

**hit man
for the
dead**

**EPISODE ONE
WICKED MESSENGER**

**Created and Written by
Bob Burden**

Bob Burden Presents

HIT MAN FOR THE DEAD

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This EDITION is an Advanced Reading Copy and Galley proof for review. (You are special if you are reading this.)

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.

A NOTE from the AUTHOR

I do not start this new series with an origin story (which to me is usually the kiss of death for a series) but rather started out in the middle of the action, with the ending of an old investigation (Inquest or inquisition-the killers have their own code talk for the things they do) and the beginning of a new one ala a James Bond movie style.

As the story begins our protagonist is a full-fledged killer (a Traveler or Inquisitor) finalizing a hit job (Settlement) with one of his victims (a Client). Later he enacts a séance (the dance) to contact the spirit of a dead girl (get in touch) and launch an investigation (Inquisition).

While I have a lot of killers in the series, I started with this blue-collar, wandering vagabond character, and somehow that seemed to make the supernatural and spiritual elements work better.

Bob Burden summer 2021

CHAPTER ONE

A BAPTISM...

Two men sit alone on the breezy, barren, overcast and offseason beach in folding chairs.

I am one.

My “uncle” is the other.

We are both movie buffs it seems - me and this old man - which is why we’re not talking about sports.

It’s a dull, boring, dead day: foggy, sullen and humid, almost chilly, and there is no one around as far as the eye can see. The Atlantic Ocean is still and silent. The old man has an orange in his lap.

“Tuco?” The old man shakes his head. “No... Clint Eastwood. I’m sure Clint Eastwood is the leading man.”

“Remember, I said: *the protagonist*.”

“No....” he says, shaking his head slightly.

I smile politely. “Tuco is the protagonist because...”

“No. How can that be...”

“Because he has a character arc.” I reply.

The old man gets a quirky look on his face and his head twerks a bit and he runs his finger inside his priest collar in an unconscious, habitual manner as if to softly say: “Well, just what is a *character arc*?”

“The arc,” I continue. “is the change the protagonist goes through in the course of the story. Maybe he learns something that changes him, you know, or maybe *we* see something that changes

our perception of him. Say a man, bitten by love once, shuts the world out but then learns to love again. Or a boss who is mean to his workers learns that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

I can see he is thinking. He is looking off into the water, as he nods slightly. Then he smiles and says: “You catch more flies with shit than honey, my great grandmother used to say.”

Fucking smart-ass old man, his dementia is showing, and I have to love it. I can’t believe I’ve got to kill this guy. I kinda like him.

And that was a good one I’ll have to remember it.

“Blondie doesn’t change.” I explain. “But Tuco? He changes,”

“Maybe the story is a sermon then.” The old man thinks for a second. He looks down at the orange in his lap but doesn’t make a move for it. “But how does Tuco change? I must have seen the movie twenty times. He is still a villain at the end?”

“A very good question, Uncle. Remember the scene where Tuco takes Eastwood to a mission, you know to that monastery, where he takes Blondie to recuperate; to recover the from that death-march in the desert?”

The old priest seems to be following me. His eyes furrow, in trying to comprehend it all.

“And then later on, Tuco’s brother shows up,” I say. “His brother who is a monk there at the mission – and then they argue...Tuco and his brother argue. We see them arguing about Tuco being a criminal and all, you know, and they are in this dilapidated basement place, like some storage place under the mission...” The old man nods: he’s remembering now. “...and Clint is watching, watching it all through the clapboards...”

The old man begins picking at the orange in his lap. As a priest I figured he would, of course, remember the only scene in the film with a man of the cloth in it.

“Now, in the beginning... in the beginning of the movie... the story starts with a long litany of Tuco’s crimes being read off, you know, as he is about to be hanged. No question he’s a bad guy. Later on in the story, after the basement scene and as they are leaving the mission, Angel Eyes and Tuco are riding off in the wagon –”

“Blondie! Not Angel Eyes. Angel Eyes is Lee Van Cleef,” he corrects me.

“Right, yer right, I mean Blondie. I’m sorry. Anyways, they’re driving off from the mission – this is where it is --Tuco is bragging grandly about his brother. He is telling Clint Eastwood how his brother is a big-shot there at the mission, how his brother is in charge there, like the Pope is in Rome even... and then...”

The wind flies up and the priest’s hat almost blows off.

“And then Tuco says the thing about – *‘it’s good to know that even for a bum like me, that there’s a brother somewhere who won’t refuse me a bowl of soup.’* And then Clint smiles, and he doesn’t let on that he knows the real deal or anything...”

I light a cigarette. The priest is smiling as it all sinks in.

“Ahhh... Now we see! We see Tuco differently – so yes – he has changed.” He gestures his hand out, “Changed in our perception of him. He is a criminal but also a human being now... not just the vile, little rascal that we see at the beginning...” He smiles. “So he has an arc, then. Yes. We see his loneliness and his need to be loved, to be respected. That is the change.”

“Right. Tuco’s braggadocio is so sad, sooo pathetic, that it makes him real. You actually feel sorry for the guy. It makes him *human* to us, and he goes from... from being a one-dimensional cardboard caricature – a buffoon, almost a cartoon character villain to – to being a real human character.” As a renegade and an outsider and vagabond and a bit of a bandit myself, I start feeling a little touched.

The old priest nods. Smiles. He has learned something today. “Sergio Leone... He’s the man!” he says, shaking his head and smiling.

“Oh yeah, that’s good storytelling. That’s a professional at work there,” I say.

“A true artist,” murmurs the priest, holding up his index finger. “And a fine craftsman.”

The wind tugs on his hat again.

“It’s good you came to see me.” He eyes my cigarettes. I feel like offering him one, but then think *What’s the use*. He shakes his head slightly, pondering the fragments of destiny he has left at 81-years-old.

“I don’t have much time left,” he says. “My mind wanders. I can remember what I did 40 years ago, but I can’t remember what I had for breakfast.” He slips a flask out and takes a swig. “I just don’t have much time left. Sometimes I hear voices.”

I kind of smirk, wince, and squirm in my seat a little, at the irony of his words. *Hear voices? Man, I’ve heard an earful this last week. I think to myself. The dead have been talking. Talking a blue streak and it’s all been about you, dude. You and your cronies and all the deaths your big mouths led to.*

He picks up on that. He thinks for a second, and he says, “You didn’t come here just to see me.”

I shake my head.

He reaches over and takes one of my cigarettes from the pack. Lights it.

“I haven’t had a cigarette in... 11 years now,” he says proudly.

“Go ahead,” I say, motioning to the pack. “Why not....”

I guess any condemned man is entitled to a last cigarette. Even him.

I look out to the sea. In the distance, I can see a freighter faintly moving down the coast in the morning haze. We’re sitting on Belmar Beach, in New Jersey just south of Asbury Park. It’s the off-season; the weather’s been messy all week.

“I came to take a walk with you, Father.”

I rise up from my seat and take a stand in front of him.

“Let’s walk, Father.” I hold both my hands out to him – down to him – and pull him up, rising out of the seat.

Standing, he’s a little unsteady and befuddled for a second. Then he takes my hand, and we start walking down along the beach.

I walk a few steps and stop. He stops. He turns to me. I point out to the ocean. He looks down. He can’t bring himself to look out at the ocean. Not now.

“You’re *not* really my nephew, then. You’re not Gracie’s boy.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“This isn’t about the parking in the handicapped zone without a sticker...”

I put my right hand over on his shoulder and take his left hand in mine to walk with him, guiding him. “You were a shepherd of the poor. A shepherd of the people.”

I am walking us into the water now. He looks down at the splashing.

“Always. I loved my people,” he says, looking up.

I know that’s a load of shit, and I smirk.

“And you *sold them out*. Sold out a whole lot of people. Brave men and women; your people, your friends – people who trusted you.”

“They were traitors, my son. Betrayers of the state.”

“They were human beings.” My voice cracks a bit. I’m taking all this personal but... “And they were patriots. Patriots and freedom fighters.”

“Maybe we know that now...”

“And you knew that then.” He stops walking and is catching on, as we stand there at the edge of the slightly lapping water. “You know what you did. Your words, you and all your friends’ words – all men of the cloth: your words sent the death squads. Your words pulled the triggers. Your words dug the mass graves.” The partially peeled orange falls from his hands into the shallow water, splashing. “And now they are waiting for you.”

“Out there.” His voice sounds soft, thin and bewildered, like a naïve child, as his head turns from me out to the foggy ocean.

“Yes, you hear them calling now?”

“You can hear them, too?” he says.

I nod.

“And you’re here for them? On their account?”

I nod again.

“Who... who hired you? What is this about?” We’re wading deeper into the water now, and he’s not resisting. The water is cool, even cold today. “They are all dead and gone. Everything’s over with.”

I smile. “And the other priests, they’re all dead now too. You’re the last one.”

“You’re here to take me, too...” He hangs his head with resignation, numb to it all now.

“Think of it this way, Father: finally, the waiting is over. You no longer will worry about all those bad things that happened all that long a time ago. You will... be free now.”

We’re up to our knees now. The sound of a seagull passes above. He looks up.

“So this is revenge, not justice,” he says.

He looks up into my eyes. I make a clicking sound with the side of my mouth, wink, and point my finger at him. *Yes.*

Earlier, in our “movie buff” conversation, we had talked about revenge. He felt that revenge always made for the best kind of story plot. I agreed. Then we talked about how revenge and justice were different. “Justice can be merciful... forgiving. But revenge... revenge never is,” he had said.

Funny how that works.

“So, there’s no mercy for old Father Mickey?”

“The check’s already written and been cashed. Look, Father, you will be setting them – all your victims – free. You will be ending their anguish and suffering... and your sacrifice will... set you free, too.”

We are up to our waists now. He’s slowing down. He stops and turns to me.

“You’re not dead. You’re not one of them. You’re from the church then?”

“No. This *is* an ancient ritual of the Catholic Church. One of the last surviving rituals of the Spanish Inquisition, but I’m here to settle things... for them out there, who are calling you now. I am a sort of ‘hit man for the dead.’ I set things straight so that those unquiet souls out there are released,” I explain.

“You too are a priest?”

“No, I’m no priest.”

He looks at me, confused.

“What I do is *not* what a priest can do... or should do. I avenge the dead; the wrongfully slain. I avenge them so that their innocent souls can pass on and find peace. That is my work, Father. This is my life now.” The cigarette falls from his mouth, hitting the front of his black coat and sprinkling ash and embers as it trips across the cloth and into the water with a sizzle. “The innocent, Father... can you hear them calling now?”

“I hear...”

“No one else can.” I smile into his eyes. “Just you and me.”

“Wow,” he says.

Wow? It seems to me, a strange thing to say right now, and the childlike wonder and the surprised innocence to his tone throws me off. But sometimes people come “off-track” when they are where he is right now.

He’s getting weaker and sliding down in my arms, losing will and strength. I hold him back up, straighten him. We’re getting up to our chests now.

“So, there is an afterlife?” He’s staring deep into my eyes, deep and beyond them even. “There *is* an afterlife... and forgiveness?”

I smile and shake my head. “God forgives – I don’t.”

He gets a stunned look, his head rocks back and forth from one side to the other, and he blurts out. “Terence Hill, 1967. Bud Spencer, too... I think?”

So much for trivia night on the misty morning beach. I put my hands on his shoulders and take a few more steps with him.

“Are you ready, Father?”

He nods.

I push him down. He is resigned to it. Doesn’t fight it at first, but as soon as the bubbles start coming up, the survival instinct kicks in, and he starts bucking and grabbing at me. I’ve done this kind of thing before and understand how it is. I keep him forced down, bringing my weight to bear.

He expires.

He’s dead and floats up.

“You came into this life with a baptism, and now you go out with one too, eh Father?” I say to the dead man, his eyes, one half closed, the other wide and frightened: kind of like a drunk with his hat on askew, only now the expression is askew. I wipe my palms across each other in a gesture of finality. I smile at the irony I’ve performed here this day.

I look around, up and down the beach. No one. As far as the eye can see. In the far distance a fisherman, not much bigger than a dot, casting his line into the water. No one else.

I go back to the car and get the broom, walk down to the waterline, and I sweep my footprints from the sand, leaving only his.

The job is done.

A perfect “suicide.”

His body is floating out to sea. Out there to them, his victims. The orange remains bobbing slightly in the shallows, as solitary, adrift and alone in the world as I am now.

I light a cigarette then descend into the car.

There is silence and an everyday peacefulness all around me.

As the window rolls down, I blow the first lungful of smoke out.

A seagull in the distance....

Investigation closed.

This is my life.

This is an ugly life: killing people that you just met. Traveling here and there. Talking to the dead. Investigating their murders. Creeping, lurking, observing... Up all night examining murder scenes. Picking locks and sneaking into a suspected killer’s condo. Going through their shit. Old receipts, examining their drugs in the medicine cabinet, checking their arrest records on the internet, looking through their porno in the nightstand by their bed, getting DNA from strands of woman’s hair in a shower drain....

This is a strange, lonely life.

Sometimes I feel like an alien. A creature from another planet visiting here and just floating around, waking up every morning and taking it as it comes.

Detached.

I am detached.

Detached from life, from a normal, everyday life.

I'm like a planet flying out of its orbit, off its axis into space... or like the orange floating out to sea into oblivion.

I stay in cheap motels, living out of my car, wandering and bouncing around from place to place, like a pinball in a pinball machine.

I watch movies all alone, in the afternoon, when no one else is in the theater. I wander, like I am myself one of my victims, a rootless, vagabond serial killer. I decide between life and death for strangers who have no idea who I am.

This is an ugly life... and I love it. I dig it. This is me now. And I really like it. My own private Idaho. My Rapture. In slow motion. My strange and certain doom. My story.

This is my story, what you are reading here. Or journal really. Yes, my journal. My exploits. My own personal take of what happened in the spring of this year, and a personal experience, well worth recounting.

But a story is crafted, well thought out, sometimes even a work of art. This thing of mine is more of a mess, a wandering, an escapade than a duty or a vocation. As is my life. My strange and ill-fated life.

I look over at the brown bag sitting next to me in the front seat with two bottles in it. On the way to the beach, jolly Father Mickey had me stop at a liquor store, and he bought two bottles of Glenlivet. I grab the open one, the one he topped off his flask with, and take a swig.

Good stuff. I look at the label. The 18-year-old stuff.

A man of class and distinction.

CHAPTER TWO

FOLLOW THE DANCING BALL

I'm heading south.

Weather's getting bad. Foggy. Waves of rain. Early darkness.

There's a big Memorial Day family get-together in Jacksonville, Florida this weekend. It's my mother's side of the family. They have a big farm – 'The Ranch,' they call it, because they have a lot of horses and they all like to wear cowboy hats and boots down there, like as if they were in Texas.

As the college radio station I was listening to back in NJ fades in and out, I start to hear a strange and curious song wafting in. Is it a march? An old song. The words are in Spanish? An anthem. Sounds like a song I've heard before almost, but the words are in Spanish.

It is a salute to me: the song – however faint - of the patriots I avenged back there on the beach, they are singing to me, singing with such gusto and resolve that it touches me deep inside and I am their hero. They have died and there's nothing I can do about that now, but and they are fading, forgotten and unknown – but not unavenged - sinking into the waves of history.

A catchy tune.

I start to sing along. Louder and louder.

Soon the song is fading back into the darkness of static and silence. Maybe they didn't like my singing. LOL.

I make it to Virginia and crash.

A DEAD, WHITE MOUSE ON A COLD, GRAY DAY

Shitty motel.
Thin walls.
A dark morning.
I roll out of bed and light a cigarette.
Raining outside.

A hangover, but it's not that bad when you have a good bottle like Uncle Mickey's. Just a haze, not a throb.

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 thing on the door handle...? There was something... something I did.

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

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

I go to the window. The screen almost falls off as I pull the drapes back. Dark day outside. Rain and cold. Shitty, dirty weather. I'm just outside of Baltimore 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? And that's why his eyes were white?

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

Gotta be a bad, bad hand 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, that 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 – lays 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 who finds him doesn't care. And he doesn't care, cause he's dead. His story arc: all finished.

I look at myself in the mirror. Getting thin again lately, lanky and lean. And shabby looking. Clothes getting loose and hanging. Got to bulk up some. Hair getting wild. Bushy.

“How the fuck is your character arc doing, Anthony?” I ask to my face in the mirror.

Everyone's got an arc of some kind.

Everyone has a system – a machine, a company, a school curriculum – that they’re plugged into. Now and then there’s a wanderer, a madman, an imbecile who exists outside any system, but that is rare. The whole world is one big ball of spinning energy and actions and reactions and mistakes and dreams and escapades, all going on at the same time. All these entities are clued into one another: millions of people, like millions of watch parts turning and spinning and clicking, as the planet flies off into space at a million miles an hour.

We all need to belong somewhere. To belong to something. The need for belonging is innate and inescapable.

The little “biosphere” that I’ve fallen into and am living in right now? My gang of fellow killers? Now, that’s a gas.

We all work for the maestro known as Jack Ketch. He runs the whole show – at least our show. Our unit. We’re ten or twelve devoted killers, “Double-O” numbered assassins wandering the country tracking, adjudicating, and killing the murderers, and avenging their victims who have died wrongly – who have passed too soon and before their time.

We have a larger support staff to help out, clean up the mess that guys like me leave behind, and the whole thing has to be kept out of the spotlight. Most of our victims just disappear; some die of natural causes (that are unnatural). Some are deemed not guilty in the inquest, and they get a pass: found innocent, not guilty enough, or sometimes just not enough clear evidence.

We mostly get our evidence direct from the words of the deceased in a rite called the Eastern Ritual. Still, there’s no reason to believe whatever the ghost tells you just because they’re a ghost. We have to make up our own minds. Ghosts can lie, too. Or misunderstand or mis-recollect things, so a thorough investigation is always in order.

For me, the coolest thing is that we exist just outside of – and right on top of – the real world that everyone else lives in. The other coolest thing is that it’s kind of like being a detective or secret agent. We’re like modern-day cowboys. Saddle tramps. Like the rolling stone. Wherever I hang my hat is my home.

Get the picture?

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

The nice smell of coffee.

Windows all fogged up.

The rain.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERESTING VISITORS

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

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

I pull into the parking lot....

But I hesitate. Sit there. I'm thwacking my plastic room key between my fingers, but something's wrong with the picture. What is it...?

In front of my room there's a car – a car that doesn't really belong there. Why? *It's a nice car*, clean and big. All the rest of the cars in the place are hoopties and shit-sleds, all banged up, dirty, old, unwashed... faded bumper stickers. Ones with different-colored hood and quarter panels and peeling paints. It's a cheap motel, I told you that. So, what's this creampuff, almost new, showroom perfect, beauty doing here?

I sit there and watch from the distance for a minute. My radar is going off. My first instinct is that it's some kind of cop car. Detective types, plainclothes....

I pull into a parking spot at the other end of the building. Eventually a guy comes out of my room. *My room from last night. What kind of fuckery is this?*

He looks pretty straight. Suit, tie undone, sunglasses.... not quite a Men-in-Black look but – ya know – he's getting there. Cops? Government boys? Men in Black? And he's moving fast.

He's in a hurry. He gets something out of their car and goes back in the room.

The car has one of those fins on the trunk, an antenna fin for some kind of high-shit communication gear inside, and it makes it look like a limo, but the car'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 backseat of the car and gets something electronic-looking – something about the size of a meatloaf – and then he goes back into the room with it.

Then they come out of my room talking sharply, arguing. They are so into the squabble that they don't see me watching from my parking spot off down the way from them. They get something from the car and walk back into the room again, jabbering away.

I go into my trunk and put together a little surprise of my own for them. I rig up a bomb in a small computer bag. A sort of delightful, explosive cocktail. I can set it off by timer, tripwire, or remote control, and I choose remote.

I look around. I spot a pushcart that the maids use to clean. I put on a knit cap and an old fleece sweater from my backseat and nab the pushcart while the maid's in one of the rooms. As I pass my room, I throw my remote-control bomb surprise right in through a fortuitously open window, into the back seat of their car. They didn't see anything.

I continue to wheel off down the way and I watch out of the side of my eye as I stop to sweep up some cigarette butts into the maid's dustpan, the kind with a long handle so you don't have to bend down for.

Finally, they come out, get in the car, and take off.

After they're good and gone, I go in. They didn't even take the iPad, but they messed with it, as it's been moved around.

I look over the room. Nothing unusual. But there's a strange smell in the room. It's a bad, chemical smell. It's worse in the bathroom. I walk around. I smell the sink. It's there, too. Coming from the toilet. I flush the toilet. Something burps up and swirls up a bit, and then it all goes down. WTF was that!?

I hear a noise behind me.

It's the maid. Fuck. I almost pulled my gun.

I smile and leave, grabbing the iPad on the way out.

Beginning to rain again now.

As I'm heading across the parking lot back to my car, I see the black car, with the fin antenna out of the side of my eye. They came back. Or are they going to follow me. Who are they? I may have seen them before – they seem familiar. They're watching me, but I pretend that I don't see them, and 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 thick traffic. Cool. After a bit of roadway acrobatics and sleight-of-hand, I manage to disappear and slip around and wind up a few cars back behind them. Now I'm watching them from behind and they're arguing and looking all around for me up in front of them, heh, heh, heh. I enjoy this for a few ticks, and then slide up to 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, a bit frantic, and tripping out. Finally, the driver just turns and sees 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. They keep accelerating and keeping up with me. We're doing 80. Then 90. I want to lure them into going at a good clip.

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

They catch on, and the passenger looks over into their backseat. He sees my surprise package and he starts reaching back there at it. He pulls the computer bag up front with him, looks inside and starts to roll down the window. He's going to throw it out.

Fun time now. I put one of those paintball grenades in there, similar to the kind that banks put in the bags of cash when they get robbed – but worse, and I push the remote-control ignition.

The paintball-bomb explodes...but that's not all – I put a couple of cool, hi-tech bottle rocket/roman candle-type devices in there that are going off now, too! 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 trying to slow down, trying to get control, and I'm beginning to move up past them. I swerve and give them a tap, and then I punch it and go on beyond them and off, as they start to fishtail and swerve from my nudge. 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 on the side of the road, and the whole car just starts flipping.

I just keep tooling on. Good riddance.

Who the fuck were those guys?

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PASSWORD IS SWORDFISH

I'm heading south and feeling good. With each settlement I get a little piece of my soul back. At least that's what I tell myself. I can feel it... maybe, and I'm feeling better and better almost every time.

When I lost my soul three years ago in that card game down in Mexico, everything changed. Everything changed for me: my feelings, my energy, my connections to humanity, even my sense of smell... for a while I couldn't smell for shit. And I was empty inside, empty and my heart was cold.

Now it's all coming back. Little by little.

Sure.

I reach down and finger the ancient amulet that I was given by a Mexican Catholic Priest to protect me in my quest to get my soul back. I remember him telling me all about the ancient Gods of Mexico from before Christianity and stuff. Real interesting and relevant to my stolen soul situation if you can believe all that stuff.

I have no choice but to believe it, considering the predicament I'm in.

Outside of Richmond I get a text from Big Red: "Call me."

She's in Hagerstown, Md., and she texts me that there's some good stuff I need to see there in her "settlement" and that I should come by if I'm in the area. Naw. I'd have to back-track.

But then she shoots me some pics of some slabbed coins (slabbed: coins in sealed, plastic containers, by companies that assay them to condition and value) and old banknotes, and there in

the background, I spot some golden age comics and a couple of real cool-looking samurai swords.

Her crew would be cleaning up after my fellow “inquisitor” Antonius Block’s latest job.

Only about 10 or 20% of us actually have “Double-O numbers”; that is, OK’d to not just investigate, but to make judgements and kill.

Block is real piece of work. Hardcore. No sense of humor. But a good man to have at your back in a pinch.

Now, I always like to add a little irony to my “settlements” with a cool twist ending if possible. Block, on the other hand is a butcher, cunning, brutal, ruthless and bloody. I’m sure she and her crew have a real mess to clean up, however, their crew still owes me from the last job, a “settlement” outside of Toronto, where I did all the work and didn’t stick around for my share of the split. I figure my share has to be three or four grand at least.

I’m turning around and I’m on it. I always have good luck when I pick up samurai swords.

It’s Sunday and there’s no rush hour traffic in Hagerstown. Weather’s cleared up, rain’s blown through and it’s sunny, but windy and kind of cold and brisk. The town is quiet, with hardly any people out and about. I’m cruising and whistling and blasting the radio with the window down and my hair blowing. I’m going to see Big Red – Big Red – and she’s always happy to see me.

See, Big Red and I have been hooking up on the side for three or four months now. Some swell girl. Almost six foot of raw shape and form and bounce and curve. Magnificent creature. Magnificent curves. Magnificent shape. And a personality that just makes you feel young and foolish – like you’re 14 years old again and summer vacation just started.

Red and I have managed to keep it on the “low-low.” She gets around, sure, but I knew that coming in, but she’s very cool about it – a real “ghost” when it comes to sex. All off-screen. She is going to see anyone else she wants to on the side, too. She comes at sex and romance like a predator, like a super vixen with more of

a man's attitude. Probably intimidating to a lot of people but my kind of girl, actually.

Funny thing is I never really went for redheads before. Especially the freckles and orange Ronald McDonald hair thing. All my life, I was down with was blondes, brunettes, black-haired women. And ya know, redheads could smell it on me I think... and would always throw themselves at me, even back in high school.

But Big Red is something very special, red hair or not. And she's a handful. Big boned and thick. Not photogenic at all. See her in a picture and she looks kinda dumpy. But in person she's hypnotic the minute she starts to move. An acquired taste for most guys probably: too thick, too big an ass, too small'a tits, too tall, too smiley, too whorish for most guys – I've heard it all, but for me: my kinda gal - an ideal and perfect woman. Dangerous because that is exactly the type I tend to fall for.

I'm looking forward to seeing her, and I reach over and take a couple of nips from the bottle.

Their "scene" is on the third floor of an office building, just outside of downtown, on the perimeter. It's Sunday, and the office building is empty, except for our crew. There's one of our guys out front in a security guard uniform. "Sorry sir, there's a biohazard leak inside. Nobody in or out now."

I give him the password. "Swordfish."

"Third floor, sir."

Never seen this guy before. Probably just another one of the Gypsies from the City. Jack has a whole building in New York City with all these Gypsies living there, all doing eBay all day long, selling all the lower-end shit we dig up in our hits. Jack is able to finance this whole operation – all our expenses through the shit we take off the bad guys and then sell on eBay whatever we field reps don't harvest.

The elevator closes behind me. I come sailing in, down the hallway to the scene, and as I turn the corner, Fennix is standing there with his gun ready. Off down the hallway about 30 feet, three other faces are peeking out of a doorway to an office at me. The guard from downstairs didn't call upstairs.

When Fennix sees its me, he holsters the gun and smiles broadly with a "Here's Johnny" delight and a tilt of his head; his

hands become sprung with excitement, and he slightly hops. For some reason, Fennix always does a slight hop when he's excited. He's "excited to be delighted".

The office building is Sunday-empty. Someone might just come in to pick up some papers or catch up on some work due Monday, you never know, so everyone's apprehensive, but happy now to see it's me.

Besides Fennix and Red, there is Bobo Bazan and two Gypsies from New York that I've worked with before, Woodlock and Mothman, helping out with the cleanup.

Bobo is a killer too, just like me. Big Red used to be one but decided to go with the clean-up crew. She'll have this place sparkling clean and looking ready to rent by Monday morning. And she makes good money on these jobs. At least three grand on a mess like this and maybe five or eight grand.

The office looks pretty upscale. Expensive furniture and real, hand-painted art on the wall. The boys have cracked the safe, a big one, and cleaned it out.

The scene is still a bloody one. Block's work. His favorite thing is to break a baseball bat in half and hammer the splintered end down someone's throat. Block's a real butcher. Kinda nuts, but all calm and collected. Quite creepy, really, but the man has saved my life more than once.

Red smiles at me - but she's being cool: no hug, no kiss: just playing it all cool-hand and sly. That she is standing down means she may be banging someone here. Not Block. Not Fennix, of course. Maybe Woodlock. Not bad a looking guy. Maybe Bobo. Red likes either real good-looking guys or downright ugly guys. Either Cary Grant or Charles Bronson. Bobo is more on the Bronson-ish side.

The Gypsies gather round and light cigarettes. We don't shake hands because they're hands are all bloody.

Fennix is coming out of the bathroom, having washed his hands and comes up to shake my hand.

"Fennix. You have a license to sell hot dogs?" Red says, chuckling a bit.

"What?" Confused.

Mothman laughs: "Your zipper, dude."

His zipper is down. He mumbles, looking down embarrassed and zips it up.

Bobo comes in from the other room and does his usual odd handshake, grasping my palm, and with our arms up like we are arm wrestling, and draws me close and pats me on the back. He's in a pretty good mood. Hmmm. He's down-right happy. So, he's probably the one she's knocking boots with now.

"Bobo! Mi sangre!" He's a Cuban.

"Hey, cowboy! What it is, mannn!"

I smile and say: "Hey, are you still living with that mannequin?"

He smiles and chuckles at the jibe like it was just another joke, but Red seems slightly apprehensive, like I've picked up on the score here (which I have) and it might start friction (which I shall not).

"Harken! You are the funny guy! Funny guy! Yeah!" He actually digs the dig. Good mood, so convivial, immune to the probing dig – he's the one. I look at Red over his shoulder as he hugs me, and she picks up on what's going on: that I'm being cool but subtle too.

Sharp girl, that Red is.

She smiles and pops the bubblegum she's chewing.

"Ahh sorry dude, I'm just a smart ass today." I say. "Happy to see you guys, yes, happy to see you all." I light a cigarette "What 'r we got here?" I'm eyeing the samurai sword out of the side of my eye as I look over the scene.

The boys have a guy bagged and about to be zipped up. The death rictus on his face is one of sheer terror.

The guy next to him looks like a European. Probably French or Italian. You can tell from the shoes. The Euro-trash always seem to have fancy shoes. Long and skinny. Designer shoes like that no one in America wears since the Disco days. The next man is one of the two that are duct taped to a chair and a broken-in-half baseball bat has been pounded down his throat.

That Block.

Mothman and Woodlock have placed a sheet of plastic tarp on the floor in back and are wheeling the bat-guy in. From experience, they know that he won't fit properly in a body bag with the bat sticking out.

Red takes Bobo's shoulder and explains that their crew owes me like 3 or 4 grand from the last job. He was out with the flu. "Look, we owe him. I mean, it was his job, and he did all the work." I can hear. He gets a confused look. She takes him aside, putting her arm around him (in front of me, which will make him feel more secure about their relationship) and talks some more, with me out of earshot.

If she's telling him what I think she's telling him: that she can romance me a bit and get me to leave out with some of the lesser junk to settle the debt— then I might get some private fun-time with her right here in the office, in another room of course. He's Mariel boatlift Cuban and while it's a macho culture, it's tempered with years of Communism and poverty. So he really doesn't give a shit if she gives something away, as long as it means they will get something good out of it.

After Red finishes with him and he goes back off to what he was doing, she comes over to me, smiling, and puts her hand on my shoulder, leading me into another room.

The Gypsies and Bobo turn the radio back on and get back to work cleaning up.

"Where's Catamuso? Wasn't he supposed to be here on this one?" I ask. Catamuso is a helper, sort of my partner in most of my killing missions, not a killer himself but sort of a squire/assistant really.

She shrugs. "Ya know...he comes and goes like the breeze..." she smile. "He's been helping out on these Block's jobs lately and he's here one minute...."

"They're probably off somewhere out there, skinning someone alive."

"Block sure left us a mess here to clean up."

The room still has blood-splatter on the curtains and walls, a couple of pizza boxes with a few cold slices and a mop in a bucket with the smell of disinfectant.

I look around.

The comic books!

A short box with about a hundred golden-age books. I flip thought them, get a feel for what's there, shrug and smile. The grades are mostly pretty high and it's a good haul.

I look up at her and nod. "Nice."

Through the doorway behind her, I see another couple of bags lying on a desk in the next office. Is it bags of cash? I look closer: body bags... and one of them is not even zipped up. Nodding to the bodies behind her, I say: "Block?"

"Naw. The Gypsies got those two guys. They walked in on us in the middle of all this. So we didn't even have to go track 'em down."

"They were on the sheet?" The "sheet" is the list of people that need to be eliminated.

She nods. "We also have these old-timey Central American thingies."

"Artifacts?"

"Yeah. These stone dolls and broken pots and stuff." She pulls a sheet back on the other end of the desk.

"Not for me. I always have bad luck with those things. If they're not fakes, they break and shit. Naw, go ahead and put them on eBay."

She closes the door and now we're alone, cut off from the main the office room where everyone is working. She kisses me and then we're into it, hot and heavy. Bobo's right in the other room, and could walk in on us any moment, but that's probably a turn-on for her. Who knows what women think?

Between kisses, I look down at the box of comics again.

"Waddaya think?" she asks.

"Real nice."

"And then that takes care of the share we owe you?" she asks.

"Definitely worth three or four grand. And they're worth more, I think."

"Then good."

"Sure. They're probably worth more. More than the three grand, babe."

"No, I'm good. I told Bobo that you like comic books." She smiles. "He thinks you're, like, retarded and you like to read them."

"You got a kick out of letting him think that didn't you?" I smile.

She laughs. "We got a deal?"

“Yeah, but you can throw in that sword over there leaning against the wall.”

She smiles. “Sure. There’s two of them. One slid down there but... it’ll cost you!”

I smile broadly and say: “Let it ride.” And give her a big kiss.

As she melts, she starts in on me and turns the music in the room up. I figure, what the hell: let her ride.

She’s a whole other kind of creature when she’s getting her prowl on. To look at her, she’s a statue of shape and curves that look like a cement truck poured her into those blue jeans. Bright, flashing eyes, smiling eyes: so magnificent she would have to be untouchable. In the heat of passion all that melts away, and she becomes a huffing, sweating animal, greedy with lust and electric with frenzy.

Now we’re going at it, I’m sort of sitting on the edge of the desk there, and I glance over at the two dead guys in the other room. Just as I do, a cell phone rings.

A cell phone....

It’s one of their cell phones, one of the dead guys in the next room.

On the second ring - I sort of see it out of the side of my eye - the dead body nearest me sits upright. On the third ring, he looks down at himself, he’s zipped up from the chest down, and looks confused because he can’t use his arms or figure out why he can’t. He looks over at me; he’s a Chinese or Korean-looking guy and has to be confused by what he sees: me pulling my gun, aiming it at him, and getting a blow job at the same time.

Smooth as butter, I level my silenced Sig 226 and shoot. Fortunately, Red doesn’t bite my dick off. The shot hits him on the top of the head, some hair or maybe some skin or skull fly up and off, but he’s still alive and struggling out of the body bag. It’s not too tight around him or too zipped up, and he’s getting out of it in seconds.

I got to get him before he gets away.

But he jerks forward, throwing up, just as I get my bead on him and I miss. My next shot misses as he rolls off the desk hitting the floor, and then he is up, off and running before I get another good shot. He’s naked as a jaybird so it must have been the dead guy next to him whose cell phone went off.

He runs right through the office room with Bobo and the guys, but they're so startled to see this screaming, blood-smearing dead guy with the top of his head shot off that they stand there transfixed, as he's able to run right out the door and down the hall.

Of course, they crew is quickly off shouting and after him like the Keystone Cops.

Big Red looks around with no idea of what the fuck's going on or what just happened. We're having tender, loving romance one minute – and the next there's all kinds of shooting and screaming going on. She looks around and she's happy to see that it's not Bobo that's shooting at us in some kind of a jealous rage or something.

“What happened?”

“One of your dead bodies woke up. He's out there running around somewhere,” I say.

“Well, they'll find him.”

I shake my head. She shrugs.

“We gotta go get him before those knuckleheads shoot each other.” I say.

“Yeah, you're right.” She heads into the other room to pick up her gun and shit. “You're right about that.”

She comes into the room pulling the slide back on some kind of Glock. “Then again, they might shoot us, ya know?” she says.

“Yer right about that.”

“I mean, it shouldn't be too hard for them to find a screaming, naked Chinaman...”

“With part of his head shot off...”

She smiles and comes back to the desk and sets her gun down next to mine.

After a while and we're finished up, we both take a look out into the hallway to check on things.

The crew is not back yet and so they're still looking for the guy, so I figure we better go get him after all. The tricky part is to not get shot by our own guys. All the while I'm still thinking about the comic books.

She looks up and down the hallway and then pulls out her phone. “You know, I swear we killed that Chinese guy two months

ago over in Ohio,” she says. She’s scrolling through her phone, which annoys me because she should be keep her eyes peeled for the victim on the loose.

“Yeah?”

“I mean, he looked like the same guy. I mean, he had a scar on his chin that looked like a bunny.”

“A bunny?”

“A fucking bunny... so I sent a snapshot of his face and his prints up to New York. To Jack. I mean, it couldn’t be the same guy. Block put a hole the size of your fist into his chest – into his heart. I mean, the heart was *gone*.”

“Poor heartless motherfucker.”

“The fingerprints were the same!” She’s looking it up on her text messages on the phone. “And I was right! Here look! But I mean... what does that mean?”

“Maybe they’re not the same guy, maybe they’re duplicates of each other.”

“Duplicates?”

“Was the guy from China or American born Chinese?”

“He was from China, I’m sure.”

“There’s a whole lotta odd things going on...”

“No kidding. A month ago in Wichita, they painted all the bodies silver. They painted them with silver paint.”

“No kidding. That’s fucked up.”

As we walk along I imagine what a dreary, dreadful grind it would be to work in this building. All year, year after year, for decades – the same bathroom, the same lunch place around the corner, the same walls, the carpet, the same smell...

“Speaking of strange, who’s this guy Quickjohn?” she asks.

“A major asshole. Where’d you hear Quickjohn?”

“We hear things. What’s going on? Why all the fuss?”

“Well, there’s a good reward for him...”

“Really. How much.”

As we walk down towards the front of the building, I can hear the sound of the all the guys klutzing around up ahead in the distance, echoing from a few floors below.

We're walking around the 3rd floor, looking in rooms. Checking doors as I go. All are locked. Then we come around a corner, and there he is!

We're walking up on the atrium area, inside the glass-windowed front of the building. Hanging down into the atrium is a big, modern-art sheet-metal sculpture-thing. Each floor has a wide hallway leading to a brightly lit, spacious, balcony, a balcony overlooking the atrium.

Our man is standing there, looking down over the balcony, and from below us, I can hear Bobo shouting directions to his Keystone Cop helpers from the lobby or a lower balcony. They're still looking for him.

Our client hasn't heard or sensed us coming up from behind him; he's about 100 feet ahead of us.

I nudge Big Red. She looks up from her phone. "Ooooh, shit!" she whispers.

I reach for my gun. Damn! *I left it in the room on the desk.* Well. At least I have a good excuse.

"Red, give me your gun."

"Shit! I left it back in the room."

Shit. "Go get it."

She tiptoes off.

I stealthily creep up on him. I'm thinking: *what if I use a gun and then miss him, and hit the windows of the lobby... well, we can't replace all the windows, and, who knows, it might set off an alarm. Maybe I can sneak up on him and grab him? Strangle him? Or push him off the balcony?*

I look around. The balcony is a wide-open area, furnished as a meeting area with a few big, overstuffed chairs and side tables with lamps. Then I notice the modern-art rug that's part of the nice, pleasing décor. The rug is about 12 feet long and about 4 feet wide – and *shit*, he's standing on it! I bend down, reaching toward my end of the rug. He sort of senses me getting close, or that something's wrong as his head begins to turn slightly.

I've noticed that some people in a heightened state will develop a sort of sixth sense for things around them or for danger coming at them.

As he looks to his left, then his right, I'm getting a real good grip on the rug. Just as his sixth-sense alerts him to turn and look

behind him, I yank the rug - I mean I grab it and I yank it real, real hard - using all my weight and falling back, with it in my hands – and there he goes, flipping over the balcony and down into the atrium below... with a yelp that sounds like a miniature poodle having his tail stepped on. It works perfectly – a totally pure, perfect Alfred Hitchcock action scene – and one of those moments that will always be frozen in my mind like a Polaroid forever!

A few seconds later, I hear our boys in the lobby below yelling and awash in commotion.

I walk to the balcony and look down. He hit the marble floor below. At least it will be easy to clean up. I think the body almost hit one of the Gypsies. They look like they are thinking: *What happened? Did he commit suicide?*

I clear my throat.

They all look up at me, their mouths go wide open, and their faces look like little kids caught pulling the cookie jar down on the kitchen floor.

I say nothing. I smile and wipe my hands together, back and forth, in a job-well-done manner. One of my elbows is on the railing and my James Bond smirk bathes down on them as they look up in awe. *I'm one of the Pros from Dover, baby!* Actually, more of a Roger Moore smirk now, than a Sean Connery one. If I was doing Connery, I would need a pithy aside to sail down at them, but one just doesn't come to mind right now.

I hear a pistol click and rack off there behind me. Oh shit! Big Red! I realize that with me standing at the balcony where the victim was standing: a dark figure outlined against the light coming in from the glass façade of the atrium – and probably looking just like our target to her.

I turn and say, "Baby!" real loud. She lets the gun down. Whew! That was close.

I think about staying over in town, maybe getting another shot at Big Red tonight, kill one of the Father Mickey bottles with her, but then, I've got the party to go to in Florida. Then I imagine her not probably being able to get away from Bobo or whoever she's got on her dance card here and me sitting in a motel room bummed out and brooding all night.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANOTHER CLOSE CALL

I leave Hagerstown, feeling top notch and all together now. The comics in the trunk beckon me, and I bring a stack of them into a Huddle House I stop at just below Fayetteville, NC,. I order a plate of their *Stuffed Hash Browns*, my favorite. Lately I've been addicted to the Huddle House's Stuffed Hash Browns, a southern roadside delicacy: meat of your choice between a sandwich of hash browns and topped with cheese and a scrambled egg patty!

It's about 3am and turns out that one of three drunk and laughing night-clubbing chicks trying to sobber up in the next booth is eyeballing to me.

She feigns serious curiosity about the old comic books. Her brother likes comics. Do you have *Gutt Ghost*? Sorry, I don't have any. Never heard of it. *Poison Elves*? No. *Weapon-X*?

"*Weapon-X*?" smiling, I whisper loudly to her: "I'll show you my 'Weapon-X'! Whenever you want to see it, babe." She smiles and winks at me. It's a sort of slow wink as she's completely hammered. I've been nipping on Father Mickey's bottle since Raleigh, and I'm flying pretty high, too.

We get out to my car, and I'm about to kiss her. Then I notice the Adam's apple. *Well shit in my saddle bags and call me stinky*. Too bad I'm not Fennix – he'd probably go for it. The sex-change doctors are doing a pretty good job these days and this one's awful good.

I look at her hands and I'm sure. I've opened the door already, but I set the comics down on the seat and I turn to her, put my hands on her arms holding her, and give her/him a soft and tender kiss – the slightest of kisses – on the cheek.

She realizes what's up and looks down and off to the left with a solemn frown. This was a goodbye kiss, she realizes. "Sorry," I say. "You understand."

She laughs it off, turns slowly and trots almost merrily back to the Huddle House. It happens to her on a regular basis, I'm sure.

Whew. Two close calls in one day: getting shot by Big Red and this.

But things come in threes. Or maybe the car with the Men in Black was one too? Maybe.

CHAPTER SIX

LIVING LIKE AN ANIMAL

I make it to the Florida state-line and hit the Jacksonville outskirts at 1AM and crash.

Tomorrow is the big Memorial Day party with my cousins and all, at the south-side family ranch. They're a mostly military family and it's my uncle Brook's birthday. He's loaded – moneywise, 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 classy-looking car to show up in. The “beater” car that I'm driving in nowadays looks like shit. It's mechanically tops but looks like something a retired donut-holer would drive, but no one ever tries to break into it.

The Enterprise near me is closed for the holiday, and I don't want to drive all the way over to the airport to get a car, so fuck it, I'll go in this heap.

I start heading over, and then I change my mind. I stop and get out of the car. I can see off in the distance that the party's already started 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 look at my crappy car. 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 also, I have a coupon! And I'll put it on the company credit card.

Well, I get an impressive Chrysler, head over there to the party, and then I stop in the same place, just stop and get out of the car again.

I'm standing there on the side of the road, and I just don't know what to do. I look off and see the party, the fun is going on, the barbeque is smoking up and the kids are on swings laughing and 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 of phone numbers.

I call the house, but Aunt Peach picks up the phone. We talk for a second – she always was real fond of me – she always was swell to me, but we haven't talked in a good while. Finally, Shelly figures out it's me and 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. Hold tight and I'll call you right back."

So I sit there for half an hour. Nothing. No call. Should I text her? No, the number I have is a house phone. I just sit there for like 45 minutes, 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 take off and head back to the motel. I feel so deeply bad inside now that I don't even want to go to the party anymore.

I go back to my motel room and try to polish off one of the bottles of 18-year-old Glenlivet and try to just ride out Memorial Day in the shitty motel room.

Maybe they'll call?

But then 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 Peach's "world famous" potato salad... they all fall silent, and 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, still thinking about going back again. 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. It's not about what happened in the past.

That world the straight world – the normal world - is gone for me. Dead. Vanished. Over. I have a new family now, and all that stuff from the past is no more.

I can't go back. I can't go home again. That's what this whole pathetic, self-pitying rubbish is about. It is a funeral service for my life as it was, and never more shall be.

So, I'm watching TV, flipping the channels, drunk on my ass, 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, actually feeling sorry for myself, and then laugh maniacally.

Some swell thing for a big, bad-ass killer like me.

Hmmph.

CHAPTER SEVEN

QUICKJOHN

Catamuso knocks on my motel room door the next morning, as I'm just waking up.

He uses his special knock, as always, (so he doesn't get shot). *How the fuck did he find me here? The company credit card? I thought I paid cash.* I'm miserable and hung-over but somehow happy to see him this morning.

"I thought I'd still find you in Hagerstown when I dropped by up there. They got a big mess up there."

"No. I left. I was all done 'dere. But I finded something down here now! Out 'dere in the swamps, man. Big killing. Lotsa dead bodies here in Florida now."

"Quickjohn?"

"No, just some bodies. Ten or twenty maybe. No Quickjohn. But you know Quickjohn, he is in Florida now."

Quickjohn is an elusive and mysterious killer. Often a mass murderer, killing large groups of people and both guilty and innocent. Some kind of psycho, acting like he's almost trying to blend in with our endeavors.

Every one of us is always on the lookout for him. He has a good price on his head. He seems to always kill and then, insidiously, blame it on anyone else. He plants evidence, and clues, and such to hang the blame on terrorists or corporations or other bad guys, or even us – so he is never a suspect, never even looked for by law enforcement.

Except by us.

"You know, I think Quickjohn does not even exist," says Catamuso.

"Wait a minute. You just told me he was in Florida." I'm shaving now.

“Ahhh shit, ya know, I’ve been hearing Quickjohn for all the years, man. But who has ever even seen him? No one. This is all made-up stuff, I think. *Un fantasma!*”

“He’s out there somewhere. Mark my words.” I say.

Catamuso plops down in a chair and picks up the TV Guide thing they have in all the rooms. “Jack has saw him once. And Mr. Block, too.”

“Anton 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, and when he thinks no one was looking and he started biting the hair on his arm.”

“Biting the hair on his arm? Like kids do sometimes?”

“That I believe!” said Catamuso, raising one 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. “He is as evil as a monster, and that he would do! Let’s go, then.”

I shake my head. Whatta nut.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FACES AT TWILIGHT

We drive and drive, and soon we're getting into the great North Florida swamps.

"Quickjohn." I say.

Catamuso smiles. We ride along in silence for a few ticks. "He is one of us I think. Yes." He says.

I think a tick. "We kill. But we have a reason. We have proof. We have to have proof."

"Your proof. Maybe he has his."

"How the hell does he have proof enough to kill 200 people who don't know each other with a concert fire in northern Kentucky? What crime would a bus load or mentally handicapped people have committed that would justify sending them crashing off a cliff. I mean, what the fuck?"

We ride in silence for a minute.

"Who's the boss?" he asks.

"We're all private contractors."

"No I mean who's the boss of all of us? Who gives the orders? Sets the rules?"

"Jack. Jack of course."

"and who is his boss?" he says, smiling.

I have no answer.

"Right. Above Jack Ketch, who knows?" Says Catamuso. "What if we are working for the Devil?"

"The Devil?"

Zink about this Harken. We are doing what the Devil does, exactly what the devil does: catching the most sinful, the most evil: catching killers... and sending them to hell. Don't you think the Devil loves us?"

“And now you’re going to tell me that Quickjohn is the devil...this Quickjohn that you, in our previous conversation, insist doesn’t even exist?”

“Or he could be a demon... we all could be demons.”

“Speak for yourself Catamuso.”

Hmmm. Catamuso has brought up something here. All along I’ve been thinking that my killing was keeping me – me and my soul, my poor, lost, wayward soul that’s out there somewhere – out of hell. But... what if – in the end – I am working for the devil? I guess you would call that ironic.

As we drive across Florida, through all the flatness – with the sugarcane fields and sawgrass and orange groves and Christmas tree farms – I just can’t help but feel the bleak emptiness of it all. I absorb it like some toxic mist.

Here and there, a little town. All the little towns: forgotten and decaying with deteriorated Art Deco gas stations, a dead K-Mart, and a Family Dollar store with one car out front. Trailer parks, used-car lots, a defunct-looking drive-in theater looming off in the distance. The towns – each one an island of lost souls – seemingly frozen in time and space like museum displays.

And then you get to the Everglades.

The Everglades. Swamps. Lonely. Mysterious. Ethereal. It 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 think I never want my murdered body to be buried here,” says Catamuso in his heavy accent. “You could take a dead body and bury it in here, and no one ever would ever find it... for hundred or a thousand years.”

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 could be sinking or drifting. He hands me a mask, as we 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 - me, a well-seasoned killer with a good lot of notches carved into his soul.

All the bodies have been buried head down – headfirst - but with their feet sticking up out of the ground.

It's the damndest thing I've ever seen. These guys are planted like mannequins; dotted all around the clearing here and there and hidden inside the stand of trees. It is kind of mindboggling.

“What kind of twisted...” I mutter.

Catamuso smiles. “A gang of cutthroat smugglers and murderers we have here, boss.” He points off at more bodies.

At first, I see like 5 or 6 bodies, but there are at least 8 or 10 human beings planted here total.

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

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

I nod.

“I szink zee whole Blue Coyote Gang is here, oui?” he says.

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. Yeesh! 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 or smelling it.

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

I bend down and pick up another wrapper, an empty one.
“Snickers! All Snickers.”

“Oh yah. Wrappers all over d’place here.”

Catamuso points to a cell phone under a bush.

I pick it up and starts fidgeting with the keypad.

Catamuso reach for it – “Lemme see that!” – but I pull away, playfully.

“Is mine! I saw it first!”

I monkey with it, trying to turn it on. The battery is dead and turns off as soon as it starts to light up. “Battery’s dead.”

“Give me that!” He grabs it.

Catamuso waves it in my face. “Iz a Nokia. I try to remember the code – what the hell is it?”

“Code?”

“Here, see Harken, we press *#4720# and hold it a second.”

“What are you doing?”

“Activating reserve power...”

The phone beeps to life. Catamuso nods approvingly and grunts.

We look around some more. We find where they all ate lunch. A card table is set up. Crumbs on a plate, icing on a cake knife, some little conical party hats ... the remains of a birthday cake. *Quickjohn lured them all out here with the promise of a birthday party.*

Catamuso hears something and listens up. I take the phone out of his hands. “Hey. 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? Hee hee. Maybe he the one who killa all these men, eh?”

“Maybe. Hmmm. Killman. Sounds like a typical Quickjohn alias!”

“Told you. 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. Sometimes it's great for an investigation. His spinning, whizzing, multitasking mind often sees both sides of everything and picks up things I'd have never thought of.

"Sure. *Elmer Slaughter, Wilson Kilgore...now Killman!* And, and the Snickers! And Quick's a total Snickers addict! Quickjohn is here, Catamuso. In Florida."

Catamuso points off into the wilderness, growing dark now as the sun fades. "See zat, Harken? Eyes out there... We better go."

The eyes in the reeds are around us now. For sure, the eyes of the dead men we have here before us planted in the ground. "Oh hell, Catamuso. You've been getting into my 'fun stuff' again, haven't you?" I'm referring to the Yage concoction that I use to contact the clients, the dead; the ones whom we are always avenging.

Catamuso smiles. "Hee hee. Yeah."

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

"Tabernac! They coming for us now, boss!"

"That's just all the dead 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!"

On the way back I explore the phone more. "Here you go, Catamuso!" I'm pulling up a text message on the phone. I scroll through the texts. "The Commons? The cafeteria? Flagler Hall. The dorm. Sounds like a college. Sounds like Mr. Quickjohn is hiding out in higher learning now."

But the phone is booby trapped. It fizzles and starts heating up in my hand. As it bursts into sparks and flame, I toss it overboard. It goes off like a firecracker before it hits the water.

"*Merde...*" says Catamuso.

"Boobytrapped! Quickjohn strikes again. You know how he loves to boobytrap things."

CHAPTER NINE

THROW ME YOUR BABY

The next day I've pieced together which college it is, and I am on it. Only one college nearby with both a *Flagler Hall* and a *The Commons*. I would have liked to have gotten more info off that cell phone – I really want to nail this guy Quick-John, not just for the reward and to improve my status in our little group, but some personal reasons.

But I should have known that if I turned that cell phone on, one of his trademark booby traps would come into play. What if I had been holding it up to my ear? I was too anxious. Going to have to be more careful...

We crashed in a motel that night, and I was hoping Catamuso would be a big help the next day, but he was gone in the morning, who knows where. How can you begin to understand a man whose last wife tried to kill him in his sleep?

The University of North Florida, housing office... I don't even bother to hack the system, knowing that with Quickjohn, there might be some kind of cyber alarm that he put in the system to tip him off if anyone searches for his name or something.

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. *Turn the screen more, lady.*

However: "He's in our system, but the address and phone number are private information, sir."

"Well. I'm a private detective." I whip out a totally bogus detective ID with picture and gold badge. She looks at it but she's not buying it.

The lady swivels in her seat, the office chair squeaking under her weight. “MARTHA?” she yells.

As she turns, I nudge a notebook that tips her Big Gulp drink over, spilling it all over. “Oops!”

Splash! Glug, glug glug!

Flustered, she turns 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 it better and I 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 now they are both preoccupied with the flood. “Listen,” I say, “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 the Commons Apartments?”

“Right across the street. Between Flagler Hall dorm and the Weatherby House. Just walk out the door. It’s right there.”

It’s an old, brown brick apartment building. Student and teacher housing.

At a mall down the street, I buy one of those big red stuffed bears with a happy-birthday ribbon on it, have it tied with a birthday gift-ribbon, and get one of those giant birthday cards.

I return to the Commons, pick the lock on the back door, and slip up the rear stairs.

Third floor. Room 312. I listen outside for a few minutes, and don’t hear anything inside. It only takes me 15 seconds to skeleton-key the door, but it takes longer for me to gingerly and silently open it. As I’m working the knob, I see a girl out of the side of my eye, staring at me from down the hallway. I have the birthday stuff under my arm, and I lift my finger to my lips and shush her, like

it's a real bona-fide birthday surprise and I'm not wanting her to spoil it. She smiles and goes off.

In the room.

No one here. Whew! Appears to be an ordinary student room. Nothing strange. It's at least a little messy - as a student room is supposed to be - but somehow, also rather spartan and almost museum-like.

I sit down and take a breath. What do I do? Sit here and wait for Quickjohn? Wait outside? But will he come in the back door or the front? I could set up a camera. Stake out the front and put a camera on the rear door?

I wonder what classes he's taking?

Probably best to lay and wait here.

What if he has some sort of alert to tip him off that his inner sanctum has been breached.

I get up and look around. If this is his place there has to be some lethal devices, some traps, a few guns or knives.

But I find nothing.

The clothes in the closet don't look worn. The soap in the bathroom has been used to where the sharp edges are rounded, but it's dry and hard...and the towels are dry as straw. No one has been in this room in a while.

Maybe Quickjohn has been out of town?

The fridge looks normal: stocked and full. I pick up a milk carton, smell it, swish it around: there's water - colored, white water - inside.

Milk goes bad, water doesn't.

There's something wrong here, something wrong with this picture... but I'm trying to figure out what the hell it is...

Maybe I will try to focus on what's not here, rather than what is.

Hmmmm. No computer here. No charging cords. No phone charger in the wall.

Then I find one thing that doesn't really fit at all.

There are some pictures on the wall and a poster of football players. A football-themed calendar. But then I see an expensively framed picture of Richard Nixon, and he's shaking hands with Spiro Agnew. The picture definitely looks like it has been

Photoshopped. The tones and colors have been boosted, a new beautiful sunset sky added in, and... standing between them is a yellow bird. It looks familiar, but it's not Big Bird from Sesame Street.

It's Limu Emu! The fucking bird from the insurance ads.
WTF!

I reach over and lift the picture off the wall to get a better look. I'm thinking *who would do this? Who would make this silly picture? Who would go to so much trouble and expense to frame this silly, fucked-up, totally goofy decorative photo?*

As I lift it off the nail on the wall, I hear a mechanical whirring and then a ticking sound. A dim LED light in each corner of the room starts flashing.

It dawns on me.

The whole room is a set-up. A trap.

As I book out, I spot an electronic keypad next to the door. It's flashing and making intermittent beeps.

I shudder as I make it out the front door. Made it out. Then down the hall and down the stairs and out the door!

I get across the street; I'm standing there just looking at the building... wondering what just happened... what is going to happen... and BLAM! Right in front of me, the place blows: there's an explosion and glass is flying everywhere. I put some distance between me and the building and watch from further down the block. Shit has been blown out into the street and everyone's screaming.

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

I come back closer in. A crowd is gathering. We're helping people and dragging their stuff across the street and all. Cars come by and honk, ignoring the fire, they just want us to get out of the way.

The cops push us back.

Another bystander points up towards the roof. “They’re trapped!” Another girl next to me screams: “Oh my God! Isn’t that Rickey?” Someone else says, “Look, there’s kids up there!”

The cops are helping people out of the lower part of the building, but the people on the roof are fucked. I hear a siren in the distance. I sure hope it’s a firetruck. They’ll have a ladder. But there won’t be time. I’ve seen how long it takes to deploy one of those things, and the streets are crowded.

I see one good option. “C’mon! Let’s try get to them from the building next door! C’mon!” A couple of the people around me buck up and follow me.

As we get to the steps of the next-door building, the cops are evacuating the last few people out of it. As we trot up the front steps, one of the cops holds up his hands, shaking his head. “No, no one’s going in.”

The guy behind me starts tripping out on the cop: “My cousin and brother are up there, next door!!” pointing to the roof next door, “We’ve gotta get them!” The cop shakes his head. “You stay here! I can’t let you up.”

I’m in front and I turn as if to leave, putting a calming hand out toward the freaked guy, then I 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’re going up the stairway, the girl is crying and saying something like: “But he was only doing his job!”

“He was only doing his job, and I was only doing mine,” I murmur to myself.

When we get up to the roof, there are already a few people from this building up there, trying to figure out how to help. There’s a lot of people over there on the roof of the burning building. The space between the buildings is too far for someone to jump.

Both apartment buildings are pretty big and have large, flat roofs. There’s signs of some construction work down at the other end of our roof. The space between the buildings isn’t so bad, if we just had something... I see some old oil drums, buckets from

where the roof was being tarred, I guess, and a ladder... I grab two guys, and we go down and bring up a ladder from down there.

We try sliding it over to the other roof, but when it gets too far out there, it almost falls down, into the alley below. One of the guys rooting through the leftover roof-tarring stuff comes up with a rope. We throw one end of the rope over and tie the other end to our ladder, pulling that end over to the other side to make a bridge.

Flames and smoke come in billowing from behind them and rise up out of the alley.

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. I can see the ladder overturning, then everyone on it plunges horribly down into the smoke-filled alley between the buildings.

They're pulling the ladder back up by the rope. I spot a mother with her child, who has moved towards the back of the roof to get away from the madness in the front area.

She's sees me coming toward her. She has found a spot near the rear of the buildings where the roofs are closer together, and she's on the edge, waving at me. She has a scarf on her head – maybe she's Spanish or Persian, but I can't tell for sure. Back here, the distance between the roofs is narrower. The ladder would work better back here. And maybe it's even jumpable...?

But the area of the roof behind her is really 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 still trying to pull the ladder back up with the rope.

I point at her baby and yell to the mother: "Throw!"

She hesitates. I plead with her, shouting with my hands cupped around my mouth.

Finally, 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!" I make a catching motion like a football player. 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 –with just enough aim and oompf... 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: *NOOOOoooo*.

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. I feel sick - so bad... but I don’t give up.

But she has.

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 100-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, she falls in: 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.

All the other people from our roof and the ones who’ve made it over from the other roof, are moving toward the back of the building, to the iron fire escape that goes down 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. Too many people behind me to go back up. I just sit down on the steps and wait for doom, my chin cradled between my hands and looking off across the campus quadrangle before me.

OK. The cops have come around, and people start coming off the bottom of the fire escape quicker, but gingerly, one at a time.

Now stretching off behind the building there's like an open park – the college 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 videos...

...as I'm sitting there, I notice one face that doesn't fit. Everyone else 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 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 is eating the hair or his arm; biting it off.

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

The line going down is moving better, and I start to head down now. The people below me are mostly off the fire escape, 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, Quickjohn sees me. He realizes that it's me – someone who's looking for him – and he takes off. The two cops at the bottom have left, now that they have things moving, and have gone around to the front to help.

I've got him this time. I take aim. Steady my arm on the railing of the fire escape....

But I just don't have a clean shot. I'll have to give chase.

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 there about 12 feet up, his swaddling baby clothes 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, surrounded by swirling smoke, someone takes my picture. I look around and Quickjohn is long gone now.

I hand the baby to some other police that have just come by, and GTF out of there.

CHAPTER TEN

A GIRL IN THE MIRROR

That night I hit it. I need a drink. I need people around me. I go out on the town. 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 just having no luck at all. I guess I'm an older guy compared to most of the kids, and look like a teacher or something.

So, I'm sitting there on a stool at the bar, eating fish and chips. I ask this girl next to me for the salt. "Bite me, you freak!" she says and starts laughing maniacally! I'm a little stunned but I start laughing to. She's drunk, and... I mean who uses the term "bite me" anymore.

"Foo da shah!" I say.

Her laughter arrests, her head bobbles ever so slightly and she turns and looks at me. "Foo da what?"

"I's glibberish."

"It's a new language. Sort of glib-gibberish."

She stares at me, her head cocked a little to the side, like a dog hearing a funny noise.

"Foo da shah?" I continue, "Means *fuck that shit*. Sort of abbreviated and streamlined. It's a man-made language, sort of like Esperanto or Pig-Latin."

"Man made?"

"It was created in a lab, it did not naturally develop, like most languages... like which expanded and changed over centuries of evolution and natural selection."

"You mean like slang..."

"Or jive."

"Jive talking?"

I smile and begin my line of BS in earnest. “Now I know about this because I have a degree in Etymology, the study of words... and Jive and Jive talking are two different things. Jive is a language or dialect, whereas Jive Talking is obfuscating the truth and verbally running rings around someone to confuse them.”

“Isn’t Etymology the study of bugs?”

I smile and say: “See, a perfect example of “Jive Talking” don’t you see?”

She shrieks with an uncontrollable and almost hysterical sort of delighted laughter, and turns towards her friends, gabbing away. The one sitting next to her leans back from the conversation and looks at me dourly, and as if I have two heads, laughs out loud and goes back to the conversation.

Well, I fucked that one up. Now I’m a laughing-stock. I look around but the bar is crowded now. No other place to sit and I have a good spot at the bar.

I turn back to the girls. The one next to me laughs abruptly and uncontrollably at what one of the other girls said and farts. Farts loud enough for me to hear. She looks over her shoulder a bit, not turning far enough around to make eye contact but to see that I’m still there, and facing her. She starts laughing maniacally again.

I shake my head. “Foo da sha...” I murmur. A generation gap maybe. It seems I only have a gen-gap problem in college towns. You have to wonder what they are teaching these kids these days.

I look around the room.

No hot girls nearby. One or two hot ones but with guys. Looks like it’s not my night.

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

And now he knows what I look like.

Maybe he has set up some other booby traps out there, somewhere in the town...

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

...and my spider sense IS tingling...

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

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

Can I even recognize him if h'es not biting the hair on his arm, I think.

Then I see a nice-looking girl looking at me in the mirror, making eye contact. I smile. She smiles back with a nice, sly, smirk and a knowing wink.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE GIRL'S GOTTA HAVE IT

The girl's name is Tori. She is a free spirit. 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 got done with the recreational passion and our romantic moonlight activities, she cooked me breakfast (at 2:30 in the morning), and since it was still early, we got out the wine and talked, sitting there at her kitchen table. It was like we were both just a couple of freshmen college students again. She was at least 28 or 30, maybe 35-years-old. She had wild, dirty-blonde hair. Nice, full, thick, luxurious hair and a low hairline. Like Kathleen Turner. Yeah, like her.

"Ah, Tori! Great! Look at this! Breakfast of champions! Look at this! We got fried eggs, butternut squash, hummus, macadamia-nut brownies, corn flakes in kefir... Wow. Great. what a feast!"

She smiled. "I aim to please."

She's a movie buff and we wind up playing a little drunken trivia game of hers. One of us picks a movie character, and the other would come up with someone that could beat or defeat the other in some sort of battle. Like Hulk vs. Superman.

"Eraserhead!" she says.

"Wait a minute, girl. The last one you picked was Thanos, Dark Lord of the Universe." She smiled. "And now Eraserhead?"

I had to think about it – *Who would beat Eraserhead?* "How about Benny Blanco from the Bronx!"

"Perfect! I win!"

“What?” I asked.

“Eraserhead wins! Yay, Eraserhead!”

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

“Eraserhead walks up: he erases Benny Blanco’s head! *Zoop!* And just like that! Gone! That’s what Eraserheads do! They erase your head! *Zoop!*”

“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 Eraserhead!” I say, bewixed and befuddled.

“My game – my Eraserhead!”

I had to say, she 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 at his peak.

“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. The one that played him in the movie.”

“His name was Jack Nance. Yeah he died mysteriously.”

“Yeah! I read about all that when the new *Twin Peaks* thing came out again. Someone killed him, and they never caught him,” she said, lighting another joint.

“Well, maybe someone did.”

Maybe me. Actually I know who the fuck killed him. Maybe I was in on the inquest and the settlement for the client, back a few years ago, back then when I was starting out. But I can’t tell her about that. She’d think I was making it up anyways.

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

“Piss test?”

“No, I actually have to get high sometimes on purpose. Sometimes for my work, see, but...”

“Well. Too late now.” She says.

“What?”

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

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

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

“Damn 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, but...”

Yage is an ancient herb, and in the hands of a master alchemist, and mixed with the right sub-elements, makes for a most perfect and quintessential formula. It came out of the Ural Mountains eons ago and was brought to the Americas by the Norse incursions in the centuries before Columbus. There are about 15 or 20 different methods and preparations for distilling and refining it into that which would give your mind wings...or, in some more dangerous mixtures, take the top of your head off.

We – The Travelers – can use many of the Yage formulas – but have our own special formula of it that no one else has – the best formula 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. Our special words *get in touch*, meaning to get down with the clients, finding out what really happened, conducting an investigation (inquisition, if you will).

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

CHAPTER TWELVE

STRANGE DREAM

I'm lying in bed.

We're lying in bed, in Tori's bed. And I'm feeling great. I'm thinking that I could get used to this for a while. Tori and I have great chemistry and an easy listening relationship seems to be developing.

We came home tonight, and she got right to it. No games, no fooling around, no playing coy: and that's the kind of relationship for me. When the girl plays chaste, when they're game players, those relationships never seem to develop into anything worthwhile. For me at least. It's like they're stalling because have something to hide, because they're defective maybe? Who knows what goes on in their minds.

It's been an insane couple of days and now I'm feeling it. I was looking forward to a good night's sleep. But now.... the Yage – our formula of Yage – with all the special essential oils, mushrooms, botanicals, absinthe, adrenochrome, belladonna, and...a 'secret ingredient usually found in jellyfish...' (just kidding around on that last part) is hitting me hard, mean and fast.

Soon, I'm seeing the trails above my head and I'm getting touched. Poked at. Getting the vibes. Hearing distant rumblings and whispers.

Tori sits up, looks around like she's hearing it too, and flops back down. "Do you hear that?"

"Uh..."

"What's that?" she says, as a wave of grainy, wisping light dashes over our heads.

“That’s stardust, baby.” She’s done it too, the Yage formula, and I have an idea of what she’s seeing, but no idea what I meant by “stardust”.

When you’re a Traveler and you get high, particularly while on the Formula, you’re susceptible to “clients” (the dead people) hitting you up 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 all coming down.

I smell death now.

Something’s in the room.

Something’s above me but I can’t look. For a second I see the reflection of hands and feet and some clothing hanging down in the mirror of her dresser. I see the shadow on the floor of a body floating over but can’t bring myself to look up at it.

Fuck it. I’m haunted again. A slowly forming vision approaches the bed. I sit up and reach out, but it’s like the body is made of smoke and swirls around my fingers floating... blowing.

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

“What is itttt...?” she says. “I hear crying...”

“Everything’s OK. Go back to sleep.”

“Don’t go now... Are you leaving?” she says.

“I’ve got to... I’ve got to go do this now. Don’t worry, I’ll be here the whole time.” She’s totally stoned. The pot, and her first Yage trip is fitting her right into the scene. Best to just play it like everything’s fine.

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

The spirit of someone who needs me is here.

Here in the room with us. And the room’s a dreamworld. It’s becoming a dreamworld now. And I’m in the dream. I look around and the bedroom has only one wall now, the wall with a window. Through the window, I see a little girl floating by. 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.

Over there crying.

She's on a bench, like a park bench or a bench at a bus stop.

I'm thinking that this case is probably a murder, maybe a murder to cover a sex crime of some kind. Who else but some pervert or serial killer would kill a cute, little, innocent girl like that?

I sit down next to her – careful not to spook her – and give silence a minute.

All the while I'm aware I'm dreaming this. That this is just a dream.

I wait for her to look at me.

“Hey there.” She just looks at me. “Can you tell me what happened?” I say.

Off behind us, I see Tori floating by. She's floating along like the Dude in *Big Lebowski*, in the bowling scene. She waves at us. The Yage has got her good now too, and she's caught up in our dream.

I try to talk to the little girl, but she's not talking yet. “What's your name? Did someone bring you here?” She shakes her head.

Now Tori floats right in front of 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 now. Her mouth moves like she wants to talk. Perhaps a nice woman like Tori floating by with her flowing hair and smile and talking to me has made the little girl more comfortable with me.

“Talk to me, little lady.”

“I...”

“What happened? What did they do to you?”

“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.

“Whattttt...?”

“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, correlates, and she realizes what’s going on.

My name is Anthony.” I say softly. “Can you tell me your name?”

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

“Tell me your name, honey, your full name. I need your last name, too. Do you know it?”

“I am Brittany Gorkin.”

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

“Who killed you? Who did this?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

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

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DEAD BAT

Next Morning.

Tori's place, while not a dump, is nothing fancy or glamorous, but even less so in the morning's sober light. Overflowing ashtray, dishes piled up in the sink, a line of clothes and now dried underwear running across the middle of the kitchen. Somehow, I don't remember any of this from the night before, but... I do feel right at home.

But I do remember the bat. She has this bat. It was a big one. And it's stuffed. Taxidermized. 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. He does have a big nose. His lifetime's big bucket-list dream moment is to someday 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, researching the little girl. How do I spell her name? Brittany G-O-R-K-H-I-N... Britanie Gerchin... No, no hits. How about Gorkin....

I look up, and on her little kitchen countertop TV, I see myself. "*...and police are now looking for this man for questioning in connection with the explosion yesterday at the university...*" Damn security cameras. I didn't have my signal scrambler on yesterday.

I reach out over the table and turn the TV off as Tori is just coming in the door. She's in cutoffs, no top on and drying her hair. The cutoffs 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 this.

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

"Yeah. Anything but brownies, eh?"

"Yeah, I think we've had enough brownies..."

She hunches down to light a cigarette on the gas stove, and then leans down and kisses me. So easy going, so cheerful. What a great gal.

"You dream loud, eh sugar..." she says.

"Yeah. That pot really got to me."

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

I turn around to her. *The little girl*. She remembers the little girl. "She kept you awake? I'm sorry." I'm playing along.

"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..." I say playfully.

"You're kidding me."

"Of course I'm kidding you," I say. "Listen. That was... 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." *Yeah, let's change the subject.*

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

I fluff it off now, make out like it's nothing. "Now you can go tell all your new-age girlfriends about it!"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, and I'm sure that they'll all go to bed tonight with – like – their biggest crystals and a clove of foxfire under their pillows." I joke.

She's done with her hair, and she looks over my shoulder at my laptop. "Is that her?"

"Yeah. This is her."

"The girl from the dream. That's her?"

I nod.

I'm looking at Brittany Gorkin's face on the screen. *A 19-year-old coed from Towson, MD, killed in auto accident two weeks ago. Let's see. Four kids dead in all – a car wreck on the way home from spring break at 2am. Alachua County, FL. This has to be her.*

Worth checking out. Could be a murder going on here. She came to me in the dream for a reason. A murder reason. But what's the story. Human trafficking? Drugs? Maybe Quickjohn?

"Now, how is that her..." she asks.

"Oh, 'at's her all right, the little ghost girl from last night, all grown here. Yeah. See, last night she appeared to us as a little girl. After she was dead, she was scared, and – well...she became a little girl again. A little girl looking for her mommy. And this happens sometimes. People get freaked out when they're dying." *I gotta keep talking.* "It's like guys that got shot 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. Like they were little boys again. Ya know?"

"This girl's dead, then."

"Yeah." I look up at Tori. "Now all this is secret stuff. Top secret. So don't tell anyone about this shit."

"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..." I take another sip of coffee. "...sometimes people get trapped between here and there. Sometimes they need help. Sometimes, maybe they need something more." I say.

I'm looking at Florida now on Google Maps. Brittany died in Menlo, Florida. About 45 miles from where I'm at now. Only a half 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..."

"Oh shut that off. I can't look at that stuff."

"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 old, family Bible out.”

“Baby, I was just kidding around. I’m sorry I freaked you out. Will you please stop tripping?”

“And my Kabbalah candle!” she says.

“And burn some thyme?”

“Does that help? I have sage!” she screams out to me from the other room.

“Yup. Always does it for me.”

The phone rings, an old hard-wired home phone. The way it rings brings back memories of earlier days and old, B&W movies.

She picks up in the other room, cheerful, but then her tone of voice changes and my ears prick up. Something urgent. Something heavy. Something sad. She closes the door to the room while she’s still talking, and as she gets close to the door, it sounds like she’s about to start crying.

I sit there and look at the wall above the stove. I can see a darkened spot where something she was cooking got a little out of control. Between the dark area and the doorway, there’s an outline of where a wall phone once was and then a holy water angel dish. There’s a phone number or two written on the wall to the side of the wall phone shadow.

I get up and go to the stove and light my cigarette on the gas stove eye. I look closer at the ancient phone numbers on the wall. George Carlin? George Carlin’s phone number is there. The George Carlin? It *is* a 310 number. California. Hollywood. Hmmmm.

I sit back down at the table. I can hear the water dripping in the sink. I can hear her conversation in the other room rising and falling, strained, troubled... not good. I don’t know what’s going on in there, but I feel bad for her. I realize that though I hardly know her, I care about her already. I guess when what you see is what you get, and when the person is pretty real, it’s a lot easier to get attached.

I look back at the phone number on the wall. I imagine George Carlin sitting at this same table that I’m sitting at. I imagine him

sitting there in his underwear, drinking coffee and smoking a joint. It's a nice thought actually. He could have been on the road, done a little comedy-club show here in town, or maybe doing a summer-stock production... who knows.

After a while: quiet. She's not talking anymore. I stand up and go to the bedroom door. I turn the knob and go in. She's sitting at a desk in front of a typewriter with a sheet of paper in the rollers, her face in her hands. I come over and touch her on the shoulder.

"What happened?"

She throws her hands up in the air, shakes her head back and forth and goes over and flops down on her bed. *Well shit.*

I sit down at the desk. "What's the matter?" I say somewhat softly.

Her mother just passed. She had cancer, but she died of a stroke. She was in Minneapolis. Dying in Minneapolis. Tory was going to see her but never got around to it. As she talks, I look over the letter in the typewriter on her desk. It's to her mother. She started it over a month ago. Seems she had some issues or bad blood with her mother and her sisters. None of my business, just a glance into her life, a moment of curiosity, like the cigarette burn on the edge of her kitchen table... was it from George Carlin's cigarette? What did she cook him for breakfast in the morning? Did he take a bath or a shower?

I go over to the bed and lie down next to her. Put my arm around her. She takes my hand and pulls it into her comforting warmth.

I start humming a nameless lullaby and rocking her. "Tell me all about your mother, baby... tell me about a long, long time ago... and far, far away."

I booked out while she was at work that afternoon. She was called in to set up for a bartending gig at a banquet that night, and I left her a note. I really enjoyed my time with her – what little it was – and I will be back if I can. As I drive off, I can picture her, a few days later, telling all her stoned friends about the little ghost girl...

But I stole her bat. The stuffed bat – I kidnapped it. I don't know why.
Fucking bat.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MENLO

Menlo, Fla.

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

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

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

Just a small, sad town. Menlo, Florida. Five or ten thousand people maybe.

A cement plant, a weed-infested drive-in parking lot (the drive-in screen fell down, but the rusty speakers are still on the poles), a defunct lead-smelting operation, a Waffle House, a deserted Putt-Putt... no Starbucks, no Walmart, not even a Chinese restaurant.

But there are ghosts here. Now I've got to find them.

I grab my tape recorder and start making some notes as I enter the outskirts. *"Anthony Harken here with my report. In Menlo, Florida, now. Arrived 2:20 PM. Today is... April 14th. Or 15th. I am down here in this shit-hole town, investigating the death of one 19-year-old Brittany Gorkin. She and three other students returning from spring break with her...they all wound up dead. Paper says it was a car accident...but we're going to see about that. I suspect some kind of cover up. Maybe some local people killed them? The cops? Who knows...? From the clean looks of*

those kids, the pictures I saw on Facebook, all red cheeks and well-fed looking, it was probably not a meth or coke deal gone wrong. They didn't look like any kind of big drug users. But this is a drug-running corridor area.... This might even be racial...one of the kids was Black or Indian. India Indian. 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 right there, if anything happens to me.

Ya never know. You start spooking around in these little towns and they never find you again. Not that anyone would really miss me these days.

The town is a trip.

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 and half-abandoned downtown. I'm creeping along, taking it all in. The old store windows. The broken sidewalks. Cracked walls. Peeling paint. Weeds growing in the corners and cracks in the pavement and the walls.

A flip-flop sitting there in front of me, in the middle of the street at the city's main intersection.

I sit there, staring at that flip-flop in the middle of the road under the red light. 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 a picture, and in its own way a perfectly beautiful picture.

I take a lot of pictures.

And I'm good at it. Amateur, but good. "F-Stop Fitzgerald" is one of my Twitter names. It's a hobby, sure, but I often also like to use the photographer angle as a cover. I have a picture scrapbook in the trunk titled LONELY THINGS. If I get caught snooping around I show 'em my camera. I can make out like either I'm doing a *Bridges of Madison County* thing, or sometimes 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 while I'm here. Might spend an afternoon there and do a photo essay.

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 the 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 old war stories. He never could. He was a man who had seen too much. Literally seen too much.

Then one day – this was some years later, and I was a teenager – he was in chemo and dying, and kinda dizzy on a lot of pain 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, and 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... he was 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 down 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 delicate scent of raw sewage wafting in through the open window of my car.

Potholes. Kids playing in an abandoned refrigerator. A long defunct Blockbuster Video. I pass a guy in his bathrobe and bedroom slippers walking along, sipping on a cup of coffee. A now-skeletal Christmas tree in an alley I pass, defined only by a few strands of tinsel and ornaments.

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

I find the museum-like feel of the town both haunting and kind of romantic. It's not a Saturday museum feel, like when families come down, or a weekday school class feel. But a dead, empty, soulless, ethereal weekday afternoon when only two or three people are there in the museum – or no one at all. In college, I talked an interesting girl into skipping class with me, and we went to the museum. No one was there. Since my regular girlfriend came by my room in the middle of the afternoons and took a nap in my sheets waiting for me to come back from my classes, the museum was a good place to have some extracurricular romance.

We had the place to ourselves. We smoked a joint, we kissed, we danced hand-in-hand, and she treated me to an impromptu strip tease – and we finally made love in a backroom with crates and darkness around us. It was one of the most romantic moments of my youth and my long-gone student days. I remember that day with her there in the museum storeroom like it was yesterday, but ya know, I can't even remember a single lovemaking session with my main girlfriend at the time. Funny, isn't it.

We walked around the museum after. I remember all the exhibits – all frozen in time, in the air conditioning of the building, and the dust floating in the beams of sunlight stretching across the room, and time stood still for us. The exhibits had to have enjoyed the show we put on for them that day.

That moment that me and that girl had together that day was a museum display of sorts - in my mind - like a Polaroid snapshot, a brief crazy moment smeared on the long line of

time. Just a spot. Don't blink, or you'll miss it. But a Polaroid snapshot none the less.

And our whole lives, everyone's life is really perhaps nothing more than a blink on the face of time: a cigarette smoked and tossed out the window of a moving car, a leaf in the storm, bumping down the gutter and circling the drain and gone. Just gone.

Eventually I'm past downtown and 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 back to the main drag.

Now I pull up to the light and there's some dildo's car sitting stopped there in front of me, texting.

He's sitting there, texting right through the green light. Yup. Here comes the yellow light. Fuck this guy. The doofus has his left turn signal on – but he's not turning, just sitting there like a turd in the punchbowl. Of course, he's badly situated and a big truck with a winch is parked on the side in the oncoming lane, so there's not enough room for me to just go around 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 to red. The guy's still just sitting there. He has no idea that I'm there right behind him. I'm getting livid, then infuriated.

I honk the horn!

He jumps up in his seat, and his frigging phone pops out of his hand and out the window of his car, like a watermelon seed. It lands on the pavement, 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 pulled loose and his uniform shirt unbuttoned. No gun belt on. Looks like he's just off work - coming home in his own civilian car - but he's got the surly-cop smirk on his face. This is not going to end well. He glibly snaps up his

phone and shoves it in his shirt pocket. I get out of my car, too. (You never 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 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 with rising antagonism.

Sure. Like I really believe him.

He reaches for his gun – or maybe the cuffs or baton – none of which are there now – because he left his service belt in the car. I can smell whiskey and beer and Cheetos on his breath – and then he realizes that the belt’s not there, but the lifting motion tightens his clothing, tightening the pocket until the cell phone pops back out again and hits the ground right in front of me.

I reach down and pick up his cell phone while the drunken sod is 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 fucking 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.

The sound of a TV coming out an open window. A dog barking in the distance. It’s a sleepy residential side street.

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 sync.

I go back to my trunk and dig out some nice “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 he has there in the seat – cheap 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 will look good if he wakes up; or someone finds him, and it 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 SIXTEEN

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Time to check in somewhere.

The Starlight Motel looks like a real trip.

Up front, there's a nice, neatly laid out garden of dead flowers and shrubs. A ring of different-shaped rocks circles the withered flowers and thriving weeds. There's a dry birdbath over to the left. Nice, big, shady, trees, all painted white around the first four feet of the trunk.

Someone threw a pair of sneakers tied together by the shoelaces, onto the powerlines going from the street 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. I gotta love this place.

This will be my headquarters, my base of operation for the next few days. There is no Hilton or Marriott in this town; may be 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 right 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 now looks like Cousin It from the old *Addams Family* TV show.

The TV behind her is playing *Wheel of Fortune*.

\$39.95 a night, \$189 for a week.

Cool. I give her a fake name and pay in 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 also 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 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. I know it can't be, but I can't stop looking at it.

Do I want to rent a VHS tape player? No.

I notice a stack of junky-looking videotape players on a rickety rack at the end of the reception desk, then a library shelf full of VHS tapes, their labels faded and bleached of color from 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 sticks 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 office in the middle of nowhere – that comic, reading the rest of that very comic – was what I had been looking forward to when I got back from lunch earlier this afternoon.

Too lazy to pull the car up in front of the room right now, I walk down to my room. I'm actually walking so I get a good look at the girl in cutoffs lounging against the fence around the pool and drinking a Dr 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 Brad Pitt, but sometimes, women still actually do like me. Not every girl. Brad is for every girl, but for some, (and all too few mostly) I'm "their type."

Now the ones that do like me – if I pick up on it, I usually still have to run a little game. For their own good of course. I try giving them the cold shoulder at first, (instead of the whistling, leering wolf act) and I make a real effort to ignore them with a coldly pleasant, courteous, hello, while looking off the other way. Then I do a sort of hit and run, give them the come-on, then a curt brush off, and then back again. It's a mating dance perhaps. And if that gets things revving, then I'm on to something. If they go back to talking to their girlfriends, I'm through and out of there.

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 motel-room smell. Nonsmoking room, but it's sure 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 a hard, firm bed - good 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 her face and stuck to the corner of her mouth. That whimsical 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 drank a lot last night. Got high. Fucked a 35-year-old out-of-work aerobics instructor/wanna-be actress. Beat up a cop. Got 4 or 5 hours of sleep last night... I drove all afternoon.

...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?

The car's fine. Doors tight. My car's a tired, ragged-out old hooptie anyways, and that's the way I like it. No one wants to break into my 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 setting, coming in at low angles – slipping down – a cooling star falling slowly into its own sunset. I light a cigarette and check things 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 it with my cell phone.

A seagull sails over, drifting and gently rocking back and forth. 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. Day workers. I smell a waft of pot smoke. I hear bottles rattling in a paper bag. Someone's going to have a party in their room tonight...or watch the game.

I go into town, drive around, grab a bite, float, ride, cruise, check things out.

Darkness is falling, creeping in all around me. All is quiet on the Western Front tonight. I pass by a bar called the Collier Room with two drunken old hippies arguing outside. A couple of cars at the VFW. Ah ha, a strip club, but 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 new friend Philbey though. Tall guy with hair and a Village People moustache.

I'm hitting the edge of the old city proper, and still no rich or upscale neighborhood. Maybe they don't have one in this town. Mayor probably lives in a double-wide.

Then some empty lots in rows. Lots of an unfinished subdivision, gone-belly-up-now. The lots are laid out with a few foundations here and there with sprouts of wiring and plumbing coming out.

Past there and outside of town now.

Flat.

Florida flat. Just fields of sawgrass. No mountains or hills. There's some kind of small military base or installation 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.

All 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 – cop's pulling someone over. He's got some college kids. I pull over and watch for a while. Definitely a speed-trap town. It's a cottage industry in a lot of small towns. I hate speed traps. The cop doesn't like something one kid up against the car says and kicks his feet out from under him. The kid tries to crawl under the car, one of the girls starts laughing and the cop backhands her. She goes down and the cop grabs the kid going under the car by the feet, but the kid has a good grip on something under there. Then – wow - the girl has gotten back in the car somehow and is driving off, and running over the cop's foot and maybe her friend's legs. I shake my head and drive off.

I get back to the motel 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. Later, then. In a minute.

But the far-off parking spot is a blessing after all. As I walk the distance past the room that's two doors down from mine, there's the girl – the one from before, 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, the one that I met when I was so fucking high the other

night at Tori's. She's there down past my room and the motel walkway. But just for a brief second. Now she's fading away the more I look at her....

Back in the room.

What a day. What a week. What a life.

I'm in Bum-fuck America. Middle of nowhere. In every way possible. I'm haunted by a little-girl ghost, smelling a petting zoo when I open my door, watching a girl in a shitty motel pleasure herself, beating up cops and pissing on them... Now how cool is all that, motherfuckers.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WAFFLE HOUSE

In the middle of the night, I hear a noise. Something wakes me up. I'm thinking about how all my good stuff that's still in the trunk of the car might be vulnerable. I do have the alarms on, but you can never be too careful with guns, expensive electronics, drugs, loot from the last job, comic books...

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 at me.

I like being on the road.

A blue-collar killer.

A killer on the road. *His brain is squirming like a toad...* bouncing around like the pinball in the pinball machine. Rolling, buzzing, floating. Always a new, strange place right around the corner. New people. Strangers. The open road. I'm a leaf blowing in the wind...along with all the other leaves. Blowing in the wind, along with all the answers my friend. Drinking, chasing skanks and bimbos, killing people and looting their shit.] I am a modern-day cowboy. A saddle-tramp and a rolling stone. I'm the restless wind. I *AM* the restless wind.

I have to stay on the move now. If ever I settle down and stay somewhere for a couple of months, I start feeling stale. I find I fall into the daily rhythm. Then days fly by. Weeks. Whole seasons. You become one with the days and the place you are at. An ordinary person. 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. *Like sands through an hourglass: so are the days of our lives...* Hell yeah!

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? Sure. The air is a bit colder, and the breeze is picking up. I decide to take a spin and run through the fucking town, see it at night... and get a bite.

There's a bar that looks interesting. Just closing though. Some interesting people in the parking lot. Just a couple. A hot chick or two. Too tired to go in and make a move. As I drive by the marshy side of a waterway, the frogs are croaking up a storm.

I've got it covered. I've seen the town in daylight, twilight, and now night. A good way to acclimate. I got a job to do, and I like to let the town lose its mystery, to lose its 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: the knife and fork on a napkin. Cool. The menu, a smile, then a glass of water. And another smile. Swell.

"Hello there, Princess." She doesn't reply, just smiles back, sort of shyly. Something about a girl getting shy gets me curious sometimes.

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

A girl like that could be coming on strong for a number of reasons. Maybe just for tonight. Maybe she's sick of this place and wants to get out of town and I'm a "perfect stranger." 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 more 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 once," 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.
Great. *He doesn't recognize me!*

I pay up and hit the road.

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 and my cell number on them up in her fist as she's talking over her shoulder to the cook behind her, and my drawings just get thrown out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BEING WATCHED

I get back to my room and I can't sleep. I can't find the 2nd bottle of the 18-year either, and 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 technically doing it for fun. And I've got to get some sleep. For the good of the job.

After I kill the Yage, I find the bottle and have a swig. I turn on the TV, and there are reruns of *The Love Boat* *click* some talk show about the warning signs of alcoholism. I just turn the TV off when I hit that. I remember reading how alcoholism got rampant among the guards in the concentration camps. Seems death and killing can do that to you.

Still can't sleep, so it's time to hit the computer.

One good thing, the roofers or whoever stayed in this room before left a bunch of shit in the refrigerator. A half loaf of Arnold Oat Nut bread, a six-pack of off-brand beer that I've never heard of, breakfast sticks, a bottle of Old Spice cologne (?), a packet of sliced baloney that's gone shiny and slimy, some double-A batteries, chocolate-flavored peanut butter, a tequila bottle with two fingers left, a whistle... I crack one of the off-brand beers and sit down.

I find Brittany's Facebook page. Such a natural cutie pie. I watch a cellphone video she had posted on her vacation. Our 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 that they are traveling with. They are all happy and kissy, and loading vacation gear into a small SUV. Everyone is beautiful when they're 19. Most everyone.

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

Nice girl. Very big, beautiful eyes. So young. Still a little baby fat, shapely, bouncy, bubbly, carefree. The “carefree” reminds me of the phenomenon of how kids in college are still floating in a sort of anesthetized, happy, embryonic fluid. Floating and not having any idea of what life is really like or the fucked-up shit that lies ahead. A small pet terrier dances around her feet as she loads her overnight bag into the car.

I wish I was in the fluid again, just for a little while.

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 tattoo on one ankle, a comical bat or vampire on the other. She had a bat on one of her T-shirts: a bat and the words “FLY BY NIGHT!” A cool design which I’ve never seen before.

It’s weird, looking at this girl, knowing she is dead and gone but so alive in the pictures.

Now let’s check the accident report.

I’m in luck – the police department database is updating, and I find an open “back door” to hack in through, accessing the accident report and anything else I want to know about. Got it.

The report seems fishy from the start. Vague in one spot and then verbose in another. Lots of typos. The description of the accident doesn’t make sense. It seems to say that the kids were - or may have been - driven off the road by another SUV, and then it implies that there are no witnesses. How do you conclude that, if no one saw it? There is no supporting evidence entered into the report, and the pictures are not that good. Poorly lit and some look like they have condensation or spit on the lens.

Well, fuck me! Look who filed the report – Officer Philby! That dildo cop back there with the Angry Birds. Well hello, Philby.

I do a google search for Officer Philby, Menlo Florida and get a hit on the city government website. A posed and artificially lit picture, probably taken at Glamor Shots in some shopping mall off down the interstate.

A mite or a tiny gnat lands on the screen and pulls me out of the computer trance I’m in. I try and thumb the gnat two or three

times before I get him. The crushed gnat is right there on Philby's smiling, fat face.

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

Got a good buzz going on now, and I'm feeling pretty mellow. There's a vending machine near the front office. How about some dessert? 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 something to my left, down the breezeway, and I turn. I look and see a blue glow. I see a blue glowing entity standing about 20 feet from me. But I can't see it when I look right at it, only out of the side of my eye. This is what we call a "Blue Louie." This is a remnant kind of a client. It's a haunted soul, but one who died a good while ago and is so old and diminished that it can't remember who it was or the specific, horrific event that caused it to remain in the Borderlands. This is perfectly normal and no cause for alarm. When you do the Yage, you have one foot in the real world, and one foot in the nethers.

These Blue Louies are sad things, and I've heard that 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 head back to the room, and I'm thinking.

I took Philby for a doofus when we first met: a comical, harmless, Barney Fife-type caricature, but maybe he's the one covering up for whatever happened... or, if this was a murder, he could be protecting some local bigwig, or bigwig'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've 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 walking.

I decide to have another cigarette before I go to sleep and finish my candy bar.

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 and watch the bear. "Hi bear. Wanna sip?" I offer him 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 of my mouth when the bear lunged, and I sit down in the beside-the-pool chair. "Sorry, dude. No Heineken for you today."

The bear lumbers back to the other side of the cage as if he heard and understood me. I think sometimes animals do understand us – well, sort of.

After I finish the cigarette, I saunter back to the vending machines to get a soda. 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 rotting ghosts are mostly harmless too but can be trouble sometimes. They are beyond the Blue Louies. These are the ones who never could 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), but he misses some sometimes. They still give me the willies though.

I go back to sit with the bear.

I'm pretty lonely, I guess.

"Hey there, fella. Full moon tonight." I ask him. 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 out of nowhere 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 casually. "I told them it has rabies."

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

"No, they got someone coming for it."

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

She lights one of my cigarettes. She did it without asking and I take that as a good sign. Her being familiar.

"I saw you looking last night," she says.

I smile. "You were working on a good one there. It was a beautiful sight to see." 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 more. Then we click and I start kissing her in earnest. She melts a bit and then gets more whipped up for a while. She pulls out and leans back and catches her breath.

My eyes wander to the left, and I notice the night-shift kid in the office is watching. He has a sad, frozen look on his face. Got to be a lonely job, night shift in this shithole town. Watching us is just gonna make him feel lonelier, but he can't help it.

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

She slinks over to right in front of me – self-confident, majestic, brimming with lust – and straddles my lap, smiling and throwing her cigarette away over her shoulder. She descends and starts kissing me intently now, her hair cascading down on me, and her arms lazily wrapped around my shoulders. 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 and smiling. Fuck the boyfriend. Fuck someone driving by seeing us. Fuck the cops

driving by. 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 NINETEEN

JUST CALL ME ANGEL OF THE MORNING

Next morning, everything's all fucked up when I wake up.

The girl wants me to give her 200 bucks. I'm half into a cup of coffee, and she's got me on spin dry over the money. I almost spit-take the coffee as she tells me.

I laugh. *Some Romeo I am!*

She gets mad. Thinks I'm laughing at her. I have to explain that I'm not laughing at her: I'm laughing at myself. Here I was last night, thinking what a great lover I am, what an irresistible leading man I am...and now this.

But this is going to be tricky. On the one hand, 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 sure don't need some ding-dong pimp or boyfriend gunning for me. But I'm not giving her 200 roses either.

So... I have to talk her down now. Smooth things out. Make everybody happy.

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 on me. I don't need anyone snooping around in my room or breaking into it or the car when I'm not there. For another, I don't need any jilted frail or jealous boyfriend 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 lowdown.

“Listen girl, 200 is way too 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 her eyes.

“Don’t give me that,” I say, 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 first.

“See, for me – at a hundred bucks – now, that works for me. I can tell myself that I’m not really paying for the woman, as much as I’m paying for a woman to leave after. It’s her gas money. Money for her trouble. Whatever.”

Strangely enough, she seems to be following me. That’s great, the \$100 also gives me the freedom to see anyone else if I want and not be tied down.

She lights a joint. “So...see, when you take in the cost for dating...” I shrug, “I mean, this is how I look at it...dinner, movies, ya know, that adds up. But the most expensive thing is time. And my time is worth a lot. At least to me... and all that dating stuff takes time. A whole lot of time. So, let’s make it easy. A hundred bucks. For you. Fine. Ya see?”

She nods.

“Now another thing – I gotta tell you – 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: the hairdresser or the dentist will tell you how much it is first. It’s the American way. Now, I know you can run this ‘next-morning surprise’ game on some of these doofs out there, and more power to you – they’re doofuses and they deserve it.”

I put the cigarette out in the ashtray. She crushes the fire out of the joint and sets it on the side of the ashtray for later.

“And then they don’t ever get you off, right? And I may be mistaken – but I rarely am in this matter – you did get off last night. I mean all the buzzers and bells?” She nods and smiles.

“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 vagina and run back to their wives or their girlfriends, and there’s nothing else to it.”

I take her leg into my lap and rub on her calf.

“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 enjoy being with 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 – don’t hang out or anything – and fine: no hard feelings. It’s her right, as a woman to just take off when she gets tired of you. 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...ya know, off the books or whatever?”

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

“Now this one’s on the house, right? This one’s for you. You’re queen for a day today, right?”

She laughs and drags me. “Listen buster, you’re all mine this time and you’re gonna work me over but good! You might even have to earn that hundred dollars back!”

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

CHAPTER TWENTY

AN AUTO GRAVE-YARD AFTERNOON

Afterwards she falls asleep. Just like last night. She's part Cherokee: the cheekbones, the blond hair, and the nice tan. I can't even wake her up. Yep. She's whupped. Unconscious and down for the count.

Her purse is lying there open, next to the bed, with a pack of cigarettes on top. I left mine by the pool or somewhere and I grab one of hers. Under the cigs I see a long pair of scissors. Girl on her own's got to defend herself I guess.

It's a nice morning. So I go for a ride. As I start the car, Barry White is singing "Another Love TKO." I smile and shake my head. That's business as usual for me: more irony and coincidence in a week than most people have in a decade.

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 for a second look. She is not among them.

I head over to the crash site. I stake it out and wait till the cop at the speed trap goes to lunch. He should be at lunch for at least 45 minutes.

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 digital camera. It's a special camera. It's actually 5 cameras: one lens 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 than a regular camera, but it works.

I take a good, long look at the tire tracks. Find 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 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 misinterpreting evidence.

Next, I head out to the auto graveyard.

I finally find the wreckage of the car the kids were driving. "This is it." 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.

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 the windshield. Tires good: no blowout. School notebook. Sunglasses. Blood. Hair. Hello Kitty keychain... A couple of old record albums – Bowie, Doors, Meatloaf, Iggy, Steely Dan, Talking Heads... good taste in vintage vinyl. Still have the price sticker on them from a used record shop they probably hit on the way down. Fantasyland Records in Atlanta. I've been there before.

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

There are some things that don't jive with the accident report. That's not proof of anything yet, could be sloppy police work, but in my business, it keeps me going on this thing.

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

I take a few more pictures and go home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CATAMUSO BUSTED

That afternoon I get a call from Catamuso; a voicemail, 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. I think her nickname was Lamb Chop.

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.

Now 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, and in front of some cops that are just coming up the steps to the station and 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. She's a sexy girl and dressed right. She has these tight cutoff blue-jean shorts, a tight T-shirt – and she smells really good.

After we drop her off, we go to the impound to get Catamuso's car.

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 just keep forgetting to ask her name."

"But I want her. I must have her," he says.

"Then why did you start an argument with her?"

He says nothing back to me, but he 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,” I say, pointing up to the next intersection. “There’s a 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 that last score up in Connecticut two weeks ago. And you’re whining about buying me lunch?” I *did* score a lot of good stuff up there in Maryland with Red’s settlement.

“Yeah, and I had to ‘correct’ five guys up there in Connecticut. Four of them were well-trained, top-notch guys. So, it is whoever gets there first. The firstest with the mostest gets the bestest. 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-TWO

WHAT'S IN THE TRUNK

It's the middle of the afternoon and the restaurant is not crowded. 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?" I ask.

"This morning when I woke up in my hotel room, I looked out the window. A man dressed as an Egyptian Pharaoh is 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," I reply.

"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 good stuff in Hagerstown than we thought," he says, changing the subject.

"You got up there again after me, then. What did I miss?"

"Frozen people."

"Strange." I think for a second. "Cryogenic?"

"Frozen. I don't know 'cryogenic.' I don't know what is that." And then he added: "But I have one in the trunk."

Asking Catamuso WHY would have been confounding.

"You can crash in the other room tonight. Its right upstairs from me." 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 “Princess” girl – the waitress from the Waffle House – eating with her girlfriends there across the room. 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 back. 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 knowing that, but now 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?”

“I have the “kavorka”, the lure of the animal. Today I am irresistible to women.”

“You smell?”

“No, I can do it with my eyes. With a “come hither look. Look around. Pick out a girl in here. Let me show you.”

Catamuso looks around the room. “Now don’t point. Just tell me. Describe her. And 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. What would she want with you?”

I let a few seconds tick by. I’m smiling at her. I whisper to Catamuso: “Now watch this...”

I beckon at Princess with my index finger and a stern but smirking 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 walking seductively towards us.

She almost sits down next to me, but I extend my hand 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 do.

"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. "Awww, poor baby."

"Let's do something today, 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? Noooo. Let's 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 at what I've just said. I'm loving it.

I can see Catamuso in the window, his eyes following me as we leave. He shakes his head and wonders what the word "hither" means.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MEET THE MAGICIAN

After Princess splits, Catamuso comes up to the spare room. “Sorry, I messed up your room, amigo,” I say. “I really had to use this one. The girl in the room next door to mine downstairs might...”

“You had to do that then. No problem, Anthony.” The French in Catamuso – whatever French there is – is sympathetic to matters of love.

“Sad little town, eh?”

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

“The flip-flop girl? Her boyfriend’s here?”

“I don’t know. The girl next door. 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. 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 Catamuso somehow, though. Not just because I owe him, but I need to keep him around. He’s the one “squire” that is always on the ball and never lets me down. Sure saved my ass a number of times. He has a real, strange sixth sense about things too. Never seen anything like it. But he can up and leave at the drop of a hat. Never even says goodbye. Or “*do you need me for anything else?*”. 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 if/when I meet her man. Also, once I meet the husband or boyfriend, it’s probably fineet-o for me and her because I always seem to lose the lust after meeting the husband or boyfriend. I don’t know, I have no idea why that is.

Catamuso looks at the stuffed bat on the TV set. He doesn't touch it but bends down looking at it carefully.

"Bat?" he asks.

"Bat." I answer.

Still buzzed on coffee milkshake, Catamuso goes downstairs to the other room to get on my laptop 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, breaching 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 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. Maybe I'm not going to sleep in this room anymore.

I go downstairs to the other room. Catamuso's killing it on the computer.

"Waddaya got, amigo?"

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

"You bet. The highway outside there that runs in front of the hotel. 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 doubt they even know what a Bitcoin is in this town. You find 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, and they're just getting back from going to eat dinner or something.

Now I was expecting a big, burly, tattooed redneck, or a pit-bull-faced thug of a motherfucker, but this guy is a nobody. 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. He's not going to start anything with me. Not because he's afraid of me, but he's not going to into anything just on suspicion.

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 now; 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. The cookies or the 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 and put it off for now.

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 maybe?

She has a melancholy air about her. He's gone again. Not much of a life for her: living in a shitty motel room, watching TV and getting high all day, and seeing Archie every week or so. Maybe watching VHS tapes on a rickety, old tape deck. Walking down to the corner to eat where there's a choice of Arby's, Krystal, and the rolling hotdogs and Big Gulp fountain drinks in RaceTrac.

But now 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 life story.

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.

OK. That is about all I need to know. I don't really want to hear it. Love is funny. Sometimes the more you know about somebody, the less you want them. 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.

She rambles into her relationship, her boyfriend, their cooling and wobbling love affair, his diminishing passion.

I can't handle it. I have to do something.

"Baby, that haircut..."

"What?"

I point to her purse and say: "Give me the scissors... and let your hair down girl."

I cut her hair, so she has bangs now. Fluff it up. It looks good. "Men like bangs. Sexy. Now get up and walk sexy for me..."

She walks but she just doesn't have it. "Grind those hips girl. Like you're trying to grind up a tomato between your thighs, that's it. Swing your hips. Yeah. You've got it."

I show her a few more things. I pull her denim cut-offs up tighter. "There ya go. Sew 'em up so they're a size or two too small."

"Won't that make me look fat?"

"Fat in all the right places."

She smiles.

"You're turning into a real sexpot."

"Sexpot. I like that."

“Now try it on him when he comes back in town. No guarantee, but I think that’s got it.” I say.

I think I’ve created a monster.

Now I steer the conversation around to Catamuso. I want to set up a deal for her to go take care of him. I give her explicit instructions: “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 nightstand. 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 thinks 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 he does his job a whole lot better with the edge off. I have an emergency budget stashed away to smooth things over when it gets wonky on a job. And it helped square things with her by putting some more money back in her pocket.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WAVING AT STRANGERS

When I get back to the motel, Catamuso's in a great mood. He's whistling and has made himself a cocktail. Love and romance work wonders on the ordinary person. Humans should do it more often.

"We need to go get some ice for the man in my trunk." Catamuso announces. OK. I go with him. I don't want him getting in any more trouble. But Catamuso's car won't start, so we go in my car. The RaceTrac is out of ice, so he considers buying packages of frozen food. I shake my head, too expensive, and we find another convenience store.

As he's loading the ice into my backseat, I see a cop go by, eyeballing us. I saw on a rack of hats inside the RaceTrac, a couple of those fucked up crush-sided cowboy hats for sale. I take Catamuso inside, but none of the hats fit him. He has a big head. Not unlike a pollywog.

"Catamuso, we have to get you a cowboy hat."

"But... I am no cowboy?"

"Yeah, but I am. Just ask Bobo. He thinks I'm a cowboy. And as a cowboy I can ordain you a cowboy, too."

"What?"

"All you have to do is go to Laredo and walk down the streets with your cowboy hat on."

"Tabernac!" he says. That's some kind of French swearword.

"Man, the hat will disguise you. From the cops. At a distance." He looks at me like I'm trying to put something over on him. "Look, I'll pay for it." He nods OK and smiles a little.

After we get back and pack his trunk with ice – I don't want to even look at the thing so he does the dirty work, and even sitting on the hood of his car I can smell the funk coming from the trunk – we go to buy him a cowboy hat.

We roll along through another part of the downtown dismal-land. Most of the stores boarded up here too but there are some signs of life: an old-school repair shop, a used bookstore, a Goodwill-type thrift store in and old Zayre's building. The letters of the ZAYRE corporate logo are still up there. I haven't seen that Zayre's sign since I was a kid. I have to take a good picture of that. I wonder if one of the letters fell off or it was always called Zayre, but everyone pronounced it Zayres... Will have to check that one on the internet.

We find a Family Dollar store and find a squashed California cowboy hat that fits for the "buckaroo." Catamuso also buys a box of last year's baseball cards. As we drive along, he's opening the packets, looking at the cards and throwing them out the window, one pack at a time.

He says: "If you wave to strangers, you know...often they will wave back." He waves at some people on the street that don't notice him. When he's gone through all the B-ball cards he pulls out a nasty-looking blunt, lights it, and hands it to me.

"Have you ever been in love, Harken?"

"Everyone's been in love. Don't you think?" The weed is real smooth and almost perfumy. I look at it and nod with approval. He always has pretty good stuff.

"I think they fall in love with you and then one day, it's not good anymore. And they go on to another. Another man. Then they get tired of that man, tired of men, and they go onto something else they go. They go on to drugs or religion or sewing a lot of things."

"Watching TV?"

He nods. "Yes, I think so."

"You know what I think?"

He shrugs emphatically.

I smile. "I think... we are all just occupying time and space. Living through various specific sequences of time and events. We have no idea why we are here, what we are doing. You know, really...this world – for many of us – is all a series of

ridiculous orders, silly chores, pointless rituals and programmed behavior.”

Catamuso smiles. “A friend of mine was really into Uber, and one time he Ubered all the way to Hawaii...” Catamuso smiles more, “... and he drowned.” A joke. Where does he come up with these gags? That’s not the kind of joke you read in the PLAYBOY joke section.

“Catamuso, you’re just a little silhouette-o of a man...” He knows I’ve got a good buzz going, so a little bit of a rude jab won’t bother him. In general, Catamuso is immune to cuts and insults of all kinds. Rolls off him like rain.

He reaches out and turns on the radio. The first few chords of “Bohemian Rhapsody” are just coming on. He smiles broadly.

“Pretty good, man!” He’s great with that kind of thing. I don’t know how he does it. “Synchronicity is a bitch.” I say.

We stop at a red light and sit.

“Harken, why do you have such a beater, old shit car?”

“I know, look at your car. Spiffy! It’s a year and a half old, and it won’t start.”

“What? What is ‘spiffy’?”

“Nobody’s going to break into my old, piece-of-shit car. Nobody’s going to steal my car. Nobody’s going to expect a deadly and dangerous hit man to be driving around in this old hooptie. But you know what? This car is perfect under the hood. Tip top mechanically. I got it fine-tuned, rally ready, and it’ll blow the doors off that full-size creampuff you got back there at the motel.”

“I see it, Anthony – you got me there. That’s good smarts.” He tosses the roach out the window. “But what is ‘spiffy’?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KARAOKE NIGHT IN MENLO

I get some sleep, a nap, and when I come out of my room refreshed, Catamuso is doing some kind of feng shui/Pilates thing in front of the animals in the petting zoo.

Coming back into my room he looks over the comic books I've got lying around. He picks up a slabbed book and tries to open it.

“Whooh!” I exclaiming and retrieve the book from him.

“You don't take it out of the case!”

“How do you read it then?”

“You don't. That's a collector's item. They are slabbed!”

“What is slabbed?”

“Slabbed means it's been graded by experts and put in a sealed plastic case for collectors. They can't touch it or even read it, but it makes it a known quantity as far as its condition and thus its value and in effect, making it more of a commodity than a delightful collectable. Of course, you can always crack it open, but...”

“Let's...”

“No!” and I take all the books up from him. And then I show him what these comics bring at some of the auction sites I use, “Let's go to Comicslink.com or Comicconnect.” His eyes get wide when he sees what some of these books bring.

“You see?”

“You Americans are crazy.”

I shrug. I can't argue with him there.

“I am going to see the movie tonight,” he says. He's been talking up the new *Bourne Identity* movie that just came out.

“Harken. You want to come and see?”

“Naw. There’s a bar in town I’m going to go hit later, maybe. Maybe watch TV a bit first. I want to look over those comic books I just got.”

“OK. I have a drink first though?”

“Got some good stuff, amigo. Glenlivet 18-year shit. Got a couple bottles of Remy VSOP from the crew in Hagerstown, too.”

“Remy.” He thinks some more. “That will be good.”

He drinks with me right through the time for his movie as we look at the comic book that aren’t slabbed. I only let him handle the lesser books, the lower-grade ones, but he’s still a little rough with them, so I pay to add an adult movie channel to the TV in my room.

Great. Now he’s horny and after a while we just have got to hit the bar down the street. But – oops! – a *Seinfeld* rerun comes on and he has to watch that, too.

It’s Karaoke night at the bar, and there’s like fifty or sixty people there.

“Jackpot!” I say as we park.

“Is a good night...?” asks Catamuso.

“Great! There were five cars parked here when I drove by last night. Of course, it was earlier in the evening, ya know.”

Inside, we continue to drink. We find a table in the back, out of the way. Catamuso immediately fixes his sights on a rather thick girl with a Star Trek T-shirt sitting in front of us with some other girls. He wants me to be his wingman and for me to take on one of the other girls, or at least charm them all and break the ice. But this assignment is not for me. I like shapely women, but Catamuso gets a little loose with his standards. Out there and over the top. Particularly after watching the Playboy Channel and putting away about four fingers of the Remy. These girls have been to the Dairy Queen one too many times for me.

“Naw, I think you’re on your own with this one, amigo. I have faith in you, my man! You have a virtual smorgasbord of girls there. Has to be one that you will hit it with. Naw, you don’t need me, leave me out of it.”

Catamuso simmers silently and watches them like a cat that’s eyeballing a passing mouse that is getting closer and closer.

Then he throws up his hands and caves in: “Ah, this is making me nerves already. I say I just chill the fuck out and enjoy the music. Eh?”

As if on cue, a really bad singer begins croaking her song.

“How do I become an Inquisitor then?” he asks.

“Believe me, you don’t want to become like me. It’s a real mess, it is.”

“But what if I do?”

“We will see.”

“How many have you killed now, Harken?”

“About as many as I haven’t.”

“You missed some, eh? I would never miss one,” says Catamuso.

“Some, you... don’t kill.”

“When is that?”

“If someone is not guilty, for instance. If someone is already dead. Or if you can’t find the killer... then phffitt! No kill. Not every inquest results...”

“How is somebody not guilty, then? How does that happen?”

“In New York City, there was... well, a certain estate lawyer got shot and tortured to death by one of his clients. He came to us and begged for vengeance. He was beside himself, howling to have us set things straight. His murder was in all the papers, but then, he had a lot of enemies and we couldn’t pin it on any particular one of them. So the killer skated.”

The waitress comes up, and we order drinks and Catamuso orders two hot dogs. “In another lawyer related inquest, we discovered that the lawyer’s client was actually right to kill the guy. That was my call. My judgement. The lawyer had fleeced half of his grandmother’s estate for like three-quarters of a million dollars. Just put it in his pocket. So fuck it. We let the killer go, and we sent the lawyer straight to Hell. I had to just laugh.”

“That is how it can work then... Hmmm.”

“Sometimes there’s not enough evidence. You have to be sure in this business,” I say.

“I think this thing here in Menlo is drug deal gone wrong. These cops are dirty.”

“The cops may be in on it.” I say, just throwing it out there.

“Well, if I find him, find who it is, then can I kill him?”

“You know the rules.”

As if I’ve just said nothing: “I am good, Harken. I would be fantastic killer. I will spring and strike like a cat!” He gestures outward with his hand.

I am holding my mouth down to keep from laughing out loud.

“For one thing, you have to be chosen. Jack Ketch does the choosing, not me. And to be a good inquisitor – to travel around and do these investigations - you have to fit in. Sail invisibly through the crowds... and you don’t fit in.”

“What...?”

“You just look odd. Out of place. And that accent? No. You’ll stick out like a sore thumb.” I shake my head. “No-no-no, you have to blend in. Be invisible in the crowd.”

I throw a wadded-up cocktail napkin at the back of the girl Catamuso was leering at. It hits her on the shoulder, bounces up in front of her, and lands on her table. She picks it up and looks at it. Looks over her shoulder at us, glaring a bit.

I point to Catamuso who now sits upright, in surprise and apprehension. The woman throws the napkin back at him, hitting him harmlessly on the forehead. She turns away and resumes chattering with her girlfriends, and Catamuso turns and glares at me.

We sit there a minute, saying nothing. Our drinks arrive.

A huge, local guy from a table in front of us and to our left (but still next to, or behind the girls from where he could have seen the napkin thing) stands up and pulls over a chair and sits down next to Catamuso. He wouldn’t have seen me throw the napkin but would have seen it hit the girl and get thrown back at Catamuso.

“You’re a couple of funny guys, eh?” the local says in a heavy Southern drawl. He’s a burly, bristling, drunken, roughneck with beer-breath and a Duck Dynasty T-shirt.

He pulls up to our table, and before he can say anything, I lean over some and look him in the eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?” I’ve found that for some reason the one who says the *name thing* in a confrontation usually wins. Not always – and in

this case – I probably have a dog’s chance in hell – but WTF, you cut the cards and see what you get.

His head twerks back a bit at my words, as he takes a nasty, arrogant, snarling look at me. The cat has his tongue and he’s confused. He simply doesn’t know what to say after my polite but bold and seemingly fearless effrontery. I’m not usually like that, but after a few drinks... and there’s something that I find amusing and ridiculous about this Jethro Bodine doofus. I can’t resist, but I’m ready if he makes a move.

We both stand up, him kicking his chair back. We face off, and then Catamuso – scrawny, little, dog-eared, male-pattern-baldness, harmless-looking Catamuso – stands up between us with his finger raised and a haughty look on his face.

Then it dawns on me what he’s up to. He’s “cutting in.” He is interrupting us – like *he* wants to fight the guy. But he pushes the roughneck back and puts up his dukes against *me*, like he’s defending the doofus-Jethro-drunk and I’m the enemy now.

I start laughing. Jethro starts laughing, the girls are laughing, his friends at the table are laughing... the people on stage’s song ended and I’m smiling.

The brute spins poor Catamuso around, his arm cocking back, Catamuso is about to grab his arm in some judo move, and just in time... the bouncer comes over and intervenes loudly and bluntly: “NO FIGHTING!”

Just then, three guys – the next act – are lit up on stage, and the first notes of “Bohemian Rhapsody” come over the speakers. That song again?

Now the ruffian and Catamuso both turn to the karaoke singers, distracted and transfixed. The two men who were about to fight quickly talk back and forth between each other. They are apparently both big Queen fans, and obviously this is their favorite fucking song.

They now sit down, and both reverently listen to the song, occasionally singing along with it to their favorite parts like old friends. At one point, Catamuso – the “little silhouette-o of a man,” turns to me and makes a funny, WTF face. I can’t help laughing at it all.

Pretty soon, Catamuso is buying his new comrade a drink. Not long after, the ruffian’s friends have pulled their table over and

the herd of big girls have joined us, too. Of course, Catamuso is buying everyone their drinks.

It dawns on me.

I smile, shake my head, and start laughing.

OK, I get it now: The ruffian is a hustler! He's mooching drinks off of Catamuso! Drinks, then popcorn and then hot dogs all around, for him and all his friends. We're strangers in town, and we're targets. He's as big as a house, built like a linebacker, and his game is that he starts a row with some random, unfortunate stranger from out of town or passing through... and gets his drinks bought for him free! Catamuso has a credit card and so he invites all his friends in. Even the bouncer.

We put it all on the company credit card, the three Bohemian Rhapsody guys win the contest and Catamuso gets the girl's phone number.

All's well that ends well.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WAFFLE HOUSE AGAIN

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

“The cops – they always sit at this table?” I ask one of the waitresses, pointing at the table right next to ours, and where they sat before.

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

I get up and take another spot that’s closer to the door, and away from the “cop table.” Later, when no one is looking, I go over and place a special ballpoint pen under the napkin dispenser, grab a napkin from the dispenser to cover my actions, 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 me up to them.

From our interplay and the other girls talking between themselves about us, Catamuso begins to catch on that I knew Princess from before. He’s suspicious, then sullen, and then properly pissed. He loves to put one over on you, but the idea that someone could put one over on him is anathema.

He glares at me. I smile back, gloating a little. He’s about to say something nasty as I hold my finger up, shaking it in his face. “No, no, no! She has girlfriends, dude. They all like to smoke dope and party.” He understands. They may like to smoke dope and party: I don’t know if they’ll like Catamuso.

Eventually the cops come bustling in and head to “their” table. One of them 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 to the 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 will get their dashcam."

"You mean dashcam video. You will request it at the station."

"Yes," says Catamuso, a little annoyed that I corrected him as he will only be able to get the video, not the whole camera.

"I am innocent! I will have the films. And will take it to court! Fucking bobo, 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. Out-of-town plates. 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.

"Yes!"

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. Just leave 'em alone.

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," Catamuso says to him.

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 activities just to raise money for the city government is total abomination. It is 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.

Catamuso continues: "When the mayor or the police chief tells 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 or police captain 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, these mayors and police chiefs then? 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."

The cop glances at me. I shrug like Seinfeld when George does something goofy and say: "hey, I just met this guy tonight at karaoke! I gave him a ride 'cause he was hammered!" It seems churlish of me, but I have to maintain a peace with the cops for the sake of the mission that I'm on.

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

We talk some more about the Block situation, how he's so bloodthirsty and violent, about which waitresses would be perfect

for Catamuso, and about the baseball season coming up. Then I get up and go to the bathroom.

When I come out Catamuso and Randall are going at it again. It's just exploding out loud – and everyone's looking, even the people outside that were just leaving are looking in. There's all kinds of yelling and screaming. As Randall goes for his baton, one of the other cops comes over and intercedes with Randall – and I grab Catamuso. They back down, disengage, and we all slink back to our respective tables.

We sit for a while and get some glances. Catamuso says: “We come back and get the pen later.” As if he plans to leave and come back after the cops take off. Then he gets up and goes to the bathroom.

I look at Princess, as she's reaching up to get some coffee filters and displaying her form, her nice ass and legs for me, as she turns her head and smiles like a figure skater. Gotta love it. She's a gem in the rough of a Waffle House world.

I order a slice of pie and, as it's just being set down in front of me, Catamuso walks by at a good clip, heading for the policemen's table.

As he passes me, I say to him: “I'm gonna finish this p...” And he keeps walking past me, wearing a determined, ornery face worthy of Danny Trejo.

Oh, boy.

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 over his shoulder towards the door, then he turns and walks out of the place. Well the cop's a big guy. He's about a foot to a foot-and-a-half taller than Catamuso, but Catamuso is pretty good too, with all his years of Judo and all. And he's best when he's drunk, like now. Fearless and instant.

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

This is not good. 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 bullshit. Catamuso didn't start it, no, but he's *not* waiting till the

job's over to take care of his personal matters. Plus, I have a slice of hot, pecan pie and white ice cream. But aww.... What the fuck, a pal's a pal. One for all and all for one, right? I throw some money down, look up at Princess who's fretting with the other girls, and head out.

I come out the door as the cops are all walking down to the far side of the building. The side of the building away from the road. The cops all turn the corner to watch the fight, but all suddenly stop and 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 start 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 video of the "fight" all on her cell phone already, and the others are gathered around her.

Ahhh. Pie.

And our listening pen.

As we drive away, Paul Simon's "The Boxer" is on the radio. "Catamuso, how do you do that?" I say, as I proffer my hand towards the radio. He shrugs like it's nothing.

"Dude, you got your own special kind of *Fight Club* going on here. I like it. I like it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LOOKING AT COMIC BOOKS

Next morning, I get out the comic books again. I have a relaxing drink and start going through them as I listen to the recordings of the cop conversations that I've downloaded on my laptop. I've always loved old comic books and movie posters. There's something about the art on the covers on old 1940s comics. Not only are they colorful and sort of simple and primitive, but they also give you a peek into the minds, the perceptions, the creativity of another era; into the mentality of a simpler, sometimes more honest, and more goofy time.

Batman #11! This is my favorite Batman cover of all time. Batman and Robin against a plethora of playing cards punching out a totally sick looking Joker.

The appeal of the Joker is straight across the board these days. In some ways, he's a bigger character than Batman. I've often wondered what the big deal was. I know that for me, killing one of my complexly batshit-crazy victim is a little sticky. I mean, if they don't feel any guilt, are they really guilty? Take someone with Down syndrome. Do they really have a good handle on what they are doing when they do something wrong? Are they really guilty of a crime that maybe they didn't intend or completely understand? In my job we have to use a lot of judgement and leeway with our settlements. This is definitely a conversation to confound Catamuso with sometime.

I start looking up recent auction sales. Wow. Some of these are really good books. There's some nice DCs and Marvel comics here, including the Human Torch/Submariner battle issues of Marvel Mystery Comics, but there's a lot of off-beat titles here too. Some Fox and MLJ comics and even more obscure titles like Whirlwind Comics, Punch Comics, Hyper Mystery, Speed

Comics, Cyclone Comics... so cool to look at books I've never seen before.

The ballpoint pen recordings are yielding a mother lode. It turns out that the killer is probably Philby, the little fat guy with the Angry Birds on his phone. I hear him 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, because sometimes he wakes up in the morning in a cold sweat. He confesses that he went to her Facebook page the other night.

Nothing damning there but one of the other cops gives us what we want, what we need to lower the boom: "Yeah, but you hadda do it. You fucked up, and you took care of it. Did the right thing," says one of the other cops. We hear drinking glasses clink as the other cop salutes him.

Had to do what? Did the kids get out of line? Did the kids catch him doing something? He did something serious – murder no doubt – but how do you prove that? Did he kill all the kids, or just Brittany?

The recordings also tell me that Philby was not eating anything there at Waffle House last night because it was past midnight, and he was going in for a yearly Police Department physical tomorrow afternoon. He had to fast to check his diabetes.

The rest of the cops sound pretty cavalier about the murder. None of them are too bright or savvy. Just regular working Joes, sitting around, eating breakfast at Waffle House. The killing sounds like it was nothing vicious: more of an accident – but for them, killing four kids was no big thing. Just something that happened.

An investigation can be fun, but it can be frustrating, and dangerous. At some point, you may have to either pull the trigger or walk away from it. This is where my being judge and jury is tricky. It's usually all about *motive*. Murders for greed or theft or lust are the easy ones. An accidental death is not what we are going to execute someone for. Now if someone's negligent? Drunk, high, impaired? That's another thing. But it must be proven conclusively. A lot of people can drive fine with a few drinks in

them, but then another person can get fatally distracted when they're totally straight and wind up killing; someone.

I'm getting close on this case but there are still some pieces of the puzzle missing. I'm going to have to do a ritual. That's where I contact the dead ones. The Eastern Ritual. This is the hard part. This is where the rubber hits the road. At least for me. I'm going to have to talk to that little girl again and get to her as her adult self, the adult self that knows what happened.

How do the dead people find us investigators in the first place? I wish I knew. No one gives me a straight answer on that one. Maybe I have to be with the outfit longer. Maybe no one knows. Right now, I don't.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A STEALTH RECONNAISSANCE

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 or on the weekend, when all the neighbors are home and I might get spotted as someone out of place.

I hack into his desktop machine and go at it. It does appear that the speed trap business is good these days.

He likes taking pictures. Lots of pictures; some of it drivel: 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.

The wrecked SUV. 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. Here's one: it looks like he's standing on a girl's neck and smiling. I'm pretty sure it's Brittany. There's another cop in the picture, off to the side, smiling and holding his own cell phone up and also getting the shot.

That gets me thinking. It's not like he's standing on a "trophy kill": can't be sure, but it's more like he's putting his weight on her.

Not much of value here in this apartment, though. All the electronics are cheap Walmart stuff. 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 have it stashed somewhere else. But where?

It's creepy sitting in his world – another man's world – and looking at all his 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... what if I was born in this shithole, dying, town and grew up here, and this was my only choice: being a speed-trap cop frisking college kids for their pot and pills, and getting blowjobs from drunken teen girls – how fucked up I could have turned out?

Then a shock of awareness shudders 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 listen for a second, listen closely, and I hear a slight, distant wheeze, 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 and headphones on.

I stand there and stare at him, transfixed somehow. I just can't move for a few seconds.

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

But I leave.

I will choose the time and place.

Not in broad daylight and not in an apartment complex where everyone around knows him. I will wait and find the right moment. Make it count. And maybe throw a little irony in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

TWILIGHT IN A GARBAGE DUMP (Sounds kinda like a cool love song, eh?)

Time for the “dance.” the dance is our special phrase for a séance of sorts, a talk with the dead. If we can get them to show up and talk. Sometimes they just fade on us in the middle of our inquest. And you’ve got to take your best shot with whatever you have. If you don’t have enough testimony or data and the clients stop talking to you, you may have to close the whole thing down and hit the road.

This seance will involve burning some of the client’s personal possessions in a special procedure.

I can’t very well conduct the magic show in my room or out in the parking lot. I’ll need a special place, one with some privacy. Some seclusion. 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 stuff, and all these little towns have a dumping place off in the woods somewhere, where people leave their tires and old sofas that they’re too lazy to take to a proper dump.

“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.*

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 littered here and there with tires, bundles of newspaper, and old shoes with weeds growing through them.

I set up my “altar”: a rusty spin-basket from an old destroyed and bullet-ridden washing machine, planted atop a small pile of tires. I gather some kindling into it and bunch up some old

newspapers. This is how we summon the clients. This is how we see what the unquiet souls have to tell us. I put the girl's hat in there, her Hello Kitty keychain, a few locks of her hair, and all the stray items and bits of things that I pulled from the car, the personal things of hers, and of her friends.

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

Sure, I do the Yage myself, just for fun of it – we're not supposed to, but now and then when you're dry, and it's all you have... and sometimes I see a lot of weird things when I do that shit. Sometimes I see these almost clear, see-through, curious, impish beings that look like amoebas – giant, watermelon-sized amoebas – running about all around me, but it's like they are in another dimension and they swim right through me. Sometimes I see fragments from my past, not important events, but just little things from childhood, like riding my bike or running across the lawn and drinking water from the barrel of my squirt gun; a green German Luger squirt gun. Sometimes I see the worms on the side of the road, coming out of the ground on a rainy day as I'm walking to the school bus stop at the corner of our subdivision. Sometimes I hear my mother crying in the other room. Sometimes I hear the pleasing sound of doves off in the distance as the day's sun goes down behind the trees. Nothing special.

I look around, and off into the distance. Climb up the side of a tree to get a view. Sawgrass and brush and trees as far as the eye can see. No kids hiding in the bushes or houses on the horizon where someone might spot my fire and come to check me out. 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 and twilight falls around me, I'm real relaxed – feel real good. I'm buzzing and coasting. Contentment.

Contentment...

I like playing cards when I feel like this. 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've 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 your mind's perception is 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, not just one groove, not just the present.

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

So, the child – to interface with the world – if he wants to eat, or to grab something - 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; has to 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, and a “de-focus”, when I step back, I can feel the cards that are coming – I swear it – I can feel when I need to double down, I can feel when the dealer's gonna go bust, or when I'm gonna make that straight. I'm living in the future – just a toe-dip into it – too. Crazy, huh?

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. Ten minutes later I can see faint, wispy shapes, faintly moving out there. Dimly glowing eyes light up.

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

The other side is opening up... The souls are whispering. 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 want to help you.”

I look around.

I can seem 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: I need to see what happened. Can you help me?”

I wait. I light a cigarette. I 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 takes a bit; I’m explaining to them what I want to do. I explain to them why I can speak to them and why they can hear me. They come around, and after a while and they’re whispering, murmuring. Then talking up a storm out there.

Something approaches me. It’s a shape. A shape made of ...darkness. The shape stops, wavers a bit and dims.

“We took a short cut,” a voice says.

I sit up. I’m listening.

“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 fast or anything. The words are coming faster now.

But that cop came out of nowhere, flying into us – like we were standing still. He was going to chase after 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 is Pulling out after that guy, the speeder that had just blown by us a minute ago! The damn cop just pulls out right in front of us without even looking. And 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?”*

The other voice comes back: *“But Brittany – she was still alive. I could hear her making–”* the voice is 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... as she gave up.”

“Was it a fat guy? The cop? A little fat guy? Pointy head?” I ask.

“Then I began floating up faster... And as I rose up, 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 leave?*

All of a sudden, the former little ghost girl appears, an adult now, whisking up out of nowhere: right up in my face, transforming and growing sharper! I recognize her. It is Brittany.

“YESSS!”

Then she is gone.

“Don’t worry, guys I’ll take good care of this.”

Just 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 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 tied together with twine... all this meaningless stuff... and all the meaningless lives that go with them. 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

TIME TO CELEBRATE

That evening, Catamuso makes his detective presentation to me like a good assistant. So far, 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, we have a better picture.

The city has been hanging by a thread these last 4 or 5 years, and the speed traps have been ramped up as one of their better revenue streams.

"There is also a little bit funny business going on – maybe stealing from impounded cars – a few lawsuits for that – some incidents with drugs, mostly pot, I think... but I think they lost their franchise, a while back. Four or five years ago maybe."

"Franchise..."

"The drugs. Lotsa drugs flowing through here in Florida. This place was once a pit stop on the 'underground railroad' until sometime four or five years ago."

"Wonder what stupid shit these knuckleheads did to get it 86'd..."

"They use the drones now?"

"Any sex? Any scandals?"

"A few things. Some sex, drunk driving, a very few of ze murders covered up. Standard things. Nothing unusual. No, usual stuff. However... here's the thing – there are there a few emails about our girl Brittany, and how they will handle things if the parents of any of these crashed, dead kids come down to here, or send investigators."

"Ah, ha!"

"Now is the best part, Harken." Says Catamuso. "This is the dash cams!" He pushes the play on the computer desktop.

One dashcam is missing some footage, the dashcam that would be directly on the murder scene: turned off or edited. But there is another one that has caught part of the scene from one of the cop cars in off to the side, and Catamuso has enhanced the audio.

The other cops tell Philby that it's his mess. We even hear the "celery crack" of her neck and the little animal gasp.

That's it." I say. "The death sentence. It confirms everything the clients told me. Philby."

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

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

"What is it then?"

"A bat."

"Smells funny."

"It's a stinky bat."

"What does it do?" He sniffs it again.

"It stinks."

He sets it back down, shakes his head a little and lights a cigarette.

He looks at me. "What we gonna do boss?"

"The die is cast, Catamuso. The gas is floored. Philby is our man. That's it. Done deal. Mark it and strike it."

"I have an idea... something I've been thinking about. It just might work. I'll need to get a few more things, though. But if Amazon Prime can overnight it..." 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...."

We decide to celebrate and order a pizza. The pizza parlor is just closed because their toilet overflowed, so we decide to hit the strip club down the street.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE NAUGHTY NEGLIGEE

The lights and garish facade outside promise a real den of sin and tons of lurid entertainment, but Naughty Negligee is actually a pretty grim place inside. Dark, pathetic, shoddy, snarky, poorly lit, outdated and rickety furniture, cigarette burns everywhere and on everything, and a smell in the shadows like a cocktail of microwave-burnt plastic, liverwurst, hair weave, green Jell-O concentrate, and disinfectant.

It's shift-change time, and the girls are tipping out or just now dragging in. SHE RIDES by Danzig is playing as we walk in. Seems I hear it in every strip joint, but rarely do they do the honor of playing it as I enter.

After more than a few stiff drinks (on my tab of course), Catamuso is going off on cops again. apparently the idea of local governments using law enforcement to generate income instead of raising taxes is going to be our downfall.

Now and then, the bouncer/doorman 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. Bad shit is everywhere."

"Look man, without a doubt, these speed-trap guys are a real bear, no pun intended (referring to the archaic term for such cops and their "Smokey the Bear" hats), but how will it become like Mexico here?" I ask. "Will we have to wear sombreros and ride on burros around?" 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 had a lot of time to think about this thing.

"Once they start to be 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 to get money? And the next a bribe to make it go away, and one little thing then the next, until they are working for all real 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? Maybe the cop – if he’s a real man – maybe he should stick a gun in the mayor’s 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 Bentley!” she says.

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

“Sorry, my friend here was acting out a scene he saw on TV last night.” I say, explaining Catamuso’s dramatics and theatrics.

She sits down and smiles. “Netflix?”

Catamuso nods.

“Hi, I’m Bentley.” She says again.

“I’m sorry, Bentley.” I smile like a used car salesman and reach out to take and kiss her hand. “I’m... Mr. Dow, and this is Mr. Jones.” Catamuso shakes her hand.

“You’re from out of town, I guess.” She says.

“We’re in the industrial average business.”

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

I’ve been waiting for Catamuso to do something fucked up again, to start another fight, or insult someone... but he’s very placid and quiet tonight.

She kinda likes me (who can blame her) and chats me up, not paying any mind to Catamuso.

She’s talking a blue streak, flying on some kind of speed or Red Bull or coffee. She has a dog she got from the pound and she’s sure it has amnesia and can’t remember who it is. Then all the medicine the dog had to take and how much each thing cost... what food the dog likes and doesn’t like.

Ignored and dejected, Catamuso pretends to fall asleep. His head falls into his chest, and he lets out a loud snore. I go along with it. I reach out and tap him: “Wake up, wake up! Jones!”

Another girl sits down and begins watching what’s going on. “He might be narcoleptic.” She points at Catamuso.

“What’s that?” Bentley asks.

“It’s kind of like sleepwalking. Someone just falls asleep any time.”

“I’ve heard of that stuff! It’s a medical condition.” Says Bentley.

“And if you wake him up, he’ll die.” I add in.

“Oh dear!” she says.

“Wow!” I say. “Maybe we better get this fucker out of here! We don’t want him to die in your place. Bad press. Maybe he’s dead already.”

She touches him. Nothing. And then she kind of presses down on him, and then presses harder. And then he farts loudly! “Oh my!” she says.

The other girl immediately gets up and leaves us without even a goodbye.

Now, Fennix and Catamuso are good friends, and according to Fennix, all you have to do is fart on a woman and she will fall in love with you. I shake my head. Most insane. So, this is what Catamuso is up to, I figure.

Anyways, she turns back to me and starts talking a blue streak again. Her dog was kidnapped by her old boyfriend who tried to train it to hunt and point, but it bit him, so he let it run off. Her car has a squirrel nest under the hood, and she can’t bring herself to drive it because she’s afraid of cooking the babies. Her roommate loaned her other roommate’s boyfriend two thousand dollars for his band to promote their new record and she can’t pay the rent this month. She just lost a cap on her tooth and thinks she swallowed it in her sleep because she can feel it in her stomach. She was writing her biography (at the age of 22), had finished 480 pages of it, and now her computer died. You know, talking up a storm, faster and faster like a merry-go-round whose gears are shot, or a little kid spinning around a maypole until he’s so dizzy he falls out of his seat. That’s exactly what happens now, right at the moment of her most emphatic point, she literally falls out of her seat. I look over

at the seat and there's nothing the matter with it – but there she is, on the floor getting up. I reach over to give her a hand, but she slaps my hand away, and after she gains her feet, she hugs Catamuso. Now, bear in mind that he has not said ten words to her. The *Fennix Scenario* is working.

I buy Catamuso a table dance from Bentley. The dancer has a band-aid on her butt. To me, that indicates that she must be new to this. Almost every stripper you ever meet will always have a curling-iron burn on her ass. They have these hot-curler things that they use to curl their hair but they all also love to leave lying around hot the dressing room, and it's only a matter of time – of hours, or even minutes, before a new girl sits on one, scarring her forever with a little cigarette butt-sized brown spot on her ass. Most of them only have one, but if you meet a dancer that has two, three, five of them – you've got a special commodity. Someone who has the IQ of a houseplant.

After two dances, they are in love. She kisses Catamuso right on the mouth, (something that generally never happens in strip clubs.) I grab her arm to get her attention, and I give her a C-note, telling her to take Catamuso into one of the VIP suites. The VIP is a small, darkly lit series of rooms in back where supposedly anything goes. Sometimes it's a scam and the guy gets nothing, but a hundred bucks in this place should Catamuso him to seventh heaven.

Now for my own fate. There she was, coming right at me after getting down off the back-stage – the “Las Vegas stage,” as the DJ called it; the front being the “Carousel stage,” and the one on the left that nobody's dancing on is God knows what.

As she walks toward me, she grinds her hips in almost predatory fashion, like a vixen approaching – or the girl in *Cat People*. Maybe she's not the prettiest, sexiest girl I've ever seen, but the attitude, the stance, the cadence of her walk...she's ringing all the bells and blowing all the whistles.

She comes over and pulls a chair out – but not to sit in the chair: she's just pulling it out of the way so she can sit in my lap. Then she picks up my drink, kills it and starts twirling with a strand of her hair. If a girl likes you, she touches her hair, or plays

with it or whatever. It's a "tell," as they say in poker. She doesn't even know she's doing it, but it telegraphs her intentions.

"You're in the industrial-average business..." Word gets around fast. I nod. She picks up a napkin, unfolds it, and tucks it into her necklace as an impromptu bib, as she pulls over the basket of chicken wings that Catamuso's girl ordered before. As she starts eating the chicken wings with one hand, she reaches down with the other and grabs my genitalia.

Just as I'm thinking that we probably should have come here earlier in our stay in Menlo, I hear a bloodcurdling scream rip out behind me.

I turn around and there's Catamuso's girl, running out of the VIP suite in nothing but her heels. She has a bloody nose, the blood's all down the front of her, and she has something in her hand above her head – and I think it's a gun.

As the object in her hand goes off and fires into the ceiling, I figure out that it *is* a gun! As it goes off, she freaks and throws it – spinning – up in the air. It's coming right at us and I lean out to the left, almost coming out of my seat, reaching out my hand and catching it.

Catamuso comes out of the VIP suite now, holding up his pants. The bartender is turning back around after pulling out a ball bat from under the bar behind him.

The bouncer/doorman comes trotting out of the bathroom.

Catamuso has buttoned his pants, but he still hasn't zipped them up. He can't. He's still in *flagrante delicto*. Hanging all out. Franks and beans. The bartender and bouncer coming at Catamuso both sort of stop in their tracks, transfixed.

"That thing's huge!" says my girl, as she sucks all the meat off another wing and the robotically spinning house spotlights shines on it for about half a second..

The bouncer murmurs something standing next to him, probably wondering how one should proceed against a man so exposed and well equipped.

"I've never seen a honker that big on a human being except in porno movies." Says the girl, still causally killing the chicken wings.

"She pickpockets! My wallet! My gun! Tabernac! Where'd she go?" he shouts to me.

I guess she wasn't that much of a newbie after all. I spot his wallet on the floor, and point for him to pick it up.

His yelling to me seems to break the "spell", and the two bouncer-guys are coming for him. Catamuso, even with his dick out, is still one hell of a kung-fu judo-master motherfucker. It's a wonder to see him go at it.

I look at my watch as I casually take up a chicken win too. In about sixteen seconds, he has them both on the floor: one moaning, the other crying. Both have bloody faces; one is literally squirting blood out of his nose with every heartbeat, and the other is staring at his hand where one of his fingers is bent obscenely back.

I go over to them and observe. "You guys have had it."

I toss the chicken bones over my shoulder, bend down, wipe my hands on the bouncer's tie and frisk him. sure enough, he's got a small, hammerless Smith & Wesson .38 - a Sentinel I think they call it - in a waistband holster in the small of his back. I pull it out and throw it all the way across the room. The ball bat guy is probably not packing, but I frisk him anyways.

A customer walks in, right past the front-door kiosk where they take money. There's nobody there, so he just kind of wanders in and sits down at a table not far from us. As the newcomer's eyes adjust to the light, and he sees me and Catamuso standing over the bouncer and the bartender on the floor, he kind of freezes for a second, then calmly lights a cigarette, stands up and walks out.

The bouncer begins to get up, muttering, "You sonofabitch...!" and I kick him right in the face.

Two of the strippers come out of the dressing room. When they see the club's designated protectors lying on the floor with the shit kicked out of them, and me standing there, calmly lighting a cigarette, they let out a couple of high-pitched yelps, and run back into the dressing room.

Hmmm.

I toss Catamuso (who's finally got his tiger back in the tank and zipped up) the ball bat and I walk back into the dressing room. Time for the special damage control bankroll that I always seem to have to use the most when Catamuso's around.

The girls in the brightly lit dressing room stare at me, wondering what the hell is going to happen next. “Hey!” I yell real loud. They quiet down and I say: “Listen, girls! Everything’s going to be OK... OK... but I got one question: Did any of you call the cops?”

The new girl pulls out her cell phone (an old flip one) and says, “OK! I’ll call them now.”

The house mom stands up and takes the phone from her. “We always handle our own shit around here, baby.” *Good.* And then I take the phone from the house mom.

“OK, watch this!” I yell and pull out the wad and I walk around the room giving each one of the girls a hundred bucks. The House Mom I give two. “Now ladies, I’m not holding the place up or anything. Ya know, no stick-up guy’s going to be handing out hundred-dollar bills. This money is to just keep the peace and see that we all stay friends. No one is gonna talk about this, right?”

As I go out the door, I shake the girl’s cell phone at her and say, “I’ll give you this back in a minute, darling. Just everybody be cool. Everybody be cool and Fonzie now.”

When I come out, Catamuso’s sitting at the table, passing around a joint with the bouncer and bartender. Catamuso still has the bat in his lap, and the doorman’s .38 revolver is sitting on the table in front of him. The house lights are on and nobody else is out here on the floor.

The bouncer looks up at me, and then the bartender looks at me.

Just a couple of working guys doing their jobs.

I’m standing there like the boss of things, and I boss Catamuso to give the bouncer back his gun. Catamuso picks the gun up, clicks open the cylinder, and drops all the bullets out into the palm of his hand.

Like any good, experienced revolver handler, he shakes it and looks in the cylinder to make sure all the bullets come out. When you don’t pay attention to that - when you do it cavalierly - sometimes one of the five or six bullets in a revolver can hang up and stay in the gun... and then when someone pulls the trigger thinking it’s empty...! Catamuso snaps the cylinder closed and

hands it back to the guy. Then he throws all the bullets off into the rear corner of the room.

The doorman is a Russian and the other looks slightly Jamaican or Haitian. Both are over six feet, but no monsters, just born losers and pretty knocked around right now.

“Listen, guys. I’m sorry about my friend here. But the one thing we don’t need to do right now is call the police. Or your boss. I mean, look...” – holding up Catamuso’s wallet between two fingers and shaking it back and forth – “Fuckin’ bitch stole his wallet and then grabbed his fuckin’ gun. Fuckin’ pickpocket... But I’m not going to call the cops. and you’re not going to call the cops.”

Then I skillfully drop some hints drop implying that we work for some big-time international cartel drug-dealers or something, just passing through. “So we both don’t want any trouble or cops or nothin’.”

I pull out my wad of hush-money cash that Jack gives me to carry, and peel off a couple of hundred-dollar bills and stick them in the bouncer’s pocket, and then a couple of hundred-dollar bills in the bartender’s pocket. Then I stick 200 more in the bouncer’s pocket, pointing at his finger. “For the broken finger.”

He shrugs agreeably.

I smile and give a thumbs up. “Our board of directors, they wouldn’t like it if anybody fucked with us or got us tangled up in some dumbass, stupid bullshit. Tonight someone decided to pickpocket and roll the wrong guys. Hey, it happens. But right now, we all just gotta pick up the pieces as best we can and walk away from it all.”

I hand the girl’s cell phone to the bartender. “Now take this back there and tell those bitches, each and every one of them, to keep their fuckin’ mouths shut about all this. Shut up for at least week or two. This story never happened, see?”

The nod and “yep...” me.

“And you sure don’t want anybody to know that that this little scrawny-assed motherfucker, who is old enough to be both your fathers, kicked you motherfucking asses. You mark my words and listen to everything I said, motherfuckers. Agreed?” They both

just sit there, nodding – and I grab the bartender and say, “Now look me in the eye and say you agree.”

He looks up at me like a hurt little kid and says, “I agree.” And as I reach out to the other one, he puts his hand up and looks me in the eyes and says, “Yes sir, I agree.”

There you go. *Yes, sir.* I like to hear Yes, sir.

As we drive off, Catamuso counts the money in his wallet.

“Catamuso, that’s three fights you’ve been in these last couple of days. I mean, that’s a lotta violence and contention in three days.”

“At least I win all my fights, Harken!”

CHAPTER THIRTY

RIDING IN THE DEATH CAR

Heading back to the motel, we drive by the speed trap. It's blue-light city, and the speed trap is open for business and going to town with a host of their victims pulled over.

As we pull in back at the motel (on the other side of town), I spot something funny.

"Is that your car?" I ask Catamuso.

We are driving in my car (his was leaking a bit from the frozen body in the trunk), and I see that there's someone monkeying around inside Catamuso's car.

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

There's a car off down the parking lot that looks suspicious: slowly 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'm not moving and I have my lights on, I'm guessing that the driver doesn't even 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, also one in the glovebox, and one under the seat, but the silencer is in the room. I take out my pocket gun and chamber a round. I slip out the open window, so I don't make any noise by opening the door.

Catamuso is now 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, as it's his shit. 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.

One way or another, he's out cold (or dead), 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 LC9 – 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 a problem. It's 3am and we have three bodies to get rid of.

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

We're about eight miles outside of town, and we pick up a cop. First, he's coming down the road right up on 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, following us like a shark. We come to an intersection, and we split up. I go off one way, and Catamuso the other. I'm wheeling it hard and fast, and drawing him after me. Soon I'm burning up the road and he's following me, but still at a safe distance back. I think how that 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 and setting a trap up ahead. We may be fucked. Actually, *I* may be fucked, and now Catamuso will have to come bail me out.

It's not the end of the world if I get arrested, as long as Catamuso doesn't get caught with the 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 rearview mirror – and there’s nothing there! I slow a little and take a better look. 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 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 eyeballs in his eye sockets – he’s one of *them*, a Blue-Louie motherfucker - one of the Damned, waiting for the solstice, and just having a little fun tonight fucking with me: nothing more than a phantasm – all in my head - cop car and all!

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: he’s dumped the car, and he gives me directions to pick him up.

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

The Luger is a WWI dated DWM, 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 THIRTY-ONE

A PERFECT SET-UP

Next morning, Princess - 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! Princess has her parents 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? WTF. That's a new one.

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

"OK, your girlfriend's place is fine. Two o'clock is fine. Sure."

I leave early so I can stop at the Dollar Tree to get some batteries. I buy some other stuff, including a big, ridiculous plastic flower and some comically oversized novelty sunglasses that are bright orange and about a foot wide. I'm feeling frisky and choose to have some fun with her by showing up with that stuff on.

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 preoccupied. Not on point. I'm thinking about all my options: how am I gonna kill this Philby 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. Fucking speed trap cops.

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

So I’m sitting there thinking; Oh, I hate the gangster that gets off on bullying everyone in his way, the child molester, the banker 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, sirens suddenly come on out of nowhere. Cop! I look in my rearview 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 of Langley Highway and Mustard Street.”

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. It’s broad daylight and, of course, I’m not going to be able to take care of this doof right here and now.

“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 an old hooptie-mobile like what I’m sitting in.

“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 for my wallet, he hits me with a cheap shot! Philby swings a big haymaker at my jaw. BAM! 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.

"All right, shitbird! Here's your warning!" as he kicks me again: "Here's your fucking warning!"

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 left in there, and it's sure as shit gone now.

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 says 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 away, he picks up his hat which has fallen 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 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 Princess's address on it out of my pocket and look at it. I walk down to the apartment, knock on the

door and a late-middle-aged Black lady answers. 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.

Princess... I guess Princess set me up.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE PRINCESS RETURNS

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!

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 my real name's Jack from the name, Jack Ketch, on the credit cards that I paid with. "You gotta hear me!"

"Yeah, what? What's next? You're gonna have the local Klan come by and nail me to a burning cross now? Cal the FBI? The CIA? Sure! Real nice girl!"

Catamuso is enjoying the row like he's watching a scene on *Days of Our Lives* or some other soap opera.

"Look, I did you a big favor, lover man."

"Sure. What?"

She comes in and closes the door behind her. Sits down. Lights a joint.

"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 them a '*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 – I know he’s sitting there thinking about how he can approach banging her, now that I’m 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 if you don’t like it, just fuck you. I fuck who I want, when I want and how I want! I’ve been hooked up with those douchebags for years! Hell, since I was in high school, I’ve sold a lot of the pot the cops take off the college kids that are coming through town here!”

OK. My kind of girl again, I admit to myself grudgingly. “But you kinda like me, don’t you,” I say. “You like me sorta special.”

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

“Why?”

She plops down on the edge of the bed, now that she’s figured out that I’m not going to kill her and hands Catamuso the joint: “Well, let’s see... 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 good lover. And you love animals.”

“Animals?”

She points at the stuffed bat.

“That’s a taxidermized 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. Me too. 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) again.

“I believe her,” Catamuso says to me, changing the subject.

“I do, too... shit.”

Catamuso is on her side now. “After all, four or five of them evil coppers could have bashed your motel door in while you are asleep, or ambush you somewhere out there, and you’d be dead duck. Yes, good thing she’s in with those guys. Right! Let’s drink a toast to the power of the pussy!”

I agree, and I pull out our bottle of Remy 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 the shots and all laugh.

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

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

FOR A SPECIAL OCCASION

For breakfast next morning, I decide to wear a disguise, just in case Philby comes sniffing around. Catamuso remarks, with delight, at how good my moustache, Afro wig, and my makeup makes me look... and now he's joking around that he wants a disguise, too, something more than his cowboy hat.

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

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

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

A ROAD LESS TRAVELED

It's a dull, dead night in Menlo.

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 ZAYRE store, the cement plant...

The flip-flop that was in the middle of the downtown intersection is gone but not forgotten.

I'm tooling around the town, wearing a bear suit and working on the last half of the Glenlivet. I feel like a kamikaze that's ready for his first big mission, but who really wants to go to go back to his bunkbed and just stay there reading comic books.

No comic books tonight. I'm ready to hit it. Ready for *my* kamikaze mission.

I drive downtown, speed trap coming up.

My car flies by Philby's spot at 80 miles an hour.

But 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. Damn Angry Birds.

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

I do have a "Blender" in the trunk. I pass on by him again, driving into a parking lot, to get the Blender out. It's a high-tech cyber weapon that will scramble most any electronic devices that I

aim it at. I turn it to a frequency that will specifically disable his radio and cell phone, (but still, 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 a ways and then come flying back by. I see Philby standing outside the car now, waving his phone up above his head trying to get a signal, and I start laughing.

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

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.

He follows.

It's cat and mouse.

He comes driving around a 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.

In his headlights, he sees a man in a bear suit sitting in a car. I've got a liquor bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I wave at him, flick the cigarette at him, give him the finger, and take off. He tries to find me, but I make it out of the trailer park and onto the road first.

A bit later, Philby's car pops out onto the road and he chases after me. I would love to have seen his face when he had me in the headlights back there, and I gave him the finger.

I slow down. I let him pull up alongside me. He is motioning and yelling and using his car's 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 it is getting old.

Eventually he has to catch me. It's part of the plan.

We're a good way outside of town. I pretend to run out of gas and coast to a halt on the side of the road. Behind me, Philby's cop car skids to a halt in a spray of gravel.

He jumps out, gets his fucking gun out, and falls prone onto the hood of his car, aiming his service revolver at me with both hands. As I step out of my car, I call out to him: “You win! I ran out of gas! FUCK! I ran out of fucking gas!” Philby looks kind of astounded and quizzical as he sees the full body bear suit I’m wearing.

“Let me see your face!” he yells.

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?”

“Yeahhh...” I say in a *what’s wrong with that* tone of voice. “So what.”

As soon as he shuts the door, I’m already picking the locks on the cuffs. Everything’s going according to plan.

As we are coming up on that gravel road going off to the dumping area, I push a button on a remote-control device. In the distance, a great and bright explosion splits the air. Then a whole lot of explosions. The fireworks. I cleaned out the motel’s entire stockpile and the show is great.

“Holy shit! What the hell is that!?” Philby exclaims.

There’s smoke in the distance, coming up from the explosions. “Might be a plane crash,” I say helpfully. “I dunno, terrorists? ISIS maybe?” he stops the car abruptly. “Been a lot of strange Isis activity down south of here. They been pulling shit like this from Coral Gables to St. Augustine lately.” Of course, that’s all bullshit, but Philby’s just the kind of person who would not be informed. He starts back up and makes a hard turn going down the side-road to the dumping area.

We cruise down the dirt road, the car rocking and gravel crunching. Philby has his gun out and is peering into the darkness all around him ready to shoot any Isis on sight.

We come up on the smoking weeds just ahead of us, and Philby gets out to investigate.

“You sit tight now!” he barks at me.

“Don’t leave me here alone! I’m scared!” I slur drunkenly and with my hands behind me as if I’m still cuffed.

“Shut up!”

I make a menacing bear-like face and growl at him.

“Rrrrrawwwrrr!”

He goes off, wandering around in the garbage and the sawgrass with his flashlight looking for clues to terrorists, and I go to work. Every few minutes, I remote-control off another explosion in the distance to keep him occupied.

Finally, he comes back to the car, flustered and shopworn from the weeds and the mud. “Damn! Just some damn fireworks! Kids! Some kids with some fireworks.” He slouches sloppily into the driver’s seat. “Ain’t no fuckin’ ISIS,” he says to me.

Only it’s not me in the back seat anymore.

“Fucking kids...” he mutters and drives off.

As he disappears down the road, I emerge from the bushes and stand there proudly relishing a plan well executed. My own car is close by, as the car I drove around in, while wearing the bear suit, was a hot-wired “borrowed” car.

So... as soon as he put me in the car I picked my cuffs in the backseat – easy, like Houdini. The rabid, raccoon-bit bear? He’s now in Philby’s backseat. Yeah, it took some doing. Last night, I sprung the bear from petting zoo – got him for \$150. Had to put him to sleep with a couple of injections. Planted the dozing bear in the bushes in the dump area that I led Philby to.

While Philby was off rubbernecking the explosions, I manhandled the groggy bear into the backseat of his squad car (and that took some engineering), then I gave him a couple of shots amphetamines as a wake-up call.

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

Lastly, I bugged Philby’s squad car with a spy 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 from Amazon Prime overnight. \$150 cash for a rabid bear and cage. \$110 worth of fireworks. Rabid bear devouring a crooked speed-trap cop: PRICELESS!!!*

I can't look away. I watch Philby screaming and howling as he is being torn limb from limb by the bear on my hidden camera inside the cab of his car. Ahhhh... modern technology!

I drive off into the wonderful night, laughing out loud. I drain the last drops of Glenlivet and toss the bottle.

I get a text as I get back to my motel room: *"Nice work."* Then I get a second text: *"You know what you're doing. You're good. You're like me."* And it was signed *"Ricco DelAmuerte."*

Shit, 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 an emergency or mess somewhere over the rainbow. As usual, he leaves without saying goodbye. As always, a strange bird, that Catamuso.

I listen to the wall hoping Flip-Flop is still there for one last tryst, but I can clearly hear that she's getting banged (very well BTW) by her magician again. The bangs and the sexy walk worked! So, I don't get a chance to say goodbye to her. But as I'm leaving Princess stops by and brings me a foot-long loaf of banana-nut bread that she made herself, special for me.

As I'm packing up, I notice that the bat is gone now. Princess didn't take it. I had my eye on her and I think she pretty much hated that stinky bat.

No way Catamuso would have taken it. Not without asking me for it. I remember seeing it last night, but today its gone.

Very mysterious.

A month later, on one dead, rainy night when I was sitting there, hammered and lonely in another shitty motel room, I called Tori to chat and maybe talk about old movies or something. I apologized to her about losing the bat. I told her I was only going to keep it for good luck for a while, and 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 said with a slightly surly tone.

I was too perplexed to even respond... so I shrugged and changed the subject.

Interesting.

THE END