

HIT MAN FOR THE DEAD

Book One:

Wicked Messenger

Created and

Written by

Robert Burden

*YOU KNOW
HOW THEY'RE
ALWAYS SAYING:
"SOMEONE SHOULD DO
SOMETHING ABOUT THAT?"*

WELL, I'M THAT SOMEONE.

Bob Burden Presents

HIT MAN FOR THE DEAD

This property is solely owned and controlled by Robert Burden

© and TM Robert Burden

June 2019

WGA registered.

SPECIAL Beta version- Preview Edition

Published by BOB BURDEN PRODUCTIONS

in association with DARK HORSE COMICS.

Dark Horse Logo is owned and Trademarked by Dark Horse Media LLC -- 2019

Send all correspondence to: PO Box 467251, Atlanta, Ga. 31146

Or

Wildcraft7@mindspring.com

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the expressed permission of the copyright holder or holders. Names, characters, incidents and places in this publication either are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to any person (living or dead) events, institutions or locales without satiric content is purely coincidental. All rights reserved.

Printed in the UNITED STATES.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR ABOUT THIS STORY:

CAUTION: This book is intended for mature audiences.

WARNING: gritty realism, vivid adult situations and edgy characters. A more sedate version may someday be forthcoming. (Maybe when hell freezes over.)

BETA VERSION: This is a “beta” or preview edition of the book, a reading copy of sorts. This is a prototype story in a series that intended to show how the concept of *Hit Man For The Dead* will work. It is a road test to demonstrate how it all fits together, how the characters tick, and to hopefully to get feedback and learn how it will be received.

LIMITED EDITION: This book is limited and not many copies are printed. An improved version, a true First Edition, will follow later. This one may be priced and sold at the conventions or on [Kickstarter.com](https://www.kickstarter.com) to raise funds to make a full blown comic book of the project.

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL: There may be synopsis and notes in the back. Will decide at the printers. Feel free to check them out if you like before or after you read this story. Either way works. If not in the back of this book, check the website bobburden.com for links to more material.

I'm anxious to hear what you think and you can hit me up at wildcraft7@mindspring.com

Chapter one

I always wanted to kill someone with a sword.

I know that sounds strange, but I lead a strange life these days.

I'm in a warehouse in Maryland on a job. A warehouse out in the middle of nowhere, with trees and fields all around. Someone just cut the power in this place. As the AC winds down, an ominous silence descends around me.

I take a deep breath.

I have a brief WTF am I doing here moment of clarity - shake it off - and get ready for the situation that's about to explode. I had the element of surprise 12 minutes ago, but I managed to screw it up.

Instead of four or five dead guys there are only two.

Two of the living ones are trying to kill me and the other one is totally freaked out, has pissed his pants and is hiding somewhere in this vast building. It's nothing personal, I don't even know these guys, and yet, I'm here for the revenge.

I love vengeance. Revenge. Who doesn't. It's just sometimes it's so damn much work.

Why vengeance?

That's my job. I kill murderers, so that their innocent, haunted, unvanquished victims can chill out and pass on... *I'm a killer*. I'm an "expediter" for all the un-avenged souls... The poor souls trapped between life and death, wandering between the winds and haunting our world.

See, I lost my soul a few years back, in a card game with some dumb-ass, loco gangsters from a Mexican cartel. Now, I keep the devil off my back by sending him a steady stream of psychos, shit-heels, angry cuckolds, child molesters, and any other kind of murderer you can think of. I'm a HIT MAN FOR THE DEAD. Walking death. Destiny with a gun. A murderer's worst nightmare. His last nightmare. We kill the bad guys and then we sell their shit on EBay.

We have been staking this place out for two days, me, and some of my fellow expeditors. For two days. Nothing. Yesterday, everyone (but me) got called up into the Adirondacks, and of course, our four
Hitman For the Dead Last Supper TEXT 7 ©bob Burden 7/13/19 6:55:38 PM 5

serious guys then show up. I call my boys but it'll take them about too-many-hours to get back down here. So fuck it. I go in myself. You have to be pretty hammered to do something like that, but the serious gentlemen might not be here in 20 minutes and there's a lot of loot-able, good-money stuff in this place.

These four guys are all professionals. The guy that they were meeting with - not so much, but from the face recognition IDs we've compiled, they're all the ones we want; they are all killers one way or another.

I do have an idea where the freaked-out guy is, but no, I don't know exactly. He's in the storage loft over the machine shop, somewhere up there, but there's a lot of stuff up there: boxes and piles of used, surplus gear and file cabinets and seashells... thousands of seashells. (I cased this place two days ago, while they were all still in some place called Calabozo - I kid you not - and I know the floor plan inside/out.)

The logo on the door - RADIAL BLUE TECHNOLOGIES - was nicely designed. You Google it and there's very little there. All of it bullshit.

I just found a very cool sword behind the doorway into a nice office, and I intend to kill someone with it. That being said, I...

There's one now! He's on the balcony to the left of me! I see him out of the side of my eye, and he sees me at exactly the same moment. I get off a shot first. The damn glass takes some of the punch out of my bullet - a 308 round - but it still knocks him down. The second one goes right in his ear as he gets off a round - a wild one - off into the sky.

I saunter up and put one more shot into him to make sure. His Kevlar vest stopped the first round but even after going through the glass, the high powered .308 round hit him like a truck and knocked him on his ass.

But as I was saying: ...*that being said*, a sword is not always the greatest killing weapon. Sure, it doesn't run out of ammo, it doesn't make a loud noise, but you do have to get close. A sword can stab or slice. A good, hand forged samurai sword can slice you in half from your shoulder to your hip, like a Star Wars light saber. If you're stabbing though, you can hit something that deflects, like a wallet or pocket flask or a belt buckle - but it's still no fun getting stabbed.

There must be 40,000 square feet here in just this one section. The distance that I would normally take two minutes to cover, takes me eight or ten, moving so slowly.

I find the perfect spot to set a trap behind some boxes, and so I pop a soda can and light a cigarette. Then I place the cigarette on the ground - filter tip down - on the cement floor. The sound of the pop-top and the smoke: this is my trap.

Soon the guy is moving in. I'm backed off from it now about 20 feet, and watching. If he thinks I'm stupid enough to take a cigarette and coke break, then let him.

In about 3 minutes I see him. He was close. I see his shadow first - there he is - but I sure didn't even hear him coming up. He's being the trained professional.

The smoke is still drifting up from the cigarette trap, and lingering. I have my pistol out and the AR10 is slung, as the area that I'm in now is tight and cluttered, and a rifle would be too cumbersome to wave around in these close quarters.

His shadow disappears, and then a few seconds later I spot him. I can see the back half of his head, and an elbow. I take a shot. I'm sure I got him but – like a deer that's missed or winged – he leaps forward, and disappears swiftly behind the boxes.

I may have got him, but then, maybe now he's going to get me?

I throw an empty magazine over the boxes and I hear him move, just as it hits; but his sound - just a slight, faint sound – doesn't come from where I'm expecting him to be.

I circle around some. Now he's behind some other boxes, but from where I'm at, I can see they are empty boxes. Nothing in them. They've been opened and emptied. I bring the rifle up and go for broke. I lay a quick line of full auto fire across the boxes. Then I put another mag in and let loose, drilling the boxes high and low.

Silence. Then a groan and a drop. Unless he's a real good actor he did go down. As I get closer, I throw the next empty magazine over the boxes. It clatters, but nothing. No reaction. I listen close. Then I see the blood trail, a good, thick one - dark blood, artery blood - coming from behind the boxes. It's what I want to see. He's bleeding out. He's finished. I take a peek. His eyes are still open and his chin is on the ground. I aim, flip the switch to semi-automatic, and make sure.

Sometimes professionals hide behind empty boxes. Then they're not professionals any more.

Now for the guy with the piss-trail going up to the loft. I go back to the door out of the office and get the sword that I set by the doorway. Yes. This sword is a scimitar, an Arabian sword design and this one is a Mamaluke, the kind Marines get when they became officers, and this one has an name etched on it. It's a beauty, and someone's going to miss it.

I had the presence of mind to dig out the last guy's cell phone. Maybe I'll get lucky. The loft is kind of vast and messy. The guy is probably armed too, so it will take a whole lot of time and slow moving to find him. I have the piss trail to follow but, it tapers off and fades soon. I give the phone a try.

I dial the last phone number that was dialed on dead-boy's phone. Bingo. I hear the pisser's phone ringing about 10 feet in front of me and to the right.

"Hello?" he whispers. "Franco?"

I come up behind him – he's on all fours and his ass is up in the air, his gun in the same hand as the phone – and I toss Franco's phone at him. Startled, he turns and sees me, dropping his gun and the phone. He's terrified. I draw a bead on him and he gets the idea.

"But why?" his voice is squeaky and strained.

"It's just time to die. Time for everyone to die."

"But why? Why us? Who are you?"

I smile. "There's a village in a foreign country with no name, but you called it Tract 14."

"But those people... they were nothing. Nobodies. Why? Who sent you? Do you know what you're doing?" He's right. The place was nowhere, the people all nobodies, but we got the call, we did our investigation, and now – tag – you're it. *There were a lot of bodies, a whole village dude, and a whole lot of unquiet souls, and that's the way it goes, ya know.*

“Those people were nobody nothings. Now you’re a nobody too. So there.” I draw the sword.

He gasps.

With a rude and contemptuous swipe of the sword, I knock his gun and phone out of his hand. The gun flips around and lands to his side, right by him, and he reaches for it. I shoot him in the arm with the pistol in my other hand. I step forward: kick his gun away and then step on him. I place the point of the sword to his chest. I drive it in, putting my weight into it, sliding it in, watching him die.

Seeing someone die for the first time is always a trip: traumatic. After a while, after seeing a lot of death, that changes. For some people it becomes more clinical. I’m not that way but in this case, knowing all what these people did - and who they killed, it’s kind of a kick. *I did it for kicks*, I think to myself, amused.

Now these guys regularly knock off a lot of bad guys themselves, however, then they think that all that stuff they do makes everything alright. In a way it does. And then they’re all high on these synthetics all the time and their minds play them. Next thing you know, they’re rationalizing anything. Of course look at me, and our people: you probably could say the same thing about us. But that’s why I stick with hard liquor and a little pot now and then, unless I have to stay up for three days, ya know.

The thing is: at the end of the day I got them, and they got got. I hit them up out of the blue and wiped ‘em out. I win, they lose. That’s really all there is to it. And now we get their shit. And I get first pick.

Whatever. I’m done.

I go make sure everyone’s dead, and I spook around a bit. I’m looking for a safe, for cash, valuables, collectables, art...

I load up some good stuff, a coin collection, some slabbed silver dollars, some wads of cash, a couple of 1st generation Colt single actions in high condition... my boys will be here in another hour or two, if they don’t stop to eat, and then the wrecking crew will be here tomorrow morning to clean up and take care of the bodies. There’s a lot of good stuff here to loot. And that’s how we keep our operation going. After we kill these guys and avenge the dead and murdered, we take their shit.

Then we sell their stuff, the menial stuff on EBay or Sotheby’s, or Craig’s list even. We have a whole crew of Gypsies up in New York selling the crap after we deal with the best stuff: cash, fine art, coins and jewels... and we all get a piece of everything pretty much. How about that.

CHAPTER TWO

Motel. Morning.

I'm heading south. I made it to Virginia last night.

I roll out of bed and light a cigarette.

It's about noon, and after the maid came in three times, rattling my door and then pulling out when she heard me groan, I'm awake.

Why didn't I put up the do-not-disturbo sticker on the door handle - I'm trying to remember now - I came in pretty drunk last night- let's see, there was dripping in the bathroom. It was keeping me awake. So when I looked under the sink - what the fuck - there's a dead mouse. I had to use the plastic do-not-disturb thing to pick up the mouse and throw him out in the middle the parking lot. Then I smoked a cigarette, staring at him in the night rain, and almost fell asleep standing there at the doorway.

Never did find the dripping. Just forgot about it, I guess.

I go back to the window. The screen almost falls off as I pull the drapes back. Rain and cold outside. Shitty, dirty weather. I'm just outside of Richmond somewhere in the middle of nowhere, at some bleak, unknown expressway exit.

Across the Street; a Phillips 66 gas station and a Waffle House. A truck goes by. A muffled THUMP comes from the room upstairs. A drop of condensation rolls down the windowpane in front of me.

No dead mouse lying in the parking lot now. The cats or the rats musta got it.

The mouse had white eyes. Guess he was down there under the sink a while, and his eyes turned white?

But what if he was blind?

Heh heh. Now there's just *two* blind mice, right?

Gotta be bad to be a blind mouse. How does the blind mouse live? A mouse born blind - he's really got to have a tough time of it, don't you think?

And who would bless the poor blind mouse with blindness?

I'd like to believe that all blessings aren't also a curse. Seems like all my blessings were mostly curses too. No doubt about it. Perhaps blessings are what you make of them. This trip I'm going to make the most of it.

Now the blind mouse, he can smell. So little by little, he can find some food: a few crumbs missed by the other mice. He has that gift, even if he is blind: the gift to smell... and then one day he smells a nice chunk of cheese - boy it smells good - and he sticks his head in the mouse trap - WAP - and he is gone. Somebody finds him there in the mouse trap - throws the whole thing away - the guts are everywhere - cleans it up - puts down some bleach - but they never realize that it was a blind mouse, or that he had a tough life. Nobody cares. The other mice don't care. The cleaning lady that finds him doesn't care. And he doesn't care, cause he's dead.

Why don't I walk across the street to the Waffle House and eat breakfast? First some Alka Seltzer for the hangover. Brush my teeth. Smoke a cigarette. Strap on the gun. Dance across the street between the raindrops. Three eggs over medium, waffles, and iced tea.

The nice smell of coffee.

Rain.

CHAPTER THREE

Two exits down I-95 I remember that I left my iPad and charger plugged in there, back at the fucking motel.

I get back to the motel, and this is when something weird happens.

I pull up, and in front of my room there's a car - a car that doesn't belong there. It's a nice car, clean and big. All the rest of the cars in the place are hoopties. Banged up, dirty, old, unwashed, stickers on the bumpers, one with different colored hoods and quarter panels.... It's a cheap motel, I told you that.

A guy comes out of my room. Looks official. Looks all business. Not quite a men-in-black look but - ya know - he's getting there. And he's moving fast. He gets something out of the car and goes back in the room.

The car has a fin on the trunk like an antenna fin. It looks like a limo, but it's not quite big enough to be a limo. They're coming in and out of the room; one is talking on a cell phone. The other goes into the back seat of the car and looks around for something. He finds it - some thing about the size of a meatloaf - and goes back into the room.

Then I hear them arguing.

I go to my trunk and put together a little surprise-device-cocktail for them; I put it in a small computer bag. I spot a pushcart that the maids use to clean. I put a knit cap on and an old fleece and nab the pushcart for a run. As I pass the room, I throw the surprise that I just did up into the back seat of their car.

After a while they come out, get in the car, and take off.

After they're good and gone, I go in. I still have the room key in my pocket. They didn't even take the iPad but they may have moved it around some. I look over the room. Nothing special.

There's a strange smell in the room. It's a bad smell. A chemical smell. I go in the bathroom; it's worse there. I walk around the room again. Definitely worse in the bathroom. I smell the sink. It's there.

The toilet too. I flush the toilet. Something burps up and swirls up a bit and then it all goes down. What was that!?

I hear a noise behind me.

It's the maid. But fuck it; I'm getting out of here. I smile and leave, grabbing the iPad on the way out.

Raining bad now.

As I'm heading across the parking lot, back to my car, I spot the black car with the fin antenna out of the side of my eye. Did they come back? Are they following me? Who are they? I just may have seen them before – they seem familiar – but who knows where. They're watching me, but I pretend that I don't see them. I get in my car and go.

I'm a pretty good wheelman. They're following me for about 10 miles and then we hit some heavy traffic. Cool. After a bit of roadway acrobatics and slight-of-hand, I manage to disappear and slip around to a few cars back behind them. Now they're arguing and looking all around for me up in front of them, but I'm behind them, heh, heh, heh. I enjoy this for a few ticks, and then slide up right alongside them. I ride there for a bit, with them not noticing me. Then the traffic thins out and we're both kind of alone on the highway.

I'm just happily riding alongside them; they're talking a mile-a-minute, arguing, carrying on. Finally the driver just turns and looks at me. I wave my fingers at him. He grabs his buddy's arm. Now they're both looking at me, stone faced. Seriously, I have no idea who the fuck these guys are.

I speed up a little. We're doing 80. Then 90. They keep accelerating and keeping up with me. I want to get them going at a good clip.

Now we're parallel again. Just riding along next to each other. I motion to my back seat, and I point at them – and then I point towards *their* back seat.

They catch on. The passenger looks over into the back seat, he sees my surprise, and starts reaching back there. He pulls my surprise package up front. He opens it up. I put one of those paint-ball grenades in there, similar to the kind that banks put in the bags of cash when they get robbed - but worse.

He pulls it out, he's turning it over in his hands and looking at it quizzically, and just as it seems to dawn on him, I push the remote control ignition. The paint ball goes off – but that's not all – I had a couple of hi-tech bottle-rocket, roman candle type devices in there that are going off now too – BLAM! The paint covers the windows perfectly. They cannot see where the fuck they are going. They don't know whether to shit or go blind. The fireworks are bouncing all around in the car. I imagine they are screaming at the top of their lungs. I am now laughing out loud.

They are slowing down, trying to get control and I'm beginning to move up. I swerve and give them a tap, and then I go on past them and off, as they start to fishtail. They catch some of the shoulder – they correct - but correct too much – they're still going fast – and then they correct so much the other way that they start digging into the grass and the whole car just starts flipping.

I just keep tooling on. Good riddance.

Who the fuck were those guys?

CHAPTER FOUR

I make it to the Florida line, hit the Jacksonville outskirts at 1AM, get a room, and crash.

Tomorrow is the big Memorial Day party with my cousins and all, at the south-side family ranch. They are a mostly military family, and it's my uncle Birch's birthday, and he's loaded - money wise that is - and they usually have a hell of a good party.

It's been about 10 years though. It's not so much will they remember me, but can they forget.

Next morning I try to get a rental car, a nice looking car to show up at the party in. The 'beater' I'm driving is mechanically tops, but looks like something a retired donut-holer would drive - you know - I drive a beat up car so no one is inclined to break into it. But the Enterprise near me is closed for the holiday, and I don't want to drive all that far way to the airport for a car, so fuck it, I'll go in this heap.

I start to go over and then I change my mind. I get all the way almost to the ranch, and I stop about a mile out. I get out of the car. I can see off in the distance the party's starting up. I can see everything clearly off across the flat plain of tall grass and I see the farm, almost glistening and shining in the nice sunny day.

I can't help it, I've got to go to the airport and pick up a decent looking car. I want to show up in a nice car, and I have a coupon. And I'll put it on the company credit card.

Well, I get an impressive Chrysler, head over to the party, and then I stop in the same place, just stop and get out of the car again. I'm standing there and don't know what to do. I look off and see the party, the fun is going on, the barbeque is smoking up, the kids are on swings laughing, the girls are riding horses, and I'm sure they got some fine liquor... but now I'm getting cold feet.

I decide to call my cousin Shelly, but her number's not in my phone - I called it a month or two ago but I didn't save it - and I'm digging through my trunk to find my database printout. I call the house but Aunt Teach picks up the phone. We talk for a second - she always cared a lot about me - she was always swell to me, but we haven't talked in a good while. Finally Shelly grabs the phone.

I tell her that I'm coming by for the party, going to show up soon... is that OK? Do you think that's OK? I know we talked about it a month ago, but I just thought I'd still check.

"Welllll..." she says, hesitating. "I better check around. I'll check – I think so – but I'll call you back."

So I sit there for half an hour. Nothing. Should I text her? I'm sitting there for like two hours. I'm watching all the fun from a distance. (What a great name for a sad song. *I'm watching all the fun from a distance.*)

Knowing Shelly, she's probably just forgotten about me, getting drunk and – well – I just sit there for a whole 'nother hour and a half... and then I go. I just go. I feel so deeply bad inside now.

I go back to my motel room and try to polish off one of the bottles of 25-year-old Glenlivet that I looted from the warehouse, and try to just ride out Memorial Day in the shitty motel room. Maybe they'll call.

But I picture Shelly sitting there at the picnic table and she mentions: "Anthony called." And everyone sitting there with her, eating barbeque ribs and hot dogs and Aunt Teach's 'world famous' potato salad is silent. A few look up with solemn stares... and the whole idea of calling me back is gone. Vaporized.

I wake up about 11 or 12 at night, and think about showing up at the party now. Everybody's probably pretty well lit by now, and probably no one's going to make a fuss about what happened before....

But no, I've got to stay here in the shitty motel room, and feel sorry for myself. Who am I kidding? They have nothing to say to me. That world is gone for me. Dead. Vanished. Over. I have a new family now and all that stuff from the past is no more.

So I'm watching TV and the scene in ED WOOD comes on, where Bela Lugosi does the "*Home? I have no home! Hunted, despised, living like an animal...*" speech and I start welling up, and then I'm actually bawling. Feeling sorry for myself is all.

Well, fuck me running. I still have some feeling somewhere down there. Wow. Today I've cried for the first time in forever, and laughed out loud for the first time in a good while. All this killing and vengeance I'm doing? I think maybe I really am getting my soul back.

Interesting.

Interesting development.

CHAPTER FIVE

Catamuso knocks on my motel room door the next morning. He always uses a special knock - so he doesn't get shot. How the fuck did he find me here? The company credit card? I thought I paid cash.

Catamuso is kind of like my squire, or my assistant, or scout. He doesn't ever seem to kill anyone – he's part of the team and all – but he mostly tracks down, cleans up killing scenes, and he's a whiz at hacking computers, cell phones, and databases. (Probably how he found me).

He's a rather quirky, odd fellow and would remind you of the little guy from Penn and Teller. He speaks French, but I can never get out of him exactly where he is from. I often think of him as Quequeg from MOBY DICK, my Quequeg friend. Sometimes he spells it Catamousseau and sometimes Catamuso. And he has six fingers on one hand and four on the other.

“I thought you'd still be up there in Maryland looting the Radial guys' warehouse ?” I ask.

“All done. But I found something down here now! Out there in the swamps, man. Big killing. Lots of dead bodies in Florida.”

“QuickJohn?”

“No, just some bodies. Ten or twenty maybe. No QuickJohn.”

“You know Quickjohn is in Florida, right? You know that? He's in Florida now.”

QuickJohn is an elusive and mysterious killer. Every one of us is always on the lookout for him. He has a big price on his head. He seems to always kill large groups of people, and then, in some way, blame it on anyone else. He plants things, clues and he will hang the blame on terrorists, or corporations, or organizations, or the police or even us, so he is never caught, never looked for. Except by us.

“You know I think QuickJohn does not even exist.” Says Catamuso.

“QuickJohn is real.”

“Ahhh, but I’ve been hearing QuickJohn for all the years, man. But who has ever even seen him. None of you. Not one. This is all made up stuff. Un fantasma!”

“Jack saw him once. And Block too.”

“Antonious saw him... where? Where did he see him?”

“He saw him in a Goodyear Tire store. QuickJohn was in the waiting room, and he went to stand in a corner when he thought no one was looking, and picked his nose and ate it.”

“That I believe!” said Catamuso, raising one of his six fingers on his left hand, he has four on the right, but only because two of them got blown off in the Spanish Civil War. “QuickJohn is as evil as a monster, and that he would do! Let’s go then.”

I shake my head. Watta nut.

CHAPTER SIX

We drive and drive, and soon we're getting into the great swamp.

When I drive across Florida through all the flatness, and the sugar cane fields and saw grass, and orange groves and Christmas tree farms, I really feel the bleak emptiness of it all. Here and there, a little town. All the little towns; decaying, forgotten, with crumbling art deco gas stations, a dead K-Mart and a Family Dollar store. Trailer parks, used car lots, a defunct drive-in theater looming off in the distance. The towns - each one an island of lost souls - seem frozen in time and space like museum settings.

And then you get to the Everglades.

The Everglade swamps. Lonely. Mysterious. Ethereal. This is another world. Oblivion. Endless nothingness. Miles and miles, and acres and acres. Nothing but swamp and moss and snakes and murky stagnant water for as far as the eye can see.

"I would never want to be buried here. You could take a body and bury it in here, and no one would ever find it for hundred or a thousand years." I mumble.

No one but good old Catamuso. He would find me.

And this time Catamuso has found a treasure trove. There are bodies everywhere, a mass killing. All dead. A mystery. A horror. An atrocity of the first order. Buried off, deep in the swamp. Well, mostly buried.

We get out of the rented airboat and onto land finally. I say land: it is a narrow, overgrown islet with spongy ground that squishes and gives way underfoot. It has the feel of something that is sinking or drifting. He hands me a mask, as I can smell death already. We go around the side of this islet and into a stand of trees. Here they are. The macabre sight is unnerving, even for me: a dedicated and professional killer, who has a good lot of notches carved into his soul.

All the bodies are buried head down - head first, into the ground, but with their feet sticking up. It's the damndest thing I've ever seen. They are planted, like mannequins; dotted all around the clearing here and there, and hidden inside the stand of trees. It is kind of mind-boggling.

"What kind of twisted..." I mutter.

Catamuso smiles. “A gang of cut-throat smugglers and murderers we have here boss. This is the Blue Coyote Gang.” He points off at more bodies. At first I was seeing, like 5 or 8 bodies, but there are at least 15 human beings planted here total.

“How long do you think they have been here? Two days? Maybe three?” I ask.

“No, not even that long. Fresh kills. Only a few maggots. I found them this morning.”

I nod.

“I szink zee whole gang is here, oui?”

I pick up a stray bit of paper and study it.

“What’s the matter with that boss?”

“I’m not the boss, Catamuso. We’re both independent contractors. Remember?”

“Sure boss.”

“ I mean what kind of creepy person would even do something like this.”

“You a-tellin’ me. Tabernac! At least he didn’t go and skin ‘em alive this time, eh?”

“Jeez, this took a lot of work. Doing it out here in the middle of nowhere? Who would go to all the trouble to...” I notice that Catamuso is picking apart something wrapped up and tasting it.

“Oh hell, don’t eat that Catamuso, you don’t know where it’s been!”

I bend down and pick up another one of the wrappers, an empty one. “Snickers! They’re all Snickers!”

“Wrappers all over d’ place here.”

Catamuso bends to pick up a cell phone.

I reach for it, “Lemme see that!” but Catamuso pulls away.

“Is Mine! I find it!”

He monkeys with it, tries to turn it on.

“Give me that!” I grab it from him.

“Iz no good. Battery dead.”

“A Nokia.” I try to remember the code – what the hell is it - and then I press *#4720# and hold it a second. The phone beeps to life.

“What you doing Harken?”

“Activating reserve power...”

Catamuso nods approvingly and grunts.

“Something’s out there boss. You hear that?”

“I’m not the boss...” I mutter as I scroll through the history and call logs on the phone. “Now here ya go... a call to Marlow Killman.”

“Kill-man? He he. Maybe he the one who killa all these men, eh?”

“No Catamuso. That’s a typical Quickjohn alias!”

“Quickjohn. Bad news.”

“Good news. We might get another shot at him.” Catamuso has no problem denying that QuickJohn doesn’t exist, and then advocating capturing him with great dispatch. It’s like he has two operating systems going at the same time: both Mac and Windows and he’s fine with that. I’m fine with that.

“Remember *Elmer Slaughter*, *Wilson Kilgore...now Kill Man!* And, and the SNICKERS! He’s a total Snickers addict! Quickjohn is here. In Florida.”

Catamuso points off into the wilderness, growing dark now as the sun fades. “You see dat. Harken? See the eyes out there? We better go.”

The eyes in the reeds are around us now. For sure, the eyes of the dead men we’ve got planted here before us. “Oh Catamuso. You’ve been getting into my ‘fun stuff ‘again, haven’t you.” I’m referencing the Yage that I use to contact the “clients”, the dead; the ones that we are always avenging.

Catamuso smiles. “He he. yeah.”

As if they notice we are able to see them, they slowly edge closer.

“Tabernac! They coming for us now boss!”

“That’s just all the spirits of these clowns here! But we’re not gonna help them! No! They can go straight to Hell.”

Catamuso cups his hands and yells: “You go straight to Hell you guys! Fuck the Coyote gang! No soup for you! Ha ha ha!”

“Here we go, Catamuso!” I’m pulling up the text messages on the phone. “The Commons? The cafeteria? Flagler Hall? The dorm? Sounds like a college. Sounds like Mr. QuickJohn is hiding out in higher learning now.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Soon I figure out which college it is and I am on it. Catamuso has disappeared: maybe back up north, called back to the warehouse in Maryland, or to New Orleans where Candide and Lollipop are on the trail of transvestite serial killer who shoots people with a 22 caliber Barbie Doll or to Miami to play Jai Alai.

The University of North Florida, housing office... I don't even bother to hack the college databanks, knowing that with QuickJohn, there might be some kind of cyber alarm that he put in their system to tip him off if anyone from outside does a search for his name.

The lady at the front desk is not supposed to do this, but I charm her enough to get her to pull the name up on her screen. That's it! Marlow Killman. He's here. Turn the screen more.

Elmer Slaughter, Wilson Kilgore--and now, Marlow Killman. It's gotta be Quickjohn.

"He's in our system but the address and phone number is going to be private information, sir."

"Well. I'm a private detective." I whip out a totally bogus detective ID with gold badge. "We have to go through a lot of training and classes so we can get this kind of information on people. And oh boy, does it cost for our permits.... Just so we can deal with private information." I'm beginning to feel like Barney Fife trying to pull a scheme off.

The lady swivels in her seat, the seat squeaking under her weight. "MARTHA?" she yells.

As she turns, I nudge a notebook that tips her BigGulp drink over. "Oops!"

Splash! Glug, glug glug!

Flustered, she turns her back to me. "Now look what you've done!" She looks around her workstation. "Patti, where are the towels?"

"What towels?"

"Paper towels."

And as her back is turned, I turn the screen on the computer so I can see, and grab her mouse.

I tap the KILLMAN, MARLOW E. on the list and his personal info, address, phone numbers, etc., pop up. I slyly, quickly take a screen shot with my cell phone camera.

The lady comes over with the paper towels and they are preoccupied with the flood now. "Listen, I've got to get to a meeting, but I'll be back in a bit. I'll bring you another soda."

"Damn right you will." She mutters under her breath as she cleans up the soda.

"And some fries too! But eh, say... Where is Flagler Hall dorm?"

"Why, that's right across the street. Just walk out the door. Its' right there."

I'm coming out the door looking right at Flagler Hall and BLAM! It blows up right in front of me! The building blows up. There's an explosion and fire. The place doesn't come down but shit blows out the windows into the street and everyone's screaming.

Soon there's a crowd, people are throwing their shit out the window; jumping, running out the doors. The cops arrive and everything is nuts.

Another bystander points towards the roof. "They're trapped! Up on the roof!"

A girl screams: "Oh my god! Isn't that Rickey?" Someone else says: "Look, there're kids up there!"

I see an option. "C'mon! We can get to them from the building next door! C'mon!" A couple of the people follow me. As we get to the steps, the cops are evacuating the last people out of the neighboring building. We trot up the front steps, but one of the cops holds up his hands shaking his head. "No one's going in."

The guy behind me starts tripping out on the cop: "My son and brother are up there next door!! We've got to get them!" The cop shakes his head. "You stay here!"

I'm in front, and I turn as if to leave, and put a calming hand out toward the freaked guy, I then spin back around with an uppercut, and clock the cop hard as I can, right on the jaw.

He goes down, out cold. The freaked guy yells "YESSSS!" and pumps his arm up and down like he's at a football game. The girl behind us starts crying.

As we go up the stairway the crying girl is saying: "But he was only doing his Job!"

"He was only doing his job and I was only doing mine." I murmur.

We get to the roof and there are still a few unevacuated people there, people from the building who had the same idea I had. And there's a lot of people on the other roof. It's a big roof, a big apartment building roof, with remnants and scaffolding from some repair work down at the other end. There are some old oil drums and buckets from where the roof was being tarred, I guess. The space between the buildings isn't so bad. We need something...

I see an answer in the pile of stuff off at the other end of the roof. "Grab that ladder!"

Two guys bring the ladder up. We try sliding it over to the other roof, but when it gets too far out there, it almost falls into the alley. Some of the people rooting through the leftover roof tarring stuff come up with a rope. We throw one end of the rope over and tie the other to the ladder. They get it, and they start pulling the ladder over the alley to make a bridge.

Flames and billowing smoke start to rise from behind them. People begin to cross on the ladder, creeping on their hands and knees. A section of the roof behind them falls in and some of the people panic, rushing the ladder and overturning it as everyone on it plunges disastrously down into the smoke-filled alley between the buildings.

I spot a mother with her child, having moved towards the back of the roof to get away from the madness in the front area.

She sees me coming toward the back area. She has found a spot where the buildings are closer together, and she's on the edge, waving at me. She has a scarf on her head, maybe Spanish or Persian but I can't tell for sure. Back here, the distance between the roofs is narrower and it's maybe jumpable.

But the area of the roof behind her is smoking up now. Flames and smoke start swirling behind her. The smoke is curling up, out of the alley too. I glance back to the front, and they are pulling the ladder back up with the rope, but there's not enough time.

I point at her baby and yell to the mother: "Throw!" The mother puts one foot up on the ledge, like she's going to jump across. She's considering... she looks over her shoulder at the smoke behind her. I yell again: "Throw the baby!"

"C'mon! THROW! Throw him like a football!" I make a throwing-motion like a quarterback. "I'll catch him!" She looks around her again. "You can't jump with the baby!"

She decides to throw the baby.

She rears back - throws it, heaving it with both hands - as hard as she can - but with not enough aim... the baby's flying through the air... flying, flying, but the baby catches on an unseen wire, hangs up - flips around some and then...

The mother is screaming.

And I'm like: *NOOOOooooo*.

And the baby flips around and around and falls down into the alley; into the fiery, smoky chasm between the two buildings.

I'm stunned but I don't give up.

But she has, as any mother would want to do.

The poor little mother is standing there - empty - stone-faced - all the life gone out of her. The fire is rising up behind her now.

I yell: "Lady! Lady! Jummmmp!" But she's frozen. I see the mother's face—she has this 50-mile stare—she's looking right through me. The roof below her starts to give away, flames and smoke are coming up around her - but she's standing there motionless, and as the roof gives way below her and she falls in, she is still stiff, lifeless, emotionless... like a doll, she is falling into the burning building.

A man comes up behind me - he's yelling. The flames are spreading to our building now. I look back and all the other people on the roof are moving down to the fire escape on the backside of the building.

I'm one of the last ones going down. But there are too many people... as the person behind me gets on, I feel the fire escape shift a bit. A bolt pops loose-- people are jostled, I look down at the surprise, fear, and mortal terror in the faces of the people below me. *WTF, we're all going to die.*

Everyone's screaming. I just sit down on the steps and wait for doom, my chin cradled between my hands and looking off across the lawn before me.

OK. The cops have come around and people start coming off the bottom of the fire escape, gingerly, one at a time. Off behind the building there's like a park, the campus quadrangle - and crowds have gathered here and there, cars have stopped, some people have their hands up to their mouths, some are holding up their cell phones taking video...

...as I'm sitting there I notice one face that doesn't fit. Everyone out across the quadrangle is riveted, horrified, shocked or stunned.

But there's one guy out there, leaning against a tree. A funny looking guy. He's way, always off there, but even from that distance, I can see that he has this grinning, sick smile on his face. And his posture, his stance looks so different from everyone else down there...

...then I see him do it: he sticks his finger up his nose, roots around, pulls out a booger and eats it.

Shit! That's him! That's Quickjohn!

The line is moving better and I start to head down now. The people below me are mostly off the fire escape now, but not fast enough for me. When I'm close enough to the ground, I jump over the side of the railing. I leap, pulling my pistol and as I land. He sees me. He realizes that it's me - someone who's looking for him - and he takes off.

I've got him this time but...

...I don't go after him.

Right then I hear the BABY. I hear the baby crying. The baby is alive. I make my way into the alley and there he is: hanging in the alley, his swaddling clothing caught on a vent.

I climb up on a dumpster and snag the little fellow.

As I walk out of the alley with the baby, all surrounded by smoke, someone takes my picture. I look around and QuickJohn is long gone now.

I hand the baby to the police and GTF out of there.

CHAPTER EIGHT

That night I hit it. I find a nice college bar and proceed to get hammered. The girls in this place are being pretty hard on me though, and I'm having no luck. I guess I'm older than most of the kids. Maybe it's that I look like a teacher.

So I'm eating fish and chips, sitting there at the bar, and I ask this girl next to me for the salt. "Fuck off, freak!" she says! I'm a bit stunned. I've done nothing freaky. And nothing to fuck off for. Maybe she was talking to the chips.

Well, at least now I know what QuickJohn looks like... sort of...

And now he knows what I look like.

Maybe he has set other booby-traps out there...

...maybe he's watching me right now...

... and my spider sense IS tingling right now...

I raise my eyes to the enormous, room-wide mirror over the bar.

I'm looking up at the mirror with this "Where's Waldo" horde of people behind me, and I'm scanning. *Which one are you...?*

Then I see a hot-looking babe, and she is looking at me in the mirror, making eye contact. I smile. She smiles back with a nice, sly, smirking smile.

Yage is an ancient concoction, a most perfect and quintessential formula that came out of the Ural Mountains eons ago and was brought to the Americas in the Scandinavian incursions, centuries before Christ. There are about 15 or 20 different very good methods and preparations for distilling and refining it into that which would give your mind wings... or in some mixtures; take the top of your head off.

We - The Travelers - use Yage – our own special formula of it - to “get in touch”. That’s our big secret. If you’re going to avenge the dead, you have to be able to connect with them. When we “get in touch”, we mean that we reach out over into the other side. It's our code word for getting down with the “clients”, finding out what really happened, and conducting an investigation (inquisition of you will).

The girl’s name is Tori. She is a free spirit. Like me. Maybe a little more cheerful and effervescent than me though. Which is not unusual, considering my work.

She taught dance sometimes, taught aerobics, and that night she taught me some tantra. She also waitressed, tended bar, but mostly was out of work, and sold pot for a living. And she was out of work right now. Fine with me. Maybe I’ll hang out with her here for a while. Shack up and take a vacation.

After we get done with the recreational passion and the moonlight activities, she cooks me breakfast (at 2:30 in the morning) and since it’s still early, we have some wine and talk at her kitchen table like we’re both just a couple of freshmen college students again. She’s 32, maybe 35 and has thick, dirty blonde hair. Nice, full, thick luxurious hair and a low hairline.

“Ah Tori! Breakfast of champions! Look at this! Fried eggs, butternut squash hummus, macadamia nut brownies, corn flakes in kefir... Wow. Great. A feast!”

She smiles. “I try to always hit the spot.”

She’s a movie buff. We play a little drunken trivia game of hers. One of us would pick a movie character, and the other would come up with someone that could beat or defeat the other in some sort of battle.

“Eraserhead!”

“Wait a minute, girl. The last one you picked was Thanos, Dark Lord of the Universe.” She smiles. “...and now Eraserhead?”

I have to think about it. *Who would beat Eraserhead?* “How about Benny Blanco from the Bronx!”

“Perfect! I win!”

“What?” I ask.

“Eraserhead wins! Yay Eraserhead!”

“Now girl, how the fuck would Eraserhead ever beat Benny Blanco? Benny, he’s a tough, New York gangster. With guns and henchmen and shit!”

“Eraserhead walks up: he erases Benny Blanco’s head! Zooop! And just like that! Gone! That’s what Eraserheads do!”

“No, no. Eraserhead, he sits there and looks at the radiator. He cuts up the man-made-chicken!”

“But that’s your Eraserhead!”

“That’s everyone’s eraser head!”

“My game - my eraser head!”

I have to say, she’s got me there. “Ok you win!”

“What do I get?”

“A kiss.” I kiss her.

“I want more.”

I smile and we’re heading back into the bedroom again. At 35, she’s at her sexual peak, so to speak, just like a horny 16-year-old boy is.

“Poor Eraserhead.” She says.

I smile. “Yeah, they cut his head off and made pencil erasers out of it.”

“Noooo, I mean the real guy. Jack Nance.”

“Yeah he died mysteriously.”

“I read about that when Twin Peaks came out again. Someone killed him and they never caught him.” She says, lighting another joint.

“Well maybe someone did.”

The funny thing is that I actually know who killed him. I knew all about that! I helped avenge him. I was in on the inquest and the settlement for the client, back a few years ago, when I was starting out.

She offers me a joint. “No darlin’. I don’t wanna get high.”

“Piss test?”

“No, I actually have to get high some times for my work but...”

“Well. Too late now.”

“What?”

She nods at the plate of brownies that I just took another one of. “It’s in the brownies. I forgot. I should have warned you.’

So fuck it. I reach out for the pipe. “Well, in for a penny, in for a pound.”

WTF? Now I taste some of my Yage in the bowl.

“Dam girl! This is my stuff, Right?”

“Oops again. Thought you wouldn’t mind.”

“I do.”

“Hey, I saw the gun in your pants. I thought you might be a cop. Soooo... then I saw that stuff too, so I figured I was wrong: that you’re a dealer, not a cop. Cool with me and all.”

“Well I hope you like to dream. This stuff is the shit for that.”

CHAPTER TEN

I'm lying in bed. Damn that pot. I was looking forward to a good night's sleep after the last week's stake out in Maryland and the gunfight and that bottle of 25-year.

Now I'm feeling it. The Yage - our Yage - our formula, with all the special essential oils, mushrooms, botanicals, Absinthe, and the "secret ingredient usually found in jellyfish..." (just kidding around on that last part.) ...can hit fast.

Soon, I'm getting touched. Poked at. Getting the vibes.

When you're a Traveler and you get high, particularly on the Yage, you're susceptible to the "clients" hitting you out of the blue, wherever you may be. You have one foot in this world – the real world – and one foot in the Borderlands and there's a banana peel in there somewhere, yah-suh.

I can feel it coming down. Something's in the room.

I smell death.

For a second I see hands and feet and some clothing hanging down in the mirror. I See the shadow on the floor of a body floating over me, but can't bring myself to look up at it.

Haunted again. A slowly forming body approaches floating. I reach out but it's like the body is made of smoke and swirls around my fingers.

I Get up and sit on the edge of the bed. Tori is rising up behind me and looking over my shoulder.

"What..." she says.

"Everything's OK . Go back to sleep."

"Don't go now... Are you leaving?" she says.

"I've got to go. Go do this now. Don't worry, I'll be here all the time." She's totally stoned by the Yage she did; my Yage that she bogarted to roll our joint, that's got her into this deathly dreamscape, and I'm best to just play it like everything's OK.

“Mmm’kay...” She murmurs sleepily, and lies back down again, fading out.

The spirit of someone who needs me is here.

I’m in the dream. The bedroom has only one wall now; the wall with the window. I see the little girl floating by, off through the window. I walk to the window, look out for a second and then crawl out the window into the bleak, dark dream landscape out there that stretches off into oblivion.

The little girl.

There she is.

She’s over there crying. She’s on a bench, like a park bench.

This case is probably a murder, I’m thinking, maybe a murder to cover a sex crime of some kind. Who else would kill a cute, little, innocent girl like that?

I sit down next to her – careful not to spook her – and am silent for a minute.

I Wait for her to look at me.

“Can you tell me what happened to you? What’s your name? Did someone bring you here?”

Off behind her I see Tori, floating by; like the Dude in Big Lebowski, in the bowling scene. She did the Yage too, and now she’s caught up in my dream.

I try to talk to the little girl but she’s not talkative.

Now Tori floats by me, flat like she’s planking but turning her head and smiling slightly. “This is all a dream, right?”

“Yeah baby.”

The little girl looks up at me. I think Tori floating by and talking to me has made the her more comfortable. More able to talk to me.

“Where’s my mommy?”

“Your mommy’s not here.”

“Please, can you please tell my mom that I’m okay? That I’m here?”

“Honey, you’re not okay.”

She sobs.

“What?”

“You’re not alive anymore.”

“Oh no...” She says in a soft, almost faint, little-child voice.

She sits silent for a bit, as what I said sinks in, and she realizes what’s going on.

“Tell me your name.”

After a good while, the lost little girl leans over and whispers into my ear: “Brittany.”

“Tell me your name, honey, your full name. Last name. Do you know it?”

I am Brittany Gorkin.”

I nod. The little girl starts sobbing. I hold her in my arms.

Now I’m seeing myself sitting there with her. I’m looking down from above at myself, seeing myself in my mind, and slowly the camera’s eye pulls up and away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Next Morning.

Tori's place is nothing glamorous, but even less so in the morning's sober light. Overflowing ashtray, dishes piled up in the sink, a line of clothes and drying underwear running across the middle of the room. Somehow, I don't remember any of this from the night before.

But I do remember the bat. She has this bat. It's a big one. And it's stuffed. Taxidermied. I remember smelling it last night when she was in the other room. Hey, I was drunk. I was high, OK? I smelled it. I smelled a dead bat.

It had this odd chemical smell. Like liverwurst and burnt motor oil and peppermint. I'm sure Catamuso would like to smell it. He loves to smell odd things. He may be part bloodhound. His life's big dream, bucket-list moment is to go to New York City and smell the Statue of Liberty's feet.

Coffee. This girl knows how to make coffee.

I'm on my laptop and researching the little girl. How do I spell it? Brittany G-O-R-K-H-i-n... Britanie Gerchin... No. How about Gorkin....

On her little, kitchen, counter top TV I see myself. *"...and police are now looking for this man for questioning in connection with the explosion yesterday at the university..."* I reach out over the table and turn the TV off, as Tori is coming in the door, wearing cut-offs and drying her hair. No top. The cut-offs are old ones and maybe she's gained a little weight, so she's bursting at the seams nicely. I look her up and down, checking out her nice, tan Florida aerobics body. I could get used to all this.

"Hello tiger. How 'bout some breakfast now?"

"Yeah. Anything but brownies."

She hunches to light a cigarette and then leans down and kisses me.

"You dream loud, eh..."

"That pot got too me."

"That little girl, she was crying all night."

I turn around to her. "She kept you awake? I'm sorry."

"Baby, all that was a blast. What was that in your shit? DMT? Mushrooms? I haven't had a trip like that since my last divorce party." Good, she thinks it was all a trip.

"Windex and baloney juice...."

"You're kidding me."

"Of course I'm kidding you. That was a special, top secret formula."

She smiles. "You had a good time last night. Didn't ya?"

That's more like it. "Yeah. "

"That's so cool! We both had the same dream!"

I pretend like it's nothing. "You can go tell all your new age girlfriends about it, and I'm sure that they'll all go to bed tonight with their biggest crystals and a clove of foxfire under their pillows."

She looks over my shoulder at my laptop. "Is that her?"

"This is her."

I look at Brittany Gorkin's face on the screen. A 19-year-old coed from Towson, MD. Killed in auto accident two weeks ago. Four kids dead in all. A car wreck on the way home from spring break. At 2am. Alachua County, FL. Worth checking out. Probably a murder here.

"Now, how is that her..."

"Grown. Yeah, but that's her. Last night she appeared to us as a little girl. She was scared, and, well... she became a little girl again. A little girl looking for her mommy. And this happens sometimes." I got to keep talking. "Guys that got shot and in WWII would lay there dying and cry out for their mothers. Big, tough Marines, and they would cry out for mother on their last breath."

"This girl's dead then."

"Yeah."

"At's fucked up." She makes a funny face and scratches her arm. "Are you some kind of psychic investigator?"

"I dabble."

"That's creepy."

"Well... sometimes people get trapped between here and there. Sometimes they need help. Sometimes, maybe they need something more."

I'm looking at Florida now on Google Maps. Brittany died in Menlo, Florida. About 75 miles from here. An hour's drive (the way I drive.)

"So that girl in the dream was a ghost? Really...a ghost. Here in my house?"

"I think so..."

"Shut that off. I can't look at that shit."

"Awww. Don't get spooked. " I make the laptop screen fold down some.

She leaves out of the room, her shoulders up, in an uptight posture and wringing her hands. "Ghosts! Yaaah!"

"You don't believe all this shit do you?"

"No! Not a bit of it! But I'm still going to get my Necromicon and Bible out and start reading."

"Baby, I was just kidding around. I'm sorry I freaked you out. Will you please stop tripping?"

"And light my Kabbalah candle! Where's my Kabbalah candle?" She says.

“And burn some thyme?”

“Does that help? I have sage!” She screams at me from the other room.

“Yup. Always does it for me.”

I left while she was at work, and I left her a note. I really enjoyed my time with her – what little it was – and I will be back.

But I stole her bat. The stuffed bat – I kidnapped it. I don’ know why.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It's about five or six miles from the freeway exit to the edge of town.

Weather's cool, sunny, and pleasant. I'm eating a cold Chick-fil-A sandwich and polishing off a mostly melted, but still a little cold, milk shake. I'm breezing along with the radio playing, sunglasses, and a smile.

I figure I'll scout around some before I find a motel.

Just a small, sad town: Menlo, Fla.

Five or ten thousand people maybe.

A cement plant, a weed infested Drive-In parking lot, defunct lead smelting operation, Waffle House, deserted Putt-Putt... no Starbucks, no Wal-Mart, not even a Chinese restaurant.

There are ghosts here too. Now I've got to find them.

I grab my tape recorder and start making some notes as I enter the outskirts. *"In Menlo now. Arrived 2:20 PM. Today is... April 14th. Or 15th. I am investigating the death of 19-year-old Brittany Gorkin. She and three other students returning from spring break with her all wound up dead. Paper said it was a car accident, but we might see about that. Suspect some kind of cover up. Maybe some local killed them? The cops? Who knows? From the clean looks of these kids it was not a Meth or Coke deal gone wrong, but this is a drug running corridor area... But I think they're using drones now or something nowadays. ...might be racial. One of the kids was Black. Who knows. The Brittany ghost-girl has shown up, but I haven't seen any of the other kids yet."*

The report loads up to the "cloud", and it's there, in case something happens to me.

A wave of nostalgia for a bygone era mixed with a despondent "land that time forgot" feeling washes over me as I troll through the bleak, half-abandoned downtown.

A flip-flop in the middle of the street at the city's main intersection.

I sit there under the red light, staring at that flip-flop in the middle of the road in front of me. If I weren't so tired, I would probably wonder how it got there. I take a snapshot of the lonely flip-flop. To me, it's beautiful. I take a lot of pictures. And I'm good. Amateur, but good. "F-Stop Fitzgerald" is one of my twitter names. It's a hobby, but I often also use the photographer angle as a cover. I have a picture scrapbook in the trunk titled LONELY THINGS. If I get pulled over, I make out like either I'm doing the "Bridges of Madison County" thing, or sometimes that I'm a state or govt. inspector taking pictures. I even have some cool, fake inspector credentials in the back.

Later I'll head back and get a shot of the decrepit windmills at the deserted Putt-Putt sometime. Might spend all afternoon there.

A dog trots by in a horrible condition. It has just given birth, but the puppy is stuck, only halfway coming out of the mother, and it's dead, just flopping around.

No picture of that.

It would depress me later. The kids these days thrive on all that gore, and macabre and “day-of-the-dead” stuff. But I’ve seen enough horror and bad things just doing the job I’m doing now and I don’t need any more.

I remember when I was a kid, the neighbors had an uncle that sort of lived in the attic. When I found out he was a war hero, I went hard on getting him to tell me his stories. He never could. He was a man who had seen too much. Literally seen too much.

Then one day – this was lotsa years later and I was a teenager – he was on chemo and dying, and kinda dizzy on a lot of pills. Agent Orange had got him and got him good. I was sitting on the front porch with my new laptop, checking out the chat rooms (a big thing back then; this was the first computer I owned) and some of the crazy porn I’d been hearing about – and he comes staggering up on the porch and sits down next to me. He was dying, and... drunk.

He started telling me about the war. He wasn’t telling really, he wasn’t confessing. I think he was like “downloading” to me. All his memories.

Like the dog; he knew he would die soon. It was all over now, and there was nothing he could do about it. At the end of the stories he was crying, the tears running down his face. Then silence for a while, and then he asked me if I could drive him down to the liquor store and take him trolling for whores down on Lincoln Street.

I told him I would be honored.

He wanted a skinny Black one in a tight dress, with a big Afro. Sure, why not?

So back in Menlo, I turn off the main drag onto a side street. I pass by an empty lot with a marshy, infested looking, stagnant pond, with an old, beat-up mattress in the middle, and clearly the smell of raw sewage wafting in through the open window.

This town is dead. They just haven’t buried it yet. It’s just lying here rotting away. Decomposing.

I’m breezing through a broad, long residential area: a neighborhood - kids playing in the yards, water sprinklers, streets named after trees – and I take a turn down a street that leads to the main drag.

Now I pull up to the intersection and I got some dildo, setting there in front of me, texting right through the green light. Yup, here comes the yellow light. The doofus has his left turn signal on. Of course, he’s badly situated and there’s not enough room for me to pull up on the right side of him, so I’m sitting there waiting. Waiting, waiting, waiting. What’s going on? I look up at the light and it’s green and then just turning red. I’m watching it now. The light turns green again. The guy’s still just sitting there. He has no idea that I’m sitting there right behind him. I’m getting livid, infuriated. I honk the horn!

He jumps!

His frigging phone pops out of his hand and out the window like a watermelon seed. It lands on the sidewalk, probably broken now. He still doesn’t go. He doesn’t turn around and look at me. He just sort of huffs and deflates like he’s totally pissed. Good. Fuck him. Then he gets out of the car. He’s a fatso guy, with that steroid look: shiny face and a shaved, bald head; like a lot of bouncers you see at strip clubs and rougher bars... but he’s a cop.

He's got his cop tie loose and his cop uniform-shirt unbuttoned. No gun belt on, like he's just off work, but he's got the surly cop smirk on his face and this is not going to end well. He glibly snaps up his phone and shoves it in his shirt pocket. I get out of the car too. (You don't want to be sitting down and vulnerable when a situation gets sticky.)

I tell him like – “Hey. Sorry. I didn't know you were a cop... but you were sitting there for three or four green lights.” As he comes at me, I see he has a lazy eye; one eye that sort of points off, that doesn't coordinate with the other eye. And a pointy head.

“Hey now, that was important police business I was on, boy.” He says.

Like I really believe him.

He reaches for his gun - or maybe the cuffs or the baton – none of which is there now – and I can smell whiskey and beer and Cheetos on his breath – and he realizes they're not there, but the lifting motion tightens his clothing, tightening the pocket until the cell phone sort of pops back out again and hits the ground.

I reach down and pick up the cell phone while he's still trying to figure out where his cuffs and gun are. I look at the screen. Angry Birds! “This is the important police business you were on?! Angry Birds!!” I say laughing my ass off.

As he realizes that he left his gun-belt on the seat of his car and he's actually helpless, and that I just caught him with Angry Birds on his phone, his face contorts like he doesn't know whether to scream or throw up. He's a bit paralyzed and I'm pretty mad so I just catch him with an uppercut to the jaw and knock him out cold – POW – just like that!

“Now I've done it.” I say to myself.

I look around. Total silence. No one saw. A silent, residential side street. The sound of a TV coming out an open window. A dog barks in the distance.

I bend down over him. A pulse. He's still alive. I pull out his wallet. Philby. Marcus Wayne Philby. 28 years old. 5 foot 8. 235 pounds. His mouth is smiling in his ID picture, but his eyes are still sad. And out of synch.

I go to my trunk, pull out the third case, and dig out some magic tricks.

I hit him with a hypo that will make him forget everything and should let him get a real good sleep. Rohypnol. I hate to waste it on this fucktard, but at least he will have amnesia.

I drag him into his car seat. I take a swig from his quart of single malt whiskey – nice stuff BTW - and pour a little on him, then let the bottle leak all over the pavement. I feel a leak coming on myself, and think “Hmmm, that will be a nice touch. It would look good if he looks like he pissed himself.”

I laugh as I piss on his lap a bit and some down onto the floor. Not too much now. Don't wanna overdo it.

Never pissed on anyone before.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Time to check in somewhere.

The Starlight Motel looks like a trip.

Up front, a nice garden of dead flowers and shrubs, neatly laid out. A dry birdbath over there to the left. Nice big shady trees painted white around the first four feet of the trunk.

Someone threw a pair of sneakers, tied together by the shoelaces onto the power-lines going into the office. A hand painted sign out front (that looks like it was done by a child with a lot of time and pride) announces that you can buy fireworks inside. Off to the left is another sign that leads to a petting zoo.

I love it.

This will be my headquarters, my base of operation for the next few days. There is no Hilton or Marriott in this town; maybe a Fairfield Inn back up by the expressway, but this is my kind of place. I have chosen well, and it's a beaut. The place is a dump, but if you don't like it fuck you. If some girl I pick up at the bowling alley doesn't like it, fuck her. It's cheap and easy and I can pull right up to the door and bring my shit into the room.

The lady at the front desk is very short, probably having shrunk a good bit over the years. She has a wig that looks like it may be 20 years old. At least 10 years old. It has been primped, nudged, and lovingly reshaped so many times over the years that she looks like Cousin It from the old Adams Family TV show.

The TV behind her is playing Wheel Of Fortune.

\$49.95 a night, \$189 for a week. Cool.

A fake name and cash.

A choice of rooms. The end room, the one on the right down there, with a view. Great. I'll have a view of the petting zoo out the side window. I get the room right above it too.

Cousin It is smoking filterless Camels. I didn't know you could even get those anymore. Behind her on the wall, I notice an old, yellowed picture in a Woolworth Five-and-Dime frame; a picture of a fat Hitman For the Dead Last Supper TEXT 7 ©bob Burden 7/13/19 6:55:38 PM 37

guy in a bunny suit holding a hatchet. The fat guy has a certain demented smile on his face, and looks like an insurance salesman with a little Bill Murray thrown in. As a matter of fact I think it is Bill Murray. It can't be, but I can't stop looking at it.

Do I want to rent a tape player? No.

I notice a stack of junky looking VHS tape players on a rickety rack at the end of the reception desk, then a library shelf full of VHS tapes, their labels faded of color in the Florida sun.

Cousin It was reading a comic book when I came in, but she slid it away under some newspaper. The edge of the comic tips out and it looks like an Archie comic. She thinks I didn't see it, but I did. I can imagine for a moment what it would be like to be reading a comic to pass the time in a motel in the middle of nowhere – that comic – reading the rest of that very comic - was what I was looking forward to when I got back from lunch earlier this afternoon.

Too lazy to pull the car down in front of the room right now, I walk down to my room, and that way I get a good look at the girl in cutoffs lounging against the fence around the pool and drinking a Doctor Pepper as I walk by.

She has flip-flops on. But I only see one on her. She actually has only one flip-flop on.

“Hey, I know where your other flip-flop is.” I say as I walk by, and I'm totally not even looking at her.

I'm not Paul Neuman, but sometimes, I snare a smile or a second glance from a random, passing cutie pie. Not every girl, like if I was Brad Pitt, but for some I'm interesting. For some I'm “their type” I guess. These days the whistling, leering wolf type seems to scare girls. Maybe something in the water makes them more skittish than a hundred years ago? But maybe that's not it. I'm seeing that if you come on real strong they figure: “Oh, I can have him any time.”

I was in college and my roommate was all-dogs-down in love with this girl in his Journalism class. He took her out to dinner, gave her flowers, remembered her birthday and Valentines Day, and rubbed her feet while they studied together in the library. But he never got laid. She fucked every other swinging dick around, even a couple of her teachers, but he was zero for zero on that girl. When he got hip, he was crushed and left engineering school for a job managing a chicken hatchery.

Anyways, if a girl gives me the eye I can be a Zen master of the cold shoulder. The trick is hit-and-run. You come up, make a splash and then you have to go off for something more important. The minute you hit on the girl; the clock is ticking. The longer you linger, the thinner and weaker your chances get. If you don't hit them up and just totally ignore them then you don't get noticed (unless you're Brad Pitt). At least that's what works for me. Hitting it too hard is the kiss of death and ignoring them; that usually drives them nuts. Conniving? Yes, but it's for their own good.

So I make my pass and scarper on down the walkway. Cool, so maybe she'll follow me down to my room... or not. Guess not. Maybe next time. Actually, she looks so high right now, she's probably too mellow to do much more than smile. But I can feel the smile on my back as I walk up to my room.

We'll see.

I go in the room. The smell. Non smoking room, but its been smoked in. A lot. A room like this would have had a crew of roofers staying in it last week, or maybe some seedy old solitaire-playing traveling salesman. I plop down on the bed. Good and hard. I like that for my back, which is doing fine right now, but just stretching, I can crack it in three places.

I think about the single flip-flop girl; her smooth tan skin, the way a hint of young chub pooched out over the front of her tight jeans, the strand of hair slinging around and stuck to the corner of her mouth. A smile in her eyes as she looked up from watching CRAZY RICH ASIANS on her cell phone as I walked by.

I doze off. Just for a second now.... I need the rest. Been driving all day, drank some last night. Got high and fucked a 36-year-old out of work aerobics instructor/wanna-be actress. Got 4 hours of sleep last night...

...just need 5 minutes.

About 3 hours later I wake up. What was I dreaming? Where am I? Did I lock the car? Was that girl in the walkway a hooker – truck stop hooker maybe – or someone's girlfriend? Or wife? Petting zoo? Fireworks...

The car's fine. Doors tight. It's a tired, ragged-out old hooptie anyways, and that's the way I like it. No one wants to break into this heap. Still, I have the car all rigged up to set some alarms off if someone tries to get inside.

No sign of the girl now.

The sun is coming in at low angles; setting – slipping down - a cooling star falling slowly into its own sunset. I light a cigarette and check out around the pool. A condom with a dead ant stuck to it is floating in the deep end. I shake my head. The light's hitting it just right, and I take a picture of the ant-inflicted condom with my cell phone.

A seagull sails over, drifting. Maybe there's a dump nearby? I hear a TV off in the distance, in some room with the window open. A car rolls up on the other side of the fence around the pool, gravel crunching and radio turning off. Mexican radio. Smell a waft of pot smoke. I hear bottles rattling in a paper bag. Someone's going to have a party tonight.

I get a wild hair and go into town, drive around, grab a bite, float, ride, cruise, and check things out. All is quiet on the Western Front tonight. A bar called The Collier Room, two drunken old hippies arguing outside the VFW, a strip club, all pretty dead and empty looking. Maybe it'll all get better on the weekend.

I see the speed-trap up ahead: cop car sitting like a waiting shark. I get a bad feeling as I drift by slowly. Cop lights a cigarette just as I turn my head to look – it's not my boy Philby though.

Hitting the edge of the old city proper, and still no rich neighborhood.

Then some empty lots in rows of a long-ago, gone-belly-up-now unfinished subdivision. There are streets, and the lots are laid out with a few foundations here and there, with sprouts of wiring and plumbing coming out.

Past the edge of town there's nothing. Flat. Florida flat. Just fields of sawgrass. No mountains or hills. There's some kind of small military base east of town, a junior college over there, a series of Quonset huts in a row, a local radio station with a small one room structure under a sky-high radio tower.

I get the feeling of being free; free and able to just wander, the kind of thing you so take for granted until you're locked up or lying in the hospital.

Getting dark now. As I drive through downtown again, things are beginning to come to life. Not entirely in a good way, but not all bad either. As I cross below the underpass I see the blue lights - cops pulling people over. Definitely a speed-trap town. It's a cottage industry in a lot of small towns. I hate speed traps.

I get back to the hotel and someone is parking in the spot right in front of my room where I wanted to park. Fuck. I still haven't unloaded all my crap out of the trunk of my car. Later then. In a minute.

But the far parking spot is a blessing after all. As I walk past the room that's two doors down from mine, there's the girl - the one from before, who was watching the Crazy Asians. Her curtains are pulled closed, but I can still see right between them, and there she is, lying on the bed, going at it with a vibrator and nutting like a fiend. Beautiful. The female orgasm is perhaps my favorite fetish. She definitely dropped acid or MDA by the looks of the way she's going at it. Should I knock? Ask for a cup of sugar?

I hear something and turn to the noise. It's my "client", the lost little girl that I met when I was so fucking high the other night. She's there, down past my room at the end of the motel walkway, but just for a brief second. She's fading away the more I look at her... And I really was kidding about asking for a cup of sugar. It must be about 11 now..."

Back to the room.

What a day. What a life.

I'm haunted by a little girl ghost, chased by mysterious assassins sent by unknown sources, watching a girl in a shitty motel pleasure herself, and beating up cops... how cool is all that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In the middle of the night I hear a noise or something. Something woke me up. I'm thinking about all that good stuff in the trunk of the car that might be vulnerable now. I do have some alarms set, but you can never be too careful with guns, expensive electronics, drugs, loot from the last job...

The car is fine, but I decide to go ahead and bring most of the stuff into the room.

Then I smoke a cigarette outside. Nice night. I walk over to the petting zoo and then past it. A goat bleats behind me.

For me, this is the life. I like being on the road. Always a new strange place, right around the corner.

Walking around the parking lot at 3 in the morning.

If I stay home for a month, I start feeling stale. I fall into the daily rhythm. Days fly by. Weeks. Whole seasons. You become a servant to your life. A robot. A daily robot. Your life goes by on you, and you're just sitting there watching TV all the time.

Or is the TV watching you?

Some people worry about that.

I look up at the night sky and the clouds are flying over now. A front moving in maybe? The air is colder, and the breeze is picking up. I decide to take a spin and run through town, see it at night and get a bite.

There's a bar that looks interesting. Just closing though. Interesting people in the parking lot. Just a couple. A hot chick or two.

I've covered everything. I've seen the town in daylight, twilight and night. A good way to acclimate. To let the town lose its mystery; to lose intimidation.

People eating at the Waffle House. I sail in and get a seat at the counter. One of the waitresses is eyeballing me and she beats the other girl to me with the setup: a knife and fork on a napkin. The menu, a smile, then a glass of water. And another smile. Swell.

“Hello there Princess.” She just smiles back. Something about a girl getting shy gets me curious sometimes.

Not a bad looking girl. So I start to figuring.

A girl could be coming on strong for a number of reasons. Maybe just for tonight. Maybe she wants to get out of town. Maybe she just broke up with her boyfriend. Or girlfriend. Or maybe she’s just broke.

She’s young, so maybe she wants to get away from her parents. She’s not a virgin. Virgins are usually playful and silly. Giddy even. Then again, ya never know.

I start sketching on some napkins, just doodling like I often do, and I’m drawing some horses and horse heads. Girls love horses.

I eat, I smile, I get my ice water refilled. She looks at my horse.

She turns up her nose with wrinkles and says: “I hate horses. They kicked me,” and turns away.

Just then, some cops come in. Four. They’re all laughing and joking. Probably high. Then my blood runs cold for a second when I notice Philby is one. He’s almost right on me, as I turn and his eyes meet mine. He keeps going. He looked right through me. He doesn't recognize me.

I pay and hit it.

When I get outside, I remember that I wrote my phone number on one of the napkin sketches, but I forgot to give it to her.

I sit outside in my car at the other end of the parking lot. I sit and watch.

Princess beats out another waitress again, and is waiting on the cops now. She’s flirty with them and putting her hands on one guy’s shoulder as she jokes and laughs with them.

I’m sitting there watching this. Can you believe that? Like a jealous high school boyfriend. I don’t even have a little pint bottle to sip on like if I was in a movie.

Well shit...

Then one of the other waitresses cleans up my spot. She bundles the napkins with horses on them up in her fist as she’s talking over her shoulder to the cook behind her, and my drawings get thrown out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I get back to my room and I can't sleep. I can't find the bottle of 25 so – WTF – I do some of the Yage I've got in my pocket. I mean, I'm on a job right now so I'm not really doing it recreationally. And I've got to get some sleep. I turn on the TV. There are reruns of the Love Boat and some talk show about the warning signs of alcoholism. I turn the TV off.

I hit the computer.

I find Brittany's Facebook page. What a doll she was. I watch a cellphone video she had posted. A 19-year-old Brittany Gorkin is walking out of a Vero Beach hotel room with her friends: apparently her boyfriend and another college-age couple - all friends, and are loading vacation gear into a small SUV.

She's really pretty. What a loss: so young.

Pictures of them on the beach, having dinner, partying, having fun...

Nice girl; actually quite beautiful. She had these amazing eyes; very big, beautiful eyes. So young, still a little baby fat, shapely, perky, almost hypnotically sexy/pretty. What a shame. What a waste. A small pet terrier dances around her feet as she loads her overnight bag into the car.

In one picture, Brittany is smiling at the camera as she shows off her tan and doffs her summery straw hat to display a new hairstyle. Nice legs. A dolphin on one ankle, a comical bat on the other. She had a bat on one of her T-shirts; a bat and the words "FLY BY NIGHT!" A cool design I've never seen before.

Its kind of weird, looking at this girl and knowing she is dead and gone.

Now let's check the accident report.

Just my luck - the police department database is updating, and I find an open “back door” to hack in through, accessing the accident report. Got it.

Well, fuck me! Look who filed the report? It’s that dildo, cartoon cop back there with the Angry Birds. Officer Philby! Well hello, Philby.

I hear the bear roar. I go out to get some air. Take a walk around.

Got a good buzz off the Yage going on now, and I’m feeling pretty mellow. There’s a vending machine near the front office. Now for desert. I try to buy a candy bar, but push the wrong button number and buy a comb. I try again. I’ll try a Snickers, in honor of our boy QuickJohn. Hell, I’ll try two.

I feel someone to my left, down the breezeway, and I turn. I look and see a blue glow; a blue, glowing entity standing about 10 feet from me. But I don’t see it when I’m it looking right at it, only when I strain to see it out of the side of my eye. This is perfectly normal and no cause for alarm. This is what we call a “Blue Louie”. This is a remnant kind of “client”: a haunted soul, so old and diminished that it can’t remember who it is, or the specific, horrific event that caused it to remain in the netherworlds that we call the Borderlands. That limbo-land between life and death, where the unquiet dead, who haunt our world reside until I, or one of our helpful, friendly murderers, avenges them. When you do the Yage, it’s as if you have one foot in the real world and one foot in the nethers.

These are sad things and there’s a way to get rid of them, to put them out of their misery, but I’ve only been with the crew for a year or two and am still learning.

I took Philby for a doofus: a comical, harmless, Barney Fife type caricature, but maybe he’s the one covering up for whatever happened... If this was a murder, he could be the one protecting some local big-wig, or big-wig’s kid, or even another cop.

On the way back to the room, I pass a room with a guy sitting there watching TV with the curtains wide open. I noticed that when a room is not occupied, the drapes are wide open and the beds are made, all nice and tight, and you have to shut the drapes yourself when you check in. This guy just forgot. Looks like he’s watching porno when I glance, so I look back to where I’m going.

I decide to light another cigarette before I go to sleep and finish my candy bar. Snickers always seem to have a slight, almost imperceptible, salty taste and I always need a drink to wash it down.

The bear is not looking good, but he’s hanging in there. Not a big bear, but not quite a baby.

I pull up one of the cheapo plastic chairs from the swimming pool. “Hi bear. Wanna sip?” I offer the can of beer in my hand.

The Bear roars and lunges at me. He has a lot of froth and slobber flinging from his mouth.

“Easy there, Ace.”

I pick up the cigarette that flipped out when the bear lunged, and I sit down in the beside-the-pool chair. “Sorry dude. No Heineken for you today.”

The bear saunters back to the other side of the cage as if he heard me.

After I finish the cigarette, I saunter back to the vending machines to get a drink. I don't look when I go by the porno man's room, but on the way back he turns – I can see him turn out of the side of my eye – and without thinking I turn and look. Now I can see that his face is sallow and cracked and he has a damp, deathly pallor. The eyes are no more than ghastly sockets, hollow and rotten looking, as if the eyeballs rotted and insects and birds ate the tasty eyes out of the head. He has a sick grin on his face and waves at me.

These kinds of ghosts without eyes are mostly harmless too, but can be trouble sometimes. These are the ones who will never be avenged; the ones who are not innocent, and are just hanging around waiting to go to Hell. Satan comes every solstice to collect these souls. (Found that shit out the hard way actually. LOL)

They still give me the willies though.

I go back to sit with the bear.

I'm lonely I guess.

"Hey there fella. Full moon tonight." Off in the distance a well-timed tire squeals and a glass-packed muffler revs and ka-putters into the night. "Lotsa action going on tonight, amigo. We're missing it all you know, the good stuff at least."

A voice says: "How you doing?" But it's not the bear.

I look around and it's the girl with one flip-flop. She is pulling another chair over to where I'm sitting. She sits down. She has both her flip-flops now.

"Bear got bit by a raccoon." She says. "I told them it has rabies."

"And they don't want to hear it, huh?"

"No, they got someone coming for it now."

"That's good. Poor thing is probably suffering."

"I saw you looking last night." She says.

I smile. "You were doing a good job there." She smiles. She's just woken up and her hair is nice and messy. "The bear woke you?"

She smiles demurely and nods, looking me in the eye. She's coming on strong.

I move over closer and put my hand on top of her hand. She smiles. I lean into her and kiss her. She smiles. Then I start kissing her in earnest. She melts a bit and then gets more whipped up for a while. She leans back and takes a breath.

My eyes wander to the left, and I notice the kid in the office is watching. He has a sad, frozen look on his face.

She takes some more deep breaths and then stands up. She knows what she's doing. She knows what she's gonna do.

She slinks over in front of me, self confident, majestic, and straddles my lap, smiling and throwing her cigarette away, over her shoulder. She starts kissing me in intently now. My mind goes in five different directions, one of which is; what happens if whatever boyfriend she has comes home or wakes up right now.

She draws back from the kissing, reaches in her shirt pocket and pulls out a condom, waving it in my face twice and smiling. Fuck the boyfriend. Fuck someone driving by seeing us. Fuck the cops. Fuck the ghosts. Fuck the kid in the motel office; I've got a good hand here - a full house - and I'm going all in.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Next morning everything's all fucked up. The girl wants me to give her 200 bucks when I wake up. I'm half into a cup of coffee, and she's got me on spin dry over the money. Anything more than a hundred bucks in this dumpy truck-stop motel is preposterous!

I laugh. *Some Romeo I am.*

She gets mad. Thinks I'm laughing at her. I have to explain that I'm laughing at myself. Here I was last night, thinking what a great lover I am, and now this.

But this is going to be tricky. I'm right in the middle of a delicate operation, here in Menlo, Florida, and don't want a squabble or any bad blood to fuck it all up, which can easily happen. If she threatens me with rape or it turns out she has a "manager", what do I do? Kill both of them? I don't need some ding-dong gunning for me. So I have to talk her down now. But I've definitely screwed up this time.

For one thing, I've got a lot of sensitive, dangerous and valuable things stashed in the room and in the car, and sometimes carried right on me. I don't need anyone snooping around in my room or breaking in when I'm not there. For another, I don't need any jilted, frail, or jealous boyfriend/pimp slashing my tires. I don't need anyone trying to jump me in the parking lot or hit me over the back of the head when I'm coming out the door.

I sit her down to talk to her. Gotta do this right. I give her the low down.

"Listen girl, 200 is gonna be crazy for me. Now, you're worth that – don't get me wrong – and you're worth more! Sure, why not? But you have to look at it from my side too. For me, it all kind of becomes more than romance when it gets above a C-note."

"What's a C-Note?"

"A hundred bucks. A 'C-note' is a hundred bucks." She rolls here eyes.

"Don't give me that." I said, shaking my head. "Now listen to all this. I'm going to give it to you straight. I'm not going to give you the run-around, and I'm going to take my time to say all this. This is where I'm coming from."

I light a cigarette, take a breath and think about what I'm gonna say. "See, for me - at a hundred bucks – now that works for me. And it works for you. In my mind, I can say that I'm not really paying

for the woman, as much as I'm paying for a woman to leave after. Then when you look at the cost for dating..." I shrug, "like dinner, movies, ya know, but the most expensive thing is time. And my time is worth something. All that dating stuff takes time. So it's better for me to just give it up, to give you a hundred bucks. Ya see?"

She nods.

"Now another thing, if you are going to charge a person for something, you have to tell them up front. You get your hair done? You get a tooth pulled, they can tell you how much. It's the American way. Now, I know you can run that game on some of these doofs out there, and more power to you – they're doofuses and they deserve it. And they don't ever get you off. Now there's something to be said for that. You're a real, healthy, sensuous woman, not some old dried up biddy. You had a real good time with me last night, you got to admit. The doofs, they just jerk off in your pussy and run back to their wives and there's nothing else to it.

"Now thirdly, it can sorta work the same for a woman." I say.

"How is that?"

"Well, say, what if you *like* me – say you really do like me – say you wanna hang out – I don't know... go see a movie, or drink some wine and smoke a joint... as the sun sets or whatever... then it's your choice! It's voluntary. A woman should have a choice, don't you think? If you're on a date, you're stuck with this guy until you can bug out of it, ya know. But if you don't give a shit about me – some do, some don't – then fine, you take off – no hard feelings. It's her right, as a woman to just take off when she gets tired of me. Right? Does all that make sense?"

She shrugs.

I pull out a C-Note and drop it in her lap.

"So now, it's up to you. Up to you... if it was good for you, maybe you wanna go again sometime..."

She nods, stands up, and leads me down to her room again.

That's business. And that's romance. That's the way it's done. Better to have good friends than bad neighbors.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Afterwards I leave.

As I pass the Waffle House, I see some waitresses getting off. But I don't see "Princess". I circle around and come back by. She is not among them.

I head over to the crash site. I wait till the cop at the speed trap goes to lunch. He'll be at lunch for at least 45 minutes. Forensic observation is a critical and significant part of this job.

The crash site is a grassy area by the abutment of an overpass. The vehicle hit the abutment and bounded back onto the grass. Must have been going at a good clip.

I take some pictures with my pocket camera. It's a special camera. It's actually 5 cameras, one center, two on the sides, and then top, and bottom. You know how when you have two teenagers cat-fighting in a McDonalds and it's shot with a cell phone? And you miss the action when they go off screen? Well, cell phone cameras are designed to take posed snapshots. My five-eyed camera works like a shotgun. It gets all the action. You just have to point it in the general direction. They could make a fortune with a camera like this, but the camera and cell phone companies are too stupid to invent it. But Jack Ketch wasn't. Our boy Jack invented this camera and it's the best. It runs through batteries and memory quicker, but it works.

I see the tire tracks. Some car fragments in the grass. Blood and gore spots here and there, now a cruddy copper brown in color... It looks to me like the SUV hit the ground at an angle and hit on the two right-side tires first. I'm not sure what that means, but it brings up more questions than it answers. Forensic studies of an accident scene can lead you in wrong directions and down dead ends very easily. Even a real pro can get all snarled up in interpreting evidence.

Next I head out to the auto graveyard.

I finally find the wreckage of the car the kids were driving. I climb around in it, up on the roof, look underneath. The smell of death - baked in the Florida sun for the last week - still clings to the car like an aura.

“This is it.”

The wreckage is all twisted up and a real holy mess. It’s sickening to imagine that there were four people – four human beings -in this thing when it hit the wall at so-many-miles an hour.

Whoever was driving busted the steering wheel with their chest. One head came through windshield. Tires good: no blowout. School notebook. Sunglasses. Blood. Hair. ‘Hello Kitty’ keychain... A couple of old albums, Bowie, Doors, Meatloaf, Iggy, Steely Dan, Talking Heads... good taste in vinyl.

There was an impact on the front left, and signs of paint from impact with another car, but the paint from the other car has been mostly rubbed, scraped, and scratched off. That tells me something right there.

I’ll need some personal items. I recognize Brittany’s straw hat, all crushed and twisted now, the same one she was wearing in her Facebook video.

I take a bunch more pictures and go home.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

That afternoon I get a call from Catamuso; a voice mail actually. He is in town. But he's in jail already. He was coming to hit me up about something and got caught in the speed trap. LOL. Knowing Catamuso, he started something with the cops too. He can really get on people's nerves in a really nutty way. His third wife set his bed on fire while he was sleeping in it. Her name was Lamb Chops.

He got one free phone call from jail, and I was it. He didn't call our headquarters because I'm right here, and it might take them a while to get someone else down here.

I want to stay as invisible to the police as possible – off their radar screen – so I get the flip-flop girl to go in with the bail. As they come out, I see he's already getting into it with her, arguing in front of some cops just coming up the steps. So he almost gets arrested again.

As we drive back to the motel, Catamuso is looking at the girl out of the side of his eye. Either she is dirty – that is someone who has been set up to fuck with me - or he's thinking about her. She's a sexy girl and dressed right. She has these tight, cut-off, blue-jean shorts, a tight T-shirt – and she smells really good.

After we drop her off, Catamuso is curious. “Who is that girl?”

“I don't even know her name. I call her the flip-flop girl.”

“She's not one of us then.”

“No, no, no. I keep forgetting to ask her name.”

“But I want her. I must have her.”

“Then why did you start an argument with her?”

He says nothing back to me, but pulls out some lotion and starts rubbing it on his hands very methodically. “Old dishpan hands.” He says smiling.

“What-er-you, getting ready to feel her up now? Wanna be well prepared, huh?”

“You don't even know her name.”

“Strange isn’t it? Love is sure strange, don’t you think?”

“I am going to eat lunch.”

“I’ll drop you up here, there’s a the Dairy Queen and a Krystal and a fish and chips place.”

“You have to buy me lunch now.”

“Why do I buy you lunch?” I chuckle, amused. “Why do I need to buy you lunch? Can’t you buy your own lunch?”

“You’re loaded. You are flush from the score up in Maryland. And you’re whining about buying me lunch?” I *did* clip a lot of good stuff up there in Maryland.

“Yeah and I had to ‘correct’ five guys. Four of them were well-trained, top notch guys. So, whoever gets there first. The first-est with the most-est. And I got the mostest.”

I feel Catamuso frowning at me. “But I guess I can buy you lunch today, Catamuso. Certainly. As I enjoy your company, my friend, and I would be delighted!”

I can feel Catamuso smiling.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Of course Catamuso orders the most expensive thing on the menu. And a \$6.95 deluxe milkshake.

“Why did you come down here? What’s up?”

“This morning when I woke up in my hotel room, I looked out the window. A man dressed as a pharaoh stood across the street in front of a car lot. He was flipping a sign around and trying to bring customers in. He looked like you from the distance and so I thought of you.”

“I woke up this morning and looked out the window and saw a toilet seat hanging from a no-parking sign.”

“No omen there. Just public silliness.” Catamuso looked up from his food.

“No, never would I associate you, my dear friend, with a toilet seat. Just a coincidence.”

“I’m not sure I like what you just said.”

“Well, you’re saying a pharaoh in front of a car lot looks like *me*?”

“You know, there was a lot more in Maryland than we thought.” He says, changing the subject.

“What did I miss?”

“Frozen people.”

“Strange.” I thought for a second. “Cryogenic?”

“Frozen. I don’t know cryogenic. I don’t know what is that.” And then he added: “I have one in the trunk.”

Asking Catamuso *why* would have been confounding.

“You can crash in the other room tonight.” He knows that when I shack up in one of these cheap motels I usually have a spare room to fall back on, or change up to, or sleep in if the neighbors are making too much noise. Standard procedure.

Just by luck, I spot the waitress from the Waffle House across the room eating lunch with some girls. We are making eyes. She looks a lot better now, with her hair down and not all done up for work. I smile at her. She smiles. I take a sip from my glass. She takes a sip from her glass. I run my hand through my hair. She runs her fingers through her hair. She's up for it. And I *have* to mess with Catamuso's head. I can't help it.

So I say: "I'm feeling good today. I have the gift today, Catamuso."

He shrugs. He's chowing down. "What?"

"Look around. Pick out a girl in here. Now don't point. Just tell me. I will pick her up. I'll bet you lunch, double or nothing."

He looks around. All over the place. Princess and her friends are the only ones here that actually look interesting. He points towards her table. "The blonde," he says.

I smile and shake my head. "Now that's a hard one. She's the hottest girl in here. Did you have to pick the hottest girl in the whole town?"

"I doubt you have any chances with her. She is a nice one, Harken."

I let a few seconds tick by. I'm smiling at her. "Watch this," I whisper to Catamuso.

I beckon at her with my index finger and a stern but smiling look. She runs her fingers through her hair, smiling. She looks around her table, picks up her plate and her drink, hoists her purse over her shoulder, and comes towards us.

She almost sits down next to me, but I extend my hand to her; indicating for her to sit down next to Catamuso. I want to be able to look her in the eyes and don't want Catamuso staring at her as he is wont to.

"What's your name, princess?" I ask.

"I like Princess. Princess is fine."

"Princess, I'm Anthony and this is my uncle Catamuso. I just got him out of jail."

"Oh my." She looks at him with apprehensive surprise and amusement, if not suspicion. "Jail?"

"I am not his uncle." Says Catamuso, and leaves it at that, with no further explanation.

"Don't worry, he's no dangerous criminal." I look at Catamuso and smile. "He was arrested in one of your town's wonderful speed-traps."

She smiles at Catamuso and pats him on the back.

"Let's do something, you and me. Waddaya say. Do you have an opera in this town?" She smiles and shakes her head "no". "A zoo?" She shakes her head. "A racetrack?"

"No, but they have a demolition derby over in Impaqua on Saturday night."

I wink at her.

"Saturday? Lets go back to my hotel room now."

“Your hotel room. What’s there?”

“A bed and a TV, and the TV’s broke.” Catamuso almost chokes on his food.

“Let’s go!” She says. Catamuso’s eyes roll. I’m loving it.

I can see the Catamuso’s reflection in the window, following behind me as we all leave. He shakes his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

After she leaves, Catamuso comes up to the spare room. “Sorry I messed up your room, amigo. The girl in the room two doors down, well, you see - I have something going on with her.”

“You had to do that then. No problem, Anthony.”

“Sad little town, eh?”

“But I saw her boyfriend come home just now.”

“The flip flop girl?”

“Oui.”

Boyfriend? She did mention a boyfriend coming home, but I didn't think much about it. His stuff – some man stuff - was in her room, so I asked. I was going to try and set up/hire Flip Flop Girl to take care of Catamuso tonight, but with the newly arrived boyfriend around, I'll have to put that in the cooler.

I need to take care of him somehow, though. Not just because I owe him one, from the last Dallas job, but I need to keep him around. He's the one “squire” that is always on the ball and never lets me down. Saved my ass a number of times. He has a real strange 6th sense about things too. Never seen anything like it. But he can up and leave at the drop of a hat. One day he's there and the next he's on his way to Stonehenge.

Now I'm wondering if my neighbor girl is going to be cool and keep her mouth shut when I meet her man. Also, a lot of times I kind of lose the lust for a girl, once I meet the husband or boyfriend. I never want to meet them because it somehow spoils it all for me then. I don't know, I have no idea why that is.

I'm not going to ask him how he found me again, but I am curious: “How did you wind up down here in this Nowhere'sville town?”

“I followed a trail of cookie crumbs here.”

“Really?”

Still buzzed on coffee, Catamuso goes downstairs to the other room to get on the computer and work his wizardry. You wouldn't know it by just looking at him, but he is a maestro in digging up dirt, cracking secure sites, bank accounts, utilizing closed-off government resources, and fucking with people who piss him off. They never know what hit them.

I take a nap, have a few more shots of the Glenlivet and doze off. Later I wake up with the feeling that something is in the room. I look around but there's nothing there. Look out the window. No one out there. Look in the bathroom. Under the bed. I flop down on the bed again.

There, on the dresser... a white mouse, sitting up on his hind legs and staring right at me. Slowly I move my hand to the ashtray on the nightstand, touch it, grab it, and then pitch it at the mouse as hard as I can. The mouse moves and dodges so fast I can't tell which way it went, almost as if it disappeared into thin air, as the ashtray bursts into forty-three pieces on the wall.

Fuck it. Catamuso is going to sleep in this room tonight. I go downstairs to the other room. He's killing it on the computer.

"Waddaya got amigo?"

"They write a lot of traffic tickets in this town."

"You bet. The highway outside: it's a shortcut between the 301 and the other highway."

"They have lot of accounts here and the Bitcoins they have too. Some Bitcoins."

"Bitcoins! I would be inclined to doubt they even know what a Bitcoin is in this town. Any other unusual deaths, murders, fatal accidents?"

"Nothing unusual. Some things, you know."

"Anything on the girl's accident?"

"I'm downloading all body and dashboard cams now."

"This stuff drives me nuts, sitting around and waiting. Look, I'll be back. Call me when you have something."

Going out the motel room door, I run into the flip-flop girl and her man. He's returned from wherever he went.

Now I was expecting a big, burly, tattooed redneck or a pit-bull-faced thug mother-fucker, but this guy is a nobody. A sort of average guy with a moustache and a sport coat, blue jeans, and loafers. He's not going to do anything. Not because he's afraid of me, but he's not going to do anything just on suspicion. He's a normal looking guy but smart enough to pick up that something may be going on between me and her. He looks at her for a second. Then me.

He looks like a salesman in a department store, selling suits or shoes or underwear or something. Probably a nice guy. I'm happy for him - that he's got the hot girl - and sad for him because probably he's got more than he can handle.

She introduces him.

He's a magician by profession. Puts on magic shows for those fundraisers, those ones with phone-bank boiler-rooms that raise money for the underprivileged children and the shrine clubs.

Apparently he is just passing through; sort of came home to eat dinner and get laid and he's on his way off to another job on the road.

They go into the room and I wander off to take a walk. I want to go to the deserted Putt-Putt and take some arty pictures of the defunct windmills. I like windmills. Cookies or real ones.

About half a mile down the 4-lane highway though, I see a baseball game going on and sit down to watch it. I forget about the windmills, put it off for some other time.

It's a good game and I'm getting into it, then 40 minutes later, flip-flop girl comes up and sits down next to me. She must have seen me walk off in this direction.

He's gone again. But I'm not into it anymore. Not into her. Not right now. Maybe tomorrow. And I kinda knew that would happen.

Loneliness is a hard game. I put my arm around her and we sit there in silence.

After a while, she starts telling me her story, but I don't really want to hear it. I often find that the more you know about somebody, the worse it all gets. There's an old saying that goes: sometimes the greatest love lasts only for a week... or a day. Some of the flames that I've felt closest to, I just saw across the bar – our eyes meet – linger – and we go off together without any words at all.

Her father used to hypnotize her when she was twelve, and she went along with it as if it was a secret pretend game they played. At fourteen, she fell in love with Vanilla Ice and later, she tricked her way into a concert and nailed him. Her mother regularly fucked an inner city basketball team behind her second husband's back. Her little brother ran away from home and fell asleep on a railroad track and got his head run over. She has a crystal that now protects her from all bad luck and evil influences.

That is about all I need to know.

I steer the conversation around to Catamuso. I want to set up a deal for her to go take care of him. "Just knock on the door and ask for some sugar. Just wear this big shirt, but no shorts. Tell him I told you that he might have some sugar. If he blanks on you and won't open the door, tell him there are some packets next to the empty coffee cup from Waffle House. On the TV. Once you get inside, ask if he speaks French, and could he translate something for you. When he says: "What?", you lift up your shirt and show him your pussy."

"That's a lot to remember."

"You got it?"

She thought about it for a tick. "Yeah, I got it now."

It cost me \$200. Good. I want it done right. Catamuso's a horny little bastard and works better with the edge off.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

When I get back later, Catamuso's in a great mood. Whistling and has made himself a cocktail.

We need to go get some ice for the man in his trunk. Ok. I go with him. I don't want him getting in any more trouble.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

We hit the Waffle House again, to sober up, and for me to come see Princess. The first thing I do is get a glass of water – no ice – and pop a couple of Alka Seltzer again.

Catamuso catches on quick that I knew Princess from before, and he is properly pissed. He loves to put one over on you, but the idea that someone could put one over on him is anathema.

“The cops - they always sit at this table?” I ask one of the waitresses, pointing at the table next to ours.

“There? Yeah. Unless someone is sitting there.”

I make a point of getting another spot closer to the door and away from the ‘cop table’. Later, when no one is looking, I go over and place a ballpoint pen under the napkin dispenser, grab a napkin and go back to my table. It will record their conversation. They should be in soon.

Princess is in a good mood and very attentive. I catch the other girls looking at me from time to time. She must have been talking.

Catamuso is upset about Block.

Antonious Block is another “traveler”, like me, going around “rectifying situations” and such, but he’s a little more hardcore and brutal than I am. “He has them trapped and cornered. But still he has to play with them. One by one he takes them down,” says Catamuso. “I think he savors killing every person.”

The cops come in and head to their table. One cop eyeballs Catamuso. “That’s the one who pulled you over?” I ask. He nods. Catamuso is watching him, focused on his every move, every step, like a dog ready to pounce.

“How’d they get you, Catamuso? You drive like an old church lady.”

Catamuso turns to me. “He got me for not slowing down all the way at a stop sign. There is no one around. No one around for a hundred miles.”

“Well maybe not a hundred miles...” I add.

“But I did stop. I have dash cam. I look at it today. I am innocent! I have the films. And will take it to court! Fucking bastards, I have had no ticket in 15 years! And I did stopped.”

“When’s your court date?”

“I don’t know.”

“Probably six months away. You’re not going to come back for that.”

Catamuso grumbles. Shakes his head, and looks over at the cops.

“See that's the way they get you. This strip right here through town is a shortcut. A short cut between that expressway,” I say, pointing in both directions, “and that expressway. They just want you to pay the fine and go.”

“They got me, yeah.”

“Catamuso. Just go into their database and erase your fucking ticket!”

“Hah!” he exclaims. He looks back over at the cops. He’s smiling like the Cheshire Cat, or maybe an angry, drunk pirate.

The cops sitting over there are looking back. They have no idea what he is smiling about, but they don't like it. They’re talking about us. I never smile at cops. It’s like they can't stand to see anyone happy, and if they see you smiling, they immediately will be trying to figure out how to fuck your day up.

I weigh the possibilities of that wisdom ever absorbing into Catamuso, if I tell him that. I shake my head: *No!* And spear another breakfast sausage link with my fork.

Sure enough, the cop who pulled Catamuso over comes sauntering up. He’s not smiling.

“Hello officer Randall. Nice night out there isn’t it.” says Catamuso.

Randall says: “I’ve got my eye on you,” and starts to walk off.

But Catamuso can't leave it alone. “You know sir, it is my opinion that using law enforcement to raise money for the government is total abomination. A civil disgrace. It should be banned.”

The cop turns back around. He’s not glaring. He’s expressionless, which is even more disturbing to me.

“When the mayor or the police chief tell you to write more tickets or else you lose a job? You shouldn’t write more tickets.”

The cop’s head turns a little to the side, and he’s actually listening for a second now.

“A mayor who tells his men to do that, he’s no man, he is a little pussy-shit.”

The cop glances to the side, and then shakes his head ever so slightly.

“What you do with these people? Maybe tar and feather the mayor is good? Ride them downtown on a rail? Or maybe someone, who is the really good person, would just shoot them in the face.”

At this point one of the other cops comes over and pulls Randall back towards the cop's table murmuring something. "Not here, not now."

We talk some more about Block a while. About some baseball. Then I get up and go to the bathroom.

I come out of the bathroom, and now Catamuso and Randall are going at it again. It's just exploding out loud – and everyone's looking, even the people outside that were leaving are looking in. As Randall goes for his baton, one of the other cops comes over and intercedes with Randall - and I grab Catamuso. They back down and disengage.

We sit for a while and get some glances. Catamuso says: "We come back and get the pen later." He gets up and goes to the bathroom. I've just ordered a slice of pie and it's just being set down in front of me as Catamuso walks by me.

I say: "I'm gonna finish this pie." And he keeps walking past me, over to the police.

I can't bring myself to watch.

I turn around anyway, just in time to see Catamuso tap the Randall cop on the shoulder. It looks like he says "outside." And points his thumb towards the door, then he turns and walks out.

The cop takes a sip of his coffee. He shakes his head. He's about a foot to a foot and a half taller than Catamuso. He stands up and heads towards the door. I'm sitting there eating my slice and watching all this. The rest of the cops are up and out after the first cop.

First of all, I've got a job to do here in town. I don't want to fuck up the execution of that job with this shit. Catamuso didn't start it, but he's not waiting till the job's over to take care of his personal matters. But aww.... What the fuck? A pal's a pal. One for all and all for one. Right?

I come out the door. The cops are all walking down to the far side of the building. The side away from the road. As the cops all come down to watch the big fight and look around the corner, they all burst out laughing. I run down there. I'm still about ten feet back from the cluster of cops and I see what's going on.

Catamuso is standing there in the middle of the alley with his dukes up, a look of fierce determination on his face, and not one stitch of clothing on. I was expecting to see him wrapped around a drainpipe like a pretzel, but there he is, like some Greek statue in a roadrunner cartoon.

But the cops are all laughing their asses off. Then they're taking pictures with their cell phones. Even Officer Randall is laughing. He says: "No way! No way in hell I'm fighting a naked-assed man. That dude is fucking crazy!"

One by one they put up their phones, turn, and walk off to their squad cars, laughing. One of them pats me on the shoulder as he walks by. "Nice fucking friend you got there."

I go inside and finish my pie.

One of the waitresses is looking at it all on her cell phone already, and the others are gathered around her.

Ahhh. Pie.

And our listening pen.

CHAPTER TWENTY Four

Amazing stuff.

Turns out it was Philby, the little fat guy with the Angry Birds on his phone. We hear him on the pen, talking about the pretty girl with the bat tattoo and about what a shame it was because “she was so pretty.” And how her face haunts him. He’s had dreams about her. It’s bugging him, and sometimes he wakes up in a cold sweat. He confesses that he went to her Facebook page the other night.

“Yeah, but you hadda do it. You fucked up, and you took care of it. Did the right thing,” says one of the cops.

Not hard, conclusive proof, but pretty alarming.

We also learn that he’s not eating anything because he’s going in for a routine Police Department physical tomorrow afternoon, and has to fast.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Next day, I hit Philby's apartment. Pick the lock, and go on in.

Because he's at his physical, I figure that it will be easier and safer for me. Walking around in the daytime in his gated apartment complex (nice place by the way) is better than going there at night, when the neighbors are home and I might get spotted as someone out of place.

I crack into his desktop machine and go at it. He likes taking pictures. It does appear that the speed trap business is good these days. Lots of pictures; some of it dribble: him goofing around, selfies with dead bodies in the morgue; him with his parents and the family at Thanksgiving; getting blowjobs from college girls that he pulled over; him dressed up as Conan at a comic book convention....

Then I see what I really want: his cell phone. It's sitting there charging, but still on - so I don't need a password. I go to his pictures. Lots of pictures. Finally I scroll to a shot of him at the accident. I'm taking pictures of his pictures with my own cell phone.

There, the same SUV from her Facebook. Brittany's straw hat lying there in the background. Close-ups. Gruesome pictures. Philby and other officers posing with the wreckage. One of him with a dead body. I'm pretty sure it's Brittany. Here's one: it looks like he's standing on her neck and smiling. There's another cop in the picture, off to the side, smiling and holding his cell phone up and getting the shot.

Not much of value here in the apartment though. On the wall a map of collector's state quarters. If he's monetizing his police job, he must have it all hidden really well here or stashed somewhere else.

It's creepy sitting in his world, another man's world, and looking at all this stuff. I'm fingering his personal things – things he never imagined anyone would touch. As appalling and disgusting as all this is, I have to wonder, if I was born in this shithole dying town and grew up here, and this was my only choice, being a speed-trap cop, how fucked up I could have turned out.

Then a shock runs through me. Something doesn't make sense. If he's off at the doctor's getting a physical, what is his cell phone doing here?

I hear a slight human buzz, something like a snore?

Gingerly, I look around. I look in the bedroom. No one is there. I look down from the bedroom mezzanine on the living room. No one there. Finally, I find him out on the rear porch balcony, sound asleep in a lounge chair, with a beer in his hand.

I stand there and look at him; stare at him. I'm transfixed somehow. For no reason, I just can't move for a few seconds.

Then I'm torn between slipping out silently, or maybe yelling BOO! as loud as I can in his ear... or lifting the lounge chair up and dumping him over the railing.

But I leave.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Catamuso makes his detective presentation to me like a good assistant. His inquisition has uncovered a bit of a mess here in Menlo, Florida. Sifting between the conversation from the Waffle House last night and the data he has cribbed from the city's databanks, he has a better picture.

The city is hanging on by a thread these last 4 or 5 years, and the speed traps have been ramped up to be one of their best revenue streams.

"There is also some simple funny business going on - maybe stealing from impounded cars - there are a few lawsuits for that - some incidents with drugs, mostly pot, I think. From the talk about 'bales', it's pot. But I think they lost their franchise, a while back."

"Four or five years ago."

"Yes."

"Any scandals?"

"A few things. Some sex, drunk driving, a very few of some murders covered up."

"Standard things. Nothing unusual."

"No, the usual stuff. However... here's the thing - there are there a few emails about how they will handle things if the parents of any of these crashed, dead kids come down to here, or send investigators."

"That's good... Philby?"

"He's the one, man. I think it *is* the Philby."

Catamuso's eyes, as if mystically drawn away from mine, wander to the motel room dresser, and he fixes his gaze on Tori's stuffed bat. His eyebrows rise up and down. "What is zis?" He asks. He smells it.

"I borrowed it. It's not mine."

"What is it then?"

"A bat. It's a stinky bat."

“What does it do?” He sniffs it again.

“It stinks.”

He sets it back down, and lights a cigarette.

Looks at me. “What we gonna do boss?”

“I have an idea I’ve been working on. It just might work. I’ll need a few more things though. If Amazon Prime comes on time...” I’m pulling my cell phone out. “...and I’ll buy another few knick-knacks locally. I wonder what they want for that bear out there...”

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

I ask at the motel office: “Say, ma’am, I need to dump some garbage. Where do you do that around here?”

I need a place where I can burn the stuff, a place to do the ritual.

“Go half a mile and a half down 138. There’s a gravel road on the right. Just go down it till you’re there.” Now that makes sense. Why didn’t I think of that?

Down a gravel road to the dump. A lot of stuff doesn’t make it all the way to the dump and the road is lined with tires, bundles of newspaper, and old shoes with weeds growing through them.

I set up my “altar”, a rusty spin-basket off an old washing machine, planted on a small pile of tires. I gather some kindling into it and bunch up some old newspapers. This is how you summon the “clients”. This is how we see what the dead and the unquiet souls have to tell us. I put the girl’s hat in there along with her Hello-Kitty keychain, a few of her locks of hair, all things that I pulled from the car. The things of hers, and the things of her friends that there were personal. This attracts them somehow. They have to have some way to find me here.

I roll a big blunt of Yage and I sprinkle some on the burning pyre. This stuff really works sometimes.

Sometimes I do the Yage just for fun of it – we’re not supposed to, but now and then you’re dry... and it’s all you have... and I see a lot of weird things. Sometimes I see these impish, curious beings that look like amoebas – giant, watermelon sized amoebas - running around me, but it’s like they’re in another dimension, and they swim right through me.

I sit down in a big, discarded sofa-chair with the springs and stuffing coming out. Weeds and brush are growing up around me.

The Eastern Ritual is about to begin.

As the fire dims down, twilight falls around me. I'm buzzing and coasting in my head – real relaxed and all – real good feelings. Contentment.

Contentment... I'm a killer at the Vegas card table when I feel that perfect contentment. Believe it or not, I can see a little bit into the future.

I figured it out: when we're born, our minds are like broadband - not like a needle in the groove of a record. No! It's like a little sponge on the end of the stylus - and it's going over a whole lot of grooves, all at the same time.

The main groove that we get into as we grow up is the groove of the present - the moment we are actually living in. The other grooves around that single groove are the past and present.

So the child, if he wants to eat, to grab something - to interface with the world – to interface with the present moment – he has to focus on that one groove that *is* the present. Get in the groove, and ignore the rest; turn off the other grooves, the past and the future.

And when I'm at the table there in Reno, when I'm in the zone, I can feel the cards sometimes – I swear it – I can feel when I need to double down, I can feel when the dealers gonna go bust, or when I'm gonna make that straight. Crazy but true.

Now the night is falling, and it is what they call magic hour: when the sun has gone down, but it isn't dark yet.

Off in the distance, they're stirring in the foliage and debris. Pallid eyes light up and I can see obscure, wispy shapes faintly moving.

My head rocks back as something ephemeral flits over me; over my face and head and I feel it as my hair is lightly blown back.

The souls are whispering. The other side is opening up... rustling... crossing over.

“Can you hear me?”

There's no answer.

I wait a while.

Then a whisper: “*Who are you?*”

“I'm gonna help.” I say.

I look around.

I can see them out there, but how will this all come off? I let it go for a minute and then I say: “I need to know, to see what happened. Can you help me?”

I wait. I light a cigarette, and finish it.

Then I say: “Is Brittany with you?”

They're going to talk - I can feel it now. I tell them: “Just picture it in your mind. Think it. Think it out loud, from the beginning...”

It took a bit; I'm explaining to them what I want to do, explaining why I can speak to them and they can hear me. They come around, and after a while and they're talking up a storm.

"We took a short cut." A voice says.

"It was late, we were trying to make Jacksonville by morning. Britto and Chip had a flight, so we were going a little fast, sure, but not crazy or anything. But the cop comes out of nowhere, flying by us – flying into us - like we were standing still. He was trying to chase someone - the guy ahead of us, that just went by him, you know. In front of him, and he didn't see us."

Another voice breaks in. *"He was waiting in a speed trap, and he goes after the guy, the speeder! The damn cop just pulls out right in front of us without even looking. We hit him hard. Our car flips... When I came to... I was lying there - under the car. Every breath I took hurt. My lungs were filling up with something—blood! Oh, God... My friends were lying around me. They were dead. I was alone."*

The other voice comes back: *"But Brittany—she was still alive. I could hear her making..."* Choking up. *"Making these gurgling sounds, trying to say words. Then the cops are standing around her - but they weren't doing anything to help her. Then I began to, like, float upwards. Then I was above them. I hear them talking."* He hesitates. *"Then I see the cop put his foot on her, on Brittany – no! She's still alive! She's still breathing! And then he brings all his heavy weight down on her neck."*

"A fat guy?" I ask.

"I heard her neck crunch. It crunched like celery or something, and I heard this sad, sad, sad little gasp. It was coming from her throat... as she gave up."

"Was it a fat guy? The cop? A little fat guy?" I ask.

"Then I began floating up faster... As I rose, I heard a gunshot behind me. I looked down, and there was her little dog, lying dead on the grass. Her dog...they even shot her dog..."

After a while of silence, I ask: "You're sure that's how it happened?"

No words. I look around. Did they go?

All of a sudden the little girl appears, whisking up out of nowhere, right in my face! I recognize her. It is Brittany. As an adult now. *"YESSS!"*

Then she is gone.

"Don't worry, guys. I'll take good care of this."

Like that, it is over. They're gone.

I sit there a minute. I look around at the garbage and debris as the light of the fire flickers. An old sneaker with a skull and crossbones and bleached out by the sun. An old, wood console record player, like people used to have in their living rooms, a jumbled pile of coat hangers, a vein of old VHS tapes... all this meaningless stuff, and all the meaningless lives that go with it. There's so much nothingness in the world, so much nothingness... if you just take time to stop and look, you can see it.

Yes. I think we have a case.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

I am buzzed and pretty high from the Yage – so high I need a drink.

I limp back to the motel without drawing any cops.

Catamuso is in the room, in a totally good mood, whistling and working away on his research. I ask him to drive me to the club down the street to get some drinks.

But instead we hit the strip club.

He's had a taste of poontang and now he's on the warpath.

The Naughty Negligee is actually pretty grim. Pathetic, shoddy, snarky, with old cigarette burns everywhere, and a smell in the shadows like burnt plastic, green Jello, concentrate, and disinfectant.

It's shift change time, and most of the girls are tipping out or just now dragging in.

After more than a few stiff drinks (on my tab of course), Catamuso is going off on cops again and the idea that local governments using law enforcement to generate income without raising taxes is going to be our downfall.

Now and then one of the bouncers looks over at him with the old hairy eyeball.

“If they do these things, soon we will be like Mexico! Human heads found in the street. Bodies hanging from the overpass, when you go to work in the morning. Everywhere.”

“Without a doubt, there is a special place in Hell for these speed trap guys, but how will it become like Mexico here?” I ask. “Will we have to wear sombreros and ride around on burros?” I know better than to argue with Catamuso, so I just ask a question at this point. He spends a lot of time alone, and has a lot of time to think about things.

“Once they start pulling you over to make money? To keep their job? That's where it all goes to Hell. Bit by bit, one day traffic tickets and the next a bribe to make it go away, and one little thing worse than the next, until they are working for the criminals.”

It actually makes sense. The nature of gradual decay.

“If a police captain or a mayor says to give more tickets because the city needs money - because they gonna lose their jobs? The cop – if he’s a real man – should stick a gun in the mayors mouth and blow his head off!”

A cute girl has come up behind Catamuso and overhears the end of his tirade. Her eyebrows go up and down, but she’s going to give it a try anyway. I look up to her.

“Hi! I’m Candy!” she says.

“Have a seat, Candy.” I kick a chair out for her to sit in. Catamuso is eyeing her up and down, watching her every move but says nothing.

“Sorry, my friend here was acting out a scene he saw on TV last night.”

She sits down and smiles. “Netflix?”

Catamuso nods.

“I’m sorry Candy. I’m Mr. Dow and this is Mr. Jones.” Catamuso shakes her hand.

“You’re from out of town, I guess.”

“We’re in the industrial average business.”

“Hey! I think I’ve heard of you guys!”

Heading back to the motel, we drive by the speed trap. It’s prime-time blue light city and they are going to town.

As we pull in back at the motel, I spot something funny. “Is that your car?” I ask. We are driving my car – Catamuso’s was leaking a bit from the frozen body in the trunk - and I see that there’s someone monkeying around inside his car.

Catamuso is out the door and on it, before I even stop the car. He’s circling around to get behind the guy - behind the open door - and is gingerly sneaking up the hood and onto the roof of the car parked next to his.

There’s a car off down the parking lot that looks suspicious, as it’s pulling out of a parking spot with its lights off. It’s aimed at me and looking right into my headlights.

So it’s facing me with the lights off. Since I have my lights on, I’m guessing that the driver doesn’t see I’m in the car. He gets out, on the driver’s side, cranes his neck to see inside the cab of my car (I duck down) and then starts up towards Catamuso.

I have a gun in my pocket, one in the glove box, and one under the seat, but the silencer is back in the room. I take out my pocket gun and chamber a round. I put the gun back in my pocket and I slip out the open window so I don’t make any noise by opening the door.

Catamuso is grabbing and pulling the burglar guy out of his car, wrestling him, and I’m hearing shit falling out of the car, clattering and rolling. That’s gotta make Catamuso mad. I’m coming up on the other guy, sneaking up, and trying to figure what kind of weapon he’s got: gun, knife, or nothing.

I'm almost on him, I start to run at him, and I get hit from my right side by another guy. Tackled! I go flying against the front grill of a parked car. The funny thing is that the tackling guy, a big, beefy 300-pounder, hits the fender so hard that I think he cracks his skull.

He's out and the other guy is taking aim at Catamuso. I see the silhouette of a Luger in his hand. I immediately want that Luger.

I'm reaching for the mouse-gun in my pocket, a Ruger LC9s, but before I can get it out, Catamuso hits the guy with a shovel. No idea where he got the shovel, if it was in his car, or whatever.

So.

We have now placed three bodies in the trunk of their car. I'm driving Catamuso's car and he's driving theirs to somewhere outside of town, to get rid of the death car and I'm following so I can bring him back.

We're about eight miles outside of town and we pick up a cop. First he's coming right at us. He passes us by, and then I see, in the mirror, he's turning around, and he starts back, following us now.

He's holding back, back there following us like a shark. We come to an intersection and we split. I go off one way, wheeling it, and drawing him after me. I'm burning up the road and he's following me, but still at a safe distance back. I think how it's odd that he isn't on my bumper, with sirens and lights flashing. He's probably calling his little buddies on his radio. We may be fucked. Actually *I* may be fucked and now Catamuso will have to come bail me out.

I don't care if I get arrested, as long as Catamuso doesn't get caught with a carload of bodies. That would throw a real monkey wrench into the inquisition that we're conducting.

After a few more miles, I look in my rear view mirror and there's nothing there! I slow a little and look back good. Did he turn his lights off? There's a full moon and still I don't see him back there. He must have got called to something more important, or ran out of gas, or something.

Then, like a ghost or some bat out of Hell, he's right *beside* me, all his lights and siren and even his cab lights on – and he's inside the cab, his head turning towards me and he's got no eyes in his eye sockets – he's one of *them*, one of the Damned, waiting for the solstice, and just having a little fun tonight fucking with me.

I look him right in the eyes – er, sockets – and I give him the finger and my war face, and he laughs maniacally and drives off – fading and disappearing as he goes.

After a while Catamuso calls, and gives me directions to pick him up.

“They won't find those guys for a long, long time,” he tells me.

The Luger is a WWI dated DWM and has been re-blued, but the magazine still matches. A nice souvenir from an engagement with a couple of fuck-faces who don't need this gun anymore.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Next morning the Waffle House girl calls me and wants to hook up. Great!

How 'bout that afternoon? How 'bout we meet at her girlfriend's house? Great! Her parents are staying with her - in from out of town - and we can't do it at her house, and the stuffed bat I have in my room really creeps her out.

"Why? In what way?"

"Well, 'creeps' isn't right the right word, baby, but - I don't know - you like that thing... so much. I think you like it more... I think I'm a little jealous."

"Jealous of a stuffed bat?"

"And it smells funny." She takes a breath. "It sorta stinks."

"OK, your girlfriend's place is fine. Two O'clock is fine. Sure." Catamuso is still in the other room and it's too much of a mess already.

I leave early so I can stop at the Dollar Tree store to get some batteries. I buy some other stuff including a big, ridiculous plastic flower, and some comical novelty sunglasses that are giant and about a foot wide.

So I'm about to pull into the apartment complex of Princess's girlfriend. My arm is out the window with a cigarette. I'm relaxed. Sitting back. Waiting for the oncoming traffic to go by.

So I'm thinking about all my options: how am I gonna kill this guy now? At night shift? Hit him while he's asleep at home during daylight? It would be nice to step on his head and break his neck like he did that girl... but none of those are in the cards right now. I have a madcap scheme - something that I will be telling the gang about for years to come - and I'm going to do it. Fuck yeah, I'm going to do it.

Lotsa traffic coming now. What... is school getting out down the street?

So I'm sitting there thinking how I hate the gangster that gets off on bullying everyone in their way, the child molesters, the bankster who has a whistleblower murdered, the corporation that poisons a whole town in India to save 1.34 cents per unit... But man, there's got to be a special place in Hell for the speed-trap cop!

As I finally turn into the parking lot and am off the street, the sirens come on. Cop! I look in my rear view mirror and it's like ET has landed. Close Encounters of the Third Fucking Kind. Fuck me running! It's Philby! My man! What are you doing in my rearview mirror?

He comes up to my driver side window and says: "Sorry sir, you didn't have your turn signal on when you were pulling in, and sir, you failed to come to a complete stop back there, at the intersection or Langley Highway and Mustard St."

I'm thinking: Great, He doesn't recognize me from the other day. But at the same time... I did have my turn signal on. It's still on. I get a queasy feeling. Its broad daylight and I'm not going to be able to take care of this doof right here and now of course.

"Officer, I'm sure I came to a full stop back there, this is..."

"I'm going to let you off with a warning this time. Now is this a rental?"

"No, this is my car." What's he mean "rental"? No rental company would try to rent this old hooptie-mobile.

"Could you step out of the car please, and show me your license and insurance card?"

As I start to come out, my new joke glasses that were on my lap and I was going to surprise Princess with, fall out on the pavement. I look down at them. He looks down at them, then he looks at me, kind of baffled. Like, what the fuck are those things? What's a grown man doing with them?

As soon as I'm on my feet and going through my wallet, he hits me with a cheap shot! Philby swings a big roundhouse at my jaw. Coldcocked.

"Thought I didn't recognize you huh?"

Shit.

I'm on the ground and he's kicking me. Gets me in the head pretty hard.

"Alright, shitbird! Here's your warning!"

A few people from the apartment complex are coming out and gathering.

"You hear me, shitbird!? You hear me loud and clear?!"

It stops, and I kind of fade for a minute. I come to, and now Philby is going through my wallet and tossing various cards up in the air as he rifles through them. I have about 400 bucks cash in there, and it's sure gone now, like a snake in the tall grass.

He has his phone cradled between his chin and his shoulder and he's talking to someone: "Naw, not a fed, not a private investigator. Card here say's he's in burials and coffins. Name's Jack Ketch. See if you can run that quick and get back to me."

He throws the wallet over his shoulder and leans down, pressing a Billy club into me. "This is your first and final warning. It's time for you to get out of town now, shitbird! And not come back!"

As he walks off, I try to muster up and say “*Dude! With a pointy, fucking head like that, you need to wear a hat! All the time!*” But I’m on spin dry cycle and the words just aren’t coming right now.

I’m lying there a few minutes. The people from the apartments are all looking at me, but no one brings me a bottle of water or tries to help me up. I kind of reach over and put the joke glasses back on. They’re smashed up and kind of crooked on me. I stand up. For the sake of the audience I dust myself off, try to straighten my glasses on my head- the kids are giggling – and reach in the car and pull out the joke flower. Now the adults are laughing too. I mean, I’ve just had the shit kicked out of me, but I can still have a little fun, right?

I take the napkin with the address on it out of my pants pocket and look at it. I walk down to the apartment, knock on the door and a late-middle-aged Black lady answers the door. She looks at me for a second and shakes her head. “We ain’t buying anything in this house, motherfucker. Now git.” She lets the screen door shut and wanders back into the darkness muttering something about white people.

I guess Princess set me up.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I come into my hotel room with a torn shirt, bleeding lip, and swollen black eye. I wonder if I should go to the hospital. No, in this town they would probably try to kill me there too.

Catamuso comes down and checks me over. I'm a mess. "No more pussy for you, this trip." He says.

"The fucking Waffle House girl set me up!"

As if on cue there's a knock on the door. I go to open it, pulling my gun.

It's Princess, the fucking Waffle House girl!

I laugh and just slam the door in her face. She darts her foot out, and stops the door from closing all the way. She pushes it back open and comes in.

"Listen, Jack!" She thinks I'm Jack from the name, Jack Ketch, on the credit cards that I paid with. "I did you a big favor, lover man."

"Sure. What?"

She comes in and closes the door behind her.

"Philby and his guys were going to kill you, motherfucker! KILL! K-I-L-L! Youuuu... I talked them out of it. And I did a sweet fucking job. I gave the 'how can I deal with them if they murder someone' angle."

I look at Catamuso, sitting there working on a crossword puzzle that I started before, and instead of looking at me - ready to roll his eyes at whatever bullshit story she's feeding us - he's sitting there, thinking about how he can approach banging her, now that I am probably out of the picture after she set me up and all.

"You're fucking one of them aren't you?"

"Dude, I'm fucking all of them. And fuck you if you don't like it. I fuck who I want, when I want, and how I want!"

Wow. *My kind of girl.*

“But you kinda like me, don’t you? You like me something special.”

“Like you? I dig the shit out of you.”

“Why?”

She plops down on the edge of the bed and pulls out a cigarette, now that she’s figured out I’m not going to kill her. “Well, lets see. It’s so nice to meet a man that’s not looking for his mother in every woman he meets. You are good looking – were good looking - and you don't talk too much. You carry a gun and are probably some kind of gangster or secret agent or something. You are a great lover and sort of well endowed, shall we say? Does that count? And you love animals.”

“Animals?”

She points at the stuffed bat.

“That's a taxidermied bat.” I say. “Not a pet.”

“Yeah but he probably was a pet, you know, and you loved him so much you had him stuffed, right? So you’re sentimental too! I loooove that.”

Catamuso speaks up. “It’s a she.”

“What?”

“It's a she bat.” Catamuso says, barely looking up from his puzzle. “A female bat. Not a male bat. Look for yourself.”

She’s confused. Why would anyone have examined the sex of a dead bat. Catamuso of course. *But who is he?* She’s thinking. By his somber, diminished tone, I can tell he has lost all hope of having a sexual adventure with this girl now that she loves me (or something like that). “I believe her.” He says to me, changing the subject.

“I do too. After all, four or five of them evil coppers could have bashed my motel door in while I was sleeping, or ambushed me somewhere, and I’d be dead. Good thing she’s in with these guys. Right! Let’s drink a toast to the power of the pussy!”

I pull out the second bottle of 25-year Glenlivet (that I finally found in all that shit, still in my trunk) from behind the TV, and pour three good shots into the motel Styrofoam coffee cups, one for each of us.

Catamuso raises his cup in salute. “Here, here! To power of the pussies! Yes!”

We kill it.

“Why does he have six fingers?” she asks.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

For breakfast I have to wear a disguise (in case Philby's around). Catamuso remarks, with delight, at how good my moustache, Afro wig, and my make-up looks on me, and how he wants a disguise too.

Later, back at the room, I pull out the bear suit: the one that I ordered the other day from Amazon Prime. As a joke, I lay it out on the bed as if it's for him. As if it's *his* disguise. He looks over at it and dryly says "I'm not wearing that."

"It's a joke, my friend." He doesn't laugh, just glances at the bear suit, makes an eyebrow ripple to show his indifference, and goes back to his crossword puzzle.

I start putting it back. "What is that? Is it going to be Halloween, Harken?" Catamuso asks.

"This is for tonight. For a very special occasion."

"For a very special friend then?"

"Of course. Nothing but the best for this occasion."

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

It's a dull, dead night.

This will be my last night in town.

I cruise around; say good bye to the deserted Putt-Putt, the Waffle House, the strip club, the cement plant... The flip-flop in the middle of the intersection is gone but not forgotten.

I'm tooling around the town, wearing the bear suit and killing off the last of the Glenlivet. I feel like a Kamikaze ready for his first big mission, but wanting to go to go back to my bunk bed and stay there reading comic books.

No comic books tonight. I'm ready to hit it. Drive down town. Speed-trap coming up. My car flies by Philby's spot at 80 miles an hour.

He's sitting there - no doubt three sheets to the wind - and with his face so deep in the cell phone that he doesn't even notice me going by.

I circle back and drive by him again. No good. I stop in the middle of the road right in front of him. Honk? No. That would be too much.

I have a "Blender" in the trunk. I pass on by, driving into a parking lot, to get the Blender out. It's a high tech cyber weapon that will scramble most any electronic devices I aim it at. I turn it to a frequency that will specifically disable his radio and cell phone, but his car will still start.

I come up on the speed trap again, barely rolling, lights off, and as I drive by I hit him with it. I go on down some and then come back flying. I see Philby standing outside the car, waving his phone up above his head, trying to get a signal and I start laughing.

I honk the horn and he notices me now. And I have my bear head on now. I'm going the wrong direction that I need to be going in for the plan, so I turn around down the road and come back by him, still flying. I break hard, screeching right in front of him. Now he's scrambling into the car. I take off.

After a while, he's catching up with me and we're burning down the road like two bats out of Hell. He catches up and then I lose him.

Eventually I turn down into a trailer park. Cat and mouse. He drives around the corner and I'm sitting there, right in front of him, leaning out the window, but I'm on the other side of a cyclone fence. He sees a man in a bear suit sitting in the car. I've got a liquor bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I wave at him, give him the finger, and take off. He tries to find me, but I make it out of the trailer park and on to the road first. A bit later, he pops out onto the road and is after me. I would love to have seen his face when he had me in the headlights back there when I gave him the finger.

I slow down. I let him pull up alongside. He is motioning and yelling and using his loud speaker to yell at me. I lean towards him putting my hand to my ear, like I'm trying to hear him. He yells and yells. I give him the finger again and take off.

I'm really fucking with him, but its getting old.

Eventually he has to catch me. I pretend to run out of gas and coast to a halt on the side of the road. We're a good ways outside of town.

I'm getting out of the car. He's got his fucking gun out, and he is prone on the hood of his car, aiming it at me with both hands. He looks kind of astounded and quizzical as I step out in my bear suit.

"You win! I ran out of gas! Ran out of fucking gas!"

"Let me see your face!"

I take the head of the bear suit off.

"*YOU!*"

I shrug lackadaisically: "Ya got me!"

I'm cuffed and thrown in the back of the squad car. "Shit! I *WAS* leaving town, just like you said!"

"Drunk 'n in a bearskin?"

"So what?"

As we are coming up on the gravel road going off to the dumping area, I push a button on a remote control device. In the distance there's a great and bright explosion. Then a whole lot of explosions.

"Holy shit! What the hell is that!?" Cries Philby.

There's smoke coming up from the explosion. "Might be a plane crash, I dunno. Terrorists? ISIS maybe?" Philby makes a hard turn and goes down the side road to the dump. "Been a lot of strange ISIS activity from Coral Gables to St. Augustine lately."

Gun drawn, Philby gets out to investigate.

"You sit tight now!" He barks at me

"Don't leave me here alone! I'm scared!"

"Shut up!"

I make a menacing face and growl at him. "Rrrrrawwwrrr!"

As he's off wandering around the grass and the garbage with his flashlight looking for clues to terrorists, I go to work. Every few minutes I remote control off another explosion to keep him occupied.

Finally he comes back to the car, flustered and shopworn from the weeds and mud.

“Damn! Just some damn fireworks!” He says to me “Some kids with some fireworks.” He slops into the drivers seat. “Ain’t no fuckin’ ISIS.”

Only I’m not in the back seat anymore.

“Fucking kids...” He says.

See, I picked my cuffs, easy, like Houdini. The rabid, raccoon-bit bear?

He’s in the back seat. Yeah, it took some doing.

I rescued him out the petting zoo for \$135. Had to put him to sleep with a couple of shots, but as soon as I got him into the back seat (and that took some engineering) I woke him up with a couple shots of speed.

I just figured it would be a nice touch to let the poor bear enjoy its last dinner in real style and go out in a blaze of glory befitting a great and noble beast.

I bugged Philby’s squad car with a camera, so I could enjoy watching “the last supper” on my cell phone, as that drunken ass-hat tries to pull a rabid fucking bear out of his backseat.

Not a bad deal... *\$189 for a bear suit - Amazon Primed overnight. \$135 for a rabid bear and cage. \$110 worth of fireworks. Rabid bear devouring a speed trap cop: PRICELESS!!!*

I watch Philby screaming and howling as he is getting torn limb from limb by the bear. Ahhhh... modern technology!

As I drive off, I get a text: “*Nice work.*”

Then I get another text: “*You know what you’re doing. You’re good. You’re like me.*” And it was signed “*Ricco Del Amuerte.*”

Quickjohn again.

EPILOGUE

Next day I'm packing up.

Catamuso's already gone. He took off in the night, probably on some mission to help some other Traveler clean up a mess. He leaves without saying goodbye as always.

Flip-flop is getting banged by her magician again, so I don't get a chance to say goodbye to her, but Princess stops by and brings me a 6-inch banana-nut bread loaf that she made.

As I'm packing up I notice that the bat is gone now.

No way Catamuso would have taken it. He seemed to like it, but wouldn't have snuck into my room while I was asleep and take a chance of surprising me and getting shot in the dark. I remember seeing it last night, but today its gone.

Very mysterious.

A month later I called Tori, on one dead, rainy night when I was sitting there, hammered and lonely in another shitty motel room. I called to chat, and talk about old movies. I apologized to her about the bat, and told her I was only going to keep it for good luck for a while, and I was going to send it back to her, but it just up and disappeared somehow.

She said she didn't know what the fuck I was talking about. She never had a fucking stuffed bat.

"That must have been some other girl, slugger." She says with a slightly surly and snide tone in her voice. I was too perplexed to respond. I shrugged and changed the subject.

Interesting.

THE END

About Anthony Harken: HIT MAN FOR THE DEAD

ANTHONY HARKEN is a drifter, a detective of sorts, and a killer. While he kills the most evil kind of people - the unpunished murderers of the innocent - he knows he's still a murderer, taking human life and operating totally outside the law.

In the world of good and evil, Harken has chosen sides, but in the world of normal, everyday life, he has chosen an extreme and dangerous path. He carries a gun, he does drugs (Yage), he kills, and lives detached from a society that has no idea that people like him are even among us.

To be sure, he fills in where the law fails: he is a vigilante. He is judge, jury and executioner. And there is no guarantee that he is always right or that he, himself will not make a mistake someday and dispatch someone who is totally innocent.

Anthony is not the only "hit-man for the dead" out there. There are others.

He is an Inquisitor for the Dark Court of JACK KETCH, the mysterious and barbaric overlord of a motley group of avenging killers whose agenda is one of the last modern day vestiges of The Spanish Inquisition. They too are all out vindicating the wrongly killed. They all use drugs: The Yage, which is the South American elixir they use to bridge the pathway between our world and the netherworld of the Undead. They travel, they investigate, and they avenge the dead. They kill the bad guys.

And then they loot the estate: cash, jewelry, etc; put all the rest of their victim's shit on E-Bay to sell it off and keep their little murder ring flush and running.

Harken considers himself an artiste. He is particularly conscientious about the due diligence he exercises in his investigations. He often adds some ironic twist to his hits. He also relishes the pleasure of letting his targets know why they are dying and enjoys rubbing it in.

Having lost his soul in a card game three years ago, Harken is trapped in the game he is playing and he is playing the cards he's been dealt. His darkest secret is that he is on the run from a group called Satan's Children, (all the demons, imps, devils, and spirits that wander the world seeking the ruin of mankind) and is determined to find his soul and get it back before they can nab ahold of it. Each solstice the Devil comes to collect the souls of the lost, sacrificed or guilty, but Harken has outfoxed him so far.

A picaresque nomad, wandering the country like a modern-day cowboy, Harken likes poker, camping, photography, women, going to movies alone in the middle of the afternoon, killing, cognac, vintage timepieces, irony, Benny Hill. and crossword puzzles.

He does not like coconut, speed bumps, puns, or drinking from aluminum cans.

HIT MAN FOR THE DEAD Q&A

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

The working concept is that people - wrongly killed before their time - feel their lives are unfinished and can't let go. Their spirits hang around, holding onto what they had and sometimes they haunt.

Our protagonist goes around avenging them. He contacts or is contacted by the ghosts - he conducts an investigation - and if there is just cause, he avenges them, dispatching the guilty parties.

A GENRE PIECE THEN?

No. Actually, Hit Man for the Dead is not a one-trick-pony based on a repeating plot concept. This storyline is character driven, and more about the details. As you read this story you will discover that the killings are the backdrop for the characters and the adventures.

It's more about what also goes on in the background to the murders: the downtime, the carousing, the infighting, the competition to rack up a score of death. HMftD focuses on the people, on Anthony and all the other motley and varied characters in the crew of killers. Catamuso for instance, Anthony's squire and assistant, is an odd little fellow who makes balloon animals, writes romantic poetry, and someday wants to go to New York and smell the statue of Liberty's feet.

WHO IS ANYHONY HARKEN? WHAT DRIVES HIM?

Overall, he is more drifting than driven. Anthony wanders. He gets drunk and parties. He goofs off and takes the time to embrace and savor his bleak and picaresque existence. He is not all that deeply dedicated to his calling, but does occasionally get emotionally involved and outraged by the totally atrocious and appalling things that some people do in the heat of the moment, in the throws of lust and jealousy, and when overwhelmed with greed or hate.

He likes staying in cheap motels, driving an unglamorous but mechanically tricked out car, and dressing in mundane, thrift-shop threads. He enjoys the freedom, the detective work, and going to the movies alone in the middle of the afternoon.

He's not Brad Pitt, but he has a way with girls and is good looking enough to get by. He's not a boring, black-suit-wearing hit man. He's a rambling nomad who has learned to enjoy his lifestyle. He enjoys sketching and taking pictures of obscure, lonely, "found" things. He leaves strange, poetic, little

messages wherever he goes, stuck in holes in the wall, under rocks and in the bottom drawers of the hotel rooms, where nobody looks.

I wanted to find a new protagonist, one who is not really preceded by former iconic stereotypes and at least, a little different. Anthony Harken is not a reflection of the modern millennial expatriate from society, not a echo of the Chandler/Hammett/Spillane detective, or a 21st century Holden Caulfield. He's not an On The Road Neil Cassidy or a nihilistic version of James Bond. He's Anthony Harken: his own man, his own icon. Or so they say. But let me know what you think. Sorry, but I get uncomfortable with the commonplace tendency to understand and evaluate things by comparing them to everything else out there, however vaguely similar. Even though I find myself doing it sometimes.

HOW DID HE BECOME A KILLER?

Harken lost his soul down in Mexico about three years ago, and little by little he is getting it back through his "good works".

WHO IS JACK KETCH AND WHO ARE THE TRAVELERS?

Jack Ketch, is a 500-year-old executioner who got his start in the court of Charles the II. I picture him as a short crusty, salty old pirate; the Robert Newton version of Long John Silver. He lords over a group of traveling killers, all going around avenging those who have wrongly died.

They are a motley bunch. Each has their own style, their own strengths or weaknesses, and their own origins of how they got into the business. There are also the "squires". The helpers and assistants who aid the travelers and clean up things afterward.

Then there is a building in New York that houses a whole tribe of Gypsies who spend all their time putting the loot that's hauled in on EBay.

LOG LINE:

A mysterious, young, nomadic drifter wanders America investigating and brutally avenging the murders of the innocent, so that their wanting souls that haunt our world can pass on into the afterlife.

DEATH WISH and DEXTER meet MEDIUM

HITMAN FOR THE DEAD

SAMPLE BLURB FOR THE BACK COVER OF A PAPERBACK

ANTHONY HARKEN is an “equalizer” of sorts.

He avenges the lost souls that slip through the cracks.

He avenges the people who are killed by cheating husbands angling for an inheritance. He avenges the innocent boob reaching for his wallet, that gets shot by a steroid-infused, Red-Bull-drunk cop. The victims of gross industrial negligence, irresponsible cost cutting, and outright greed. He avenges the mother strolling her baby shot by an assassin’s stray bullet, meant for someone else. He avenges the victims of drunk drivers, sociopaths, serial killers... and he likes what he does.

Anthony avenges.

Anthony avenges so that the souls that wander between the winds can pass on, in peace, into the hereafter.

Anthony’s a professional.

Anthony kills very well. He has had a lot of practice, these last three years on the road. There are others out there like him. Yes. But Anthony has a way of adding a certain ironic twist of justice to his victims - his own special “signature”. This is his art and craft. He has a killer’s heart and a dry sense of humor.

But Anthony is on the run himself.

Anthony lost his soul a few years back. Killing – killing and sending fresh, deserving souls to Hell – keeps the devil off his back. And with each just death of vengeance, he gets a little of his soul back.

Oh, and Anthony likes crossword puzzles.

A STRANGER IN TOWN

I'm a stranger. Always a stranger.

I'm a stranger who shows up in your town – out of nowhere – kills someone, and then fades away; gone like a snake into the tall grass.

Wherever I go, I'm a stranger. A drifter.

And I like it.

I enjoy what I do now. I get a kick out of restoring the balance of nature and putting things right. I like to see the looks on faces when the realization sets in that it's all caught up with them and that they're not going to get away with it. I like the danger. I like carrying a gun. Being always on the move. From town to town. I like the investigation: clues, digging out hidden evidence, plotting the perfect murder.

Most of all, I love the freedom. I love just hanging out. Here and there. I love to wander aimlessly – to float like a leaf in the stream – like a candy wrapper in the breeze. I love to bask in the serenity of a shopping mall in the middle of the afternoon. To go soak up the family atmosphere in an amusement park. To listen to all the stories of the down and out at a skid row rooming house or a rent-by-the-week motel. To kick it with the late-night crowd at some punk bar. Go bowling with squares. Meet a hot-to-trot businesswoman at the Marriott poolside bar. Movies in the afternoon in an empty theater. The sound of traffic in the distance late at night. All night card games. Every town has one.

I like being a drifter.

I like to be nobody.

It's a life that a lot of people only dream of... a life that many might even fear.

I never have to worry about all the silly little strings and pushpins that tie you down to a normal life: all the chores and errands and promises and shopping lists and appointments. I sleep as late as I want. I don't even do my taxes anymore. I just throw parking tickets away. I can eat in a different place every night. I go to the mall in the middle of the day. Never have to make the bed, don't deal with rush hour if I don't feel like it and... drift.

I like to kill and just float on.

I'm a stranger, a wanderer, a vagabond.

And I like it.

FOR THE DEAD, THE INNOCENT DEAD.

You know how they're always saying: "Someone should do something about that"?

Well, I'm that someone.

I'm a hunter. That's it. That's what I do.

I'm the one who sets things straight for all the lost souls wrongfully cut loose from this mortal coil and trapped in the "between." Neither gone nor here.

I bring justice for the forgotten ones who wander between the winds – unable to let go until their sudden and untimely deaths are avenged and they can pass on – satisfied, into the hereafter, forever, and for good.

I'm the one who avenges the murders of the innocent children, the mentally handicapped, and the cripples who could never put up a good fight for themselves. For all the jilted lovers killed to avoid alimony – and all the naïve spouses murdered for their inheritance. For the little old lady on the way to church who got run over by a drunk driver. For an innocent bystander killed by a gangster's stray bullet.

This is the life that fate has chosen for me. The echoes I hear of the hundreds of dead losers and jerk-offs that I have dispatched do not keep me awake at night.

I'm killing just to stay alive. And I know that someday, all I've done will probably catch up with me.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm even still alive...or if all this is not just walking through some post mortem dream/nightmare. Maybe this is all a big joke. A joke on me. Maybe I did die three years ago, down in Mexico.

Maybe.

Whatever.