polish hung in the air. A series of hunting scenes clung to the wood walls. The chairs on the floor, upholstered with maroon-colored leather, dated back at least to the nineteenth century.

"That's Mr. Beaumont," Hilary said, jabbing one of the windows with her thumb. The white curtains were luminous with refracted light. I walked over. In the meadow, a middle-aged man was riding a gray horse.

"Your name's Winston S. Winthrop?" The nurse had moved to the center of the room. She clutched my card in her rough hand.

"Yeah."

"What's the S stand for?"

"Salem."

"It doesn't."

"My father was from North Carolina. And he was eccentric."

"Eccentric is good. Crazy is bad," she replied. "You like being a private investigator?"

"I don't hate it."

Near the door there was a mahogany desk. Hilary sat down behind it.

"At it long?"

"About five years."

She held up her chin with her hand and nibbled on the tip of her pinkie. "What made you want to become a private eye?"

I glanced at one of the paintings. In it, half a dozen barking beagles piled up around the end of a hollow log. "I like helping people."

"You work for divorce lawyers?"

"I have."

"That helps people?"

"I think so."

She scratched her eye with the same nail she'd been chewing. "I'd think twice about taking work from the Beaumonts."

"Why's that?"

"On account they're crazy."

"What do you mean?"

"Every one of them. They're bored and rich and crazy."

"What do you know about Ernie Beaumont?"

She rolled up her right sleeve; an ugly, raised scar stretched from her wrist to her elbow.

"He did that?"

She nodded her head. Through the window I could see Antonia open a gate that led into the pasture. She was wearing a black tracksuit now, with white stripes on the pants and sleeves.

"What about Ms. Beaumont?"

"She's quiet, but still nuts. You know what her nickname is?"

"What?"

"Skunky. She gave that name to herself. Isn't that strange?"

As the gray horse carried Boone Beaumont over to his sister, she turned and pointed to the house.

"It sure is."

Hilary grew silent. She leaned forward, pressing her elbows to the table and her hands to her mouth. She looked a bit like a dog cleaning its paws. I walked around the room and stopped at a bookcase, where there were several leather-bound books. I spotted an aging copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*. After grabbing it, I sat down and flipped through the pages. A couple of minutes later, we both heard the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Hilary jumped up from her seat. The nylon fabric of her tracksuit rustled as Antonia walked into the room. Hilary darted out of the room.

"I'm all nerves today," Antonia said. She walked around the mahogany desk and opened a small door in the wall. "My brother will be in a moment." She reached into the cabinet and pulled out a bottle of Tangeray. The green glass augmented the ivory paleness of her aristocratic hands.

"We're very concerned about our brother, as you can imagine." She dropped an ice cube into a highball glass and drizzled some gin over it.

"I can. Mr. Beaumont said that Ernie left yesterday and that he couldn't think of a good reason why. Can you?"

"I have a hunch."

"Yes?"

"He suffers from the family ailment." She smiled like Ava Gardner. Ice clinked as she swirled her drink.

"What's that?"

"Self-pity, and an acute strain of it, too."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that boy gets a hate going for his situation sometimes and when it hits, it hits him upside the head, and he bolts. He's been doing it since he was a boy: trying to get out one way or the other. When he was in high school, he tried to shoot himself with one of our daddy's guns. That boy's soul is very, very sick." She noticed the book on my lap. "Are you a churchgoing man, Mr. Winthrop?"

"When I need to be."

She wasn't happy with this answer. "You love Jesus, don't you?"

"Sure."

"I love Jesus, Mr. Winthrop, because I need Him, and I need Him every moment of every day. "

"I wouldn't say I've got it that bad, Ms. Beaumont."

We heard footsteps just before the door swung open and Boone Beaumont marched into the room, smelling like sweat and wet earth. In his jodhpurs and riding

boots, he resembled a Prussian field officer. His entrance put a chill on Antonia's fervor; she leaned back with a soft smile and glanced at the room's tin ceiling. He reached for my hand and shook it stiffly. After he sat down, he stared at his sister and her glass of gin.

"A bit early," he said.

"I'm nervous." She looked away at the window and a shadow fell over the left side of her face.

Boone Beaumont turned his attention to me. "We appreciate your coming here on a Saturday like this, Winthrop. Jim Symons recommended you."

"I'll have to thank him."

Symons was a personal injury attorney who occasionally used me to run skip traces and serve papers on the people his clients were suing. On the weekends, he lived at the Northside country club, where he had friends like the Beaumonts.

Boone stretched his legs and folded his hands over his lap. "Our brother Ernest has been missing since yesterday," he said, "and we need you to find him before he gets into trouble. Get Mr. Winthrop the picture, Skunky."

Antonia stood up, walked across the room to the desk and brought me a photograph of their missing brother. He looked young and old simultaneously. His hair was still black, but the skin around his eyes was creased with deep wrinkles, as if he'd spent his whole life staring at ugly situations. His lips were puffy, but he had a steel-trap jaw, and it didn't look like he had the ability to smile. His unhappiness was so profound, in fact, that it seemed to manifest itself just as much in his nostrils as his mouth and his eyes. I'd seen the face before, it wasn't one you'd forget, but I couldn't remember where or when.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

Beaumont stood up and walked over to the window. "Our brother has been living with us, under supervision, for the last six months. But yesterday morning, around nine or so, he received a phone call from someone, we're not sure who, and less than an hour later, he was gone."

"Who answered the phone?"

"His nurse, Hilary. Unfortunately, she didn't ask for the caller's name, and Ernie, when I asked him who'd called, said it was Arnette."

"Who's Arnette?"

"His wife, his ex-wife. But it wasn't her," Antonia said. "I asked her this morning in church."

Beaumont tapped the window softly with his fingers. I opened the notebook I like to carry and lifted the Cross pen Keith Ann gave me for my birthday from the front pocket of my shirt.

"Tell me what happened after the phone call."

"He was in a good mood, for the first time really, since his return to Leafy Acres. When he came down from his room, he sat with me at the kitchen table and we had a nice talk."

"What did you and your brother talk about, Mr. Beaumont?"

"For the last several weeks, I'd been trying to persuade Ernie to help me in the stable, to groom the horses. I thought the work might help him with his nerves. Anyway, just as we started our breakfast, he told me that he wanted to spend the day in the stable. Of course I said 'yes.'" He paused. "I was so pleased. We went out to the stable. I gave

him a brush. He's never cared for horses, but he knows how to handle them. We all do. And so I left him there. And that was the last I saw of him."

"Where'd you go?"

"Out to the pasture."

"To ride?"

"Yes."

Antonia sneezed and blew her nose into a tissue she pulled from her training pants.

"Where was the nurse?"

"Cleaning his room."

"And you, Ms. Beaumont?"

"Church."

"When did you all realize he'd run away?"

"I noticed it first," Antonia said. "When I came back from the service, I saw that my car was gone."

"Not the one you drove today."

"I have two cars."

"What are the make and model of the car he took?"

"The same as the one outside, a '78 Stingray. I have matching cars."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I have two matching cars, two 1978 Stingray Corvettes. The one in the driveway is black with a white stripe. The one he took is white with a black stripe."

"What's the license plate number?"

"It's a vanity tag. SKUNKY 2."

"Registered in Florida?"

"Yes."

Boone stepped forward. "He may ditch it, though. The starter is capricious and it doesn't always work when you want it to."

"You're not interested in reporting the car's theft to the police, are you?"

"We're trying to keep everything hushed, Winthrop. We'd rather the police were left out of this."

Antonia cleared her throat in a very ladylike manner. "Let me ask you something, Mr. Winthrop. Do you think that desperate men should ever be left alone?"

"I'm sure most of them are."

Boone turned from the window. "My sister, in her subtle way, is blaming me for this situation, Winthrop. She feels that Ernie should have been in a hospital, rather than here at Leafy Acres."

"Why?"

"Our brother suffers from alcoholism," she said.

"The sort that requires hospitalization?"

"Probably," she answered.

"But you didn't-- "

"Institutionalizing our brother would have brought unwanted attention to the family," Boone said, "and I did not want to give the newspapers' another scandal to feast on."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Are you familiar at all with our brother, Mr. Winthrop?"

"Not well."

"He was once a well-regarded journalist. About three years ago, he received some acclaim, national acclaim, for a series of articles he wrote about greyhound racing in Florida and the Russian mafia's interest in the sport."

"He's always liked dogs," Antonia said.

"Our brother's work was so compelling, in fact, that he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Unfortunately, his stories contained more fiction than fact, it seems, and after the Pulitzer judges discovered and disclosed his indiscretions, he became the subject of public scrutiny and ridicule."

"Yes, I remember now." I did.

Antonia walked to the liquor cabinet for a fresh ice cube and another splash of gin.

"For Ernie, the experience was devastating, professionally, of course, and emotionally. For us, it was also extremely painful."

"Does it having anything to do with why he was living with you here?"

"Not completely. It's more complicated than that." He cleared his throat and rubbed the knuckles of his right hand with the palm of his left. The corners of mouth arched upwards, but he wasn't smiling.

"Mr. Winthrop can't be expected to help us, Boone, unless we tell him what he needs to know."

Beaumont glanced at his sister icily. "Right after the scandal, Ernie started drinking heavily. He's always been a drinker, but the catastrophe propelled him to a new level of dissipation."

Antonia sniffed at her drink with her perky nose. "It ruined his marriage, too," she said.

"Yes. He walked out on Arnette. Then he stopped talking to us. Then he completely disappeared. We tried to find him, of course, to help him, if it were necessary. But we couldn't find him."

"You didn't know where he was living?"

"No. Then, I guess it was a year later, two years ago, I guess, he called us. He seemed to be happy and confident again. He'd stopped drinking and he was working again."

"As a reporter?"

"Yes."

"Freelancing, of course, some new project."

"Did he tell you what?"

"The Russian mafia. That obsesses him."

"Anything more specific?"

"Not really. I didn't care enough to ask him for details. Anyway, during this period, we'd get calls from him now and then. He was happy and sober. He was happy because he was sober. But then, then there was the accident."

"What accident?"

"The details aren't important."

"He killed a black man," Antonia muttered.

Beaumont frowned at his sister. "It wouldn't have been so calamitous, perhaps," he said slowly, "if Ernie hadn't been drunk when it happened. But this was not the case."

"What happened?"

"Six months ago," he said slowly, "just outside Orlando, Ernie struck and killed a vagrant on the street. That's the story." He looked down at his hands and picked at his thumbnail.

"Do you think that's where he was living? Central Florida?"

"Perhaps. But he always refused to tell us. The accident happened in a town called Port St. John, by the way, in Brevard County. "

I wrote this down in my notebook. Then I said, "It seems that after the other trouble, this accident would have made good copy for the press. I'm surprised I never heard about it."

"No one did," Antonia said.

Boone's face had turned a sharp pink. "You realize that we are sharing this information with you in complete confidence, Mr. Winthrop, and that it must remain a secret."

"Of course."

"An agreement was arranged with the police after the accident."

"You must have a good lawyer."

"The best."

"And you didn't learn where he'd been living? "

Boone gritted his teeth. "No. We got it out of him that he'd purchased a house with his inheritance, but he's never opened up to us about the house's location. Before consulting you, as a matter of fact, we hired another investigator to find it. But he searched through property records in every county in the state and discovered nothing."

"Maybe there's nothing to discover. What about Ernie's wife? What does she know? Anything?"

"I don't think so. Antonia?"

"I asked her once or twice. She says she doesn't really know much about it."

"You said that he and she are no longer married, right?"

Antonia looked up from her drink. "Right, but they continue to speak to one another."

"There's a possibility Ernie might try to contact Arnette, in other words. Is her last name still Beaumont?"

"Yes."

After I asked her, Antonia scribbled an address and phone number on to a piece of paper. I recognized the street Arnette Beaumont lived on; it was off the truck route. Boone walked over to the cabinet behind the desk and fished out a bottle of bourbon. He cracked the cap and dumped the brown liquor into a glass and drained it with one gulp.

"You have to find him, Mr. Winthrop," he said adamantly.

"When I do, what steps would you like me to take?"

"I'm glad you asked that. If it's possible, we'd like our lawyer to be present when you retrieve him. Ernie, after all, may be reluctant about coming home. Our lawyer--his name is Nason Aldrich--and Ernie are actually quite close, and his presence may smooth the process a little."

"Perhaps I should speak to Mr. Aldrich."

"You should, but you can't, not right now. He's sailing in the Keys today and his cell phone appears to be 'off the grid.' I talked to his assistant this morning, however, and she said that he will be back in Miami late this afternoon."

"Miami? Does Mr. Aldrich know what's happened?"

"Yes. He and I talked last night. We decided together that if Ernie hadn't returned by this morning we would hire outside help."

"Finding your brother, if he can be found, may take a couple of days, you realize."

"Certainly. And that will give me plenty of time to touch base with Aldrich."

Beaumont and I talked about my daily rate and my retainer fee for a moment.

Then he asked me, "Do you need anything up front for expenses?"

"Five hundred works."

"Why so much?"

"For gas-and information."

He shrugged and pointed to one of the pictures on the wall and Antonia walked over to it. The painting swung open on hinges, revealing a safe. Her fingers pounced on the dial, and a moment later, she handed me a thick stack of twenties.

Boone stood up. "Contact us whenever you feel the need, Winthrop." He walked across the room to the glass door and opened it. He shook my hand. Antonia waved from her seat.

Hilary joined me In the front hallway.

"Let me ask you a couple of questions, nurse," I said. "What stopped Ernie Beaumont from leaving this house at night?"

"His bed is fitted with restraints."

"How nice. Now tell me this. The woman who called yesterday, the one who asked from Ernie, was there anything that she said that-"

"She's Slavic."

"How do you know?"

"I recognized her accent. It sounded like my grandmother's."

"What did your grandmother's accent sound like."

"My grandmother was a Jew--"

"This woman had a Jewish accent? What does that mean?"

"No. My grandmother was a Jew in Romania. A refugee-- the Nazis -- "

"What did this woman say to you when she called?"

"She asked for Ernie and that was it. Now listen, Mr. Winthrop, I know my advice hasn't been sought. But if you're smart, you'll get in that truck of yours and head back home and forget about this job. The Beaumonts are crazy and irresponsible and nothing but trouble."

She opened the front door and the late morning heat swung into the foyer like a fist.

"Thanks," I said.

CHAPTER 2

Arnette Beaumont lived in a dumpy subdivision overrun with ranch houses and chain-link fences. A sagging oak tree dominated her front yard and the clumps of Spanish moss that dropped from its branches resembled raccoon tails. Parked beneath the carport, there was a banana-colored Cadillac with tinted windows and a pair of bumper stickers on the fender. One read: I'M WITH THE BAND. The other was a pitch for the Church of Christ of North Tallahassee. I walked up to the front door. From inside came the sound of a melancholy piano. After I pressed the bell, the music didn't stop, but the door opened, and a small, washed out face appeared.

"Arnette Beaumont?"

"Yes," she said quickly.

"My name is Winthrop. I've been hired to find your husband."

She stepped back. "So Boone made up his mind."

"Apparently so."

The whistle of a teakettle sounded through the house. "That's my water." She scurried away from the hallway and soon the shrill noise ceased. "You can come in here," she called.

I followed her voice and walked through the living room. The source of the music turned out to be a CD player that was connected to a pair of old speakers. Near the fireplace, pressed into the farthest corner of the narrow room, there was a Hammond organ. Above it, a portrait of Jesus gazed sweetly at the ceiling. A sleeping cat on the floor used a pile of sheet music for a pillow.

"Would you like some coffee?"

I told her that I didn't as I entered the kitchen. She was tilting a pan of water over a white mug. A jar of Sanka sat on the counter. Her sandals scuffed the linoleum as she walked to the table. She sat down and invited me over. "Antonia was nagging me this morning, asking me if I'd heard from Ernie," she said.

"Have you?"

"No. But I might. He calls me everyday."

"But not yesterday."

"No." She sipped the coffee. "Does the music bother you?"

"No."

"I prefer country and western myself. But on the weekends, I play organ for a church and it helps me focus."

"Antonia's church?"

"Yes."

"The Beaumonts explained to me that Ernie has been working on a project, a writing project of some sort. I'm wondering if he left the house yesterday in order to pursue a lead related to it. Do you know anything about what he was working on?"

"No really," she sighed. "I asked him about it once and his answers were vague." She closed her eyes. "He said that he was writing about-that it had something to do with Russians and sex. That's what he said."

"Nothing else?"

"No."

"Do you think that he'll call you today?"

"He could."

"Antonia indicated that Ernie may be suicidal? Is he?"

"Oh no. He's too ambitious for that. He's just a bad drunk."

"Why would she say that then?"

"To appeal to your conscience, maybe, to get you to work harder. Antonia is a very self-centered woman. She and Boone are both obsessed, you know, with preserving the Old South fantasyland they share together. If Ernie is loose, running around like a tornado and breaking things, the family's honor is at stake."

"Her concern seemed genuine, I thought."

"She's a very convincing gal."

"What sort of things happen when Ernie drinks?"

"His mouth gets really big. Once he starts chatting, he can't stop. He can't hold anything in. That's how the Pulitzer people discovered he'd been lying about the greyhounds. You've heard about that, right? He made his confession to someone, some writer, he met in a bar. What scares Antonia, in other words, is his tendency to blither when he's drunk."

"What sort of thing is she afraid he'd say?"

"Ask him when you find him."

"Are you and Ms. Beaumont friendly?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"What?" She paused. "You think I'm too harsh? Everybody hates their friends a little, right?"

My only friend was Keith Ann and I didn't hate her at all.

"Boone told me that Ernie owns a house."

Above the sink there was a window. Through it I could see a squirrel sitting on one of the posts that propped up the fence in the backyard. The animal's belly was the same color as the half-and-half Arnette Beaumont was adding to her coffee.

"He does."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know. He bought it after the divorce."

She stared past me at the clock on the kitchen wall. Beneath it, there was an inspirational calendar with a photograph of a monkey in a tree. Bright yellow letters spelled out HANG IN THERE under the animal's dangling feet.

"If you wait long enough," she said, "he might call. He tends to call whenever he's upset."

"You said that he calls you everyday."

"Well, everyday he's upset."

"But he's not suicidal."

"No."

I watched her stir her coffee. Years of stress and boredom had made her almost attractive face expressionless. When the kitchen phone rang about five minutes later, she stood up slowly and walked over to the pantry and lifted the receiver from the cradle.

"Hello?" Her eyes swiveled back and forth. "Hello, Ernie."

Looking at me, she mouthed the words "living room" and pointed across the kitchen. The cat that had been sleeping on the floor woke up and scurried behind a chair.

I spotted a phone near Jesus and the organ. Ernie Beaumont's voice was ragged and drunk.

"Where are you?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Why did you run away?"

"I can't really talk about it."

"Are you okay?"

"Is someone on the phone? Is someone on the phone?"

"No."

He made a tearing sound with his throat. "I miss you."

Then he hung up. Then Arnette hung up. Then I hung up and dialed star-69. I jotted down the number the computerized voice gave me. When I returned to the kitchen, Arnette had returned to the table.

"He's not a happy drunk," she sighed. "I hope that you find him soon. He used to be something else, and I care about him still, you know?"

I left her my card. She stayed in the kitchen. The little cat ran through my feet as I let myself out.

From the truck, I tried the number I'd traced, but no one answered. Then I called Boone and told him about my adventure with Arnette and the telephone. Because I was almost out of cigarettes, I drove over to a shopping center off the truck route. I parked between a beige panel truck and a lipstick red convertible. A teenaged girl in a green Publix vest was pushing a rattling caravan of shopping buggies over the pavement. The sky above the stores was as white as a pile of swan feathers. My cell phone rang as I unbuckled my seatbelt.

It was Keith Ann again. "You're not driving, are you, Winn?" she said.

"No."

"It's not safe to talk and drive."

"I know."

"The mail came, honey. Did you know that you forgot to renew the policy on the truck?"

"I still have a couple days grace, don't I?"

"No," she said. "I'm looking at the bill. It says here that if you don't pay by tomorrow, the policy is cancelled."

"Tomorrow's Sunday."

"You better stop and do it right now, honey."

"My checkbook's at home."

"Then stop at an ATM, Winston. Don't mess around with this."

I bought a pack of Marlboros from Walgreens with my debit card and asked for fifty dollars change, figuring this would be enough, with the money I had in my wallet, to cover the premium. Then I drove along the truck route until I spotted one of our insurance company's branch offices. It was five minutes to noon. The agent, a big woman with pretty hair and a lot of gold, smiled at me as I walked in.

"We're just about to close, sir!"

I told her what I needed and gave her my account number and she searched through her computer until she pulled up my name. Her chair squeaked as she leaned

back and the soft, musty scent of female sweat swirled up from her chest. Then she told me that I needed to pay the company twice the amount I'd expected.

"What?" I winced.

"Because you're renewing your policy, Mr. Winthrop, and we like our customers to pay for the first and the last month's premiums."

The light shining through the window struck the floor and I could feel its heat seeping through my shoes. I didn't have enough of my own money to cover the bill and I felt myself blush with anger. "That's news to me," I said. "I guess I don't remember having to do that before."

"Perhaps you don't remember," she said contentedly, "but it's always been the way that we do it."

"But what happens if I die before the last month?"

Her smile lost a little of its zest. "Excuse me?"

"What would happen to the last payment if I got into an accident and the truck was destroyed and I was too? What would happen to that last payment?"

"It depends," she said. Her teeth flickered between her bright red lips. "Do you carry life insurance?"

"No."

"It might be a good time to start planning for this, Mr. Winthrop."

"I've never even thought about it before."

She glanced at the screen. "You're thirty-six years old, Mr. Winthrop. Now, more than ever, it's important for you to think about protection for your spouse and children."

"My spouse and I don't have children."

"Other family members?"

"No."

She continued undaunted. "I'd be happy to schedule a consultation for some time next week, if you'd like."

"I'm afraid it's a luxury I can't afford."

"Life insurance is more than a luxury, sir," she said gravely. She drew a circle in the air above her desk with a pudgy finger. "It's an expression of love."

I shook my head and opened my wallet. Then I drew a pair of twenties out of the Beaumont kitty and added it to the other cash that I had. "You never answered my question," I said. "What happens to that payment if I die?"

"Your spouse can request a refund." Her expression was grim. "But, in the event that she died, too, then the state of Florida would step in and take over and then-who knows?"

I lowered the cash onto her desk. "I'd like a receipt, please."

As she handed it to me, her smile returned. "Perhaps next time you visit we can talk a bit more about this."

"There won't be a next time," I said.

I left the shopping center and headed back into the city, to the public library downtown. At the reference desk, I handed a librarian the phone number I'd gotten at Arnette Beaumont's house, and I asked him to find the address that matched it in the library's reverse directory. He opened the thick book and flipped the pages with his fingertips. Then he pulled a pen from behind his ear and scrawled something onto a piece of scrap paper.

"That number belongs to a payphone," he said.

"Where?"

Instead of answering, he wobbled his head until the bones in his neck made a cracking noise. "Aggh," he sighed. Then, with a genteel, Southern sort of slowness, he reached over the top of the counter and handed me the scrap of paper. The phone Ernie Beaumont had used was located at 172 Bennet Road in Arancia, Florida.

"Thanks a lot," I said.

The librarian winked at me as he unwrapped a peppermint candy, which he pushed into his mouth.

"Have a nice day," he said.

Arancia was a small town northwest of Orlando, about thirty miles from the ocean. To get there, I headed east out of Tallahassee on 10 and then south on 75. The monotony of the landscape and the unbelievable proliferation of billboards and strip malls depressed me, and when Keith Ann called, I thanked God for cell phones.

"Where are you now?" she said.

"Near Gainesville. What about you?"

"Home." She sounded a bit breathless.

"What are you doing?"

"I've been pruning the palm tree."

"Oh no," I said. To trim a palm like the one we had, you had to cut away the spikes that grew out of the trunk with a chainsaw.

"Think you'll be home tonight?" she asked me.

"I'll be lucky if I'm back before Arbor Day."

I told her what had happened with the insurance woman and she soothed me with reassuring platitudes and reminded me that she loved me. After we said goodbye, I continued driving, heading east through farmland instead of taking the Florida Turnpike, to avoid the Disney World drivers. The sun seemed to get hotter the longer I drove, and beneath it, the cattle fields looked increasingly empty and hostile.

When I reached Arancia two hours later, the last bit of affection I had for rural America withered. Run down motels and restaurants made of plastic and cinderblock clustered around the main street's intersections like cataracts. An enormous woman with a bulging neck and a pile of bright blonde hair walked along the sidewalk, gnawing on a hot dog. A pair of monkey-faced children followed her, looking up at the sky, as if it were something new and unusual. The address I was searching for, a gas station called Chuck's Place, shared a dilapidated parking lot with a lawn mower repair shop and a BBQ pit. Bags of pecans hung from hooks around the pumps and the station's walls were the color of lemons. A large alligator, coated with a plastic glaze, glowered at me from a glass and wood box that was located next to the outside bathrooms.

I parked and got out. Instantly, sweat dropped from my forehead into my eyes and I wiped them with my red handkerchief. Then I walked inside, headed to the soda cooler in the back of the store and grabbed a Dr. Pepper. A fat man was standing behind the checkout counter up front, with sunlight streaming around his head. As I set the bottle down he grunted. He had yellow fingers and an enormous blonde beard.

"That all?"

I nodded and opened my wallet. "About three or four hours ago-a man was in here."

"Yeah?"

"He used the payphone."

"So what?"

"I need to find him."

"He isn't here."

"But you remember him?"

"Over the last three hours, a lot of people have used that phone."

I showed him the snapshot of Ernie Beaumont. "This is the man I'm looking for." He leaned forward. His breath smelled like bacon and light swirled through his beard.

"Maybe," he said.

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe twenty bucks will help me remember."

I pulled a twenty from my wallet and dropped it on the counter, but before he could grab it, I set the Dr. Pepper on top. The payphone in the back of the store started to ring. "Maybe so," I said.

The clerk's lips curled, making a shape that vaguely resembled a smile. "He was here, all right. He rolled in around lunchtime, I guess. Stormed through the door, asking me if I sell liquor. But we don't sell the hard stuff and I sent him over to the cooler there and told him to grab a beer. Then he asked me where the payphone was and I told him and he walked over to it. He dropped a couple of quarters into the slot and then he cracked the beer open and drank it down while he was waiting for the call to connect."

"Wow."

"I woulda walked over and escorted him out the goddamn door, but then the old man walked in."

"So what?"

"So he looked like he wanted to spend some money and he and the drunk were riding together." The clerk cracked his knuckles and eyeballed the twenty.

"Describe him."

"He was a swish."

"What do you mean?"

"He had his hair pulled back in a ponytail and a diamond earring right here. Fancy sports coat, too, and alligator shoes. He also had a bad gimp."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"He asked me if I sold liquor."

"Was he drunk, too?"

"No."

"Then what happened?"

"He asked me if I'd seen his friend. I pointed to the phone there and he walked over to him and the drunk hung up a second or two later. Then they started for the door."

"Did they say anything else?"

"They wanted to know where they could find a liquor store."

"What did you tell them?"

"I told them to try the next town down off 95. There's a shopping center in Westcott, where they got a place called Liquor Locker."

"What kind of car were they driving?"

"A sports car, a muscle car, a Corvette maybe."

"White with a black stripe?"

"Yup."

I lifted the bottle and he snapped at the twenty. I let him take it.

"Anything else?"

He folded the bill and pushed it into his shirt pocket. "That old guy talked funny."

"What do you mean?"

"He had an accent, a heavy one."

"Describe it for me."

"It wasn't something you hear a lot. Maybe Russian."

"Russian?"

"Did I say French?" After he ran his hand scanner across the Dr. Pepper's label, I drained the soda in two sips and dropped the empty on the counter. I didn't appreciate his manners.

"Pay up," he said.

"Take it out of your shirt."

He snarled and that was it. The cowbell above the entrance door clanged and two migrant workers walked in, wearing jeans, white t-shirts and boots. I headed outside, wincing at the bright sun. An instant headache rolled through my brain like a line drive.

The road away from Arancia was pleasant and dull and smooth and it took me a half-hour to get to 95. Once I was on it, I stayed in the right lane, keeping an eye on the signs that popped up from the shoulder. It was close to five o'clock when my cell phone rang again.

"Where are you?" Keith Ann said.

"An hour from Disney World. What about you?"

"I'm in the back yard. I had an idea and I want to know what you think."

"Okay."

A black Lexus cut in front of me. I had to swing into the fast lane in order to avoid a collision and the phone flew from my hand into the space between the dashboard and the windshield. My attitude soured instantly and I decided to send a message to the guy in the Lexus. After closing in behind him, I pressed the truck's horn. I kept my hand on it for at least five seconds. Then I reached for the Nokia.

"Keith Ann?"

"What happened, Winston?"

"Nothing, sweet. Sorry. Miss me?"

The guy in the Lexus rolled down his window and shoved his arm out and flicked his middle finger at me. I returned the gesture, steering with my knee for a second, as Keith Ann continued to talk.

"I want to move the grill," she said.

"Do you?" We had a propane grill that we kept on the back patio. "Where to?" The speed of the Lexus dropped abruptly. I stayed behind it. The phone was squeezed between my shoulder and my ear now, and I held the steering wheel with both hands.

"I want to move it out to the boathouse."

Keith Ann and I lived on the Ochlockonee Bay, off the Gulf of Mexico. Our house had come with a little pier and we'd bought a boat, an old but still reliable Boston Whaler, to go with it. This was one reason we were broke. Keith Ann had worried about hurricanes and wanted the boat to have more protection, so I'd hired some contractors to extend the dock, and I'd built a boat house at the end, with walls, a lift and a pitched roof. This was another reason why we were broke. It didn't seem like a smart place for a propane grill and I told her.

"But it'll be pretty to cook out there, Winston. We can look at the water and the bridge as we make our dinner."

"We can do that on the patio, too. Can't we?"

"It's something new."

"You do want you want, baby."

The guy in the Lexus moved into the left lane, dropped his speed and I passed him. My interest in the chase was over. But his wasn't, and he got up behind me. I could see his face in the rearview mirror.

"What are you doing down there, Winn?"

"I'm looking for a liquor store."

"You're naughty. I thought you were working."

Right then, a strip mall appeared, maybe five hundred yards away. An exit sign with the name Westcott on it flashed from the shoulder. I headed for the ramp.

"Gotta go, Keith Ann."

"Call me tonight."

The Lexus followed me off the highway and about halfway down the ramp, it swung in front of the truck and hit its breaks. I stopped in time and didn't rear end it, but then the driver hopped out and rushed toward me with a pipe in his hand. I twisted my steering wheel hard to the right and pressed the accelerator, but he got the windshield anyway, knocking a large spiderweb crack into it. My side window was open and he pushed his arm through and grabbed at my shirt. As fast as I could, I reversed the truck and the door's frame smashed his shoulder, knocking him to the ground. I was still holding the phone and it started to ring again. Boone Beaumont's number flashed on the screen.

I answered it. "Let me call you back."

"Okay," Boone said.

The man who'd attacked me was on the pavement. He'd dropped his pipe and I kicked it to the shoulder. He looked rich, new rich, the type that flourishes in Florida when you get below Jacksonville. His Tommy Hilfiger jeans were ripped open and bloody, and his knees showed through. He stared up at me with frightened eyes. Two hundred yards from us, the cars on the highway shot by indifferently.

"Take it easy," he said. The sun glinted off the gold bracelet that clung to his tanned wrist.

"We have two options here," I said. The calmness in my voice surprised me.

"Either you take three hundred dollars out of your wallet for my window, or I'll kick three hundred dollars out of your stomach."

"I don't have it."

"That's not good."

The idea of working him over with my boots made me feel a little sick. I'm no Mike Hammer. Nevertheless, I drew my foot back and he pulled himself into the fetal position.

"I have it! I have it!" He sounded like a yipping poodle.

"Three hundred dollars," I said.

He reached into his pants and pulled out a thick billfold with a gold clip. Then he separated several bills and pushed the cash into my hand.

"You have to understand something," I said pleasantly. "No one messes with me. That's my rule."

"It's mine, too."

"Maybe so. But I'm stronger than you."

I let him stand up and stagger back to the Lexus. Then I watched him drive to the end of the ramp and cross the road. He dissolved into the highway's southbound traffic less than a minute later.

I got back into my truck. The windshield was in terrible shape. I could see around the cracks, but it looked as if a hard enough wind or a blast of rain could knock the glass in. I'd have to get it replaced before I headed back to Tallahassee.

CHAPTER 3

I dialed Boone Beaumont's number.

"Where are you?" he said brusquely.

I told him and he was pleased.

"You're not far from Ernie at all."

"What do you mean?"

I started for the strip mall. A monumental clock rose from the front wall of a Publix. It was already six-fifteen.

Boone said, "He's in Merritt Island. You know where that is?"

I crossed the road into the parking lot and found a space in front of the Liquor Locker. Then I unfolded the state of Florida driving map I had and scanned my eyes over it. "It's just south of Cape Canaveral. Maybe thirty or forty miles from where I am. How did you find him?"

"He called me. He's drunk, Winthrop, but he wants to come home."

"Good. Did he give you the address?"

"Yes. The house is on 5726 Bonita Drive."

"I can be Merritt Island in less than hour. You know, he may be with someone. There could be trouble."

"He didn't mention anyone to me when he called. I'll tell you what. Go over to the house, but hold off before you do anything. I want Nason Aldrich to be there anyway."

"Well," I said, "if that's what you want, though it might be better just to take him now, before he can disappear again."

"No. It's best to handle my brother gently, Winthrop. Should he try to leave, stop him. But I'd rather have Aldrich with you. He'll be more useful than you, if there's a need for negotiation."

"Okay," I said.

Boone must have picked up on my misgivings. "No need to worry, Winthrop. Just go over to that address and wait."

"Will you have Aldrich call me, at least, before he arrives?"

"Of course." He paused. "He should be leaving Miami shortly."

"You don't know when?"

"No, but I've talked to his assistant and she said that he and his crew are expected soon."

I stopped myself from calling Boone Beaumont and his lawyer a pair of flakes. My job had suddenly become a lot easier and I wanted to keep it.

"What does Mr. Aldrich look like, Mr. Boone?"

"Average," he answered. "Middle-aged. A bit fat. Moustache."

We ended the call a moment later. Because my legs ached, I needed to stretch them, so I got out of the truck and walked toward a Krispy Kreme at the shopping center's other end. The still air, heavy with fumes that drifted in from the highway, was hot and hard to breathe. I wiped my face and neck with my bandana. A Welles Fargo truck pattered across the lot.

Inside the donut shop, the cool air smelled like flour and sugar and grease.

"Gimme a cup of coffee," I said to the chemical blonde behind the counter. When I'm upset, I tend to forget my manners. Good luck is not something I'm used to and the call

from Ernie to his brother was certainly an example of it, so I felt squirrely. The few minutes I had in there were pleasant enough to calm my nerves a little. When I stood up, the counter girl winked at me. Her bright red fingernails were long enough to be fake. As she fiddled with the locket around her pink throat, a mixture of lust and happiness surged through me, like floodwater in a storm drain. I dropped a dollar bill into her tip jar.

"What's that for?"

"For being you," I said.

By the time I reached the truck, however, my nerves were twitching again. I reached over to the glove box and fished out my S&W Special. I opened it and turned the cylinder, making sure there was a bullet in each chamber. There was.

Ten minutes later, I was back on 95, heading south. To my right, the sun was slowly dropping, falling into the pine trees, turning the western edge of the sky orange. I stayed in the slow lane, watching the green signs. The air that poured through the window carried traces of the ocean in it. I called Keith Ann.

"Hello, little one."

"Where are you now, Winn?"

"Five miles from where I was when last we spoke, my dearest. Close to Melbourne." Keith Ann's first husband had grown up in Melbourne. "I'm heading over to Ernie Beaumont's house."

"What? How did you find it?"

"Must I remind you constantly, love, of my boundless genius?"

"You must," she said. "Sometimes I forget."

After I told her what Boone had told me, she said, "That sounds like tuna."

"What do you mean?"

"Very fishy."

"I don't like it either. But these Beaumonts are a bunch of goofs, Keith Ann. It wouldn't surprise me if it's on the level anyway."

"Promise me you'll leave if things get weird."

"Okay. Did you move the grill?"

"Yep. It looks very pretty. Now let me go, Winston. I want to get started on the lawn before it gets dark."

"Don't forget to wear your shoes."

"Aren't you cute?" she said, laughing. "Say goodbye, bright boy."

"Goodbye bright boy."

When I saw the exit for Merritt Island, I turned off 95 onto an eastbound expressway that shot over trees and telephone poles and the Intracoastal Waterway. But because I was tired and moving fast, I missed the Merritt Island ramp, and a bridge lifted me above the Banana river and dropped me into Cape Canaveral. Near the port, the road swung southward and the traffic seized like ice. I lit a cigarette and watched the people on the street. Some sunburned vacationers with beach bags herded their children along the sidewalk. A pair of stunning girls, sitting at a bus stop, spilled out of their bikinis like water out of a bowl. An old man on a three-wheeled bicycle zoomed across the intersection's ped x-ing walk. Half a mile ahead, I could see the glass and granite sides of condominium buildings. To my left, above the ocean, a small plane yanked an ad banner that said SILVER LADY FULL ACTION CASINO CRUISES through the darkening sky.

I pulled over at a gas station in Cocoa Beach, a block south of the Ron Jon surf shop. A boy with a scooter propped against his leg was drinking an orange soda near the front door. Inside, a guy with tattoos around his neck leaned behind the counter, destroying a toothpick with his gold teeth. The place smelled like sweaty feet and suntan lotion.

"You sell maps?"

"Don't know."

There was a carousel rack near the bathrooms. I pulled a laminated map of Brevard County from it. The man at the counter sold it to me for four bucks.

"Thanks," I said.

He didn't answer.

After looking at the map, I re-crossed the river and took the first exit after the bridge. Within a couple of minutes, I was on a narrow parkway, headed north for Bonita Drive. The sky's light was almost gone. Like hundreds of other homes in that area, Ernie Beaumont's was located on a short, dead end street that poked into the water like a finger. He'd set himself up near the tip in a one-story unit with walls that were covered in light green stucco. A Sable palm soared up from the center of the front lawn. A soft light sifted through the front door, a glass plane with the image of a long-legged bird scraped into it. Antonia's black and white car rested on the driveway.

I parked about sixty feet away in front of a neighbor's house. My head ached, so I leaned seat back and massaged my forehead with my fingers. Around the cracks in the windshield, I could see the moon dangling above the Banana river like a toy. A breeze rattled through the silhouetted canopies of Royal palms, making a noise that reminded me of castanets. The houses, the street and the night itself were all so reassuringly middle-class and safe that I fell asleep. Almost two hours had passed when the phone woke me up.

"I hope you're keeping track of your minutes," I said.

"Weekend's are free," Keith Ann said. "Or are you saying I call too much?"

"No. No."

"What's up?"

"I'm here."

"Merritt Island?"

"Yeah."

"I'm making the dinner you promised to make me," she said. "Are you hungry?"

"Sort of."

"You're not missing anything, not really. Guess what I'm having?"

"Fresh possum in dirt sauce."

"Close." Her voice became serious. "Any news?"

"The house is quiet. Something feels a little off, though."

"Then get out of there."

"I can't do that."

"Then just go in and get the guy. If Boone Beaumont complains, remind him that you were hired to kidnap his brother. You weren't hired to help the kidnapper."

"It's not kidnapping."

"It's close. Did you bring your handcuffs?"

"They're right where they always are."

I liked to keep them under the passenger seat. As I lit a cigarette, a dark car, a gleaming black Cadillac, rolled past me. It turned around at the end of the street and stopped in front of Ernie's house. The driver killed the headlights and climbed out. He was wearing a dark suit. I couldn't make out his face.

"The lawyer's here," I said.

"Wasn't he supposed to call you first?"

"He was. Let me go."

The man walked to the back of the sedan and opened the trunk. I couldn't make out his face.

"Remember to get the hell out of there, Winn, if things go wrong. If the mob's involved -"

"Gotta go," I said.

The trunk snapped shut and the driver stood for a moment, scanning the street. My window was down and I pushed my arm out and waved to him, but he still didn't notice me. The sound of someone laughing came from the rear of Ernie's house. The man on the street heard it and started for the driveway. I pushed my gun into my pants. Then I snapped my fingers and called to him. "Hey!"

He stopped and turned toward me.

"Mr. Aldrich?"

"Who?"

As he glided toward the truck, the light from a street lamp struck his face. He wasn't overweight. He didn't have a moustache either. His eyebrows were thick, though, and his features were narrow and angular. He looked a lot like Montgomery Clift, with graying temples.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were--"

He moved up to my window and looked at me quickly. Then he swung his arm and something harder than a fist connected with my cheek. I saw a dump truck run over a dog once. My head felt like that dog. Then I didn't know anything anymore.

When I came to, I heard the banging report of a gun. There was a white ceiling stretching above me and light bounced off of the walls into my bleary eyes. Another shot fired, and then the man in the black suit, mumbling in a foreign language, squatted beside me. He spread the fingers of my right hand open and pressed something heavy—a gun—against the palm.

A male voice, sounding strange and cold and European, called from the other side of the room. "Is he dead?"

"Shh."

The man in the suit stood up. The leather soles of his shoes slapped the wood floor. "Take the laptop, Mandek, and get out of here. Meet me at the club."

"But is he dead?"

"Your friend is. And this guy will be in a moment. Leave now."

Each time I inhaled, a pain stretched from behind my ear down to my hips. The man in the suit leaned over me.

"Who are you?"

I didn't answer.

"Hmmm?"

I started coughing and I thought a tiger was gnawing my chest. Then I realized that Montgomery Clift was stepping on it, pressing down with his heel and twisting.

"Stop," I said. My voice was a whisper.

He stopped. I didn't thank him. Then he kneeled beside me and smashed my chin with something. Flurries of snow swirled around my eyes.

"Tell me."

I tried to lift my hand, to aim the gun at him.

"It's empty," he sneered.

He straddled my chest and drew his arm back and dropped another punch. But this time I snapped my head to the right, so hard that my ear tapped my collarbone. His fist smacked the floor, making a sound like a softball sinking into a mitt, and he shuddered on top of me and groaned. The blows to my head may have dropped my IQ a bit, but I still had sense enough to slug at him, and when the fist with the gun in it struck his face, it fired, spitting out a streak of light that was the same length and color as a stick of butter. He reeled backwards, swatting at his eyes with his fingers. Bits of the ceiling fell to the floor.

As I scrambled away toward the other end of the room, my knee knocked over a stereo speaker and my shoulder clipped the end of a piano. I supported myself against the corner of a table and watched Montgomery Clift as he tried to sit up, but he wobbled and rolled to his side. Then he fainted or died. I couldn't tell. I staggered into the kitchen, over to the sink, and looked at the gun in my hand-it was my .38. The man in the suit had miscounted the number of shots he'd fired before he'd given it back to me. He should have brought his calculator.

I washed my face. Above the sink, there was a window with a view of a canal and a small, rectangular pool in the backyard. A pair of butterfly chairs in the grass looked intensely yellow, despite the lack of light. The color nauseated me and I puked. Then I washed my mouth out with the bottle of scotch that was sitting on the counter. It made me feel better and the screaming pain between my ears hushed a little and I could hear a sound coming from the front of the house, the sound of someone struggling to start a stalled car. Boone had said that Skunky 2's starter was capricious.

I ran to the nearest door, which let me into the house's side yard. There was a wood fence out there, maybe eight feet high. I didn't have the strength or the will to climb the fence, so I ran back inside, and an unfriendly rug on the kitchen floor jumped up and tripped me. When I regained my balance, I was in the living room again. The man in the black suit, however, wasn't there anymore. Worse, there was a crumpled body lying on a couch, which I hadn't noticed earlier, and the stiff's face matched the one in the snapshot Antonia had given me. Ernie Beaumont clearly wasn't going to be making any more phone calls to his ex-wife or his brother. Too much blood was leaking from his forehead and his chest.

I teetered outside the front door for a moment, searching the yard and the street for Montgomery Clift. Skunky 2 sat on the driveway, and I couldn't see if there was anyone inside it. Then the engine turned, the headlights flashed on and the 'Vette blasted off. The driver had to be the same person Montgomery Clift had called Mandek in the house, and Monty himself was probably curled up on the passenger seat, licking his wounds.

I ran to my truck. I knew that I was making a mistake, that I should have stayed at the house, called the police and waited for them to take over. But the good brain my mother had passed on to me had been grievously, perhaps irremediably, injured in Ernie Beaumont's living room. So with numb fingers, I pushed the key into the ignition. The engine was still warm and it started easily. Already my face was tight with bruises and swelling.

I spun the truck around in time to see Skunky 2's red taillights swing to the right at the end of the street. I followed with my headlights off, reloading my gun as Skunky 2 turned onto the expressway. We headed toward the ocean. Beneath us, the Banana River was quiet and empty and black. The glittering tops of casino ships and a ridge of condominiums rose just to the north. The driver never tried to shake me. I kept my window down because the air that blew in helped my head some. I needed a cigarette, but I couldn't find the pack I'd been smoking. It must have fallen out of my pocket, with my fingerprints all over it, in Ernie Beaumont's house. As we neared the city, billboards swooped up with increasing frequency from the sides of the road, making pitches for the beach town's surf shops and hotels, and the color of the sky was brighter above the shoreline development. Suddenly I wanted to talk to Keith Ann. When she was serious, she had good things to say. But my cell phone, I discovered, was just as lost as my cigarettes. This should have troubled me more than it did. But like I said, I was working with half a brain.

Once we were in Cocoa Beach, Mandek took a left onto Atlantic Avenue, the local name for the stretch of the A1A that shoots down from Port Canaveral. I followed him for a mile or so, then he turned the car into a vast parking lot where at least a hundred cars were parked in front of a palatial, salmon-colored building. Above the entrance, blue neon tubes spelled out the words HERON CLUB and GIRLS and DRINKS and FOOD.

I followed Mandek into the center of the lot. When he parked, his door popped open and I jumped out of my truck. The old man heard me running, looked up and raised his arms to protect himself; but he was small and crippled, and he collapsed as I pushed him against the Corvette's side window.

I looked in and didn't see Montgomery Clift. "Where is he?" I growled.

"Get away from me."

The club's doors opened and the screaming sound of heavy metal music poured out. I pressed my gun against his liver and told him to lift the car's hatch. He did. Montgomery Clift wasn't in the trunk either. But a laptop computer was and I grabbed it.

"Where is your friend?"

"What the ---- are you talking about?"

"The one who tried to kill me."

Mandek spat at my face. I socked him in the gut and his chin knocked my shoulder as he reeled forward. Then I led him to the truck, pushed him in and handcuffed his left wrist to the door handle on the passenger side. Some of his energy returned and he kicked at my chest with his shorter leg. He was stronger than he looked.

"Don't do that," I said. I wrenched his ankle with my hands and he groaned. "If you make trouble," I said, "you'll get more back, more than you want."

He leered at me. "If I make trouble, I'll get back more than I want.' What the ---- is that supposed to mean?"

I pointed my gun at his crotch. "Think about it."

We sat in the lot together for the next hour, as I waited for something to happen, for Montgomery Clift's Cadillac to roll up, perhaps, but it didn't. After a while, Mandek became talkative.

"Listen, buddy," he said. "You're the one that's in trouble, not me." His voice was lucid, intelligent. "There's no evidence linking me, but your fingerprints--and your blood--are all over the place. The cops are probably already looking for you. Have you thought about that? I know a lawyer who can--"

"Who's the other man?"

"There is no other man."

"Who's the other man?"

The gangster's eyes flared. "You don't get it, Sherlock, do you?"

"What did you want from Ernie Beaumont?"

"They're going to throw you in jail. Don't you realize? If you turn me in, I can't help you. You'll be trapped."

My brain was shaky with vertigo and fear. I told him to shut up. He had a cell phone clipped to his belt. I took it. Then I started the truck.

"Where are we going?"

I wasn't sure. I should have taken him to the police department. I know that now. He wasn't sincere about helping, but he had a point. I'd left the crime scene and my bullets were in Ernie Beaumont's corpse, and proving my innocence from inside a cell was going to be tough.

"Are you working for Boone Beaumont?"

"Who the ---- is that?"

"What's your connection with him?"

"You're talking about shit that doesn't make any sense to me and I'm going to cut your ----head off if you don't let me go."

I needed to know as much as I could before I went to the police. If it were possible, I wanted to bring in as many of the people who were responsible for the killing as I could.

Mandek hissed like a snake. "Where are we going, ----head? Huh?"

"Tallahassee," I said. "And don't call me ----head."

CHAPTER 4

An hour later, as we headed up 95, Mandek fell asleep. From the way that he smelled, I knew that he smoked, and I found a pack of Gauloises in his jacket pocket. There were sheets of writing paper stuffed between the box and the cellophane, but I didn't look at them. The nicotine, with the hum of the asphalt, made my head hurt a little less. Despite the trouble he'd caused me, the old man looked gentle and I almost felt sorry for him.

Much of the land along the highway was still undeveloped and dark, but around the exits, there were clusters of gas stations and restaurants that threw candy-colored lights into the sky. The monotony of this section of the state started to make me drowsy after a while, and I turned off the road at one of these stops. The warning bumps on the exit ramp shook the truck and Mandek's eyes opened.

"You're a son of a bitch," he said.

"Watch your language."

He snorted and looked away, pressing the side of his head against his window. I steered the car onto a service road and headed for a McDonald's. As we waited in the drive-thru line, I took the red bandana from my pocket and wrapped it around the old man's wrist, making the steel cuff less noticeable. Pity swelled up inside of me again.

"You want anything?"

"I want to kill you."

"I meant food."

"A Coke. Get me a Coke."

The guy in the drive-thru window didn't even look at us. When we parked near the lot's exit, I handed Mandek his drink. He lifted the cup's lid with his teeth. Then he swung his arm, tossing the soda at my lap.

I shoved him, hard. "You're a mean one, aren't you?"

"I hate American scum like you."

"You're not subtle about it." I scooped up the ice from my lap and threw it out the window. "What kind of scum do you like?"

He snorted and slapped the dashboard with his bony hand.

"Don't do that." I couldn't help but laugh. "Are those the manners they teach you in Russia?"

"I am Polish, not Russian."

It was nearly midnight when we swung around Jacksonville onto 10 and started west for Tallahassee. Mandek had fallen asleep again. I decided to call Keith Ann, to get her take on the situation.

"Hey, tiger," she said.

"I need your help."

"You're slurring your words. What's the matter?"

"Brain damage. Somebody sapped me a couple hours ago."

"What?"

I summarized the evening's adventures for her.

"You shouldn't be on the road."

"No, but I don't have much of an alternative now."

"Jesus, honey, why didn't you go to the cops?"

A wave of pain rolled through my head and smashed against the back of my eyeballs. "I wasn't thinking clearly."

"What are you going to do with the old man?"

A billboard for a steakhouse soared up on the right. Clouds of insects swirled in front of the lamps that lit it. Mandek scratched at his wrist under the bandana.

"I don't know."

"Are you really going to the Beaumonts'?"

"Yes."

"You're not taking him with you, are you?"

"I thought I might."

"Not by yourself, Winn."

"What else can I do?"

"You can talk to your friends at the Tallahassee Police Department."

"I'm outside the law now, angel."

"You should be inside a hospital," she said angrily. "I want to see you before you do anything."

"Yes," I said, after a minute of thinking. "Yes. Where?"

"Wal-Mart. The one off I-10."

"Okay."

"I'm heading there now."

"Bring heat," I said.

Keith Ann's first husband had left her a nice collection of firearms when he died. He'd also taught her how to shoot. "Okay," she said.

The wind, as it blew into the cab, made the cuts on my face sting, but this helped me stay awake. I turned the radio on and listened to a Devil Rays broadcast that faded in and out. Mandek continued to sleep peacefully.

The Wal-Mart on the north side of Tallahassee occupied a hollow of land surrounded by live oaks and pasture. Under the lamps that rose from the parking lot, the building's brick walls were a faded brown, the color of soggy cornflakes. Though it was late, shoppers coagulated around the store's entrance, pushing carts filled with blue plastic bags. A row of bicycles, protruding from one end of the building, bisected a huge patio area, where customers and employees sat on benches, drinking sodas and smoking cigarettes.

I drove up and down the lot, searching for Keith Ann's car, a white Grande Am coupe. She was parked near the garden department, where the air was thick with the scent of fertilizer. I found a space near a buggy corral, twenty feet from the Grande Am.

She appeared at my window a moment later. Her full lips, pressed together tightly, were covered with fresh lipstick. She pushed her pretty face into the cab and her fingers probed the tender parts of my face.

"That hurts."

"You look rotten, Winn."

"I feel worse."

"Is that the prisoner?"

The old man was awake, glaring at us.

"He's mean," I said.

"So am I."

Mandek snorted disdainfully.

"What are you going to do, Winston?"

"I'm going to the Beaumonts."

"And you really want to bring him with you?"

"I think so."

"You're sure that you shouldn't take him to the police?"

"It wouldn't be enough, not yet, Keith Ann. I need to know what role Beaumont had in this, and if I can get to him now, rather than later, I'll have the element of surprise on my side."

"But what if Boone Beaumont had nothing to do with the murder?"

My head started to feel like a bowl of clam chowder again. "I'm going anyway."

She sighed and tapped the cracked windshield with her fingers and said, "Okay."

"Okay what?"

She lowered her voice. "I'm taking your friend home with me."

"No way."

"Yes way."

"Just get in the truck. We can drive over to the Beaumonts' together."

She shook her head. "You don't know who they have over there, Winston. They might send someone—or a bunch of someones—outside when you're inside. It's safer for us, and for me, if he and I are far away. Don't you know?"

"I don't know."

She pulled the door open. "The faster we get this done with, the better. I'll head home with him. You go over to the Beaumonts'. Find out what you have to find out. Then get the hell out of there. I can handle this guy."

"No. It doesn't feel right."

"None of it is right, darling. You should go to the police. I certainly don't think you should go to the Beaumonts."

"I have to."

"Then let's do it this way."

Keith Ann climbed into the cab. Because she was small, she had to pull the seat all the way up for her feet to touch the floor pedals. She was so close to the window that she couldn't see around the cracks. Mandek snickered and Keith Ann responded by pulling her best gun, a Colt Cobra. 38, from her purse and she aimed it at the old man's chest. "Be quiet," she said, "or I'll make you be quiet." She glanced at me. "Get my car, Winn."

I brought it over to the truck a minute later and together we moved Mandek. When he was inside the Grande Am, I strapped his wrist to the door handle and concealed the cuff with the red bandana. As she started the car, Keith Ann smiled.

"I'm sorry for everything," I said.

"Don't sweat it, friend. Love's supposed to be an adventure. Right?" She blew me a kiss. Then she said, "We'll be waiting for you in the Florida room."

She drove and waves of anxiety swept through me, making the skin on my face tingle. As they left the parking lot, one of the lamps illuminated Keith Ann's face. It looked like it was made out of steel.

She's tough and smarter than I am, I thought to myself, she knows what she is doing. She'll be fine.

Five minutes later, I was back on the truck route, speeding like an ambulance driver through a war zone.

I left the car under the trees that walled off the Beaumonts' property and walked up the driveway to the front of the house cautiously. Cutting through the night came the sounds of singing frogs and buzzing cicadas. The air was heavy with the stink of manure and rotting leaves.

As I climbed up the front porch steps, I tripped a sensor of some sort and lights flashed on around me. I heard feet running and I drew my gun as the door opened. The face of Hilary, the nurse, appeared.

"Why'd you come back?"

"I had to."

She shook her head. "I told you to stay away from these people."

"What do you know?"

"Nothing I'll tell you."

The soft, scraping sound of slippers on polished wood floated around the door.

"Go back to bed, Hilary," came the tired voice of Boone Beaumont.

He undid the door's chain and opened the door. In his hands he held a shotgun, which he pointed at my belly. He was wearing a cardigan sweater and a pair of pressed khakis.

"Toss that thing in the grass over there."

I hesitated. I was in the mood to shoot him right then, but as my finger tightened around the pistol's trigger, I realized that I hadn't disengaged the safety. It might as well have been unloaded. I lowered the piece and threw it backwards onto the lawn.

"Come in here."

I crossed the threshold and another light flashed on, filling the hall with unpleasant brightness.

"Jesus," Boone snarled.

Antonia stood at the top of the staircase, hands on hips. Her nightgown was the color of snow. Little black clouds of mascara stained her pink cheeks.

"Why'd you kill him?" she shouted.

"I didn't."

"Hold yourself together, girl." Boone's voice was calm, still and threatening. His sister softened up instantly. Descending the stairs, she looked like a kitten, testing its paws, after the claws have been removed. She didn't say anything, but she followed us into the sitting room, where we'd met that morning, and poured some white zinfandel into a glass.

"Empty your pockets," Boone said.

I put my wallet, keys, notebook and pen, as well as Mandek's cigarettes and phone, on the mahogany desk.

Beaumont made me sit down. Then he summoned his sister over. He handed her the gun and told her to keep the muzzle pressed against my chest.

"What kind of cigarettes are these?"

"They're French."

He began to read through my notebook. Then he eased the sheets of paper from the cigarettes' cellophane wrapper. He unfolded them. The sheets of paper had writing on them.

“What are these?”

“I got them off my prisoner.”

Antonia’s face was flushed and her hands trembled. She must have had a low tolerance for blush or she’d been drinking all night.

I said to Boone, “Get this gun off me before there’s an accident.”

He dropped the papers and took the shotgun from his sister. Then he pushed its tip under my chin. “What are you up to, Winthrop? What did you mean when you said you had a prisoner?”

I told him everything that had happened, from the conversation with Arnette to my rendezvous with Keith Ann. He never lowered the gun and the bore hurt me. But the anger in his face dissipated the longer I spoke and, at the end of the story, he was shaking his head. He almost looked sad.

“No. We didn’t set you up, Winthrop. If we’d wanted to frame you, we would have done it in a much safer and more efficient manner. We’d have subdued you here, not on the street, not in front of Ernie’s house.”

Antonia was sitting on the desk, cradling her drink. Her nightie was bunched up around her thighs and I could see her knees and a cleft of shadow between her thighs. “How do you know he’s telling the truth, Boone?”

“Because it checks.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

He lowered the gun and moved away from me and picked up the papers he’d taken from the package of cigarettes. There were three of them. They were long and lined, as if they’d come from a reporter’s notebook.

“You see these, Winthrop? These are notes. Or no, they’re not notes, they’re lead sentences. The opening lines to something—a magazine feature, perhaps.” He turned to his sister, holding up the papers. “See, Skunky? Ernie’s handwriting.”

A quick pain snapped through the bones in my face.

“What’s the matter?”

“Concussion, I think. What do the sentences say?”

“I’ll read them to you, but you have to agree to drop this case.”

“What?”

“You’ve got to drop this case.”

“The police may be looking for me.”

“No, they’re not. And they won’t be.”

“Why?”

“They don’t know a thing.” He looked at his watch. “Two hours ago I received a call from Mr. Aldrich.”

“Your lawyer.”

“Yes. He’s at Ernie’s house right now, cleaning up the mess you left behind. I’ve instructed him to make Ernie disappear.”

Antonia sighed heavily.

“And in a few days, when I tell the Florida Department of Law Enforcement that Ernie has disappeared, I’m going to emphasize my brother’s psychological problems, his drinking and his recent obsession with privacy. If they believe me, which I think they will, they’ll conclude that our brother has either run off or destroyed himself. Without a

body, they won't put much energy into finding him. Is your injured brain able to process that?"

He poured some bourbon into a glass and handed it to me. The fumes made me dizzy and I turned it down.

"But why?" I said. "Why don't you want to do anything?"

"Because Boone detests a scandal," Antonia said.

"Now listen." He started to read from the sheets. "*For almost 100 years, Florida has been a magnet for travelers, a land of sun, sand and semi-tropical beauty...Elderly people, tourists and smugglers have always loved the Sunshine State...When the USSR crumbled, the free world breathed a little more easily. But who could have anticipated that, in addition to releasing millions of Soviet subjects, the rising of the Iron Curtain simultaneously liberated many of the world's cruelest and greediest criminals?...The Russian Mob has infiltrated Florida, hide your daughters...!*"

He looked up from the sheets and stared at me. "Evidently, the men who killed Ernie had a problem with the article he was writing."

"Mr. Beaumont," I said, "we should notify the police. These notes, and what I've seen--it could--"

"No, you don't understand. The mafia has absolutely nothing to do with this family, Winthrop. We have no interest in them. None. What they do and what they've done does not matter to us."

"But you're brother--"

"He's better off now."

Antonia sighed. She was crying. "Boone detests a scandal."

I pointed to the papers. "What are you going to do with them?"

"You'd like them, wouldn't you?" He shook his head. Then he struck a match and brought it to the three sheets and dropped them, one by one, into a steel trashcan near the desk.

"Well, golly," I said.

"Take this money, I'm about to give you, Winthrop, and go home. That's it."

Beaumont walked behind the desk and wrote a check, an enormous one, which he handed to me.

I stood up. "What about the old man?"

"You ever fish, Winthrop?"

"Yes."

"Then you know what 'catch and release' means?"

"It's not going to be that simple."

"Then kill him. Under no conditions do I want that man talking to the police. Do you understand? Our family absolutely cannot take another black eye."

I didn't respond.

He pointed his finger at me. "I'm warning you to act carefully. No one must ever know what's happened. And you are never to contact us. Never. Do you understand? If the truth should ever come out, Winthrop, I could wind up in jail. But you-and your wife, as well-the two of you would be dead before the judge ever set my trial date. Do you understand, Mr. Winthrop?"

"I don't take threats very well, Mr. Beaumont."

"I've paid you enough to take whatever I give you."

"And what about Hilary? She's wise to what happened, isn't she?"

"She's been taken care of."

"Like me?"

The cynicism in the room felt as heavy as the air in a gas chamber. Boone headed over to the door and I followed him. He patted my shoulder as I turned the knob. Hilary greeted me in the hallway with a frown.

"I told you not to get involved with these people. You're around them enough, you start to act like them."

She shut the door. A cockroach scampered in front of me. As I descended the porch steps, I triggered the motion detector again and the front of the house was flooded with light again. I leaned over and lifted my gun from the wet grass.

It was after three when I crossed into Wakulla County. Because cops liked to hide in the culverts that lined the road, I drove cautiously. I tried to call Keith Ann a couple of times, but she didn't answer. This worried me, but not too much, because the signal sent by the phone company's antenna down there was often weak.

Ten miles from the coast, I stopped for gas at a 24-hour place. A big woman with a lot of scar tissue around her neck took my money with a pleasant, dumb smile. When I walked out, a kid with a pit bull was dropping change into a payphone. His dog pulled on its collar and growled at me as I leaned against the front of my truck. The roast beef sandwich I'd bought was flavorless, but it helped my nerves a little.

I drove some more and started to pass the packinghouses and seafood restaurants they have in that part of the county, as well as the airfield that was built on top of a drained estuary. Then the lights of the bridge that crosses the Ochlockonee Bay came into sight and the tree line stopped. Under the purple sky, the black water quivered like an injured muscle. I took the left just before the bridge and headed onto the little peninsula where Keith Ann and I lived.

We'd purchased our house and moved to the shore about a month after our wedding. Keith Ann hadn't liked driving back and forth to the city much, so she'd taken a job waiting tables at a bar in St. Marks. She'd always been an artistic type, and cutting hair had allowed her to feel creative, but waiting tables never did, and over the course of the year that we'd been married, she'd taken to working on the house, the way she'd worked on people's heads, trying to make it fashionable and pretty. She'd painted the walls inside, and had refinished some furniture we'd bought at the Tallahassee Flea Market. She'd also made dream catchers and stained glass ornaments that she hung from the windows that looked out at the bay. In the front of the house, we had a Florida room, and she'd decorated the windows with white Christmas lights, the dangling kind that look like icicles. She'd said that she would be waiting for me in this room, and the lights should have been on. But they weren't on. In fact, none of the lights in the house were on. My hands tightened around the steering wheel as bad thoughts shot through my injured head. I swung around the wall of shrubs that grew along the road in front of our yard and parked on the driveway, behind the Grande Am. Then I reached around the glove box for the gun. It felt like some little creature, an imp, was inside of me, pressing his hands against my rib cage as I ran through the grass. The front door was open.

"Keith Ann?" My voice sounded weak and afraid.

I moved through the house, turning on lights. I called for her, but she didn't answer. Then I opened the door that led to the carport and switched on the ceiling light. A Japanese beetle swooped past my face. Sweat dripped from the tip of my nose.

"Keith Ann?"

It felt as if I were walking off a cliff as I stepped toward the car. On the concrete floor, next to the tire, there was a squashed cigarette, a Gauloises. I took another step. Through the windshield, I saw something, a hand, clenched into a fist and the front of Keith Ann's blouse and strands of brown hair fell across her right breast.

"Please be sleeping. Please be joking," I whispered.

I took another unsteady step. Through the passenger door window, I could see that her hands were bound together with my handcuffs. The red bandana, the one she'd given me, was around her neck, drawn tight, and her tongue protruded through her blue lips. Above me, moths fluttered around the ceiling light, tapping the glass cover with their wings.

I ran inside. The imp that had lodged itself in my chest pounded away, harder and harder. The sink's water was cool. I towed off my face with an apron that hung from a hook near the refrigerator. My eyes fell on a picture of Keith Ann holding a can of paint, wearing overalls and an old pair of golf shoes. She liked to watch golf on TV. I started gagging.

Then I walked through the front door and lit a cigarette. The air smelled like salt, like tears. The moon looked like a great damaged eye, bleeding light over the clouds.

CHAPTER 5

The police cruisers arrived about five minutes later in near silence. As one of them rolled onto the driveway, a floodlight mounted to the roof flashed on, and an officer jumped out. He addressed me from behind the car's hood, a shadow with a gun.

"Winston Winthrop?"

"Yeah."

"You're under arrest."

I tossed my cigarette onto the flagstone walkway Keith Ann had put in the previous spring. "Someone murdered my wife," I said.

From the end of the driveway came the sound of other deputies moving around.

"We want to clear things up, Mr. Winthrop," the officer said in a calm voice.

"Clear what up? I know who did it. I'll tell you everything."

"Put the gun down."

"Not yet." My head was still gooey. "Why'd you come out here? I didn't call."

"Someone did. Someone called and said you killed your wife. We're here to check it out. Put down your gun, sir."

"But the person who called is the person who did it."

"That may be."

The man speaking didn't believe me. With my busted face and bloody shirt, I must have looked bad. I could see and hear his companions inching over the pine needles. Someone gave an order and the men raised their rifles to their shoulders.

"I give up," I said. But as soon as I said this, I don't know why exactly, I dove behind an azalea near the door. A wave of bullets blasted at the soil immediately and I scrambled behind the other shrubs that collared the house. When I got to the corner, I bolted, running, with my shoulders down, through the backyard toward the boathouse. The bay spread out in front of me. I jumped over a pile of cut grass and palm tree clippings.

"Don't do it, Winthrop!"

The dock's planks thudded under my feet as I ran for the boathouse. I jumped behind one of the house's walls. Where the boat was supposed to be, there was an empty space. I spotted the propane grill that Keith Ann had moved that afternoon, chained to a piling. Beyond it, I could see the arched bridge, stretching across the dark water.

"Come on, Mr. Winthrop. Give up!"

The rattled as some officers ran over it. I fired my gun twice into the water, to scare them. Then something heavy smashed the roof and there was a splintering sound as bullets pierced the little building's plywood walls. This was followed by the stink of gas. I started to cough. My eyes began to burn. After about five seconds of this, I was read to quit, I really was. But then, one of the policemen's bullets must have punctured the grill's fuel container, because there was a sudden explosion of heat and sound, and I was flying over the water, as if a huge, invisible hand had lifted me by the neck and tossed me into the air.

The fat, droopy leaves of the banana tree in our side yard stopped and I fell to the ground. From the grass, I looked back at the boathouse. A yellow-orange flame struck at the air where the roof had been. The cops, standing on the seawall, were watching the

flames and shouting at one another. No one saw me in the grass. No one saw me get up and stumble toward my truck. But when I turned the engine, two deputies came running.

I kicked the gas pedal, breaking through the hedges that lined the front yard as shots ripped the air and struck the sides of the truck. I sped back to the coastal highway and turned south, headed for the bridge. The moon, punching through the clouds, looked like a yellow fist. The boathouse, half-a-mile away, looked like a spurting match.

Just as I reached the top, the center of the bridge, I could see three police cruisers rushing toward me. I responded by slamming the brakes and jamming the truck into reverse. But as I look up into the rearview mirror, the last of my hopes for a safe escape vanished. I was trapped in a double-header. The deputies, the ones I'd been fighting at the house, had caught up with me.

"I tried to do my best," I told myself. "I tried and I really tried."

The air was filled with the sound of sirens. I smashed the accelerator to floor and hooked the steering wheel hard to the left. The railing shrieked as I hit and my head bounced against the steering wheel. Then the truck dropped over the side.

The windshield, weakened by the cracks in it, collapsed as it hit the water, and then the cold, black water rushed in and snatched me from my seat, throwing me back up to the surface, near the pylons that supported the bridge. The police had a spotlight, but they kept it trained on the space where the truck had landed. I doggy-paddled from pylon to pylon and got to shore after a couple of hours. When I crawled out of the water, my body felt broken. I'd lost my gun in the fall.

I walked along the side of the road, ducking into the culverts whenever cars passed. Eventually, I wandered into a fishing village called Panacea, where I found a trailer park behind an old IGA. All of the units there were propped up on cinderblocks. I climbed beneath.

Later, when the sun was up, the sound of someone walking around above me woke me up. I waited, listened. The trailer's front door opened and closed. The car in the little driveway started and drove off. I crawled out from under the unit. No one answered when I knocked on the door, and the lock was easy enough to pop. I left my shoes on the welcome mat, and my feet, because they were almost clean, didn't stain the linoleum. In the bathroom, I used an electric razor to shave my beard off into the toilet.

That afternoon, I caught rides all the way to Quitman, Georgia, a tired town on US 19, about an hour from the Okefenokee swamp. The clerk in the motor court asked for an ID, but he dropped the question when I paid him a week's lodging up front, using some of the cash that Boone had given me for expenses. The payoff check he'd written me was worthless now.

I watched a lot of television for the next few days, and early each morning, I walked into town, to the city's courthouse square, where there was a row of newspaper machines that carried papers from the around the region. The incident at Ochlockonee didn't make the Georgia news, but it made the *Tallahassee Register's* front page for a week, and it was picked up by some of Florida's bigger papers, too. The excitement tapered off abruptly, however, when the police investigator's held a press conference and made the announcement that my body had probably been sucked out of the bay into the Gulf of Mexico. I clipped and saved everything from these papers, including the last article that appeared in the *Register*, a story about Keith Ann's brother and his decision to have her body brought back home to Shreveport.

During this period, I also worked hard on restoring my health and changing the way that I looked in order to minimize the possibility of people recognizing me. My brain injuries, it turned out, were minimal, and they cleared up without help from a doctor. The skin on my chest and my arms had been damaged by the explosion, but it didn't hurt that much, and cortisone made the pain manageable. My general appearance improved quite a bit during this time. I lost weight, grew my hair and quit smoking, too. And soon, I did look different, a lot different, I thought, from the way I'd looked before Keith Ann's death, and I decided that as long as I wore the visor of a baseball cap low over my face, I could probably walk around in the daylight safely. Because I was afraid of running out of cash, I got a job as a cook in a BBQ pit called Tiny's, and when I wasn't working, I tried to learn what I could about the Heron Club and the Russian mafia by going to the Quitman public library and using its computers. I found out that the club was owned by someone named Nicolai Chestov. Unfortunately I didn't find much else. I kept this information, with the newspaper clips, in a folder.

By late August, I was ready to return to Florida to find Mandek, to get him back for what he'd done. The aches and pains were mostly gone. I had more than five hundred dollars in cash, a good pair of boots and a good pair of jeans. I also had a gun again. Boo Boo, a dishwasher at Tiny's, had sold it to me, an almost new .32, for twenty-five bucks.

It was morning when the bus let me off in Cocoa Beach. I stood outside the station for several minutes, watching the action on the streets. Most of the drivers had white hair, but the people on the sidewalks wore bathing suits and flip-flops and they were younger, happier looking. A soft breeze blew in from the ocean.

I brought the duffel bag I had with me to the beach, and fifty feet from the shoreline, I took off everything except my shorts. Sunbathers cluttered the sand, lying on striped towels and sitting in folding chairs beside their umbrellas and their plastic coolers. Behind them, the condominium buildings and hotels caught the light of the lemon sun in their windows. The warm ocean felt good around my skin as it washed the greasy feeling from my feet and my back and my armpits. When I came up, I could smell the clear light in the air. A woman, straddling an orange raft, grinned at me. Then a wave lifted her abruptly. The ends of her hair jumped up from her shoulders and she rolled in. A second later, she returned to the surface laughing.

I walked back to shore, and for several minutes I sat next to my stuff and watched the Cocoa Beach Pier. At the end of it, I could make out the shapes of people, leaning over the railings with their fishing rods. A pair of pelicans soared over the waves in a line that ran parallel to the beach. I'd taken a risk, a pretty big one, leaving the bag in the sand. It held everything I had: my money, my clothes, my gun and the file I'd started on Mandek and the Heron Club. As I hooked my arm through the bag's strap, the canvas band bit into my sunburned shoulder.

Finding a place to stay wasn't difficult. I stopped at the first motel I saw, a place on the A1A near the pier called the Poinciana Gardens. The owner, a fat man with a hairy chest and a German accent, stood in front of the motel's office, spraying a banyan tree with a garden hose. He studied my face when I asked him about weekly rates. His mouth curved into a smile and the sun tangled itself in the bristles of his moustache

"How long you really want to stay?" He paused to rub his stubbly chin. "The longer you stay, the cheaper, you know."

"No. I don't know how long I'm staying."

"But you are staying?"

"I'm thinking about it." I liked him because he was seedy and seedy innkeepers and merchants are usually more tolerant and less inquisitive than their upright counterparts. "How much per week?"

He told me. The rate was reasonable enough.

"You want a tour?"

"Sure."

"My name is Karl."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Willie."

The motel was shaped like a horseshoe with right angles, and it wrapped around a small, rectangular pool. The hard smell of chlorine hung in the air.

"We're shocking the water," Karl explained. "We like it really clean."

A woman with a heart tattooed to her left shoulder stood by the pool, covering her mouth with a red handkerchief. She was wearing a bikini top and bicycle shorts. She waved at us.

"Where are you from?" said the German.

"Up north."

"You like Florida?"

"I love it."

"Are you on holiday?"

"No. Work."

"You have a job?"

"Not yet."

Karl pushed his hand into the front pocket of his pants and lifted out a key ring. "But you do have money, yes?" He maintained his smile, though the muscles in his face tightened up, making his eyes look like dried apricots.

"I'm paying with cash."

"Good, good," he smiled.

"That's if I choose to stay, of course."

He led me to a room that was located across from the center of the pool. As he opened the door, the blended smell of Pine-Sol and Raid billowed out. The temperature inside was well above one hundred degrees. A double bed with a crimson bedspread ate up most of the room's space. Cheap, framed prints of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza hung above the headboard. A long bureau with a desk space and a mirror stretched along the opposite wall, close to the foot of the bed. Near the bathroom, a miniature refrigerator, humming softly, squatted on the carpet.

"Stocked?" I said.

"This isn't the Hilton," the fat man smiled.

I checked the bathroom. It didn't look horrible. As I came out, a wave of tiredness rolled through me, and I rested my elbow on the room's TV.

"Looks good."

"Leave your bag here."

I followed him to the motel's office, where he asked for my license. I'd altered it in Quitman with a razor blade, transparent plastic and epoxy. It worked, or my cash did, and he gave me a key. When I got back to the room, the woman in the bikini was standing by the door, dragging on a cigarette.

"You need anything?" she said.

I shook my head, let myself in and turned on the air conditioner. After I put on some clean clothes, I pulled the gun and the Heron Club file from the bag and pushed them under the bed's mattress. When I headed out ten minutes later, the woman with the bikini top was gone. For a couple of minutes, I stood in front of the motel, watching the sky, which was now the color of pale blue glass. Then I walked back toward the beach to the pier, where I'd spotted a bicycle store with a sign in the window that said SALES. The store's clerk was sitting behind a glass counter, reading a copy of *People* magazine. Two hoop earrings hung from his left ear and he pinched them between his fingers as he spoke.

"Can I help you?"

"I want a bike, to buy one."

"We don't sell new."

"That's all right."

"I've only got two right now. There's this." He pointed to a small mountain bike with a chrome finish. "It's sporty enough, but it's a girl's model. Or you can try that." He pointed to an old Schwinn on the floor with thin wheels and a basket. It was in good shape.

"Twenty-five," he said.

I gave him a pair of twenties. After he rang up the sale, he said, "New in town?"

"Do I look it?"

"Yeah. "

The clerk pressed the bell on the Schwinn's handlebars and pushed the bike to the front of the shop. We stood outside for a moment, shielding our eyes from the sun with our hands. The bicycles that lined the sidewalk in front of us sparkled. The clerk shook a cigarette loose from a pack of Kents and said, "Want one?"

"I quit."

"Smoke the other stuff?"

"Nah."

He puffed away and looked up at an airplane. It was pulling a sign that said EAT WITH THE ASTRONAUTS AT THE MOON HUT.

"How can I get to the Heron Club from here?"

His face lit up and he said, "That's where I buy my cigarettes, man." Then he said, "That place is the shit."

"So I've heard."

He gave me directions and it took ten minutes for me to get to the club. As I rode up Atlantic Avenue, I kept the visor of my hat pulled down over my face. Bits of broken glass seemed to be everywhere, bunched up against the curbs and spread over the sidewalks. I also saw a dead seabird. Half of it was smashed flat. The other half wasn't. Copper-colored flies crawled around its eyes.

The heat was already intense, and when I reached the Heron Club's parking lot, I got off the bike and wiped my face against my pants legs because they were dryer than my shirt. Scrubby pine trees lined the south side of the parking lot. I squatted under one of them. A banner above the entrance door invited the club's customers in to enjoy two-for-one drink specials and free food. Plenty of people came and went, riding in on motorcycles and pickup trucks and rich-looking cars. Several hours passed, but I didn't

see Mandek. Nor did I see the man who looked like Montgomery Clift. I would have stayed until the place closed, but a police cruiser rolled up as the sun was setting, and the officer, a big guy with aviator glasses and moussed hair, said to me, "You been here a while, pal. What's up?"

"Just resting."

"You been at it a while. You must be pretty tired, huh?"

I stood up and hooked my leg over the bicycle. "Yes, sir." As I rode off, I could feel my shoulders trembling with fear. I wanted to throw up. It wasn't going to be possible to just wait around for Mandek to materialize, at least during the day. I rode back to the motel and, for the next several hours, I mulled over the few options I had. When I knew what to do, I fluffed the bed's feather pillows and lay down. The coolness of the sheets felt good against my sunburned neck and sleep came quickly.

The next morning, just before noon, I returned to the Heron Club. A man wearing a tux shirt and a red bow tie sat on a stool outside the entrance, smoking a cigarette. He grinned at me and the bicycle.

"What's up, son?"

"You know if the kitchen's hiring?"

"Ride around back and ask for Benjamin. He'll tell you."

The service road behind the building was rough and shabby looking. It stretched between a high wall and a small pond, a pool of green water with a cement drum rising from its center. A white egret sat on the drum's lid, preening in the light. Beside the club's back entrance door, next to a Dempsey Dumpster, a man sat on an inverted pickle bucket, smoking a filter-tip cigar. He was old, but he wasn't Mandek.

"Hi," I said, stopping the bicycle. "Are you Benjamin?"

The man scowled at me. Red and brown stains spotted his work shirt.

"Do you know if this place is hiring?"

"It ain't a fag joint."

"I'm not a fag. Is the kitchen hiring?"

"Maybe." He pulled on the cigar.

"Who do I talk to?"

Gray smoke curled through his lips and over his chin.

"Who do I talk to?" I said again.

"You talk to me."

"Is this place hiring?"

"Didn't I say 'maybe'?"

"Cooks?"

He coughed and then he scratched his wrist with his teeth. "Dishwashers."

"Okay."

"You know how to turn on a sink?"

"Yes."

"Maybe we can use you." He tamped the tip of the cigar against the wall carefully.

"Are you the manager?"

"I'm captain of the dishwashers." He stood up. He was an eccentric, but not a likeable one. "Wait here."

I leaned the bicycle against the wall and smoothed my hair. Working in the kitchen, I'd decided, could help me find out what connections there were, if there were

any, between Mandek and the club. The door swung open a minute later and a huge man in a gray suit stepped out and stared down at me. He squinted and his lips curled back, revealing two rows of bright white false teeth.

"You got experience?" he said. He had a strong Eastern European accent.

"Yeah."

"If you're going to work here, you work in the kitchen. Ever go into the nightclub to look at the girls, you're fired."

"Okay."

"Benjamin's gonna tell you how we do things." He turned on his heels. "You can start tomorrow."

Before the door could close, the captain of the dishwashers reappeared. "What'd you say your name was?" he said.

"Willie."

"Come back tomorrow at ten. Bring a notebook with you."

"Why?"

"For keeping track of your hours."

"Do I need to bring anything else?"

"Nah."

He sat down on his bucket and struck a match, and once he had the cigar lit, he turned his attention to the sky. Purple clouds were rolling in from the west. I thanked him and said goodbye. He didn't answer.

It took me twenty minutes to get back to the motel. Karl, the owner, was standing by the pool, wiping his forehead with the front of his shirt. The woman with the tattoo on her shoulder was leaning against a soda machine in an alcove near the office. She smiled at me as fat drops of rain began to fall.

The next morning, the same woman woke me up by rapping on my door with her fist. I'd fallen asleep at the desk, looking over and adding new information to my file on the Heron Club and the Russians.

"What time is it?" I said.

"Eight-thirty. You want I should come back?"

I hid the folder in the desk's drawer. Then I opened the door. She stood in front of a utility cart, with a bright green scarf tied around her head. She smelled like cigarettes and cheap perfume.

"Today is Tuesday, isn't it?" I said.

"Yeah. It's Tuesday."

She walked in, carrying a stack of towels. "You made your bed!"

I looked at myself in the mirror above the bureau. My neck felt greasy and I wiped at it with the side of my hand.

"You want me to change the sheets anyway?"

"No."

I moved into the bathroom. She started to vacuum as I brushed my teeth and she finished up as I started to smear shaving cream across my face. When I finished, I returned to the bedroom and found her wiping the bureau mirror with a sanitizing cloth. The air around her now smelled like the skin of a lemon. The light from the lamp on the bureau struck the inside her right arm. I could see track marks in the soft space near the bicep. She saw me staring at them.

"You party?"

I wasn't sure I heard her right. "What?"

"You party?"

I pointed to the door. "I have to get dressed."

She crossed the room. The cart rattled loudly as she rolled it over the gray pavement toward an open door near the office. I watched her push the cart in and close the door. Then she walked to the pool and sat down on a long folding chair and slipped off her shirt. The big red heart on her back looked like a fresh wound. I think I was the Poinciana's only registered guest.

CHAPTER 6

I rode my bike that morning through traffic and arrived at the club ten minutes before I had to be there. I locked the bike to the chain link fence that divided the rear lot from the drainage pond. A white egret, maybe the same one that I'd seen the day before, was sitting on the cement drum. The clumsy thing under its feet augmented the animal's lithe beauty.

The club's back door wasn't locked. I pulled it open and the sounds of machines rolled out. The dishwashing station was just to the left. A sign, hanging from a tiled wall, declared: SAFETY IS OUR FIRST PRIORITY. Benjamin came up to me immediately. His eyes glared at me as he told me to get started. He said that he'd been called in early, because the dishwasher who'd been scheduled for the previous shift hadn't showed up. Stacks of glass plates cluttered the counter.

"I been scraping these goddamn bastards for an hour. Now it's your turn."

"I brought my notebook," I said.

"Keep track of your hours and give them to Sergei before you go home."

"Do I have to fill out any forms before I get started?"

"Do you want to?"

I didn't. We stood beside the automated dishwasher, a steel box the size of a kitchen stove.

"I'll be back this afternoon," he said. "It's all buffet food that gets served here, so you're going to be washing plates mostly, and forks. The bar's gonna send back a lot of glasses, too. And that's it. You know how to work this thing?"

He raised the washer's door and shoved a rack of cocktail glasses into it. He pulled down and the machine made a loud, whirring sound.

"Anyway, Wanda will be here at eleven."

"Who's Wanda?"

Instead of answering, he walked outside. I got to work with a scouring pad and a spray hose, breaking down the piles of filthy plates. After forty-five minutes, the station was clear, and the lunch service hadn't yet started. I was drying my hands on my apron when Sergei appeared. He walked awkwardly over the rubber mat that covered the floor. A thick gold bracelet hung from his wrist. The brass buttons on his blazer glinted as the ceiling lights struck them. He spoke gruffly. "We got a mess in the kitchen."

I followed him around the wall that separated the kitchen from the dishwashing station. The air in there, thanks to the high ceiling, was easier to breathe. A cook wearing a white coat and hounds tooth pants stood over a deep fryer. A dancer, with a sheer robe clinging to her tiny body, was leaning against a coffee urn. Fifteen feet above her, a long window stretched across the length of the wall. Its blinds were drawn shut.

Sergei pointed to a yellow mop bucket. The water inside it was sudsy. "You know how to mop?"

"Sure."

He led me to the line and showed me a huge patch of hot sauce that smeared the floor. The cook gave me an apologetic smile.

"I'd do it myself, you know, but-" The cook, as he spoke, dropped a batch of chicken wings in the fryer. "What's your name?"

"Willie."

"All right, man. Thanks a lot."

The cook reached into one of the line's refrigerators and lifted out a bag of cheese sticks, which he tore open with his teeth. A feeling of nostalgia swept through me suddenly. Then Sergei walked up and scolded the cook for being slow and sloppy and the nostalgia dissipated.

I headed back to the dishwashing station after I finished, dragging the mob bucket behind me like a wagon. A short, fat blonde with a purple smudge on her cheek was squatting by the exit door, tying her shoes. She looked up and frowned. An unlit cigarette dangled from her lips.

"Are you Wanda?"

"My name ain't Wanda. Did Benjamin tell you it was?"

"Yes."

"Well, it ain't."

"What is it?"

Her eyes wobbled behind her thick glasses. "The W ain't pronounced like a W. I'm Italian, see, and you pronounce the W like it's a V. I told that Benjamin a million times, but he don't get it." She walked outside and held the door for me with her foot. "It's not Wan-duh. It's Von-dah. You see what I'm saying, hon?"

"Okay."

She lit her cigarette and cupped her right elbow with the palm of her left hand. "That Benjamin got excited once and called me 'Vagina' and I slapped him in his ugly mouth, you know? Think you can get it right?"

"I think so."

"Then say it."

I said 'Wanda' correctly, the way she liked it, and she smiled. As she tapped the ashes from her cigarette, I could see that the middle finger on her right hand had been severed at the second knuckle.

"It's going to get busy in a couple of minutes, hon. All the dancers are here already and the doors open up for the customers in a couple of minutes. Then all hell's going to break loose."

"A lot of work, huh?"

"You got it."

She put a hand on her hip and looked at the sawgrass that grew along the edges of the parking lot. The bird on the drum stretched its wings.

"Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if they treated the help better. That Sergei is a bully."

"He dresses like a Mafia don."

"What?"

"He looks like a crook."

"You got it. It wouldn't shock me at all if he was."

"Really?"

"I've heard things, hon."

"You have?"

She nodded. "But then they all look that way."

"Who?"

"Restaurant managers. Even the ones in the greasy spoons." She cleared her throat and spat. "But I'll tell you what. As lousy as they treat you here, it's still better than where I worked before." She named a low-end chain restaurant that had always disgusted me. "Three weeks I'm at that dump and twice it gets robbed. And the side work, hon, God, it was outrageous. And everybody was prejudiced there, too. That place just sucked ass, hon."

"What did you hear about Sergei?"

"Hmmm. I heard that he likes to hit the girls sometimes."

"That's not good." I waited for a moment. I didn't want to seem eager. "Anything else?"

"Hmmm. Not anything I'd feel safe talking about."

"What about someone named Mandek? Have you heard anything about him?"

"I never even heard of him, hon. You don't mean Nicolai, do you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he's the owner. But he never comes out of his office, if you see what I'm saying."

"Oh."

She suddenly clapped her hands together. "We're going to get in trouble if we stay out here any longer." She opened the door and followed me inside. A skinny brunette in her mid-twenties was picking through a pile of clean silverware beside one of the sinks. She was dressed like a cocktail waitress, the sort you see in hotel bars, with a black skirt and a white blouse. She had an intelligent face, but it wasn't attractive. Wanda waddled over to the woman and hugged her quickly.

"You're my favorite, Martina. I ever tell you that?"

"Just yesterday, Wanda."

She pronounced the name correctly. Then she turned her attention to me and the smile vanished. It came back almost instantly, though, and she said, "Is this your first day in this crazy place?" Her accent was thick and droning and Slavic like Sergei's. In her right hand she clutched a bundle of forks. She smiled in a way that hid her teeth.

"Are you Russian?" I blurted. I wasn't being cool about things and I knew it.

"No. Are you?" She stared at me sharply.

"Martina's from Czechoslovakia," Wanda said. She switched on a faucet. Hunched over the basin, sleeves pushed up to her elbows, she looked like an old washerwoman. She was an old washerwoman and the bottom of her apron rubbed against her shins. A second later, Sergei reappeared, carrying a round serving tray. He set it down on the counter and emptied the ice from a glass.

"We need you on the floor, Martina."

The cocktail waitress slipped off around the partition. Wanda had her arms shoved into the suds that were piling up in the sink. I began to clear the remaining glasses from the tray. After Sergei left the station, I walked over and tried to get her to talk again. I've learned that if you want someone to open up, to feel comfortable in front of you, ask them to talk about what they don't like.

"So the boss at your last job was prejudiced? What makes you say that?"

"No, hon. I meant the customers."

"Oh."

"Because of this."

She held up the hand with the missing finger. "It don't bother me. I have to live with it. But customers don't like seeing something ugly next to their food."

Her mouth snapped shut like a turtle's as Sergei swept back into the station with another loaded tray. He scowled at her. Then he trained his hard eyes on me.

"How late can you stay tonight?"

"As late as necessary."

"Good. We need to clean the walk-ins. You know what a walk-in is?"

"A big refrigerator."

"Can you do it?"

"Sure."

He stormed off and Wanda muttered something to herself quietly.

"What's the matter?"

"I could use some extra hours myself," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." She smiled and managed to look distraught at the same time.

Soon the lunch service kicked in. Wanda worked slowly, but diligently, at her sink, talking to herself as she scrubbed the pots and pans the cook brought to her. Now and then, I asked her questions about the Heron Club and Sergei and Nicolai, but she didn't respond. Twice, the cocktail waitress named Martina dropped off dishes, which I fed into the big, noisy machine. She was polite to me, but indifferent, too.

When the rush ended two-and-a-half hours later, Wanda, wiping her hands on her apron, headed for the exit with a cigarette in her mouth. She waved me over. This time I held the door.

"You worked in restaurants much, hon?"

"I used to."

Dried runoff from the Dempsey Dumpster coated the pavement beneath our feet, giving off a smell that was sweet and stomach churning. On the other side of the pond where the egret was, I noticed a tiny cemetery, with white headstones popping out of the earth like teeth.

"Why'd you stop?"

"I was getting wild."

"What do you mean 'wild,' hon. Drugs?"

"Some."

"You ain't a drug addict, are you?"

"I was becoming one. That's why I got out of the kitchen." This was true.

"A kitchen ain't nothing but a pirate ship on land," she grunted. "Why'd you come back?"

"I needed work. And this place hired me."

She lit a second cigarette with the first one's cherry. "How long you been down here in Florida?"

"Since yesterday."

She pressed her shoulders against the wall. "You like it?"

"What I've seen so far. How long have you been down here?"

"Eleven years."

"Why'd you come down?"

"To get away from my old man. You see this?" She pointed to the purple smudge on her cheek. I looked at it closely and realized suddenly that it was a tear, a tattooed tear.

"You ever seen anything like it before?"

I had, but I said, "No." Then I asked her, "What's it mean?"

"Once upon a time, hon," she said, "I was in love with a guy who I loved with all my heart. He was my bubbee, right? But he was also a thug. And this bubbee got his ass caught robbing a shoe store and when the state of Maryland sent him to prison, one of my girl friends told me getting a tattoo was a good way of showing him I was still true. You know what I mean?" She tapped at the tear with her finger. "But I should have never done it."

"Why?"

"Because he didn't deserve it, hon. And he was evil. I waited eighteen months for that bastard, you see? And when he got parole, the two of us moved back to our place in Baltimore, and it was like we were living in the good old days again. But it wasn't a week before that fool started back up on the meth again. That was his thing, right. And he got so damn whacked out that he snorted my whole damn tax return right up his nose, and when I got into his face about it, you know what he did?"

"What?"

"He had this pair of pruning sheers--those little grip thingees? You know what I mean?"

"Sure."

"The bastard told me to shut my mouth. I pointed to my little tear here and told him he didn't know what love was and that he better shut up. Then he cut my finger off with the sheers, the bastard. My favorite ----ing finger!" She laughed and dropped her cigarette. "They sent him back to prison for that and this time I didn't wait for him. I always wanted to go to Florida."

"Is he still in the joint?"

"Oh, no. He died."

"How?"

"You know that pipe that connects a sink to a wall? It's shaped like-like a goose's neck? My old man pushed his head between the pipe and the wall in his cell and choked himself. That's a pretty story, ain't it, hon?"

"It's terrible."

"If we stay out here any longer, hon, we're going to get in trouble."

She opened the door. As I followed her inside, Martina walked in from the kitchen. She set down a tray on the counter and said, "Lunch is ready."

I glanced at Wanda.

"They feed us what the customers don't eat," she said.

For the next fifteen minutes, I sat on a metal table in the middle of the kitchen, picking at the leftovers from the buffet table and talking to the dancers who walked in and out from the floor. They were all young, friendly and American, and none of them had ever heard of or seen anyone who looked like Mandek.

Wanda drew a cup of coffee and trotted over to me.

"There's trouble," she said.

"What?"

"The cook walked off."

"You think he's gone for good?"

"Yep. And you know what that means?"

"Huh?"

"No food service tonight. And since they won't be needing any plates, when Benjamin comes in, we're history."

One of the swinging doors that led to the front of the house swung open and Martina raced into the kitchen. She swept past us and headed to the rear storage area where the walk-ins and Sergei's office were located. She returned a few minutes later and put her arm around Wanda's shoulder. She looked tired.

"What am I going to do, Wanda?"

"Go home and have a Miller Lite, hon."

Wanda patted the cocktail waitress' hand gently. "Martina don't work either if they're not serving food."

"Can't they find another cook?" I asked her.

"Sergei says no."

"Hey hon, you worked in restaurants before, didn't you?" Wanda said.

Martina glanced at me. "You're a cook?"

"Sure."

"You want maybe to cook today?"

"Do it, hon."

"Why not?"

"I'll go get Sergei."

She brought back the manager a couple of minutes later. He asked me several questions about my experience as a cook, and I told him the truth, that I'd worked up in Pensacola and Panama City and Tallahassee for ten years. I didn't mention my subsequent career as a private investigator. He decided to try me, and for the next thirty minutes, we walked around the kitchen together, talking about where things were located and what I was supposed to make.

"It's batch cooking, high volume," he said. "All appetizers. You work the deep fryer mostly. Martina will pick up the food and she'll tell you what she needs out there in the bar."

He led me behind the line, a long counter made of white plastic with stainless steel shelves above it that were stocked with plates and pans. Under the counter, there were several reach-in refrigerators and freezers, stuffed with bags of french fries and crab balls and other junk food hors d'oeuvres.

"What would have happened if you hadn't found a replacement for tonight's shift?" I said.

"We'd have just served drinks. It happens all the time."

"Martina doesn't serve drinks?"

"She does. But she's our food girl. When we don't serve food, the dancers get the drinks themselves. Martina only works when we have food."

"Why?"

"Because she's not a dancer."

"Why isn't she a dancer?"

"Because she's the food girl."

Once he walked off, I started to stock the line, making sure I had enough of everything in the reach-ins. A little before four, Martina handed me a list of things that were needed for the happy hour buffet, and I started cooking. Twice I caught her watching me from the metal table in the center of the kitchen. The expression on her face wasn't affectionate. I tried let this not bother me.

The shift was busy, but everything went well until my supply of chicken wings started to run low. Because Sergei was tied up in the front of the house, covering the bar, I asked Benjamin to get a fresh bag for me from the freezer in back. With a sour face he agreed. He clearly didn't appreciate my quick promotion.

Before he came back with the replacements, though, the wings ran out. And when I had a second, I ran to the storage area. Benjamin was sitting on the floor, poking at the walk-in freezer's door with a butter knife.

"Door's jammed," he growled. He looked stuck, like a mouse on a glue trap. Sweat dripped from his smooth forehead. My annoyance with him disappeared instantly. "The customers will have to do without, I guess."

"That may be so," Benjamin said. "But if I can't get this door open, I can't clean this thing out, and Sergei's not going to be happy."

"It's not your fault."

"It may not be my fault, but it is my problem." He stared at me contemptuously for a second. Then he drew his sleeve across his face and returned to the handle with the butter knife.

I ran back to the line. Martina was standing at the end of it, scratching at her ear with her thumbnail. She smiled at me politely and said, "We need wings."

"No go." I told her about the freezer door.

Without saying anything, she walked off. Then she returned, a few minutes later, carrying two bags of chicken wings.

"He got the door open?"

"I did," she answered.

At eleven, Sergei came up to the line and told me to stop cooking. He walked over to me and squeezed my shoulder. He breath reeked of red wine. "Nicolai is very happy with how you did."

"He is? Who's Nicolai?"

"The boss."

"I never saw him."

"He don't deal directly with the help."

"Where is he?"

The big Russian lifted a chicken finger out of the fry basket, tore it in half and steam spurted around his fingers. He pointed to the windows above the coffee urn. The pale yellow blinds were still shut. "I gave him a report," he said.

"Thanks."

"Clean up," he said, with his mouth full of chicken. "If you have questions about what to do, ask Martina. When you finish, come to my office for your pay."

Just before midnight I was done. The cookers were all off, the counter was wiped clean and the reach-ins were full. Because I was thirsty, I walked over to the soda

machine. A dancer wearing a pink kimono and a pair of mules had her back pressed against one of the kitchen's walls. She smiled at me and then at Martina as the cocktail waitress walked in to the kitchen from the bar.

"That guy told me to scratch his monkey," the dancer said.

Martina stopped beside the dancer and yawned. "Did you get his phone number?"

"No, but I told Sergei about it."

"What did he say?"

"He told me to toughen up."

"That's the only way to make it around here."

Martina caught me looking at them. She marched over to the soda machine and said, "Something wrong with your eyes, Willie?"

"No."

"Long shift, huh?"

"Yeah."

She leaned against the counter and cracked her knuckles. "It wasn't so terrible, was it?"

"I'll be stiff tomorrow."

"Around here, stiff is good. Thanks for helping me."

"Sure."

She seemed a lot smarter than everyone else and making friends with her could be useful. I tried small talk. "Walking out of here tonight with cash will be nice. Do they pay everybody under the table?"

"Each according to his ability, each according to his work."

"That's socialism, isn't it?"

"No. Stalinism. What are you doing after you're done here?"

From the rear of the kitchen, Sergei called for someone named Star. The dancer with the kimono walked off quickly.

"I'm going home," I said.

"You have a ride?"

"My bicycle."

"Ugh!"

"Ugh what?"

"The idea of riding a bicycle after a double frightens me."

"The Chinese must do it all the time."

"I have a car. It isn't much of a car, but I can drive you home, if you'd like." She rubbed her thumb against a stained spot on her apron.

"How will I get back tomorrow?"

"Take a cab."

"I don't have money for that."

"Sure you do. They're paying you tonight, right?"

"I'm frugal."

"I know a place with a lucky craps table. If we were lucky enough, we'd win enough to get you your own car."

"Where's this table?"

"It's on a boat, out at the Cape."

"I like my bike."

"Then we'll take the money we win and buy me a plane ticket."

"Where to?"

"Argentina."

"Why Argentina?"

"I love tango," she said, lowering her eyes. "Don't you?"

I tried to think of something clever, but her friendliness seemed forced and practiced, like a whore's, and it made me uneasy and I struggled to say something interesting. My awkwardness seemed to annoy her, and she walked off, scraping at her apron with a knife that she pulled from one of the pockets.

The bouncer I'd met the day before was named Toby. He stopped me on my walk to Sergei's office.

"The boss is in a bad mood," he said.

As if on cue, someone, a woman, screamed in the office. Then the office door bounced open and Star whisked out. Inside, I could see the Russian manager leaning over his desk. A glass of wine was sitting on top of a large Mosler safe.

"Stay on Sergei's good side, pal," Toby muttered. He asked me for the record of my hours. He reviewed it and then he counted out five twenties and handed them to me.

"Sergei wants you to come back tomorrow at three."

"Okay."

The skin above my left wrist had been burned during the shift and I stopped at the kitchen's medicine cabinet to get some cortisone. The dancer with the kimono and the mules was standing against one of the walls again. Her head drooped forward and her black hair fell across her heavy chest. She looked up and I could see that she was crying.

"Poor Star."

Martina had walked up behind me. She was wearing a jacket over her uniform and had her purse in her hand. There was a white leather "M" stitched to the purse's side.

"What's the matter with her?"

"She got slapped."

"For what?"

"A customer told Sergei that she disrespected him."

I followed her over to the coffee urn. "The guy who made the crack about his monkey?"

"Yes."

"So what?"

"Well, it was Wayne."

"Who's Wayne?"

She didn't answer.

"Sergei does whatever he wants and he does it whenever he wants."

"Why doesn't she quit?"

"Sometimes you can't." She poured some coffee into a Styrofoam cup and blew on it. "Am I taking you home or what?"

"I need my bike."

"Suit yourself."

We walked together to the exit door, which I held for her. But before we could get out, Sergei hurried into the dishwashing room.

"Martina!"

Her nostrils flared as she spun around.
"We need you back here, Martina."
"For what?"
"It doesn't matter what," he snapped. Then he said, "Benjamin needs a hand with the walk-ins."
She sighed and walked back to him.
"Do you need my help?" I said.
"No, Willie." He was standing seven or eight from me, but I could still smell the wine on his breath. "We don't want to wear you out on your first day," he smiled.
"I'd be happy to-"
"No!"
Behind him, Martina shook her head. I let the chivalric impulse fade. They walked off together not saying anything.

CHAPTER 7

Over the next week, I tried to make myself as popular with Sergei and the other employees as I could, and each night, after I got paid, the Russian manager asked me to come back the next day. No one that I talked to knew much of anything about Nicolai or Mandek and I stopped asking before I drew attention to myself. Instead, I kept my eyes open during the shift; and afterwards, I'd wait in a corner of the back lot, with my notebook and a pair of miniature binoculars, watching the exit door until every employee left, but I never saw a face that I wasn't already familiar with.

Martina was always pleasant to me, though we never talked about anything other than work. Then, maybe two weeks after I'd started at the Heron Club, someone stole my bicycle from the back lot. I had just finished my shift and I was in awful mood. I walked over to the chain link fence and kicked it. "God damn it!" I yelled. The oily surface of the pond glistened under the moon. There was a log in the water that might have been an alligator.

"What's the matter?"

The voice belonged to Martina. She was standing outside the rear door. After I told her, she offered me a ride home. Most of the help parked behind the club, and we walked together to her car. She drove a white station wagon, a Plymouth Volare, with a white hatchback and beige interior. The interior was very clean, and a blueberry scented air freshener dangled from the rearview mirror.

As we rode out of the parking lot, Martina pressed a cassette tape into the car's stereo. Grainy sounding pop music from another country seeped out of the dashboard speakers as we headed down the A1A. Through the windows, the strip malls on the sides of the road looked vast and empty.

"How long have you been in Florida?" I asked her.

We stopped at a light. A man on a motorcycle rolled up beside me with a lit cigarette hanging from his mouth.

"How long have you been in Florida?" she said.

"Too long. What is this music?"

"It's Czech."

"What's the singer singing?"

"She's bitter."

"About what?"

"Love."

"Tell me what she's singing."

"Hold on. You're quite pushy, aren't you? Let's see, she's saying-" She listened to the lyrics and translated them in her head. "She says, Love, love, bring me lots of roses, a lot of them with lots of thorns."

"That's beautiful," I said. "It sounds like something Dean Martin might sing."

"You like Dean Martin?"

"Who doesn't?"

"What's your favorite song?"

"Houston."

She switched the stereo off and started to sing. Her voice made me think of raindrops sliding down a window:

"I haven't eaten in about a week

I'm so hungry when I walk I squeak

Nobody calls me friend

It's sad the shape I'm in."

"That's 'Houston,' all right," I said.

The street in front of the Poinciana Gardens was quiet. I got out of the car and walked over to her side to say goodbye.

"Is there a pool here?" she said.

"You want to see it?"

The area around the pool was dark, though the surface of the water shimmered.

"Do they allow swimming at night?"

"I don't know."

"It would be nice. Have you got anything to drink?"

I pointed to the pool. She didn't laugh, but she followed me to my door. The tumblers in the lock made a cracking noise as I turned the key. Then I reached into the dark for the switch and the lamp on the bureau came on, smearing the wall with yellow light. Martina stepped into the room and immediately sat on the corner of my bed. She smelled like dried sweat and cheap food. It wasn't her fault. I smelled the same. She opened her purse.

"Want some?" She offered me a package of sugarless gum. I took a piece, and it made my mouth feel clean and cold. "You look familiar," she said. "You know that?" She slumped forward, propping up her elbows with her knees.

"Familiar with what?"

"I bet you think I'm throwing myself at you."

I took off my chef's coat. She snapped her gum.

"I'm not." She scanned the walls with her eyes, stopping on the paintings of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. "Forgive me," she said. "I guess I was in the mood for talking. But I'm not anymore. Sergei, you know, doesn't like the help to socialize outside of work anyway. I'm sorry for taking up your time."

"It's all right.

"I'm glad that you haven't quit. You're the best cook the club's had since I've been there."

"How long is that?"

Instead of answering, she stood up, and her purse slipped from her hand, dumping things around her feet. We rooted around the floor together for a moment. I found a compact and a pack of Roloids and I handed them to her.

"Thanks again," she said.

"Let me walk you to your car."

She opened the door. "That's very gallant of you."

"I'm not coming on either."

We started walking.

"I swear I've seen you before," she said.

"I don't know how."

The housecleaner, the woman with the tattoo on her shoulder, was sitting in the pool area. She wiggled her fingers at us.

"You don't seem like a cook, you know. Or a dishwasher."

"I'm usually not."

"But you're good at it."

"That work, it isn't very hard."

"What were you before you got here?"

"A lot of things."

We came to the car and leaned against the trunk. The street lamps lit her face. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She wasn't pretty, but her face was becoming interesting to me. The sound of the waves breaking on the beach three blocks away rolled through the still air. A mosquito struck at my forearm.

"May I ask you something?" she said. Her accent made her words sound warm and hard.

"What?"

"Are you in trouble?"

"Why ask that?"

"You just don't seem like someone who just drifted in from the street."

"But I am."

"You're not messed up enough."

"I'm not."

"Then why are you working at the Heron Club?"

I couldn't tell the truth and I didn't feel like making something up. She waited for my answer and sighed when I didn't give it.

"I'm sorry for asking something that's none of my business." She walked to the front of the Volare and unlocked the door. Behind the steering wheel, she reminded me of my sister, when she was a kid, learning to drive. The street lamp bounced off her ugly teeth before she remembered to hide them.

"See you tomorrow."

"Good night, Martina."

She waved quickly, sweetly, and backed the old station wagon out of the parking lot. I watched the car until it disappeared.

The air in the room was now so cold that it stung my skin. I opened a drawer in the bureau and found a pair of boxer shorts and a t-shirt to sleep in. I needed a shower, but I decided to work a little on the Heron Club file, while my memory was still fresh.

When I'd been a private investigator, keeping a file on the people I was tracking had been standard operating procedure. The folder now was as thick as a coloring book, filled with all sorts of things, ranging from descriptions of the kitchen's floor plan to photocopies of Ernie Beaumont's articles about the greyhounds. The story I wanted to add to the file that night was about someone named Valentin. He'd come into the kitchen early in the afternoon, wanting to talk to Sergei. When I'd asked him why, he'd walked off without answering.

I pulled the manila folder from under the mattress. But after writing for a couple of minutes, I switched to dictation, using a handheld tape recorder that I'd picked up in a Quitman pawnshop. Talking seemed to help me develop and process my thoughts.

"The windows that stretch over the kitchen," I said, "no one ever looks out, never peaks around the blinds. Nicolai's up there, they say. A Howard Hughes. I don't know if he knows Mandek. I'm probably wrong about everything. But if he does know him, I have to get up there, have to create a situation in which I can meet him. How? There's no rush, I guess. Though it's better if I find Mandek and Montgomery Clift soon. Martina said I look familiar. What kind of familiar?"

My eyes began to droop. I stood up and felt a new rash of goose pimples break out on my arms and shoulders. I left everything on the desk and walked into the bathroom, closing the door to keep the steam and heat in. The pipes whistled as I turned the faucet's knob and the rush of water eased some of the ache out of my lower back.

Twenty minutes later, with a white towel around my waist, I opened the door. The carpet curled under my toes as steamy air rolled over my shoulders.

"What are you up to, Winthrop?"

I nearly screamed. Martina was sitting at the desk, pointing a canister of pepper spray at me. The Heron Club file rested on her lap.

"What do you want?"

"What's going on?" she said. "Huh?"

"You shouldn't be in here."

The hand that held the pepper spray trembled. She stared at the scars on my chest for a second. Then she pushed the folder from her lap to the floor and the papers inside it spilled out, including the clips about me that had appeared in the papers after Keith Ann's murder.

"What are you up to? Tell me. Tell me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're Winston Winthrop. I knew I recognized you. I knew it."

"How'd you get in here?"

"I let myself in," she replied petulantly.

"But why?"

The pepper spray didn't really intimidate me. But I didn't want a headache either.

She smiled grimly. "My phone fell out when the purse dropped and we didn't get it earlier. It was under your bed. They smack you around when you lose things like that. You didn't answer the door."

"Who smacks you around?"

"I ask the questions, not you," she snarled. "Why did you kill your wife?"

"I didn't."

"I read all about it, about you, the private investigator, when it happened."

"I didn't do it. Throw me that shirt."

I pointed to my clothes on the bedspread. She speared the shirt with the tip of her foot and kicked it at me.

"Thanks."

"Talk, or I'll kill you."

"With what?"

She let me sit on the bed.

“You’re quite the snoop.”

“Ha!” She drew her lips back and growled. “Tell me what’s going on, Winthrop. What are you doing down here?”

With a quick kick, I knocked the pepper spray from her hand. It landed on the floor and I reached over and swatted it under the bed. Then I grabbed her wrist.

“What do you want?” she said, trying to pull away. She managed to swat my ear before I got her other wrist.

“What do *you* want?” I said. “I’m looking for someone named Mandek. Do you know him? You aren’t one of his people are you? Is that why you’re so interested in this?” I nodded my head at the mess on the floor.

“Absolutely not!” she cried. “Not in a million years.” Her face had turned bright pink and her lips curled back as if she’d just swallowed a shot of ammonia. It’s hard to fake disgust like that.

“You know this guy Mandek? He’s the one who killed my wife.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Tell me about it.” Some of the fury in her voice had softened.

I let go of her wrists. I didn’t know what else to do. Then I told her almost everything, from the time Beaumont had hired me to the time that Sergei had hired me. I told her about Ernie Beaumont and the Saturday morning phone call that started everything. I told her about Hilary the nurse and Montgomery Clift and I told her about the standoff with the Wakulla County Sheriff’s Department, too. When I finished, she reached for her purse, found the package of gum and offered me a piece.

“Okay. I believe you,” she said.

“You do?”

“Uh-huh. And guess what?”

“What?”

“I *do* know Mandek, you know. Very well, as a matter of fact.”

I tried to hide my excitement. I unwrapped the gum she’d given me. “Tell me,” I said, with all the politeness I could muster.

“Yes,” she said. “But first you have to tell me know what you are planning to do.”

“Well, I’m going to find Mandek, and then I’m going to kill him.”

She didn’t like this and shook her head. “Killing him isn’t enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“Shut up a moment.”

She stood up, turned around and lifted the back of her shirt, revealing an ugly arrangement of pink and white scars.

“Mandek did that to you?”

“No, but he’s responsible for it. And Nicolai Chestov is responsible for it in his way, too.”

She sat down and lit a cigarette. I went to the bathroom and came out with a glass of water, which I encouraged her to use as an ashtray.

“I want to tell you a story that should help you understand how things really are at the Heron Club, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Eight years ago, I used to live in Prague. Do you know where that is? It’s the capital of the Czech Republic, which used to be Czechoslovakia.”

“I know that.”

“I used to be very ambitious, very confident, and I wanted to travel. My friends and I all thought this way. But they all went away to university and I didn't. And everyday day, I would look through all the newspapers in the library, searching for jobs in America and Britain, and one afternoon, I found an advertisement for a job as an *au pair* in Florida.”

“An *au pair*'s a nanny.”

“Yes. And it sounded very glamorous to me, you know, working for rich Americans. So I answered the ad and a young man came to see me a couple of days later. He was very friendly, you know, and he seemed so sincere as he talked about the money I would make and the fun I would have. I listened to him closely and trusted him, and when he offered me a drink, I accepted it. But after three or four sips, then... I didn't know that there was something in the drink. He was one of Mandek's guys, you see, and they all carry drugs with them. Anyway, when I woke up, my ankles and wrists were tied together. It was very dark and hot where I was and I started to cry and someone kicked me. I felt dizzy. It was seasickness. This was inside a ship, right. And once it landed, I was in Florida, and the men took me to a place, a basement room, and they beat me up and laughed at me. One of them even said, ‘She may be ugly, but an ugly woman is better than a dog.’ That was Mandek who said that.” She lit a fresh cigarette. “For a week they kept me in that room and they didn't feed me or let me wash or anything, and then they took me to Mexico.”

“Who?”

“Mandek. His people. Organizatsiya.”

“What's Organizatsiya?”

“Russian Organized Crime. R.O.C. Russian mafia.”

“Mandek's Polish.”

“It doesn't matter, Winthrop. Russian mafia uses people from all over Europe. Nicolai's in it, too.”

“That was what Ernie Beaumont was writing an article about, R.O.C.”

“I know,” she said. “He asked me for my help.”

“You're the one who called him, aren't you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Let me tell the story?”

“Sorry.”

“In Mexico,” she continued, “they have a sort of school, where they train the girls. It's in a basement, in Chihuahua—like the dog, you know? They get girls from all over the world and they make them learn how to do things, unbelievable things, and if you don't learn these things or you don't do these things, then they kill you. Or they let some client kill you. And that's what happened to a friend of mine. Her name was Flavia. She wouldn't do something and Mandek strangled her, in front of us. To warn us, he said, what could happen if we didn't obey him.

“He was boss, you see, and he bought the girls and he rented them. To Americans mostly. They go to Mexico because it's safe there. They can do anything they want there. It's from them I began to learn English. From clients.”

She leaned back and stared at the cracks in the room's ceiling.

“There was one man, the one who made the scars on my back.” She struggled for a moment. “He did it with candle wax and after that, Mandek put me in a room with other girls, who’d been damaged, too. There was one girl—a priest from Chicago had torn her ear off.”

I went into the bathroom and put on my shorts. When I came back, I walked over to the window to open it, to let some fresh air in.

“Don’t do that!” she hissed.

“Why?”

“There may be spies. Everywhere there might be spies.”

I sat down on the bed. “How did you get out of Mexico?”

“Mandek came to me one day and got me and said that I was going back to Florida. This was a year ago. I didn’t know what to think. They drove me in the back of a truck and brought me here to Cocoa Beach. Mandek had given me to Nicolai, as a gift.”

“Why?”

“Sergei said it was because I was ugly. On the floor, serving the food, I make the other girls look prettier.” She stretched her arms and sighed.

“Why do they let you have a car? Aren’t they worried you’ll run away?”

“No.”

“Then why do you stay?”

She smiled. “A lot of reasons. They said that in Prague they’d kill my family if I ran away, and I believe them. Sergei actually said that he would cut my mother’s legs off and make me eat them.”

“You think he meant it?”

“I know he meant it. You don’t mess with these people.”

“That is a reason to stay, I guess.”

“And there are other reasons. I don’t have a green card and I can’t work anywhere else. And they pay me. It isn’t much, but I can save with it. And when it’s time for me to leave, I’m going to be able to afford the ticket that will get me out of America.”

“When will that be?”

“After I get them back for what they did to me.” She stood up and stretched.

“What’s Nicolai like?”

She sat down, yawning. “I don’t know. I never met him. He stays in his office and never comes out.”

“You want to get these people back? How do you plan to do it?”

“Well, Mr. Winthrop, now that we’re friends, you’re going to help me.”

“You mean that we’re going to help each other. But what are you thinking?”

“You see these?” She pointed to the tape recorder, then the file on the floor.

“Yes.”

“We’re going to give them to the police.”

“Oh, we are?”

“These sorts of things, these records, I’ve been keeping them, too, but not in English. I can’t write in English. And even if I gave them to the police and they started an investigation, Mandek or Nicolai would know that I betrayed them, because so much of what I know is specific to me, and they’d have me murdered, and my family, my mother. But *you* don’t have these problems, do you? *You* can learn all that’s going on around the club and *you* can present it to the police and *you* can get them started on an investigation

that will bring everything about Mandek and his friends to the surface. Then the courts will come in and send them all to prison. And no one will suspect me and I'll be safe."

"You watch a lot of television, don't you? I bet you like *Law And Order*."

"Sure. And *Matlock*."

"Your approach may be too civilized for its own good."

"It's smart."

"And dangerous for me. But I guess my safety isn't as important as yours."

"You haven't suffered as much as I have either. Your wife is dead. My mother isn't."

"Maybe I have family."

"Do you?"

I didn't answer.

"This is the only way I will help you, Winthrop. Are you still interested?"

"You know, maybe I don't want your help anymore. The more I think about it, the more I like working alone."

"Is that so? Maybe you think that sitting in the parking lot at night will help you get Mandek?"

"You've seen me?"

"Sure. I saw you. A couple of times. I didn't make anything of it. I thought you were waiting for a ride maybe. But someone else--"

"Has anyone else?"

"How would I know?" She lit another cigarette. "Listen, Mr. Winthrop. If you want to get to Mandek, you're going to need me. And if you want my help, we are not going to bust heads and kill people whenever we get the chance. Instead, we're going to take what we find out to the police and the district attorneys and the newspapers and everybody else who can help us punish them." She smiled and cracked her knuckles, slowly, one by one. "I like poetry, do you?"

"What?"

"There's a poem by an Irishman named Yeats that we studied in high school in my country. Have you ever heard of him? Yeats?"

"Yes."

"I can't remember the title, but I learned some lines by heart. These:

Move most gently if move you must

In this lonely place.

Do you know what that means, Mr. Winthrop?"

"I do, but maybe I don't agree with it."

She shook her head. "We're *going* to get them, Winthrop. We're going to get them back for what they did to us. But we're going to be careful and meticulous."

Streams of smoke shot out of her nose. She looked strong and confident.

"It's 'meticulous,'" I said. "And you still haven't told me how you're going to help me."

"In time," she said. "I'll tell you in time."

"No," I said. "Let's hear it now. And stop calling me Winthrop. My name is Willie Morgan now."

"Okay, Willie Morgan. You've got to establish a good relationship with Nicolai, because, once you know him, you'll be able to learn things about them, about R.O.C.,

that you won't learn otherwise. But Nicolai's not accessible, not at all. Though I think I know how you could make this happen."

"How?"

"I have a friend, a man who often works for Sergei and Nicolai. He drives for them and he talks to Nicolai all the time."

"What sort of work does he do for them?"

"He helps them with deliveries."

"What sort of deliveries?"

"Whatever they're smuggling."

"Like women?"

"Yes. And petrol and cigarettes and guns and whatever. My friend Valentin, his name is Valentin, used to be a cook at the club. When Sergei learned that Valentin had been in prison, he came to him, asked him if he'd like to work for Nicolai. Now he does. If I suggested your name to Valentin, there's a good chance he'd talk to Sergei, and Sergei would talk to you, and then, if things worked out, and I know they would, then you'd be asked to work for them, to assist Valentin. They already like you. But they need to know that you're okay. Valentin likes me. I'll recommend your name to him and then you'll get the job, I know that."

"That's the help you're offering me?"

"They won't consider you otherwise. Think about it. If you just do what you've been doing, you will wait and wait and wait for Madek to come to the club. And there's a really good chance he won't come because he doesn't work at the club. He works for R.O.C. and this is your way to work for it, too. If you do this my way, you will improve the odds of finding him a lot, right? And the other man, too, the Montgomery Clift guy. If we get you in with them like Valentin, a mole they call it, if we do that, we'll get them. And you'll have your revenge on Mandek without having to commit a murder. And you'll clear your name and I'll be safe and—"

"And everything will turn up roses."

She nodded her head.

"Maybe I want to commit a murder," I said. "And what if they find me out? What if they find you out?"

"They won't."

"Tell me why you called Ernie Beaumont," I said.

"No. Another time. My throat hurts."

"Tell me."

"Do I have to? I'm very tired."

"Come on, Martina."

"Okay. About nine months ago, he used to come to the club, a couple of nights a week. He would sit in the bar and drank club soda. He was a good tipper, and we'd talk about little, unimportant things. But then one night, he ordered a real drink and all of a sudden he became very serious and very, very talkative, and he asked me why I worked in a place like this. I had no good answer, so instead I asked him what he came to the club for. He told me that he was writing an article about the Russian mafia and sex workers. He asked me if I knew anything. I didn't tell him anything, not that night. But he came back and I felt like talking to him, and I told him what happened to me. Afterwards, he promised me that he wouldn't use my story, because it could hurt me. He gave me five

hundred dollars anyway and he said that he wanted me to watch out and listen for information about the trafficking, which he could use. But after that he always came in drunk and he seemed to be more interested in watching the dancers. And then he stopped coming altogether. But he'd told me, you know, he'd told that if I ever learned anything useful, I should call him. There'd be more money for me. And there'd be the chance that the article he eventually wrote would destroy them, would destroy them all. So, last June, when Mandek showed up at the club, I knew this could mean only one thing. He and Nicolai were arranging a shipment of women. So I called Ernie. But he didn't answer his phone. I remembered that his family lived in Tallahassee and I found their phone number. I called up there and asked for Ernie and he actually was there. I told him what I knew, that they were arranging a shipment. He said that he would come down--that he'd been ill--and that he was better now. But he never showed up."

We walked back to the station wagon through the pool area.

"Keep the job, Winthrop. Keep working hard," she said. "Everybody likes a hard worker." She grabbed my wrist and squeezed it. Then she sat down behind the steering wheel. "It's exciting, can't you see? You'll be a spy, fighting bad guys. You won't be doing anything wrong. You'll be helping so many people."

I pushed the car door shut. She smiled at me through the window.

"Pleasant dreams," I said.

"Will you do it, Willie Morgan?"

"Let me think about it." Her face fell and I could see all the years of pain she'd lived through flaring up in her eyes. Against my better judgment, I said, "Okay."

She slapped her hands together and laughed. "You're an angel." Then she backed out of the parking lot and sped off.

Back in the room, I turned off the air conditioner and I pushed the file and the tape recorder under the mattress. I wanted to write down what had happened, but I sat on the bed first, and, within a few minutes, I fell asleep. A dream of black water swallowing me like a soft mouth and Keith Ann's eyes materializing like green fires in the darkness woke me up an hour before sunrise.

* * *

Several weeks later, I still had the job. The number of employees who came and went surprised me. With the exception of the dancers, and Benjamin, nobody ever stayed for very long at the Heron Club, and because of this turnover, after just a couple of weeks, I took on the status of a veteran, the senior cook who trained the new people. Martina and I would get together most nights after work. She lived with some dancers in an apartment the club paid for, out near the highway. She would come to my place, where we'd talk for an hour or two. She was afraid to stay longer. Sometimes, we'd kiss each other. But she would tremble whenever I touched her chest or her legs. "Someday I'll be comfortable," she would say. She said this a lot. It didn't matter. It didn't hurt my feelings. It hurt my heart though, that violent people had used her as a toy. From this sadness for her, my commitment to the project, our project, started to grow. The more time we spent together, that is, the more I wanted to strike at the system, the apparatus of pimps and gangsters, that had put the scars on her back.

CHAPTER 8

It was late October when Sergei asked me if I wanted to earn some extra money. He walked up to the line as the staff was eating the buffet's leftovers for lunch.

"You got a minute?"

He drummed the counter with his fat fingers. A sheen of sweat coated his face and neck and a cloying mixture of booze and cologne rose up from his expensive clothing.

"Sure."

"Come on then."

I followed him into his office, where he sat on his desk. Hanging from the wall behind him there was a brand new promotional poster, a full-color shot of a dancer name Chloe. The caption along the bottom shouted: STRAIGHT OUTTA TEXAS!!

"You been with us two months now, Willie. Haven't you?"

"Yeah."

"The only people who stick around here are the ones who like it. You're one of them, aren't you?"

"Sure."

"You know the reason some stay and some go, why some are happy and some aren't, Willie?" He was slow with his words, as if they were half-remembered parts from some speech he'd heard. "IQ. It's all IQ. You ever noticed that a lot of guys who work here work here for just a day?"

"Yeah."

"They see what we're about. They see that you have to earn your money if you're going to work around here. They're lazy, but since they've got some intelligence, they get out of here quick. And then there's the ones that last a whole week, who come here thinking that they'll get to make it with one of our girls. They last as long as they do because they're dumb. But when *they* get it, when *they* see that you have to earn your money if you're going to work here, what do they do? They get smart. And they quit." He snapped his fingers. "Am I right or what?"

"Sure."

"Then you got the Benjamins, the ones with ambition, but no brains and no class. They're the dumbest of all because they can't see that there's no way we're ever going to need them for anything else besides cleaning plates and toilets. They think that hard work by itself is enough to create personal success. But it's not like that, Willie, is it?"

"No."

"Then there's the ones like you, Willie."

"Like me?"

He tapped his forehead smugly. "The ones who see that work is an end in itself. And at the same time they understand that hard work alone isn't enough if you really want to succeed around here. They understand the importance of politics, too. People gotta like you as much as they like what you do. Am I right?"

"Sure."

Martina appeared at the door. She cleared her throat and Sergei turned his bleary eyes from my face to hers.

"Leave us alone, baby."

"Food delivery man wants you to sign," she said.

His smile vanished. "Didn't I tell you to leave us alone? Or is disturbing me one of your responsibilities? I don't remember."

Martina lowered her head. "I'm sorry."

As she retreated, Sergei's smile returned. "I should be nicer to her. Martina's good. She's one of the smart ones, right? It was her, after all, who recommended you to us."

"She did? For what?"

"I'm going to get to that in a second." He reached for the glass of wine that was sitting on the safe. "But you know what's wrong with her, aside from her looks?"

"What?"

"No spine."

He pulled a cigar from the pocket of his jacket and tore the cellophane loose. Then he bit a hole into the cigar's end and spat a brown chunk of tobacco onto the floor. Then he crammed the cigar into his mouth.

"But you have spine, don't you, Willie? Cooks may grumble a lot, but they're tough. The good ones at least, right?"

"This is a big buildup to something if I ever heard one, Sergei."

"Let me ask you a philosophical question, Willie. Can I do that?"

"Yeah."

"If you found a wallet on the sidewalk, what would you do?"

"I don't know."

"No, tell me. Don't be bashful."

"Honestly?"

"Yeah."

"I'd wipe it off and put it in my pocket."

"So you wouldn't report it? You wouldn't look for the owner?"

"Honestly?"

"Yeah."

"No, I wouldn't. Unless there was a cop watching me."

"You ever done anything like that before?"

"How honest do you want me to be?"

"Tell me this, Willie. If you had a chance to help the club and it meant breaking the law a little, would you be interested in doing it?"

"Probably."

He smiled, then his face hardened. The cigar had gone out and he had to light it again, and after he did, his smile returned and fresh smoke rushed through his nostrils.

"Tell me, Willie, how far would you be willing to go with this? Would you risk your neck?"

"I might."

"Good answer. Now tell me this. Would you be willing to do something like this later today?"

"Sure. But I'm scheduled to work happy hour."

At that moment Benjamin scampered up to the office, holding a box of detergent in his bony hands. His eyes met mine for a second and hatred seeped through the muscles in his face. I grinned at him as Sergei jumped up and kicked the door shut. Then the big Russian struck a match and pressed it to the cigar. He winked at me pleasantly

and returned to the desk. He tapped the cigar against the rim of an ashtray and rolled his head from side to side.

“Screw happy hour, Willie.”

“What do you need me to do?”

He grinned and reached for his glass of wine. “The club needs cigarettes, Willie. Twice a year we send a truck up north, where we’ve got some friends. One of the guys we usually use got sick, and we need to make the pickup tonight.” He looked at his watch. “About nine hours from now. I’ll give you five hundred buck for helping out. You like that idea?”

“Yeah. I like it.”

He rubbed my shoulder with his thick fingers. “Good. Go home and change and then come back here around five. Okay?”

“Okay.”

My hands began to tremble when I walked out of the office. It was possible, I realized, that they’d found out who I was and that they were ready to get rid of me, and putting me on a truck was as smart a way as any.

I got out of the kitchen. As I walked back to the Poinciana Gardens, a humid wind dragged its belly up Atlantic Avenue. Waves of anxiety continued to roll through me, and I wanted to run out to the beach and dig a hole and hide. But instead of doing this, I tried to calm myself with some positive thinking. Maybe they really wanted to use me, I told myself. And if this were so, the opportunity that Martina and I had been waiting for—the opportunity to make good in front of the bosses and to prove my loyalty to them—had arrived.

When I got back to the motel, I felt relaxed enough to take a swim. But the water in the pool was warmer than the air and I got out immediately. If I’d seen the housekeeper, maybe I would have talked to her. She *was* good looking. But since she wasn’t around, I went into my room and watched television, cartoons, until it was time to head back to the club.

The job, thank God, wasn’t a trap. They suspected nothing, and I knew I was okay as soon as I got back to the club. Sergei, when he saw me, waved me over to his office. Before he even said ‘hello,’ he handed me a .9 mm. with a silencer screwed onto its tip.

“You know how to use this?” he grinned.

“Yeah.”

His smile was warm and affectionate and his breath stung my eyes. “I got a cab coming for you in ten minutes.” He handed me a green Miami Dolphins cap. “The driver’s gonna drop you off at place in Melbourne called Ari’s. Two guys are going to be there waiting for you. They’ll be wearing hats just like yours. The one named Valentin is the one who’ll be in charge of the job. You got any questions?” He didn’t give me a chance to answer. “You got any questions, you just ask Valentin.”

I left him and walked through the kitchen. Toby was covering the line. Martina lunged at me in the dishwashing station.

“What’s going on?”

I told her. She stared at me with a grim expression for a second. Then she smiled, covering up her teeth with her lips. “You know it’s not straight,” she said.

“That’s what I guessed.”

“It’s a way for them to get around taxes. Sergei buys the cigarettes from those men at a low price, which allows him to sell the cigarettes to the customers at a low price. It helps business. When the customers come into the club to buy the cigarettes, they usually get a drink or two before they leave.”

“You think the suppliers are mafia?”

“Maybe. You should take a camera for pictures.”

“I don’t want to risk it. A camera makes a flash. I’m bringing the tape recorder, though.”

“What good will it do?”

“It helps me think. And it helps my memory.”

“Well, don’t get caught using it. But if you do, we can transcribe what you get.”

It took me a second to understand what she meant. “Transcribe,” I said.

“Yes. Get street names if you can’t get addresses. Town names. Look at everybody’s faces closely.”

We heard a rattling noise as Benjamin walked into the station dragging a trashcan. He stared at me, at the polo shirt I was wearing instead of my chef’s coat.

“They fire you?” he said.

Martina disappeared around the partition. I don’t think he’d heard us talking. “I’m off tonight,” I said.

“You coming back?” His face was shaded with doubt and contempt.

“Benjamin, I’d work in this place even if they stopped paying me. You want to know why?”

The light from the ceiling struck his long front teeth. “Why?”

“Because I can’t get enough of you, baby.”

I walked outside. The sun, pelting the pond across the way, made the algae on the surface look as green as a bowl of olives. The egret was still standing on the concrete drum, and the headstones, in the cemetery behind him, were still standing in their places, too.

I walked around the building into the front lot. Just as I pushed a fresh toothpick into my mouth, a yellow cab rolled up. The driver, a Haitian with keloid scars on his hands, scrambled through the traffic on the A1A and dropped me off at a strip mall thirty minutes later in Melbourne. Ari’s, it turned out, was a restaurant, a square-shaped building with tinted windows, white shutters and a red roof. A man with dark eyes and an almond-shaped skull greeted me at the door. The bit of hair that grew on top of his head was black like volcanic pumice.

“I’m meeting some friends,” I said.

The host steered me into the dining room, where vinyl-covered booths lined the walls. Most of the customers sitting in them had white hair. They leaned over bowls of matzo ball soup and glasses of iced tea. Nearly all the tables in the middle of the room were free. I spotted two men with Miami Dolphins caps sitting at one of these tables, near the swinging doors that led to the kitchen. They both looked rough, but one of the men had intelligent looking eyes, which squinted at me from above a severe Roman nose and a thick, shower curtain of a moustache. He raised his hand and waved me over to the table.

“Hello, Willie,” he said.

A waiter showed up before I could sit down. The cuffs of his tuxedo shirt were speckled with dirt. The middle finger on his right hand was stained yellow from smoking.

“Menu?”

I glanced at my new friends. The smart one with the moustache shook his head and said, “We’re just having coffee today.” The waiter, hiding his disappointment with a smile, headed over to a booth and collected an empty salad plate from an elderly woman’s gnarled hands.

“I’m Valentin,” the man with the moustache said. “This is Wayne.”

Wayne nodded at me. He had sunglasses pushed above his forehead and tattooed knuckles. “I’m Wayne,” he said.

The waiter silently brought us our coffee, and, before any of us asked, he set a bowl filled with creamers onto the table. The scent of Old Spice lingered after he left us. Valentin stared at me over his coffee, blowing on it.

“Sergei said this is your first job.”

“It’s my first job for him.”

“You know what we’re doing?”

“Getting cigarettes.”

“Sure. It’s going to be very simple. We’re driving up to South Carolina, and once we get the stuff, we’re coming straight back. The truck’s out in the lot now. You have any questions?”

“Not yet.”

“We got you riding ‘escort’.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means you’re going to be in the trailer.”

“Why?”

“If we get any unpleasant surprises, you’ll be back there on top of the stuff.”

“What kind of surprises?”

“Inspectors. Cops. How are you with a gun?” With a massive hand, he poured some sugar into his coffee.

“Like a monkey with a banana.”

Wayne snickered. “I heard monkeys play with crap. Do you?”

“Not anymore. But I heard that guys named Wayne use it for deodorant. Is that true?”

Wayne snickered again. Then he sipped his coffee. “Man, this joe is nasty.”

“Listen, Willie,” Valentin said. He propped his elbows on the table and pressed the palms of his hands together. “Everything should go smoothly. There’s always the possibility that we get an eager beaver at some inspection station who wants to take a look at the goods. But the word is all the stations, at least from here to NC, are closed, and that’s why we’re making the run tonight.

“What do you want me to do if we are stopped?”

“Well, nothing. We’re delivery boys, not enforcers, and no one wants any killing, Willie. But if there has to be—there has to be.” He studied my face for a moment.

“Resisting arrest is standard operating procedure,” Wayne said. “If we was ever taken into custody, Nicolai would send someone in to whack us.”

“But wasting some dumb agriculture inspector or whatever is always the last thing to do, not the first, Willie. You know how to control yourself, right? Anyway, highway inspectors don’t usually take much interest in small trucks and that’s what we’ve got.”

“But tell me, Valentin, what can I expect if we do have to pull over?”

“They’ll ask for the manifest and weigh us on a scale, if they have one, and that’s it.”

“And if they want to look at the cargo?”

“You hide yourself. But if the inspector *does* have a curiosity problem and he finds out what we’re up to, you blow his ----ing head off.”

No amount of cream or sugar could make the coffee taste good and Wayne said that he wanted to throw his mug at the waiter.

“It’s probably not his fault,” Valentin said. “Go pay the bill.”

We watched Wayne walk over to the cash register. When the host with the bad haircut turned away and rang up the bill, he grabbed a huge handful of mints from the dish on the counter and dumped them into his jacket pocket. Valentin left two dollars on the table and we walked out of the diner.

The rig, an old, whitewashed Penske moving van with a green cab, was parked at the far end of the lot. Valentin and Wayne led me over to it and unlocked the rear door. Inside, there were plastic wrapped stacks of magazines with titles like *Amateur America* and *Cherry Pickers*.

“You like porn, Willie?” Wayne said.

“Who doesn’t?”

Valentin climbed up into the trailer and told me to follow him. Once I was inside, he said, “There’s a flashlight around here somewhere.” He grabbed a strap that dropped from the bottom of the door and pulled down. “See this?”

I couldn’t see anything.

“This works like a slide lock,” he said. There was the sound of metal scraping against metal and a space appeared in the door, the size and shape of a brick. “You look through this and if you have to, you shoot through it.”

“Just like a bootlegger’s truck,” I said.

“This *is* a bootlegger’s truck. You got any questions?”

“How do I communicate with you?”

“Pound the wall.”

“What about cell phone?”

“No. You got one?”

“Yeah.”

“Give it up. You don’t need it.”

“Why?”

The door rumbled as he pulled it open. “If an inspector did happen to climb into this trailer here and I almost got him convinced everything’s okay and then some ---- cell phone went off—and it wasn’t mine and it wasn’t his—that wouldn’t be a good thing to happen, would it?”

“You’re right.” I handed him the phone.

“You got any questions?”

“Why’s it so hot?”

“It’ll cool down. We’ve got an air conditioning system back here.”

The floor shook as Wayne started the engine. Valentin jumped down. “We’re out of here in five minutes,” he said.

Five minutes later, Wayne wandered up to the rear of the truck. As he reached for one of the door’s straps, he said, “You ask me, shoot first. Someone starts something, they started it. Right?”

Before I could answer, he yanked the door down, and once again I found myself in complete darkness. I was starting to get used to it.

The inside of the truck never cooled down and the temperature made my head hurt. For an hour or so, I sat with my back against the door, talking into the tape recorder, describing the conversation I’d had with Wayne and Valentin. Some fresh air slipped through the slot, but not much. A patch of light quivered on the floor.

The next few hours passed very slowly. I spent some more time with the tape recorder, the heat dulled my brain and soon I lost interest and I passed the time singing to myself and doing pushups. Then I dozed off. I woke up several hours later when the truck’s speed dropped and the loss of momentum caused a stack of magazines to tumble over onto legs. The patch of light on the floor was gone. I pressed my eye to the little space in the door. Through it, I could see a neon tangle of gas station and restaurant signs and a water tower with the words WELCOME TO PATENT painted on it. The truck came to a stop and a second later I heard footsteps. I drew the gun as someone pounded the door.

But it was just Wayne. “Willie Boy, it’s time to clean yourself off,” he shouted.

The door made a grinding noise as it opened and the air that rolled in smelled like hamburgers and gasoline.

“What’s up?” I said.

“Good Lord, Willie, put that thing away.”

“Are we here?”

“No. You’re taking a break.”

I didn’t move. Wayne hesitated. Then he walked off and returned with Valentin a moment later.

“Come on down, Willie,” Valentin said. “You’re a sweaty mess. Weren’t you getting any cold?”

“No.”

Valentin looked at Wayne, then at me. “That’s not good. This trailer’s supposed to be cool.”

I stayed where I was. The air felt good as I sucked it through my nostrils.

“What’s up, Valentin?”

“We’re letting you off for a spell, Willie.”

“Huh?”

“Come down here. You’re not riding all the way with us.”

“Why?”

“This is the way we always do it,” he said. “Guys on their first job never get to see everything.”

“Why?”

“Who says you’re not a narc?”

”I’m not.”

“No one’s saying you are. But you never can tell. And no one on their first job’s going to learn everything. Trust has gotta be built up, right?”

If they were going to kill me, they would have done it already, and they weren’t going to do it in the parking lot of some 24-hour fast food restaurant on the highway. I shoved the gun in my pants and jumped down.

“Sergei should have said something, Valentin.”

“Sergei don’t care about details, Willie. You ought to know that.”

“What do I do with this?” I pointed to the bulge the gun made.

He told me to follow him to the cab. He opened the passenger door and chilly air spilled out.

“Put it up on the floor there.”

I scanned the parking lot. It was mostly empty. Then I pulled the gun from my waist and set it on the rubber mat that Valentine had been resting his feet on.

“What time is it?”

“A little after midnight.”

“Where are we?”

“North Georgia.” He gripped my shoulder and turned me toward the front of the restaurant. “Goddamn your sweaty. Go in there and get yourself something to drink, Willie. You have money, right?”

“Yeah.”

My back hurt and my neck was stiff. I stumbled toward the restaurant’s side entrance as the truck roared out of the lot.

A blonde with a pierced lip shook her head with exaggerated concern as I walked up to the service counter.

“Did you swim here or is that sweat?”

“Give me a small coffee.”

“You want ice with that?”

“It’s been a long day,” I said.

“If you make it to the end of the day and you’re still breathing,” she said, “it’s a good day.”

“This one isn’t over.”

I took the coffee to the other end of the restaurant, near a glass wall that looked out at a patio seating area. A man in filthy clothes was sitting in a booth next to the trashcan. He pulled an old cigarette from behind his ear. The skin around his eyes looked like piecrust.

“How you doing?” he said.

I didn’t have time to answer. Just as the bum struck a match the restaurant’s manager materialized. The lights in the ceiling lanced the top of his head, making his hair shine. “You can’t smoke in here,” he said. His adam’s apple bobbed above his collar.

“Where’s the smoking section?” the bum answered. He grinned and a hundred tiny wrinkle lines suddenly appeared, radiating from his eyes and his lips.

“Smoking isn’t permitted in this establishment, sir.”

“What are you talking about, man? This is Tobacco Road.”

“No it isn’t.”

The tramp dropped his match on the floor. He snuffed out the cigarette on his tongue. Then he smiled. "Bring me a menu, please."

"We're not that kind of restaurant."

"What kind of restaurant are you?"

The manager glanced at me. "Sorry, sir."

"It's all right."

"It's not all right." He scowled at the tramp. "You've got to leave."

"Why do I gotta leave?"

"If you don't purchase food, you have to leave."

"But you never took my order."

"You order at the counter, sir."

"But how can I buy anything if I don't have any money?"

"You'll have to leave, sir."

"I do?"

The manager's lips trembled with anger. "I'll give you five minutes, sir, five minutes." He backed off and crossed the dining room to the stainless steel counter where the belle with the lip ring was still standing.

The old man shrugged his shoulder. "You know why I don't have any money?"

"No."

"I drank it all up."

I looked away, through the glass wall, at the empty road beyond the patio. I opened up my notebook and started to write down a description of Wayne. The tramp interrupted me by tapping my table with a saltshaker.

"What?"

"Hook me up, man."

"What?"

"Spot me a buck or two. I'm tired of being out there tonight, man, and that manager person is going to make me buy something of he'll give me the toss. Can't you help?"

I stared at him, at the damaged face and the worn eyes, and didn't respond. The heat in the truck must have shrunk my heart.

"Please, buddy. I'm hungry."

I still didn't feel anything, no sympathy, no concern. But I opened my wallet anyway and slipped him a five, hoping it would shut him up. It didn't. When he came back from the counter with his dinner, he sat at the table next to mine. I closed the notebook.

The tramp grinned maliciously. "That manager person wasn't exactly happy about taking my order. I think he'd rather run me out than take my money." He tore open a packet of catsup with his teeth and squeezed it over a pile of french fries. He watched me as he bit into his hamburger. "So how you doing, pal?"

"I'm all right."

"Enjoying your coffee?"

"It's hot."

"From around here?"

"No."

Despite his obnoxiousness, he was sort of endearing, like someone's pet rat.

“I’m from Brooklyn. I bet you can tell that from the way I talk.”

“I guess I can.”

“You ever been to Brooklyn?”

“Sure.”

He made a sucking sound with his teeth as he finished the food. Then he cleaned his fingers with his tongue, licking away the crumbs and salt crystals. After this, he reached into his pants and pulled out a pint of whiskey. He turned away from me as he drank. His face had new color when he finished and he shivered as if he were cold. Then he started to tell me a story about a girlfriend he’d had, a prostitute he knew from the Bronx named Samantha. He rambled on for a minute or two, blithering about her blonde hair and the way she smelled and the way she held a cigarette. Then he launched into a story about a date they’d had, back when he was young and handsome.

“I took her up to Times Square to watch a skin flick,” he said. “And afterwards, we were on the West Side taking a drive. We got to Battery Park, she said that she wanted me to take her to Coney Island. You ever been to Coney Island?”

“No.”

The tramp was seized by a coughing fit. He covered his mouth with a napkin and spit. Then he wadded the paper into a ball and dropped it under the table.

“When we crossed the river, Sammy told me stop for cigarettes. So I pulled over and she ran into the store and came back a minute later with a pack of Camels and a six-pack. She handed me a bottle, right, and I opened my mouth and you know what she said? She said, ‘Drink when we get there, Harry.’ So you know what I did?”

“No.”

“I put the hammer down, buddy. And right then, this suicide jumps off the sidewalk and the Buick scoops him up and he rolls up against the goddamn windshield. And so I have to get out, right, to peel the poor bastard off. And after that, I put him in the back seat. And you know what Sammy said?”

“No.”

“She said, ‘Where we going now, Harry?’ So I said, ‘What?’ And she said, ‘Harry, where we going?’ And you know what I said?”

“‘Coney Island.’”

“You got it. So it takes us twenty minutes to get out there, and once we’re there-- man! You could see the lights and the rides of Astroland shining like stars between the tenements, and it was almost pretty, you know? So I stopped the car behind this garage on Neptune Avenue, right, because there is a Dumpster there. But it’s chained shut. And Sammy asks me, ‘What now, Harry? What now?’ “I told her to hide the car. And then me and the guy, we headed over to Astroland. There wasn’t much of a crowd really, I guess, because it was late, and no one bothered us as we walked down the boardwalk. I didn’t really know what to do at that point. But there was a bench and me and the guy sat down for a rest. Anybody seeing us would have thought we were just another pair of drunks, so it wasn’t like it wasn’t safe. Maybe forty feet from us, there was this sideshow, with a pretty good crowd in front of it. You know they have a sideshow in Coney Island, right? They do. So we’re sitting on the bench a couple minutes. And we’re listening to this voice they had coming outta the speaker that was saying things like ‘Welcome to world famous Coney Island’ and ‘Welcome to the world famous Coney Island Sideshow Circus.’ And it said this over and over and over and over. Then the guy, the one I’d hit,

starts to shake. 'Jesus,' he says. 'Jesus. Jesus.' 'You're all right,' I tell him.' 'Jesus. Oh, Jesus,' he says. And then his back gets stiff like a goddamn majorette's baton. And he starts to cry. And he keeps saying, 'Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. I ruined my life, Jesus. I ruined my life.' Over and over and over and over.

"So I lift him up and carry him to one of those staircases that goes down to the beach. And we get to the bottom of the steps and I drag him across the sand and lean him against one of the posts that holds up the boardwalk. And over my head, right, I can hear the people's feet, right, smacking on the wood.

"Then the next thing—I'm back on the boardwalk in front of the sideshow. And I'm looking at The Human Worm, this old amputee they got on a little stage who can roll cigarettes with his mouth, and then I hear, 'Hey, Harry!' It's Samantha, with a big smile and a paper sack full of beer. 'Everything okay?' she says. I didn't answer at first. 'Is everything okay?' she says again. I told her that everything was okay, but I needed a second. So she gave me a second and I drank some beer and looked at the people that were lining up to get into the world famous Coney Island Sideshow Circus. And you know what Samantha said?"

"No."

"She said, 'Let's go in, Harry. Let's go in and enjoy ourselves.' And you know what I said?"

"No."

"I said, 'Why the hell not?'" The tramp leaned back and took a pull from his bottle. "And you know what we did, man? We watched that goddamn show twice before we left. Let me tell you something, pal, that Samantha was the best. No, actually, she was more than that. She was like, she was like the Muhammad Ali of women, man. She was the ---- greatest."

He wiped his hand with his mouth. Then he reached for the old cigarette from behind his ear. As soon as he lit it, the manager came running into the dining room, and this time he brought a friend, a cook from the back, who looked more like a bear than a man. Without saying anything, the cook pulled the tramp from his seat. He led him to the exit and shoved him outside. The manager stepped over to my table and winked at me. "I'm sorry, sir."

Harry the tramp wasn't done, though. He ran onto the patio and up to the glass wall, and he punched it a couple of times, making a big, thudding noise. Then, as the cook opened the restaurant's door, Harry spun around and zipped off to the road.

When Valentin and Wayne arrived in the truck about an hour later, I got up and headed for the exit. The manager waved at me from behind a cash register.

"Have a nice night," he said.

"It's morning," I said.

As soon as the rig stopped, Valentin jumped down from the cab. We met at the rear of the truck and he opened the door quickly. A strange sweet smell—like tobacco and not like tobacco—seeped out of the stacks of boxes that filled the trailer.

"You ready?"

"Yeah."

I climbed up and he handed me my gun.

“Gas tank’s full, Willie. We’re not stopping. You pound on the wall if you start running out of air or anything.”

Two hours later, just north of Savannah, the truck started to slow down, and I knew something had gone wrong. I pressed my face up to the slot in the door. The air that blew was sour with diesel fumes. The truck rumbled to a halt. Another rig squeezed up behind us and stopped, about a hundred feet away. I could see the driver’s knuckles on the steering wheel. They glowed in the refracted moonlight. The chrome bulldog screwed to the hood twinkled like a star. So did the grill.

We’d pulled into an inspection station and each time our truck moved ahead in the line toward the inspectors’ shack, the floor lurched beneath my shoes, throwing me off balance. Forty-five minutes passed like this. Then, I could hear two men shouting at each other, their voices rising above the roar of the idling trucks.

“What it says here don’t match.”

“It must be a mistake.”

“You’re either carrying less cargo than you’ve declared or you’re not carrying that cargo at all.”

A little man in a blue and black uniform walked around the back of our truck with Valentin. I shut the peephole, stepped back and drew my gun. Then someone worked the door’s lock and handle. Just as the door opened, and the first dirty light from outside rushed in around my feet, I turned around and wrenched myself up into the space above the boxes. Once I was up there, I turned myself around again, flat on my belly. The door rattled over me as it slid along the ceiling. Valentin and the inspector stood around the rear fender, looking in.

“It’s all chocolate,” Valentin said.

“Chocolate melts in heat like this.”

“Refrigeration’s not working.”

“Whyn’t you get it fixed?”

Valentin shrugged his shoulders. “No one ever told me to get it fixed.”

“Open me one of them boxes,” the inspector said.

Valentin jumped into the trailer. Our eyes met as he came up to the wall of cardboard boxes. He smiled at me and the gun. Then he started to work at one of the cartons with a box cutter. He lifted a flap and pulled out several bars of chocolate, which he showed to the inspector.

“All right. Open another. Further in.”

Standing on his toes, he reached in further and opened another box with his left hand. A small pistol had appeared in his right. As he moved the flap, I could see the red and white sides of cigarette cartons.

“Come on, sir!” the inspector barked.

Valentin glanced at me. Quickly and silently, I snatched some candy bars from the first box and pushed them toward Valentin.

He left his gun up there and turned on his heels. “Just chocolate,” he said to the inspector.

“Next time get the manifest right.”

Valentin closed the box and winked at me. He and the inspector talked a little more before he pulled the door down. I stayed up there above the boxes for the rest of the ride. When we returned to Melbourne, the sun was just coming up. We ate bagels and

scrambled eggs for breakfast at Ari's. Midway through the meal, Valentin said, "That inspector was a lazy ----."

"Yeah," Wayne said with a grunt.

"A real inspector would have checked those boxes himself."

"His laziness saved his ass," Wayne said.

"When he mentioned the heat and the chocolate, I thought our cover was blown,"

I said.

"Me too. You know why we had the chocolate in there, Willie?"

"Sure. It faked out the inspector."

"It faked out his eyes. But it faked out his nose, too. It's the smell, you know? Chocolate masks the smell of anything you put it with. With enough chocolate," he smiled, "you could hide the world's largest pile of horse shit, if you had to."

"Or monkey shit," I said.

Wayne nodded and giggled. After we finished eating, Valentin told me I could go. He gave me back my phone and I called a cab. As I waited in the parking lot, I called Martina. She'd been asleep.

"What's up?" she said.

I explained to her what happened.

"That'll score a lot of points with them," she said. "It's a good thing Valentin didn't shoot that guy."

"It's a good thing I didn't shoot that guy."

"What do you mean?"

"I was ready to."

When the cab arrived, I sat down in the back and told the driver to take me Cocoa Beach, to the club. Sergei was waiting at the back door for me. He hooked his arm around my shoulder and we walked through the empty kitchen. The only other employee on the premises was Benjamin, who was standing by the coffee urn, pouring bleach into a mop bucket.

"They told me everything, everything," Sergei said. "I guess we were right about you. Want a drink?"

"No."

"Valentin said you looked like a rattlesnake up there." He grinned and swept back a strand of oily hair from his forehead. "Take the day off, okay?"

"Okay."

"Maybe you can buy a new bicycle with this."

I opened the envelope he handed me. "There's enough here for a moped," I said.

"You deserve it."

It was still morning as I walked back to the Poinciana Gardens, but the sky was already white with heat and light.

CHAPTER NINE

The cell phone woke me that afternoon at three. Sergei sounded excited. "Nicolai wants to talk to you."

"I'm all ears."

"He wants to talk to you in person."

"I'll be right there."

I called a cab. Then I put on fresh clothes and shaved. The car picked me up in front of the motel and the reggae music that pounded out of the speakers behind my head didn't hurt my ears too much. Benjamin was standing outside the club's back door, emptying a trashcan into the Dumpster.

"What are you here for?" He followed me through the door. "Sergei said you wasn't scheduled today."

"Leave me alone, Benjamin."

He snatched a pair of tongs from a cutlery bin and opened and closed them like a crab's claws. "You watch how you talk to me, Willie. You hear?" He hurled the tongs at my chest, but they missed.

"Do that again--" There was a big knife in the bin. I picked it up and pointed it at him. "Do that again and I'll cut your eyes out, old man."

My message got through and he backed off. In the kitchen, one of the new guys I'd trained named Buck was on the line, working a basket of french fries. Martina stood at the end of the counter talking to him. She had one hand on her hip. With the other, she pointed at a bag of bright orange chicken wings that were cooling in a pan. She nodded at me as I passed by. Jealousy flared up in my stomach like acid indigestion. Wanda was standing near the coffee station, chewing a yellow apple.

"This one's a beauty, hon," she said, jabbing the fruit with her thumb.

"Goodness," I said, "all of a sudden I'm having a nice day."

I headed over to Sergei's office. He looked up and turned around as I pushed my head in. "Screw happy hour," he said.

"Screw happy hour," I said.

"What's going on, Willie?"

"I'm here."

He stood up and his gold bracelet rattled against the watch on his left wrist. "The big man's thrilled, you know."

"So am I."

"Come on."

The front of the house was loud and dark and filled with customers and smoke. A topless blonde in heels hooked her leg around a brass pole and twirled, lowering her shoulders until the ends of her hair brushed the runway's floor. A rhinestone belt, wrapped loosely around her waist, sparkled as the spotlights struck it. The air pounded with simple, thudding beats.

"Come on."

We walked into the bar area. The walls in there were black, with a dull shine, as if they were made of licorice. A row of tables draped with white linen stretched along a mirrored wall. On top of them, there were empty, silver-plated serving bins. One of the club's bartenders, a black guy named Stan, watched us from behind the bar. A blue light,

rising up from the sink, illuminated the bottom of his face. His teeth looked green as he smiled at us.

Sergei reached into his pants and pulled out a key ring. He opened a door that was located catty-corner to the bar.

“Go in.”

As the door closed, the thumping music vanished. We moved up the brightly lit stairs in silence. At the top, Sergei squeezed the space above my elbow with his thick fingers. He led me along a carpeted hallway to another door. In the wall beside it, there was an intercom box. He pushed a button and said his name into the speaker. A buzzer sounded and he pushed the door open. Then we walked into a large, dark room with soft lamps mounted to the walls. In the center, there was a wood desk, and, behind it, I could make out a set of venetian blinds. A tight nervous feeling, the imp that liked to play patty cake with the bones in my chest, abruptly returned.

“Why does he keep it so dark in here?”

Sergei didn’t answer. Instead, he called, “Nicolai?”

On the other side of the room, another door opened, letting out the sound of a flushing toilet. A figure materialized in the rectangular bar of light that filled the doorway.

“You’ve yet to learn the value of patience, Sergei.”

“I’m sorry, Nicolai.”

“Get out.”

Nicolai’s accent was a lot like Sergei’s—throaty, harsh, Russian.

“Would you like—”

“I’ll call you when you’re needed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sergei drifted over the carpet slowly, dejectedly. Then he left the room. The man named Nicolai switched off the light in the bathroom. His footsteps brushed across the carpet.

“Sometimes I think that our friend Sergei should have been shot in the cradle.”

“Why?” I said.

“He’s simple and clumsy with his thoughts. And alcoholic, as well. Surely you’ve noticed these shortcomings? Did you know that he was used to captain a fishing boat. That’s what he’s good at. Make yourself comfortable.”

I sat down on a hard chair. The white blotter on the desk glowed softly in the semi-light cast by the wall lamps.

“Of course, he’s loyal, and that compensates considerably for his shortcomings.” Behind the desk, leather cushions made a sighing sound. “Do you mind if I call you William?”

“No.”

He set his hands on the desk. In the weak light, they looked smooth and supple, like hands Rodin may have sculpted. A signet ring, set with a diamond N, decorated his left pinkie. I squinted to see his face, but this was futile.

“When Sergei reported to me about your adventure with the highway inspector, I was—very pleased.”

“Thanks.”

“You realize now that you’ve done this for us that we are likely to use you again. How do you feel about that?”

“I like it.”

Nicolai laughed. He began to play with the signet ring, to turn it slowly around his finger.

“But I have a question,” I said.

“Yes?”

“If those cigarettes are for the club, why did we drive on to Melbourne? That’s thirty miles south of here.”

He chuckled. There was box of tissues on the desk. He reached for one and wiped at the spaces between his fingers. “Your combination of courage and intelligence is a treat, William, you know that? Most of the Americans I’ve met over the years tend to possess one trait or the other, rarely both.”

“I think you’ve overestimated me, sir. I’m just a cook.”

“A smart cook,” he chuckled again. “But to answer your question, William, we never receive our shipments directly. It’s a precaution we take automatically. An unnecessary one, perhaps, but it helps us conceal our activities from the police. The cigarettes will be brought up here on a boat tonight. Now let me ask you a question, William. You speak in a manner that betrays not only good education, but good conditioning, the sort fostered by caring—and just as important—careful parents. Are my conclusions incorrect?”

“No.”

“Not only was your father a professional—“

“He was a veterinarian.” This was true.

“But your mother, too. She was--”

“A hospital pharmacist.” Also true.

“Very good, William, very good. But you, what happened to you? Why would a man with such a pedigree want to wash dishes and prepare food in a place like the Heron Club?”

I hesitated as I searched for an answer that would satisfy him and discourage further questions. “I always liked restaurants, sir. I needed a job after college and I got work as a cook. When I get tired of a place, I find a new one. Sergei hired me when I needed a job. I like it here, so I stayed.”

One of Nicolai’s hands reached across the desk and switched on a lamp, but his face remained hidden, out of the light.

“That is an almost adequate response, William. I believe it’s true. Nevertheless, there must be more to your story.”

“Not really.”

Nicolai leaned forward and his smiling, scarred face moved into the light. A pair of dark glasses covered his eyes, and the light from the lamp streaked the lenses and got tangled in his heavy eyebrows. He was speaking, telling me that he had great expectations for me. But I had trouble listening. My hands were trembling. The man behind the desk, the well-spoken gangster with the Russian accent, was Montgomery Clift, the same guy who’d attacked me in Ernie Beaumont’s house. The pace of my breathing accelerated. I tried to slow it. Sweat rolled down my face.

“What?”

Nicolai grinned. He reached under the desk. A button clicked and static crackled in a speaker I couldn't see. The sound of Benjamin's angry voice sifted into the room. He was scolding Wanda for being slow.

"I used to be able to watch everything from up here. Before my injury." He tapped the left lens of his glasses. "To compensate, we installed microphones."

"You listen to the customers, too?"

"Of course."

"And you've listened to me?"

He nodded. "For three months, you've been examined like a specimen in the laboratory. You've handled yourself extremely well. Never once, never once have you shown any sort of emotional or mental weakness. I appreciate that a great deal."

"Thank you."

"Some day soon, William, we're going to move you up. Do you like the sound of that?"

"Yes. I'm flattered."

"Some people hate success, you know."

"Not me."

"Let me ask you something, William. Do you think that you would you have killed that man in the truck?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever killed a man before?"

"No."

"But you would?"

"If circumstances warranted."

"Some day, in all likelihood, you may have to kill for me."

"That's if I keep the job."

I wished I had my tape recorder.

"Very good," he smiled. "Now let me get back to work." He pressed another button under the desk and the lights in the room brightened. To the right of the curtain there was a photograph of two men standing next to each other on a boat, holding a big, blue fish. One of them was Nicolai. The other looked a lot like Mandek.

When I got to the door, I glanced back at the desk, at Nicolai as he rubbed his cheekbones. Henna-colored scars marred the skin beneath his fingertips. Back in Ernie Beaumont's house, when the gun fired in front of his face, the flash had really hurt him.

I said goodbye and headed downstairs. As I walked through the kitchen, I passed Martina, but I didn't speak to her. That night, in the room at the Poinciana Gardens, I told her everything. We kept the tape recorder rolling for two hours. When we finished, she wagged her finger at me.

"God rewards patient people," she said.

The next month passed without incident, though the shifts got busier as Thanksgiving approached, and increasing numbers of snowbirds returned to Florida to wait out the winter in the sun. Sergei usually had me on the day shift and at night, after work, I usually stayed in the motel, working on the Heron Club file or reading novels and magazines. Spending my time like this wasn't much fun, but it was safe.

Martina often visited me after she finished at the club. She'd pick up food at Publix or some late night restaurant, and we'd eat in the room, or near the pool if the

housekeeper wasn't there, and then we'd walk along the beach. It was pleasant, listening to her talk about her day and, sometimes, about her life in Czechoslovakia before the Cold War ended.

One night we stood on the beach near the pier. With the tide low, the wood pilings looked long and ugly and thin, like the legs of a giant insect. As we stood there, watching the waves fumbling against the shore, I reached for Martina's hand, but she pulled it away.

"I'm sick of it all," I said suddenly, surprising myself.

"Of me?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

I reached for her hand again and this time she let me have it.

"I'm sick of waiting," I said. "Sometimes I just want to kick my way into Nicolai's office and drag him to the police station and tell them everything I know. Who knows if Mandek has anything to do with the club anymore? I mean, for God's sake, Martina, every night I sit in that room waiting, wasting time. I should be checking leads, talking to people, not this. This secret agent stuff is making me nuts."

"Whining is an expression of weakness," she said.

"I'm really starting to go nuts."

"I've got nuts for you," she said. "Things went totally nuts at work today."

I hadn't worked that day and I said, "What do you mean?"

Her body tensed and she spoke excitedly. That afternoon, the dancer named Star and a busboy named Lawrence had had a fight in the kitchen. The fight broke out around three, in the slow time between lunch and happy hour. Martina had been standing at the worktable, rolling silverware into napkins, when Star accused Lawrence of taking cash from her purse. He denied it. But as she walked over to him, he put something into his mouth and swallowed, and Star slugged him.

"Lawrence went crazy after that, crying and moaning."

"What'd you do?"

"I watched. It was sort of funny. But then Sergei showed up, and I got worried."

"I don't understand."

For weeks, she said, Sergei had been searching for a thief, someone who'd been swiping small amounts of cash from the till in his office.

"I know that," I said.

"Well, after he separated Star from Lawrence, and Star told him what had happened—"

"He thought he'd found his thief."

"Yeah."

As we walked, the wet sand made sucking sounds around our feet. Martina said that Sergei had pinned the busboy's arms back, then he'd poured hydrogen peroxide down his throat.

"To make him puke?"

"Yeah, and it worked. Lawrence threw up a fifty-dollar bill. The same amount Star said was missing."

"That's messed up."

The beach stretched ahead of us, long and black, between the front of the condo buildings and the quietly rolling waves.

“Then what?”

“I don’t know. I had to go back to the bar and when I got back, all of them were gone. Stan covered for Sergei for the rest of the night.”

“So Lawrence is Sergei’s thief.”

“No.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just know.”

I let go of her hand. “It’s you, isn’t it?”

“Sure.”

“Why?”

“Because they owe it to me, Willie. I may not have to do the things I did in Mexico anymore, but I’m still their slave. They let me have just enough money to live, you know, and if I ever want to get enough to get away from this place, I’ll have to steal it.”

“How much have you taken?”

“Not enough. Maybe three hundred.”

“You shouldn’t do it.”

She hooked her arm around mine. “But it’s so easy.”

“It’s so dangerous.”

“Don’t think I don’t know that. Have you got a better idea?”

I wanted to say something like ‘steal big or don’t steal at all.’ But I kept silent. She began to sing in Czech. The palm of her hand was hard and rough.

The next morning I arrived at the club a little before ten. The dishwashing station was already wet with steam and smelled strongly of fresh soap, but Benjamin wasn’t there. I walked through the empty kitchen to Sergei’s office to check in. An open briefcase sat on the safe. The big Russian didn’t turn around as I rapped my knuckles against the doorframe.

“Sergei?”

“What?”

“I’m here.”

“Nicolai wants you to see you.”

“He’s in his office?”

“Where else would he be?”

“Do I just go up?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He pulled his key ring from his pocket and handed it to me without turning around. I thought I saw the corner of a bandage creeping around the left side of his neck.

“Just go up to his office, all right?”

Wanda was standing near the coffee urn, wiping the front of the machine with a towel.

“What’s up, hon?”

“The usual.”

“I guess that’s good, hon.”

I walked through the swinging doors. The ceiling lights were on and for the first time I could see how shabby the place looked, the cigarette scorched carpet, the swivel chairs leaning on broken feet.

Nicolai's office, in contrast, was just as dark as it was when I saw it the first time. The soft lighting and the spaciousness made it feel comfortable and safe, like a chapel in a hospital. The desk's lamp was on, and Nicolai sat behind it, rubbing the skin around his eyes. The crisp scent of Noxzema hung in the air.

"Sit down, William." He wiped his hand with a tissue. "How are you?"

"I'm ready to work."

"I know you are." He sighed. "I've got to tell you something."

As he narrated the sordid story of Sergei and Star and Lawrence, I pretended it was news. Then he opened a drawer, reached in and lifted out a bag, which he set on the desk.

"Look at this," he said.

I opened the bag.

"Take it out."

I reached in and pulled out a shoe, a black leather sneaker.

"Look at it closely. Do it carefully."

The corner of a razor blade protruded from the shoe's instep.

"Did you find it?"

"It's ugly. Whose shoe is this?"

"It belongs to Lawrence. He cut Sergei's face with it."

"When?"

He sighed heavily. "After Sergei made the boy throw up, he brought him a towel, to clean himself. To be thoughtful, I suppose. He wasn't expecting it and the boy kicked him."

"I just talked to Sergei."

"You didn't see his face?"

"No."

"He spent most the night in the emergency room."

"Maybe he should take the day off."

"No. It's not necessary. He's been fired. At least as manager. Fights. Physical abuse. Things like that mustn't happen." He smiled. "So I'm going to need you downstairs, William, covering for him until we find his replacement."

"I'm flattered, Nicolai." I really was. "But what's going to happen to Sergei?"

"He goes back to his boat, William. He won't like it, but things will have to do."

"You're sending him back to Russia?"

"No, no. We still have some use for him in Florida. But if he's ever in this kitchen again, then—"

"What?"

"Something will have gone terribly wrong."

"What about Lawrence?"

"Lawrence sleeps with the angels now, William."

It took me a second or two to understand.

CHAPTER 10

I worked long days for the next two weeks, but I didn't cook anymore. Instead, I scheduled shifts for the dancers, the bouncers and the food and beverage people. I also kept track of hours, handled payroll, signed for deliveries, placed ads in the paper, kept track of receipts and made reports for Nicolai, too. Martina was happier with Sergei gone. When she visited me at night, she stayed longer than she had before he left. She was more receptive to my affections, too. Everything was more or less going well.

In the second week of December, though, I almost blew it for us. I'd just finished up for the day and I was on my way home. A soft breeze was blowing, swaying through the pines and batting at the tinsel Christmas trees that decorated the lampposts in our parking lot. The warm air and the darkness were pleasant and I stopped near the club's entrance and talked to Toby for a couple of minutes. But when a group of businessmen came up to the door, Toby had to take care of them, and I started across the lot. I was half way to the street when I heard my name called. I looked around, trying to find where the voice had come from.

"Over here, Willie! Over here!"

It was Wayne, leaning against a bright red Ford Escort. He gestured to me, rolling his hand in front of his chest. As I headed over to him, he drummed the passenger window with his elbows. He'd rigged the little car with a foil, a bra and a pair of chrome curb feelers.

"What do you think of my wheels, man?"

"Tight," I said.

He lit a cigarette and scratched his skinny arms. He was wearing blue jeans, a wife beater and the same Dolphins cap Sergei had given him for the Carolina job.

"I gotta take a ride out to the McGovernville Kennel Club and I think I'd be better off if I brought a pal along. What do you say?"

"How much is my cut?"

"Fifty bucks?"

I told him that sounded good and he unlocked the passenger door for me and I climbed in. As we made the twenty mile trip up to McGovernville, Wayne told me that he'd been instructed by Sergei to deliver a message to one of the track's managers.

"He's one of our guys," he said, "but he's been misbehaving."

"How?"

"Been ----ing with our odds, man, letting the wrong dogs run fast, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean."

Wayne giggled and banged the top of the steering wheel with his wrists. The dog track was located between 95 and the ocean, close to the city's sewage treatment plant. Surrounded by pine trees and walls, the lamps around the running area threw up a cloud of light, through which I could see a part of the tote board. Above the entrance, neon dogs chased after a neon rabbit and cheery, recorded music floated from speakers I couldn't see in the darkness. Wayne steered the car toward the northern end of the lot.

"There's the paddock," he explained, pointing to a small cinderblock building that rose up behind a chain link fence.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked him.

He stopped the car and told me to get out. Then I walked around to his side and after he asked me sit behind the steering wheel, I got in. He pushed the door shut.

“Keep the window down, Willie. If you hear me screaming or see me running, you drive this baby over to the gate there as fast as you can. Awright?”

“Sure. What are you fixing to do, Wayne?”

“Like I said, Willie, I’m just here to give the guy a message.”

“You’re not planning to hurt him, are you?”

“Christ, no. Listen, Willie, reach down beside the seat there.”

I did and my fingers brushed the side of a piece of metal.

“Pick it up.”

I lifted a crowbar out of the space and looked at it for a second. Then I set it across my lap.

“You’re a good man, Willie.”

I watched him jog over to the fence. When he got there, he rattled the gate until a teenaged boy came out from the front of the paddock. As the kid opened the gate, Wayne sucker punched him and the kid fell to the ground. For the next three minutes, I sat there, trying to decide if I should help him or not, because he was out cold. But before I could make up my mind, Wayne reappeared. He was running, so I started the car, and swung up to the side of the fence. I leaned over, pushed the passenger door open, and he jumped in. He was holding a switchblade and blood smeared his hands.

“Hit it, Willie!”

We shot out of the lot and started back for the highway.

“You said you weren’t going to hurt anybody,” I said.

“Shit, man, there wasn’t even anyone there. They just had that little dude I took out.”

“What happened?”

“Well, I guess you’d call it an emphatic gesture.” He reached into the glove box, pulled some napkins out and began to wipe off the knife. “Them dogs aren’t going to be running too fast anymore.”

“What’s that mean?”

He grinned and cracked the window and the wind sucked the bloody napkins from his hand. “I mean their goddamn paws are just as soft as marshmallows. I didn’t know that before.”

“You hurt the dogs?”

“Those were the orders if the track manager wasn’t there. He was supposed to be there.”

“How many?”

“How many paws?”

“How many dogs?”

“Four. Just four.”

Right then, I reached over with my fist and slugged him above the ear. As his head banged against the passenger window, the blade fell from his hands. He didn’t turn to hit me. Instead, he reached between his knees, trying to recover the knife. That’s when I swatted the back of his neck with the crowbar.

Unfortunately, I knocked him too hard and he died before I got the Escort onto the shoulder. This surprised me because there wasn’t any blood. At first, I didn’t really know

what to do, so I drove back to the highway, to keep myself moving, without getting myself lost. As I headed south in the slow lane, I anguished over what I had to do because I'd done something that would arouse the interest of police and the rage of the gangsters. I decided that I had to hide the crime from them. They wouldn't look for a killer, at least not right away, if they didn't know that anyone had been killed. This meant that I had to make Wayne's corpse disappear.

Another hour passed before I was able to make my next decision. It came to me in a flash, as I crossed the Martin County line, and a billboard sign for a pecans-and-oranges tourist stop popped up in front of a wall of trees. On it, there was a peeling image of an alligator. Its mouth was wide open and full of teeth.

Keith Ann's first husband Jake had grown up and lived most of his life around Melbourne, but he'd made his living as a poacher, pulling gators out of the land between Lake Okeechobee and Orlando. He died on the job, in fact, and his remains were never found, just his empty boat, not far from the trailer he kept in the woods near Lake Kissimmee.

Keith Ann had taken me to visit this trailer once, shortly after our wedding. On the drive, she'd talked about the things she'd learned from her husband about capturing alligators. "Jake believed that a gator's favorite flavor is chicken," she'd said. And the afternoon we spent in the creeks behind the house, we'd caught a baby gator with a chicken neck that we dragged through the water on a string.

I turned off the highway and stopped at a Winn-Dixie, where I bought the meat and a pack of Lucky Strikes, to help my nerves. Had anyone looked in the car and seen Wayne, they would have thought he was passed out or asleep, at least that's what I hoped. Then I drove out on a state road for forty miles or so. My memory was good and I remembered to turn off the road when a sign with the words ENJOY LIFE IN DELTON FLATS appeared. Delton Flats had been the name given to a subdivision that was planned, but never finished. You had to get through Delton Flats to get to Jake's house.

I drove onto the property, and though the night was very dark, I could make out the spaces the developers had cleared, as well as the cable spools and plywood stacks they'd abandoned. Then I headed into a mass of trees and brush and drove until Jake's house materialized, the half moon lancing it, making the aluminum walls look ghostly and translucent.

I walked to the back of the trailer. Just to my left, I could see a finger of brackish water, the edge of the swamp. It hadn't been six months since Keith Ann and I had been down there, and nothing had changed. A sheet of wood, probably stolen from Delton Flats, still leaned against the house, shielding Jake's collection of gaffing hooks and saws. His jon boat was where we'd left it, too, and I flipped it over. I reached for the long pole that was lying under it. Then I carried it to the little shore. Then I dragged the boat over.

For a skinny guy, Wayne felt pretty heavy, and when I got him out of the Escort and lowered him to the ground, twigs made cracking sounds under his weight. After removing his wallet from his jeans, I lifted him by his elbows and pulled him over the dirt, but my foot caught something at one point, and I fell backwards and he sprang at my chest. This was unsettling, of course, but I plugged on, and got him into the boat. Then I

walked back to the car for the bait and the other things. I drained two beers quickly and hot boxed a Lucky before I was ready.

Maneuvering the skiff was difficult at first. Pushing and pulling with the long pole, I got us out to a lagoon in about twenty minutes. I couldn't see any gators there, but I felt like giving the place a try anyway. So I unwrapped the chicken I'd bought and strung some twine through the breast cavity. Then I tossed it like a bocci ball, watching it arc and drop, and then hearing it land with a splash in the blackness.

After several tries, I got a bite. The response was soft at first, then sharp. I didn't know what I had, but if it was a gator, I wanted him near the boat. So I pulled the line in. And where the twine met the water, there was a sudden disturbance. Ripples appeared, then the yellow flesh of the chicken, followed by the spiny, ugly back of a baby gator. Once I had the animal in the boat, I turned him upside down and held him by the base of his tail. Keith Ann had explained to me, when we'd caught the baby together the other time, that female alligators instinctively respond to the sound of a crying infant, whether they're its mother or not. A crying baby, she said, was more effective than any piece of chicken. And to get a baby to cry, you had to snap at its belly with your finger or thumb. There didn't seem to be any adults in the lagoon, though, and after ten minutes of trying, I gave up and I lowered the animal back into the boat, between Wayne's legs. The little creature stared back at me with the ball of chicken clamped between its jaws.

Pushing the boat through the clotted arteries of the swamp wasn't fun. Branches swung at my face and mosquitoes tore into my arms and my neck. At one point, the boat got trapped, and I worried that the pole would snap. So I gave up on the pole, and pulled on the roots that choked the banks. Eventually, I got through, and the boat shot into a small black lake.

Here, the eyes of adult gators beaded the water's surface, shimmering with the reflected light of the moon. Cypress trees rose along the edge, black and shear, like giant Chinese letters dropped on top of the mud. I reached for the baby gator and inverted it again. When I thumped the animal's pale green belly, it made a chirping, giggling sound. I scanned the scummy water for movement and watched, with a mixture of horror and relief, as the ridges of a gator's back broke the water, and its tail swept back and forth like an enormous, swimming snake. When I tapped the baby's belly again, other gators responded and soon several pairs of eyes were streaming across the lake's surface.

I lowered the baby back into the boat and let him go. Then I grabbed Wayne and I pushed his arms over the side just as a giant head swept up. It trapped the dead man's right arm in its teeth and yanked, making the boat reel and throwing me to the stern. Then another blow struck, smashing at the bottom of the boat. I tried to sit up, but the boat was hit again, from the bow this time. Something hit my head. Wayne somersaulted over the side.

I didn't stick around. The swamp was now a bubbling mess of teeth and jaws. After releasing the baby, I steered the jon boat back to the narrow mouth of the stream. Because the boat was lighter and easier to maneuver, I got back to Jakes trailer in an hour. Then I drove over to Pineda, a little town just north of Melbourne. I parked behind a roadhouse called The Country Club, in a rough, white section west of the highway. And there, I cleaned the blood and the dirt from the Escort, using a package of Windex wipes that I'd picked up when I bought the chicken and the cigarettes at Winn-Dixie. I left the car there, rather than at McGiverville, because I wanted Nicolai and Sergei to think that

Wayne had gotten into trouble, had 'gone missing,' after the job, and I didn't want them to suspect the trainer or any of the others at the kennel club.

It was close to sunrise when I finished and I had to get home, to clean myself up and change my clothes, before I went to work. So I called Martina and asked her to come down to Pineda in the Volare. I used the time before she got there to add the story of Wayne and the greyhounds into my notebook. When she showed up, the sun was rising.

"You smell worse than usual," she said, after I sat down in the front seat and leaned over to kiss her. "What the hell happened?"

"Some things are better left unsaid," I said.

One night a couple of weeks later, Martina and I took a walk out to the end of the fishing pier. The great black sheets of the ocean and the sky stretched ahead of us, pierced by the lights of boats and stars and airplanes.

"The Heron Club's business is more or less clean, you know? I've looked at the books and there's nothing I've learned, nothing new really, that we can use, outside of the cigarettes, and I doubt they'd interest the police all that much, since there's no evidence other than my word."

She had her arm around my waist. A dozen people stood at the end of the pier with fishing rods. The wind snapped at them and they wore winter jackets.

"Reassure me this is going to work," I said.

"It's going to work."

"Reassure me that we're going to put on a hurting on these people and that I'm going to get Mandek."

"We're going to hurt them and you're going to get Mandek."

"Okay," I said. "But I'm worried about losing heart. I really am. And I'm getting worried about getting busted, too. The longer I stay in this state, the greater the chances are that someone will recognize me."

"Don't be afraid," she said. "When you're trying to help people, you cannot be afraid."

Three days before Christmas, Nicolai called me on the house phone and told me to come up to his office. The blinds were open now, though not all the way, and a soft light filtered into the room. As I sat down, he pushed a small box across the desk. There was a ring inside, a thick white gold band set with bits of diamond.

"Does it fit?"

It was at least a size too big. I could grow into it.

"Yes, but why?"

"For loyalty and hard work. And it's Christmas, William. Merry Christmas."

"I'm touched." I was.

"Listen. I've got some good news." He removed his glasses. "The doctor says my vision is coming back." He couldn't see me flinch. "Details are hard, of course. But the cones and rods are starting to let in some light. Isn't that good news?"

"It's great news."

"But I'm still fairly helpless, William. And that's why I need to talk to you. Tomorrow night, we'll be receiving some very special merchandise offshore, and I want you to be there, when the shipment arrives. You'll stand in for me, in other words, acting as my representative. The man we planned to use unfortunately disappeared."

“Tell me what you want me to do, Nicolai, and I will do it as well as I can.”

He replaced his glasses. “Well, that’s excellent, William. But I don’t want to tell you everything up front. Absolute disclosure can be absolutely dangerous. Do you know what I mean by this? In the event that you were picked up and questioned by the police, I’d rather you didn’t have much to hide from them.”

“I understand.”

“Later, of course, you’ll know a great deal.” He pushed a piece of paper toward me. On it there was a listing for a marina in Cocoa Beach that was located about a mile south of the Poinciana Gardens. “I want you to be at this address tomorrow night at eleven. You’ll be recognized at the gate.”

“Should I bring a gun?”

“No need. We’ll have one on the boat for you. But, William, I don’t want gunplay, not even if things go badly. You’ll be there to observe things for me, to be my eyes, so to speak. And I want you to watch over Sergei, too, as he’ll be captaining the boat. You’ll be given some money, which you will hand to an agent once the merchandise is secured on board.”

“Yes, sir.”

That night at the motel Martina came over.

“Bring your gun, anyway,” she said. “The agent he’s talking about is Mandek. You may just give him the money and he’ll get back on his boat and sail away. But if he rides in with you, you’ll be in great danger.”

“What do you think he meant by ‘very special merchandise’?”

“Women.”

“Then this is it, isn’t it? I should alert the police.”

“And if they come out there in their boats, you’ll be caught and sent to prison.”

“I know. So what should I do?”

“Bring this.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a disposable cardboard camera. “And your tape recorder and a notebook. Once you get back to shore, then we’ll give everything to the police or the newspapers and then we will get out of here.”

“What if Mandek recognizes me?”

“Stay away from him. Give him the money, but don’t look at him. It’ll be dark.”

“And if he does?”

“If he does, or if you really think he will, then call me from the boat. And I’ll call the police.”

“I could kill him right there and be happy.”

“You should use your gun only for protection, never murder. Besides, if you kill him, you could ruin everything.”

I lit one of her cigarettes and coughed as I tried to inhale. “I don’t think this is going to work.”

She grew silent. Then she unzipped her purse. “Don’t snivel. If you had to kick somebody, which foot would you use?”

“The left.”

“Where are those boots that you wore when you were cooking?”

I pointed to the space under the bed.

“Give me the right one.”

She pulled a package of razor blades from the purse. I handed her the boot. She used one of the blades to cut a sideways slit into the boot, near the tip. Then she took another razor and reached into the boot. A second later, the corner of this razor slid through the slit. "You might need this."

"Do you always carry razor blades in your purse?"

"I have ever since you told me about what Lawrence did to Sergei."

She also had a roll of duct tape in her purse, and she cut several pieces from it. With them, she fastened the blade to the boot's insole. The sharp side of the blade faced outward. To prove this, she opened the phone book that sat on the desk and cut one of the pages.

"If you are not careful," she said in a maternal way, "you can cut your ankle open. So put the right boot on first and take it off last."

After she finished, she washed her hands in the bathroom. When she came out, she was naked. I watched her walk through the room to the bed. The lights were low and the shadows made the scars on her back look less terrible.

"Come over here."

"What's up?"

"This might be the last time we ever get the chance."

The next morning, I took a cab to work, arriving there at nine to let Benjamin in. Nothing unusual happened during the first few hours as the dancers and the other employees showed up. But just before the lunch service started, Stan, the day bartender, rushed into the kitchen.

"No music, Willie," he said.

"Not good."

I tried to think of what to do, who to call. But before I could decide, the house phone rang.

"What's going on?" Nicolai said. "I don't hear anything."

"The sound system's down."

The problem wasn't colossal, yet it felt that way for me. Nicolai heard the tension in my voice.

"Go home," he said.

"Huh?"

"You shouldn't be here anyway."

"But Nicolai—"

"No, I want you clear-headed and fresh for tonight."

"I'm good."

"No, no. We'll get someone over here soon. I do have other employees, William. Go home."

"I will."

He hung up. The bartender was waiting for me.

"What are you going to do?"

I shrugged my shoulders and walked back to the office to cool off. As I sat there at what had been Sergei's desk, I felt embarrassed. I'd overestimated my importance. Affection for a place can make you stupid.

A knock on the door interrupted my reverie. Martina poked her head in. "Music's back on," she said. She glanced over both shoulders. Then she stood up on tiptoe and pecked my cheek. As she walked off, I felt my face flush.

I walked through the kitchen to the bar. From Stan, I bought a pack of Marlboros. Star was on the runway. I tried hard not to think but I couldn't.

I took a cab home twenty minutes later. The woman with the tattoo was sitting near the pool, holding a can of Coke in her hand.

"You're back early," she said.

I reached for my keys. The aluminum legs of her chair scraped against the concrete and her bare feet slapped the ground as she ran toward me.

"You get fired?" She smelled drunk. "Huh?"

I let myself in and shut the door on her. For an hour, I sat at the desk, writing a report, an open letter. In it, I described and summarized everything damaging that I'd learned about Nicolai, his cronies, his club and the deaths of Keith Ann and Ernie Beaumont, leaving out the details from Martina's story and the killing of Wayne. I read through it, and pushed it into an envelope. There was enough there, maybe, to trigger a low level investigation, but nothing that wasn't ultimately speculative, aside from the run for the cigarettes. I planned to tell Martina about the letter from the ship, if it looked like I wasn't going to make it back to land safely, and she could use it as she wanted. Then I stepped out of the room. The woman with the tattoo on her shoulder was stirring the pool with her toes.

"Merry Christmas," she said.

"Merry Christmas. Where's Karl?"

She reached for me and I helped her to her feet. We walked together to the motel's office, where she lifted the desk phone and pressed the 0 button. "Someone wants to speak to you," she said.

Karl, the owner, appeared a minute later.

"I need to store something. Do you have a safe?"

He nodded and waved me into a back room, where there was a safe that doubled as a TV stand. "It will cost you one hundred dollars," he said. He turned the safe's dial and the door swung open. The safe was filled with small, wrapped packages and a couple of guns. "This safe is very safe," he smiled. I handed him the letter, the Heron Club file and the dictation tapes I'd made. "How long you need me to keep all this?"

"I don't know."

He shut the safe's door and led me back to the office and we shook hands. "I'll add the charge to the bill," he said.

The woman with the tattoo on her shoulder followed me back to my room. As I let myself in, she said, "Honey, when are we going to party?"

I closed the door on her gently. For the next few hours, I napped. When I got up, the sun was down, and I walked to the pier and had dinner in an ice cream parlor that also sold hotdogs. When I got back, it was almost eleven. I dressed, putting on a t-shirt and a windbreaker. Next I put on my boots. The corner of the razor blade, protruding from the side of the left boot, looked sort of cute, like a little animal's tooth. I pushed a notebook into the back pocket of my jeans and the tape recorder and the camera into the windbreaker's zipper pockets. If they searched me and found these things, I'd tell them that Nicolai had asked me to keep a detailed record of the trip.

During my years as a private investigator, carrying a gun had been essential, particularly when I was conducting surveillance in rotten neighborhoods. But guns had always given me an uneasy feeling. When I was a boy, a kid I knew shot off his kneecap with a pistol, and I'd always been worried about hurting myself in the same way. I'd always been worried about children hurting themselves in this way with a gun of mine, as well. And since my first night in the motel, I hadn't touched the .32 I'd bought from Boo Boo in Quitman. I never even thought to think about it, in fact, and the mattress was such that I never felt the piece through the fluff and springs. Now though, after reaching around for it for a minute, I started to wonder if the gun was gone. I lifted the mattress and shoved it to the floor. The gun *was* gone.

Who took it? Martina? No. Karl? He had nothing to gain by taking it. And a burglar would have taken more than just the gun. It had to be the maid, I decided, the woman with the tattoo on her shoulder. I ran out of the room. She was sitting on one of the folding chairs, smoking a cigarette.

"Where is it?"

"What?"

"You know."

She smiled serenely and slowly said, "Marty's Pawn and Gun. You want the ticket?"

"Why?"

"What would you do if you found a golden egg like that?"

"A golden egg? You probably got twenty bucks for it."

She nodded her head.

"You're nuts. You must be nuts."

"I'm smart."

"You're not smart. I should call the goddamn police."

"I don't think that would be smart."

"What?"

"I know something that you don't know I know."

"Like what?"

"You think I only found that gun?" She smiled again, watching my face. "I saw your little folder, Mr. Winthrop."

I wanted to be angry, I deserved it, but I didn't have the energy or time, not now. And suddenly I was scared.

"You tell anybody?"

"Not yet."

"What do you want?"

"Who said I wanted anything?"

I didn't trust her, not a bit. But what could I do at that moment? As I turned away, I heard her laugh, then there was a splashing sound as she dove into the pool.

"Jesus," I muttered. "Jesus. Jesus. Jesus."

I walked around the office to the street. Nicolai had said that there'd be a gun waiting for me on Sergei's boat. I tried to glean some comfort from this idea. There wasn't much to glean.

The moon was high above the Royal palms and a cool wind, tinged with the scent of the ocean, swept over the road as I walked to the marina. Once I got there, I turned left

on a perpendicular side road that connected the A1A to the docks. The marina had a gated entrance, and through the chain-link fence, I could see the masts of sailboats. I could hear them, too, rattling in the breeze. A small building, a checkpoint shack, huddled behind the gate. A man was sitting on a stool in front of it. He stood up and called to me. "Willie?"

"Yeah." The gate started to open. "Valentin," I said. We shook hands. "Are you coming out with us?"

"No, man."

"What about Wayne?"

"Wayne's AWOL. He was supposed to be on the boat tonight, but we can't find that dumb son of a bitch. So it's you and Sergei this time."

"What's this about, you know?"

"I don't know the details."

He handed me a heavy, leather case.

"How's Sergei?"

"Cranky."

"Sober?"

"Yeah."

The boatyard was empty, dark. I followed Valentine closely onto the docks that jutted out far from the land. I could hear the ocean, but I couldn't see it. There were too many yachts in the way. We walked to the end of the main dock, where there was a gas pump, a soda machine and a strong lamp with moths swirling around it. The water below glistened like motor oil. There was a single boat tied to this part of the dock, a huge blue Catalina with a pair of engines hanging from the stern. Its cabin door was open. An orange light poured out from it, as well as the sound of a radio talk show host's angry voice.

"Sergei?" Valentin called

The Russian appeared in the doorway, wearing a pea coat and dark work pants. He nodded at Valentin and waved to me. I jumped down to the boat's deck. My feet slipped, but I didn't fall.

"Who wears boots on a boat?" Sergei said to Valentin.

He couldn't see me blush. He couldn't see the razor either.

"Any changes in the plans?"

"No," answered Valentin. "It's all good. They should be out there already."

"Okay."

Sergei touched the boat's control panel and started the engines. The floor started to vibrate and purple smoke curled up from the stern. Valentine lifted the tie lines from their cleats on the dock and handed them to me. A cloud of diesel fumes drifted over us.

"Make sure you're past the mark, Sergei."

"What mark?" I said.

The boat started to pull away.

"The three mile mark."

"What's that?"

"International waters," Sergei grunted. "No cops out there."

I looked back at Valentin. He waved. That was the last time I ever saw him.

A minute later, the boat was bolting across the water's shivering surface, with Sergei sitting behind the wheel. A knit cap covered his head and the collar of his coat flapped against his neck. The lights on the control panel lit his face. The scar beneath the left eye resembled a rubber band that's been pulled too tight. It still looked fairly raw.

Because the wind made it very hard to hear, we had to shout. I stood on the cabin steps, watching the shrinking shoreline.

"What are we picking up?"

"Girls."

"Nicolai said there'd be a gun on board for me."

"No."

"He said—"

"Only one gun."

He tapped his rib cage. He wasn't trying to hide his dislike for me. I suddenly missed the sweet Sergei. The one who'd squeezed my shoulder so often in the club's kitchen was far away now.

I went below. The cabin was capacious and stripped down. There were no cabinets or drawers, just fiberglass walls and benches instead of berths. I sat down and breathed slowly, wishing that I'd thought to take Dramamine.

Then my cell phone rang. It was Nicolai.

"Sergei won't answer his phone, William."

"He probably didn't hear. The wind's bad. I'm in the cabin."

"What for?"

"Trying to find a gun."

"Why didn't Sergei give you one? Didn't you ask him?"

"He said that the only one he's got is the one he's carrying."

"Oh." He paused. "'Perhaps I didn't tell him. You know, I think I must have forgotten to tell him. You won't need one anyway."

A drop of sweat rolled into my eye. It felt like someone was squeezing my guts with a lemon press.

"What did you want to tell him, Nicolai?"

"Tell him Mandek changed his mind. I just got off the phone with him. He's decided to come into shore with you after all."

Before I could respond, the phone cut out.

CHAPTER 11

Right then I decided to get Sergei's gun from him and if this meant murder, I was willing. My plan was to stand behind him and drive my elbow into the nape of his neck, and then I'd pull the weapon from his chest. But as I started for the cabin's steps, the boat rose up and down like a hammer, and the impact threw me to the floor.

But when I got back up and climbed to the top of the steps, Sergei was staring straight ahead, through the boat's windshield, with frozen eyes. He held the wheel his left hand, the gun with his right. I stepped toward him just as he killed the engine, and the sudden drop in speed made me stumble. When I regained my balance, I was standing beside him.

Fifty yards ahead of us, a cargo ship, strung with orange lights above its deck, was floating in the black water. On the ship's deck, men stood with drawn carbines, watching us.

"Bumpers," Sergei said.

He pointed to the rubber cushions that hung along the inside of the boat. I set the moneybag onto the floor. As I dropped the bumpers over, a square panel, the size of a large bed sheet, slid open on the ship's starboard side, letting out yellow light. A pair of sailors, wearing gray shirts and work pants, stood shoulder to shoulder in the opening, waving at us. One of them had a boat hook, which he used to snag a cleat. He pulled and a moment later our boat tapped against the ship's side.

Our engine was idling now. Sergei stood beside me, still holding his gun. The light from the ship made his face and his eyes pink.

"Relax," he said. "You look nervous. Don't look nervous."

From inside the ship came the sound of feet, lots of feet, walking rapidly. Someone shouted. It sounded like Italian. The sailors in the portal stepped back. Then the merchandise, the very special merchandise, materialized. Many of their faces were silhouetted, but those I could see looked young, very young, and they were filled with terror. Sergei stepped back. He switched on a flashlight and pointed it to the deck.

"This way! This way!" he shouted.

The first one jumped. She tripped, and as she tried to stand up, three more jumped down around her. The Indians used to handle buffalo this way, running them off of cliffs.

"Into the cabin. They go into the cabin." Sergei gestured with his gun hand.

I led the first one, the one who'd tripped, to the cabin door. She climbed down. Her companions followed her without resistance. Ten minutes later, all of the merchandise was safely down below. Fifteen parcels. Sergei closed the cabin door, locked it. He returned his attention to the ship, to the yellow square of light shining from its side. "We're clear!"

He took the case from me, held it up and called "All clear" again.

Our boat, lower in the water now, trembled like a kernel of corn before it pops. One of the sentinels on the ship's deck was staring down at me. His fingers, squeezing the carbine's barrel, were ashen gray.

Sergei called again and walked over to the wheel. The pistol remained in his right hand. Then a figure appeared in the side of the cargo ship, wearing a long coat and a knit cap.

Sergei laughed. He guffawed. He returned his gun to its holster and ran to the center of the boat.

“Mandek!”

“My friend,” Mandek answered in English, “My friend it’s so good to see you.”

The Russian helped the old man onto the boat, cupping his elbow with his hand. They laughed together a moment. Then Mandek said something that I couldn’t hear. I stood at the far end of the deck, watching the water. The shoreline, so far away, looked thin and ugly, like a strand of dental floss.

“Ropes and bumpers!” Sergei shouted. I unhitched the ropes that tied us to the ship, tossing them to a sailor with a badly scarred face. Then I lifted up a bumper and dropped it on the deck. Our boat began to drift and Mandek walked over to help me with the other cushions.

“I’m Mandek,” he said.

He extended his hand to me. My time of waiting was over. I could have pushed him over the side. But I took his hand and kept my head down. Sergei gunned the engines and the boat lurched away from the ship. “Nice to meet you,” I said. The moonlight bounced off of Mandek’s teeth as he smiled.

Then his smile vanished. “I know you,” he growled. Then he shouted, “Sergei!” A stiletto blade appeared between his fingers and he slashed at me and I jumped back. “Come here, Sergei! Come here! Come here!”

The boat decelerated. Mandek screamed something in Polish or Russian and Sergei turned away from the wheel and rushed at me. I ran straight at him, grabbing for the gun in the shoulder holster, and felt Mandek’s knife tear into my arm. I stumbled.

“Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!”

The Russian’s hand swung down at me, smashing my collarbone with the butt of his gun.

“Shoot him! Shoot him!”

“No,” Sergei grunted, swiping at my face. “Not good for the boat.”

He drove his knee into my belly. My tongue was bleeding. I tasted blood oozing from broken teeth.

“You’ve got nowhere to go now,” Sergei snarled, “except hell.”

I could hear Mandek’s hobbling footsteps, mixing with the cries of the women in the hold. Then the Catalina growled back to life. Sergei smiled and returned his gun to its holster.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” he said. He descended on me again, plunging at my throat with his hands. I was screaming now, kicking at him with my knees. He squatted on my chest and reached for my eyes. I reached for his, and my thumbnail got into the scar on his left cheek. The skin tore apart like wet newspaper. He swatted my hands away and staggered away from me.

I tried to stand up. A shot fired, but it missed me. I spun around. Mandek stood near the wheel, his own gun pointed at me. Sergei was on the deck, groaning, maybe three feet from where I stood, holding his face together with his hand. I thought for a second that I’d try for his gun. Then Mandek fired at me again. I scrambled toward the far end of the boat, but one of the bumpers tripped me, throwing me down. Mandek fired again and I rolled myself across the deck. A bullet sank into the fiberglass deck. The old

man hobbled over to Sergei and reached for the Russian's gun. "You're dead!" he shouted.

Mandek meant me and I didn't bother to correct him. Instead, I jumped over the Catalina's side and the Pole responded by firing more shots as I submerged myself and pulled my aching body through the black water. The air shocked my lungs as I came up and Mandek heard my coughing and he fired again and again and again. Then he stopped firing. I treaded water in the darkness, bobbing up and down with the waves. The cargo ship was now the size of my thumb.

Then the Catalina's engines started again. They were leaving me. Good, I thought. But then a spotlight on the boat's bow blinked on. The beam lanced the water, oscillating slowly. Soon it found me. The engines roared. When the boat hit me a few seconds later, I was trying to imagine a happier situation for myself, with dry sand under my shoulders and a sky full of singing birds.

I woke up several hours later in the backseat of a sedan. It was morning now and the sky was gray. My wrists were bound together with duct tape, but I could move my arms. I touched my cheek. The skin was soft and sticky like packaged sardines.

"He's awake," Sergei said. He was sitting in the front passenger seat. White tape and bandages covered the left side of his face. Mandek had his fingers curled around the steering wheel. A cigarette dangled from his mouth.

"Did you sleep well, Mr. Winthrop?"

I kept my mouth shut.

"He asked you if you slept well," Sergei said.

The car moved through the rush hour traffic sluggishly. I tried to open the door. It wouldn't open.

Sergei looked back at me and shouted, "Don't ---- around with that!"

"What do you mean?" Talking made my teeth hurt.

"It means he's going to break your neck if you forget to behave yourself, Mr. Winthrop. Would you like that?"

I didn't answer and before they could scold me, Mandek started pounding on the horn and shouting at a Buick that had stalled. He shot around the dead car just as a motorcycle cut in front of us and he punched the brakes. Sergei wasn't wearing his seat belt and he snapped forward, hitting the dashboard with his shoulder. The collision loosened his bandages.

He turned around. "Look what you did to my face," he said. He pried the dressing from his cheek. A wobbly line of fresh stitches stretched from the bridge of his nose to his ear.

"Wow," I said. "I like that on you, Sergei."

The Russian reached over and punched me in the chest. Mandek watched me from the rearview mirror.

"Glad to be alive, Mr. Winthrop?"

"It depends," I gasped. "Are we stopping for breakfast?"

"Remember the last time we were in a car together?"

A Celine Dion song came on the radio and Mandek turned the knob, raising the volume a bit. "You were in charge, weren't you? And you were married back then, too, weren't you."

"I sure was."

The misty air smeared the windshield with condensation and Mandek switched on the wipers. I could see his watch. It was almost eight o'clock. We passed a sign that said, WELCOME TO TURKEY CREEK. That meant we were near Melbourne. The women must have been dropped off far south of Cocoa Beach.

"I'm sure you'd like to know why we saved you, Winthrop," said Mandek.

"Yeah, why?"

"We ask the questions, not you," Sergei snarled.

Mandek set his hand on the Russian's shoulder. His eyes reappeared in the rearview mirror.

"Why did we spare you? It's because we like you, Mr. Winthrop." He chuckled.

"We like you a lot, more than a lot. Right, Sergei?"

"I want to tear his guts out like a fish."

"We like you so much that we're taking you back to the club, where we're going to find out what you've learned and who you've told. And then, if you're lucky, Sergei's going to remove your guts quickly, rather than slowly. How do you like the thought of that?"

"Are we going to stop for breakfast or not?"

Fifteen minutes later, when we were back in Cocoa Beach, Mandek sped the sedan through the Heron Club's parking lot and parked in the area near the back door, where Benjamin was sitting on his bucket, smoking. Some of the morning haze had burned off. Through the car's rear window, I could see the white bird standing on the concrete pedestal in the drainage pond; he was as still as a statue in an empty museum. Sergei climbed out of the car and started screaming at Benjamin.

"Why aren't you inside?"

"Door's locked," the captain of the dishwashers answered. He stared at me. "I been waiting for Willie to let me in."

Sergei shoved past the old man. Apparently Nicolai had confiscated his keys. He kneeled in front of the doorknob and worked at the lock, wriggling a credit card between the latch and the strike plate, until the door popped open. Then he and Mandek helped me out of the car.

I had trouble standing. "Can't you have Nicolai come out here?" I said. The asphalt made a scratching noise beneath my feet as they dragged me toward the doorway. Benjamin stepped aside politely. Inside, the brightness of the ceiling lights and the kitchen's yellow walls made my stomach hurt and I threw up.

"You can't take me anywhere," I said.

They dragged me over to the coffee urn. I looked around for someone who might want to help me. There wasn't anyone. Mandek grumbled and ran some steaming water over a towel, which he used to wipe some of the puke from my chin and shirt.

"You look like a goddamn Bosnian," he said.

They dragged me through the service doors in to the nightclub. The acrid air made my head swirl.

"Get me a doctor," I said.

If I hadn't hurt so much, I might have laughed at my joke. They threw me against a chair. I managed to land on the seat. The lights above the bar were brighter than the sun.

“I can’t get it open,” Sergei snarled.

He was trying to open the door that led to the staircase upstairs. Instead of reminding him that I had a key for the door in my pocket, I tried to stand up, pushing up from the desk with my elbows. Unfortunately, before I was able to complete my project, Sergei stomped over and shoved me back into my seat. I felt just like Sisyphus at the top of the hill.

“Nicolai gave you a key. Where is it?”

“I don’t know.”

He shook his fist under my chin and I spat at it. He looked down at the pink cloud of spit that smeared his hairy knuckles and snorted like a pit bull. Then he slugged me again and another wave of darkness rolled through my poor old head.

When I came to, I couldn’t see. They’d covered my eyes with something that felt like tape. My legs were free, but I couldn’t move my arms. They were stuck to the chair.

“He’s awake,” I heard Mandek say.

Heavy footsteps tramped across the floor.

“What do you want me to do?” Sergei said.

Nicolai was further away. He cleared his throat. “Nothing, not yet.”

Sergei stopped behind me.

“Well, Winthrop,” Nicolai said. “You pulled a fast one on us, didn’t you? I flattered myself thinking that you and I had become friends of a sort. You’re an excellent spy.” His chair made a squeaking noise. “What have you got to say?”

“I’m not cooperating.”

Sergei circled around the chair and he struck my jaw with something that felt like a pool ball on a strap.

“It’s time to tell us what you know.”

“I’m not cooperating.”

Sergei sapped me again.

“Do you like pain or something?”

“I’m not cooperating.”

“He won’t be reasonable,” Nicolai said. “We need to be rougher.”

“Let him see what’s coming,” Sergei suggested.

“Yes. Get that stuff off of his eyes.”

Sergei’s fingers felt like Lincoln Logs.

Mandek snapped, “Quickly!”

“That’ll rip his eyelids off.”

“So what?”

I braced myself. Nothing happened. Then Nicolai’s cool voice came.

“Take it off slowly. I want him able to see things as clearly as he can.”

The tape took some eyelashes with it, but nothing else. The blinds were open and the light they let in lit up the center of the desk. Nicolai was sitting, wiping at his ruined eyes with a handkerchief. Mandek stood by the window, smoking. The bunched up bandages on Sergei’s face resembled a diaper.

“What did you want, Winthrop?” Mandek sneered. “Revenge?”

“Too many questions,” I said.

“You know that you’re just as guilty as I am, don’t you?”

“Why did you do it?”

I felt Sergei's breath on my neck. He growled like a bear and pawed the back of my head.

"Tell him, Mandek," Nicolai murmured.

"I'll tell you, Winthrop. I'll tell you because it will upset you. After your beautiful wife and I left that night, she had to stop for petrol. Once she paid the attendant, and climbed back into the car, I kicked her in the head as hard as I could, so hard that she fell right into my lap. Can you picture it, Mr. Winthrop, her face in my lap? She was stunned, but I think that she knew what was happening to her. Getting the keys from her wasn't hard, and after that, I freed myself from those handcuffs of yours and then I—you can imagine the rest."

"The cops thought I did it."

I felt fingers suddenly on my throat.

"Yes. Because I told them that you did it. I used the phone in your kitchen in fact. Then I headed off into the night, the beautiful night, on your boat."

"You tried to frame me for Ernie Beaumont's death, too."

"Yes," Nicolai said. "And we bungled that fairly well, didn't we? We also got it wrong about what happened to you after your fight with the police."

"The newspapers said that you died," Mandek said.

The fingers around my throat tightened a little more.

"I didn't."

"Perhaps we'll let those editors in on what really happened. After we kill you, of course."

Everybody laughed except me.

"Now it's time for you to answer our questions, Mr. Winthrop."

"Forget it."

Nicolai had my waterlogged tape recorder in one hand and the disposable camera that had never been used in the other. "Now tell us, Winthrop. You were a private investigator. You've been keeping files and taking notes, haven't you. What were you planning?"

"I'm not cooperating."

I looked down. The big ring that Nicolai had given me for Christmas was gone.

"One more chance, Winthrop."

I didn't say anything and Nicolai sighed. Then he waved and Sergei walked over to the desk. The blind man whispered and the Russian nodded. He removed a cigarette lighter from his pocket and reached for something, a roll of duct tape that was resting on the blotter.

"Which foot?"

"Doesn't matter."

Sergei headed over to me. He kneeled beside my chair and looped the tape around my right leg. I didn't resist. But when he kneeled beside my right leg, that's when I kicked.

"You're the king of lost causes, pal."

I continued to kick, and as Sergei tried to subdue my leg, he moved in front of it. I think he wanted to push down on my shin with his chest. The razor in the tip of the boot got him in the soft space under his right ear. He slapped at the gash and rolled over.

"That was a huge mistake, Winthrop," shouted Mandek. "Nicolai—"

But before he could finish, the office door swung open, and Martina rushed in. She looked so pretty. In her right hand, she held the same can of pepper spray she'd pointed at me that night in the Poinciana Gardens. She aimed it at Mandek and pressed the red button on top. He shrieked and clawed at the air as the spray struck his eyes. Then Martina charged and shoved him against the window.

With the razor in my shoe, I struck at the tape that bound my right leg. Once I had the tape loose, I could stand up. The weight of the chair pulled on my back and I screamed.

Nicolai didn't sound good either. "What's happening?" he cried. "Sergei, what's happening?"

The big Russian was on the floor. His terrified eyes were staring at the ceiling. Across the room, in front of the window, Mandek and Martina looked like a pair of contestants in a jitterbug contest.

"Sergei? Mandek?"

I got my left arm loose.

"Mandek! Mandek! Mandek!"

I got the boot with razor off of my foot, and I used it to cut the tape around my right arm. The chair fell to the floor and I started for the window. Mandek may have been old and crippled, but he was determined. He was holding himself like a boxer now, one arm near his chest, the other extended. He must not have seen or heard me coming, though, and he didn't move, didn't try to stop me, when I rushed up to him. I shoved him against the window. There was a ripping sound, like an iced-over pond cracking open. The glass shattered. Mandek stumbled and lost his balance. Then, just as he fell through, he yelped, like a baby seal, maybe, as the club crashes into its skull.

"Watch out, Willie. Nicolai's got a gun!" Martina had run to the center of the room. The blind man's hands were wrapped around a huge revolver. She threw herself to the floor as he let off two rounds.

"Don't move!" he screeched.

I lifted up the chair they'd tied me too and staggered toward the desk. Another shot was fired and it sank into Sergei. I hurled the chair and it landed on the desk, somersaulting into Nicolai's chest, knocking him over. Then another shot fired, blasting a hole through the middle of the desktop. The wood shredded like lettuce.

I staggered over to the desk. Nicolai was lying on his side, slapping the floor with his hand, trying to find the gun. I dropped two punches on his chin. The second one stilled him.

Martina called from the other side of the room. "You all right?"

"Sort of."

"What do we do now?"

"I shouldn't have knocked him out. If Benjamin called the police or an ambulance, we won't have time to grill this guy."

"What do you mean?"

"You and I have to get out of here, darling."

She walked over to the window and leaned her head through it. "Wanda?"

The dishwasher called back. "What?"

"Where's Benjamin?"

"Still in the parking lot."

“Can you keep him out there?”

“Door’s still locked, hon.”

“Does he know what’s going on?”

“I doubt it, hon.”

“Is there anyone else in the building?”

“No.” There was a pause. “You did on a number on this old timer, hon. What do you want me to do?”

“He’s dead?”

“He’s history, hon.”

Martina walked over to the desk. Wanda, she said, had been in the parking lot when they brought me into the building. She’d come inside and not knowing what to do, she’d waited until Martina showed up.

“Thank God I was early. She told me everything, then I told her to lock Benjamin outside when he went out for a smoke. What do you think we should do?”

“I’d like to get the hell out of here. But I’d like to talk to Nicolai first. Too bad my tape recorder’s trashed.” I pointed to the dead machine on the desk.

From her apron she pulled out her own tape recorder, a very nice one. “I stopped at Radio Shack yesterday.”

“You’re a goddamn boy scout,” I said.

We dragged the blind man into the bathroom, where there was sink with a drainage pipe that connected the basin to the wall.

“Let’s wake him up,” I said. I turned on the sink and filled my hands with water, which I threw at his face. Martina crouched beside him with the tape recorder’s microphone pointed at his mouth. His eyes fluttered open and he gasped.

“Those women that were delivered last night, where are they now?” I said.

He didn’t answer.

“How much did you get for them?”

Still no answer.

“Tell us or we’ll kill you.”

He opened his mouth. “I never mistreated you, Martina. I helped you.”

“You bought me like a cow,” she growled. “Where are those women?”

I lifted him by the front of his jacket. Then I pushed his head through the space between the basin and the pipe. As the pipe pressed against his throat, he panicked, smacking the bottom of the sink with his head.

“Oh my God,” he said, pulling in a deep breath.

“You ready to answer the questions now?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Get it out. You buy and sell women, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a member of *Organizatsiya*, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You killed Ernie Beaumont, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Where are the women that came in last night?”

He said that they’d been dropped off in Port St. Lucie, about seventy miles south of Melbourne. They were being sent to Texas next, he said, and he gave us the names of

some contacts in San Antonio. The women, he explained, were all from the Ukraine. They'd been brought up through the Caribbean on an Italian ship. The records of the transaction were stored in the safe in his office. He gave us the combination reluctantly. Soon we had more than enough information to get him and several of his friends put into prison for a very long time.

"We can't keep Benjamin out there forever," I said. "And the others will start showing up soon."

"Ask him the questions about you," Martina said. "Something we can give the cops to clear your name."

"Nothing can clear my name," I said.

"Ask him anyway."

"Why did you try to frame me for Ernie Beaumont's death?"

"I can't see!"

Martina pressed her shoe against his forehead. Sweat bubbled up above his thick eyebrows.

"It wasn't planned," he gasped. "You called to me from your truck and I seized the opportunity."

"Why did you kill him?"

"He was a snooper. That day, that morning, he'd come into the club right after we opened. Mandek was in Cocoa Beach for business and he was sitting at the bar when Beaumont walked in. Mandek recognized him. He'd been writing articles about Organizatia and dog racing, making us look terrible and lying about it. When Mandek saw him, he knew the guy hadn't come to the club with good intentions. They talked for a while about nothing really. Then when Beaumont wasn't paying attention, Mandek drugged his drink. Almost immediately, the reporter wanted to talk about Russian mafia. He also wanted to drink cocktails. Mandek played along, giving him bits of information about the mafia and getting him drunk, hoping that this would open Beaumont up. He wanted to know what Beaumont knew. Eventually Beaumont started to talk and Mandek learned that he was writing an article about sex traffic. Mandek offered to give him an insider's perspective. Beaumont was trusting, and he obliged Mandek, when Mandek said that he wanted to talk to Beaumont in private. They went for a drive first before they went out to his house. But once they were there, Mandek couldn't get Beaumont to tell him what he knew. I used to be KGB, an interrogator. Because Mandek couldn't get the information from him, I came out there. That's when I saw you. Since we were going to kill him, I thought, why not use you for the frame? We got the information from him while you were unconscious. His understanding of the topic was negligible. We shouldn't have bothered with him, perhaps. And we certainly shouldn't have waited to kill you."

"Then what?"

"Then my eyes were hurt by the gun. When you left me alone, I got up and ran into someone's yard and hid beneath a bush. After you drove off, I called Sergei. The next day, I saw Mandek. He told me everything that happened up in Tallahassee."

"He told you that he killed my wife?"

"Yes. Everything."

"That's good enough," I said.

Martina turned off the tape recorder. She leaned toward the Nicolai's scarred face. "Comrade Nicolai," she said, "maybe the prison doctor can help you with your eyes?"

As we left the bathroom, I locked the door. Then I pushed a chair under the doorknob. Martina walked over to the office safe and opened it. She grabbed a pile of documents and a laptop computer, the one that Mandek had taken from Ernie Beaumont's house.

Wanda was in the kitchen, sitting on the metal table, with a cup of coffee. She'd thrown a tablecloth over Mandek. I could hear Benjamin outside, banging on the club's rear door.

"You two make a cute couple, hon," she said. "Tell me you got Sergei, too. I never liked him very much.

"We got him," Martina said.

The dead Russian hadn't returned my keys to me, so I had to kick in his old office door. Then I started on the safe's dial. The door popped open and I reached in, snatching about four grand from the till. I stuffed the cash into Martina's apron. Then I set the tape recorder, the papers from Nicolai's safe and the computer on the desk. I found a piece of paper and wrote out this letter:

Dear Investigating Officers:

On this tape, you will hear Nicolai Chestov's admission that he is a smuggler of human beings and a member of the Russian mob. He is also a murderer, responsible for the death of Ernest Beaumont, a news reporter who disappeared last August. A record of Chestov's other crimes, as well as those of Mandek Witkowski and Sergei Barsukov, can be found at the Poinciana Gardens Motel in Cocoa Beach. Karl Lang, the establishment's owner, is holding them in his office. Thanks very much.

Sincerely, Winston S. Winthrop

I left the letter on top of the stack of *Exotic Dancer* magazines we kept on the desk. As I looked up, Martina was smiling. A couple of her crooked teeth crept around her lips. I locked the office door and we headed back to the kitchen. Wanda was still sitting on the table, staring at Mandek. I handed her a bundle of cash.

"Thanks for helping us out, hon."

"You got it, hon."

She split the stack in half and pressed the bills into her bra. "What are you doing next?"

"We're getting the hell out of here, hon."

"That's the ticket, hon."

I used the phone in the kitchen to call the police, telling them to head over to the Heron Club if they wanted some easy pickings. I also told them to take a peak into Sergei's office. After I hung up, I grabbed Martina's hand and said, "They'll be here soon." The women helped me to the door. Benjamin was sitting on his bucket near the Dumpster, smoking. We pulled the door shut, before he could stand up. "Is it locked, Wanda?" I said.

"Yes."

"How will the police get in?" Martina asked.

"They'll find a way."

Her car was parked near the fence. Benjamin shouted from behind us, "Where you going?"

Wanda turned around and cried, "We quit!"

“It’s about time.”

As we walked along the fence to Martina’s car, I glanced at the drainage pond. The bird that liked to sit on the concrete drum was gone, but I said goodbye to him anyway. The sounds of sirens swept through the air as we squeezed ourselves into the front seat of the Volare. When we dropped Wanda off at a grocery store on U.S. 1, Wanda kissed us both goodbye. “Make me proud, hon. You keep kicking against the pricks,” she said.

As we drove down 95, Martina and I talked about money and our future. There was enough cash, she said, to make it for a few weeks. There probably was. She tried to talk me into coming to Argentina with her. It wasn’t hard. When we arrived in Miami that night, she contacted some shady friends of hers, who helped us find a space on a Chilean cargo ship. There was a doctor on board who made some splints for me and gave me antibiotics and painkillers.

Eight pleasant days later, we arrived in Buenos Aires. In the lobby of our pension, I found an international edition of the *Miami Tribune* for sale. On the front page, the Heron Club was mentioned, with references to Nicolai and the others.

I read the piece and said to Martina, “They got all the women. The Feds found them in a truck stop in Pensacola. Valentin was driving.”

“Good. Does it mention you?”

“Yep.”

“Are they looking for you?”

“Yep.”

“Are you worried?”

“I’ve been worried for so long that I don’t notice it anymore.”

That night, we wandered into a café in the neighborhood called the Abastos, where a grizzled-looking violinist with an eye patch was playing a tango. The slow sad music floated around us like smoke.

“Oh, Willie, listen,” Martina said. “That’s ‘*La Cumparsita*,’ the greatest song in all the world!”

I reached over and tickled the back of her neck with my fingertips.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Stephen Blodgett Armstrong grew up in Annapolis, Maryland. After graduating from the University of Maryland at College Park, he worked variously as a cook, a substitute teacher, and a process server. In 1998, he moved to Tallahassee to study in Florida State University's creative writing program. His work has appeared in *Film Quarterly*, *Film Score Monthly*, *American Writing*, and *Las Vegas City Life*.