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The Fullness of time

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE FULLNESS OF TIME

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Kevin Allen

2008

To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Kevin Allen, and entitled The Fullness of Time, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

John Dufresne

γ Kathleen McCormack

Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 13, 2008

The thesis of Kevin Allen is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean George Walker
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2008

DEDICATION

To Jill, for the kindness, intelligence, wit, and love that inspire and sustain me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the members of my committee for their support and guidance, particularly, Professor Les Standiford, for his unwavering encouragement from the inception of this project through to its completion. A special gratitude also to all those at Florida International University's Creative Writing program. It has been a pleasure and an honor to be in your great company.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE FULLNESS OF TIME

by

Kevin Allen

Florida International University, 2008

Miami, Florida

Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

THE FULLNESS OF TIME is a novel about the quest for identity that transcends the limitations of moral duty, social status, and cultural conventions. Set in Tarpon Springs, Florida, in 1969, it is the story of Victor Lucas, a young Greek immigrant forced to go to war in Vietnam in another man's place in order to save the woman he loves. He must survive the war to return and reclaim his love and his rightful place in society.

Based on the archetypal hero's quest as articulated by Joseph Campbell, the narrative is told from the limited third-person perspective of the main character. Though the journey is particular to Tarpon Springs in the 1960s, it echoes the human struggle and triumph in the wanderings of Ulysses. The novel's influences include Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, but is also thematically related to contemporary works exploring cultural turbulence and upheaval.

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Deeper Down

Darwin, Western Australia, 1954

As the single file of naked Greeks moved another step forward along the docks of Darwin Harbour, Stefanos Lucas closed his eyes and imagined he was back on the murky seabed in a brass diving helmet and rubber suit. Attached to the world of heaven and light by an air-hose umbilicus, Stefanos was a master of the down below, extraordinary and singular in his ability to dive deep and stay under for hours at a time. But buck naked in the sweltering December sun, his imagination failed him. He couldn't escape, not even in his head, the shame and indignity the Australians visited on the Greek diving crew every time they returned from the pearl beds off the coast of Australia's Northern Territory.

The next diver in line stepped up in front of the red-faced, bespectacled Australian, Norcross, who sat on a wooden stool and watched as the Greek stopped, bent over and spread his buttocks, then turned and lifted his genitals, finally pulling back his foreskin before continuing on to where his clothes, already having been searched, were piled on a nearby bench. The Greeks called the inspector *Anorchos*—castrated. Only a man without his own balls would be so interested in those of others, they joked.

The Australian pearl masters wished that the divers wouldn't take the searches personally. They told the Greeks not to think of the procedure as anything but a necessary safeguard of the company's investment. The owner of the company, himself descended from English cutpurses and prostitutes, understood that to be tempted was simply human nature. A man hired to dive the tempestuous South Pacific and bring up a thousand gold-lipped oysters in a day, one in a hundred of which might contain a profitable pearl, would quite naturally think from time to time of ways to spare himself such toil. It would be

naïve to think a diver wouldn't contemplate tucking away one or two of those hard-earned jewels. The searches were a precaution, first and foremost, a way of heading off far worse aggravation should any of the Greeks be discovered trying to deprive the company of what, after all, it had worked so hard for and paid so dearly.

But the Greeks weren't fools. Of course, they were insulted. The searches were an affront. The divers grew more cross and openly defiant each time they lined up for inspection. Most vocal of all was Kiri Nicholaos, who stood in line behind Stefanos cursing the Australians in general and the inspector in particular as the squinty little fellow signaled for the next diver in line to bend over. "You can look up his ass all day, Anorchos," Kiri called out, "but you'll still find shit."

The inspector spoke no Greek and so couldn't know for sure that he had been insulted. But his red-faced reaction to the burst of laughter from the waiting divers made it clear that Kiri had scored a measure of revenge. Lifting his bristled chin, the inspector signaled the man to lift his genitals.

"If you find a drip," Kiri said, "you better go home and check your wife."

And again the waiting divers erupted in cheers and whistles. Even Stefanos couldn't contain his laughter.

Behind the inspector another Australian wearing a holstered pistol like an American cowboy stood and ordered the Greeks back in line. "Shut it," he snapped. "Let's just get through this and we all go home."

His authority reestablished, the inspector continued his work more quickly. Next in line, Stefanos prepared to step up for his inspection when Kiri leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "This can't go on."

Stefanos hoped that Kiri was simply complaining and not contemplating doing something they may all regret, but Kiri's stone face gave no clue of what he had in mind. Don't, Stefanos thought, it's just an ignorant display of power. It means nothing, certainly nothing worth the risk of trouble.

"Move it along," the man with the gun ordered.

Stefanos turned and presented his spread cheeks to the inspector, then his genitals, feeling the shame turn to indignation and then anger as he unsheathed his penis as proof of his honesty. When the inspector dismissed him with a wave of his hand, Stefanos headed quickly to find his clothes. Behind him he heard Kiri speak, and it was the tone of his voice rather than what he said that made Stefanos turn around.

"Look closely." Kiri bent before the inspector. "Do you have a clear view?"

The waiting divers edged in for a closer view. Stefanos knew trouble was at hand, but he didn't care. Fuck the nosy little Anorchos. Fuck the cowboy behind him. Fuck all the Australians.

"I've been saving this one for you all day, Anorchos," Kiri said. And then he ripped off an enormous fart.

The inspector snapped back his head as if he had been slapped in the face. The Greeks roared with laughter and cheered. The cowboy reached for his gun.

The crack of the pistol shot hushed the dock. From out of his office came the pearl master, Stanley Bell, followed by his assistant, Johnny Pavlos, an old Greek. "What the hell's the trouble here," Bell demanded.

Pavlos, a fat, greasy little man who had been in Australia since before the war, dabbed his forehead with a crumpled gray handkerchief.

“This man’s being insubordinate, sir,” the cowboy said. “He’s churning up the others. I meant to stop it.”

Bell turned to his Greek assistant. “What’s he got to say for himself?”

Pavlos in turn asked Kiri what had happened.

“I wanted Anorchos to know what I thought of him,” Kiri said. “I blew him a little kiss. Can I help it if it was from my asshole?”

The assistant twisted the handkerchief in his hands. He looked wounded, betrayed. He shouted at the divers to silence their laughter. “What are you trying to do to me?” he said to Kiri, struggling to keep his voice low and even so that the boss wouldn’t sense in his outrage trouble for which he would blame Johnny Pavlos. “Do you remember how you came here? I took a big risk in talking Mr. Bell into bringing you from your wretched island. Are you trying to foul this for us all? Is this how you repay a chance to make a decent living?”

“This is how I repay being treated indecently,” Kiri said. “You probably wouldn’t understand that. It was a fart, Pavlos. I suffer from the food here. Don’t take it personally.”

The old Greek wrung his handkerchief and smiled at the boss.

“What does he say?” Bell asked impatiently.

“He says he’s sorry,” the assistant said. “He’s not feeling well. He has the wind.”

“He has what?”

“The wind, sir.”

“Are you telling me that this commotion was caused by a bloody fart?”

“Seems so, sir,” the assistant said. “And the man who farted is sorry.”

Bell rubbed his chin. "Get these men dressed and off this bloody dock," he said. "Tell them their windy friend will cost them all a day's pay."

Pavlos did as he was told. A small fine, he told the divers, with a clear note of triumph, would be withheld from their pay.

"Fine for what?" Kiri said.

"Ingratitude," Pavlos said, turning and following his boss back into the office.

A decade ago, before the world war, when sponges were plentiful, the neat, white village of Kalymnos rising above its bustling bay glittered with prosperity. Sponge divers held a special position atop the island hierarchy. Half the year they walked the narrow streets like princes, flush with the advance pay for the upcoming sponge season. And when they were at sea, their families awaited their return, anxious but comfortable with the financial security and material consolation afforded them by the sponge trade. Then with war came disruptions and deprivations, and when it was finally safe to return to the sea, the sponges had become diseased, with what no one could say. They withered and died on the sea floor all across the Aegean and Mediterranean. It was no disaster to the rest of the world. Man-made sponges were cheaper. There was little use for natural sponges, and so there was little use for Kalymnos.

The neat white houses began to gray from neglect. Many were boarded and abandoned by families seeking opportunity in America. It seemed there was nothing left for those who remained but to dry up and blow away too. But then Pavlos, the old Greek representing the Australians, came offering work, and though it was pearls Pavlos and the Australians wanted, and not sponges, the divers suddenly were giddy with hope.

Since the war, the Japo luggers could not be trusted, Pavlos explained. Everyone knew that Greeks were the best divers in the world, he said. And the Greeks were white, at least whiter than the Japs.

The optimism that gripped the island blossomed to euphoria. Many of the divers and their families were almost drunk with excitement over the prospects of fortune in Australia. But Stefanos Lucas didn't share the others' enthusiasm. He kept putting off giving Pavlos a commitment. It would be shameful for a sponge diver, who spent months at a time at sea away from his family, to admit it, but just thinking of leaving his wife and young son back in old Kalymnos while he went to the new world of Australia filled him with dread.

Finally, Pavlos announced that he was leaving the next day to make arrangements for transportation for the Greeks to Darwin. He pressed Stefanos for an answer. That night Stefanos sat his wife, Tasoula, down and told her that he was staying.

"But there's nothing here for you to do," Tasoula said.

"I can't leave you and our son," Stefanos said.

"Then don't," Tasoula said. "We'll come with you."

"And leave behind the only life you've ever known? Besides, the boy belongs here, like me and my father and his father, too."

"And what about me? I came to you with nothing. No family. No dowry. What am I staying for? You're all I have. Victor can stay here with your parents. We'll send money. I'll come and take care of you. If it's not fit to live there, we'll come back"

As reluctant as Stefanos was to part with his young son, it didn't take all that much for Tasoula to convince him. He objected awhile longer, and Tasoula patiently

answered all his concerns, and in the end he agreed that she would go and Victor would stay. He fell asleep, confident that he could accomplish anything with Tasoula by his side.

And so Stefanos Lucas prepared to leave for Australia, along with the other Kalymnian divers, out of necessity, simplest survival, tooth and claw. Betrayed by the sponge beds that had sustained their island forever, the divers and their families on Kalymnos regarded Australia as the answer to their collective prayers. A few weeks later, Stefanos and Tasoula packed up a few belongings and set off to a new world, leaving their son in the loving care of his grandparents. Leaving rocky, barren Greece, Stefanos felt that God was smiling on him.

When it quickly became clear that Australia fell far short of paradise, Stefanos didn't complain. Not about the Aussie luggers' quotas, or the sharks and rays, not even about the leaky suits or the unreliable equipment. In the Aegean islands where Stefanos Lucas was born, a man's duty was fixed and sure as the hard hills and stone houses. Each time he returned from the sea and kissed Tasoula, he reminded himself that it was for her and Victor that he dove. Five years, that's how long he had, said the old Greek divers who preceded the Kalmynos crew. Two years to learn the trade, and then three more to make some money. Anything beyond that was tempting fate. No one grew old in the South Pacific. So Stefanos concentrated on plucking the pearl oysters from the seabed and hauling them on to the lugger. Five years, he told himself over and over. Five years.

But even Stefanos was outraged when the Australians docked the divers' pay after what had happened during the search. He did not argue with Kiri and the others when they came to his shack later that night, raging against the Australians.

“They’ve gone too far this time,” Kiri said, thick-tongued from an evening of drinking and commiserating with the other divers. “Why should we stand for being treated like dogs? We have to do something, Stefanos.”

Stefanos nodded but said nothing.

“We all agree. When the lugger goes out next time, we won’t go. See how far they get without us.”

“You should go home and go to sleep,” Stefanos said. “You’ll think differently tomorrow with a clear head.”

“No,” Kiri said. “Either we stand up together or . . .” He slipped and fell to his knees.

“You’re drunk,” Stefanos said, helping the man to his feet. “Go home. You don’t need more trouble.”

Kiri wrapped an arm around Stefanos’ shoulder. “My friend, everyone trusts you. If you agree, they’ll all listen. Tell me you won’t go.”

“I have a wife and child to think of.”

“Exactly,” Kiri said. “Think of the boy. Show your son what it means to be a man, a Greek.”

Under other circumstances even the implication that he was less than a man would never stand, but Stefanos decided that it was the drink talking, the bluster just Kiri’s salving his wounded pride. Had he not Tasoula to think of and his boy back in Kalymnos to return to, he likely would have been even more imprudent than Kiri.

“Don’t answer now,” Kiri said. He turned and stumbled away. “Think about your son,” he called back over his shoulder.

It was as if Kiri had read his thoughts. And in his heart, Stefanos knew that Kiri was right. Unless the Greeks took a stand, the Australians would continue to exploit and humiliate them. He wouldn't admit it, but he was also afraid. If the Australians sent the divers back to Kalymnos, no one else would come offering work. Before going to bed, Stefanos kneeled before the icon of Saint Nicholas and prayed for guidance.

That night, Stefanos had a dream so vivid and detailed that he was certain it foretold his future. In the dream, he pried open an oyster the size of a dinner plate and beheld a perfect round pearl. It glowed in the faint underwater light, almost electric. Perfectly round and hypnotically luminous, the pearl was as big as his son's fist. Without a second thought, he plucked the jewel from its homely bed, slipped it into his glove, and calmly continued to work.

He finished his time on the bottom and ascended to the lugger. But even before he could finish removing the diving helmet and suit to sit and rest and smoke, the wind began to roar and the boat rose and fell on the rolling sea. A sudden, vicious storm tossed the boat like a toy. Men and gear were swept overboard. Stefanos clung to a rail, but the wind and waves were too strong. He lost his grip and was plunged into the roiling ocean. He fought to ride the towering swells, but he knew it was no use. No human could survive such an ordeal. He felt himself go under. He felt for the pearl inside his glove, but it was gone.

Stefanos awoke in a sweat. But when Tasoula asked what was wrong, he didn't tell her about the dream. He wasn't feeling well, he said. The next two nights he had the same dream, and both times awoke damp and panicked. Again he told Tasoula he was simply out of sorts. Better she worry about a touch of the flu than a portent of disaster.

Don't go down today, Tasoula pleaded with him the morning he was preparing to go out again on the lugger. If you're sick, stay on deck. Stefanos promised he wouldn't dive. And then he kissed Tasoula goodbye and headed out to sea.

The first week they brought up half the usual catch. It was as if the oysters were conspiring against them. The Aussie captain responded by pushing harder, upping the Greeks' quotas, and threatening to stay out at sea for a month if need be to return with a decent catch. The divers were incensed. Among them, only Stefanos remained quiet. He remembered his dream and saw disaster written in every gust of wind and every barren oyster.

Stefanos kept his promise to Tasoula. He volunteered to stay on deck to man the hoses and haul up oysters. The other divers, including Kiri, donned their suits and helmets and plunged into the ocean. When Stefanos checked the horizon, it was cloudless. No storm in sight.

After the second dive of the day, the captain grew impatient with the meager catch and ordered the divers to ascend. The men handling the air hoses on deck signaled to the divers on the other end, and they began their slow ascent. But suddenly, one of the hoses went slack. The crew worked frantically to haul it on board, and on deck there was panic.

Stefanos finally pulled up the neatly cut end of the hose. After an agonizing wait for the divers to surface, everyone was accounted for except Kiri. No one was sure what had happened. All that was certain was that Kiri was not going to return on his own. Divers went down to retrieve the body, while the men on deck studied the severed hose.

The air line was cut by a propeller. That was the Australian captain's explanation. But the Greeks weren't buying it. The skeptical whispers quickly escalated among the divers to near mutinous accusations. Kiri's death was no accident, they said. It was another example of the contempt and outright hostility heaped on them by the Australians. Kiri was murdered because he spoke up against being treated like a dog.

Stefanos looked down at the shells that had been brought up, kicking at the pile on the deck and remembering his friend. It was then he discovered the largest oyster he had ever seen—at least in his waking life. His hands shook as he lifted the barnacled shell. He could only wonder how long it had been growing down there in the dark. Everyone was gathered around the side of the boat where the divers were bringing up Kiri's body. Stefanos stood back from the commotion and pulled a knife from his pocket. He inserted the blade between the golden lips and pried the oyster open in one quick little movement. Inside, Stefanos beheld—once again—the pearl of his dreams.

He looked around and saw that everyone was occupied with hauling Kiri onboard. So he slipped the treasure into his glove, and he tossed the shell into the pile, burying with his toe beneath the smaller ones so no one would have reason to suspect him. He went over and watched as Kiri's brass diving helmet was lifted, revealing his face, smiling even now.

The body was shrouded and stowed below as Stefanos looked on, feeling the treasure hidden in his glove. Then he went back to work, diligently attending to his duties while sniffing the wind and watching the shadows. But no storm brewed. The sky was mercilessly blue. After a few more hours he went down to his bunk, but he couldn't sleep.

The crew would not go on with Kiri's body on board. They demanded that the captain return to the nearest port. And perhaps if the catch had been better, the captain would have refused, but the take was so miserable he had no choice but to head for the port at Cairns.

That night the crew lay in their bunks vowing all sorts of mutinous plots and revenge on the captain. Some talked openly of seizing control of the lugger, even by murderous force, if necessary. Quiet, Stefanos contemplated the situation and decided he had to get back on land, sell the pearl, and take Tasoula away—back to Greece and to their son. Afterward they would go wherever they dreamed. He would be rich, and rich men did as they pleased. So that he wouldn't rouse the suspicions of the Greeks or the Australians he waited until the rest of the crew was asleep and then slipped silently out of his bunk and made his way to the deck, where he stole down into the engine compartment and used the shucking knife to drill a hole in the fuel tank.

By the time the captain saw that the tanks were almost empty it was just in time to bring the lugger into Cairns. As soon as the captain went off in search of someone to repair the leaking tank, Stefanos, claiming illness, told the crew he was going off to find a chemist. He managed to leave the lugger with the pearl tucked into his pocket, and he walked off down the docks, unseen by the Australian guard who was asleep on the deck. He found a main street and followed it at a brisk pace, glancing back over his shoulder, trying to put as much distance as possible between himself and the boat before his absence was discovered.

For the next two weeks, Stefanos walked, stole rides on trucks, and scavenged for food and water until finally he found a set of train tracks that he followed to a dusty little

town with a couple of sad asbestos houses. He hid behind an embankment and waited several hours until he heard a train whistle blow in the distance. When the train stopped at the sorry little station, Stefanos hurried toward a car with open ventilation windows. He climbed up the side and through the open window and on inside into a car crowded with fat, stinking sheep. He rode for the next ten hours, until the train slowed and then stopped.

Stefanos climbed down and saw the sign at the station: Broome. He couldn't believe his luck. Another crew of divers from Kalymnos had been brought to Broome. Here, a Greek would not draw attention. He was hungry and parched from his exhausting journey, so when he saw the sign, Taverna Aphrodite, he thought, more luck.

Inside, behind a bar of rough pine planks set on wooden barrels, stood a weathered, gray-haired man. When Stefanos addressed him in Greek, the man waved both arms, bidding the stranger to come in. But when he settled in at a stool at the bar, the old man drew back. "Where have you been?" he said.

Stefanos could smell the animal stink rising up from his clothes. "I was on a sheep train," he said.

"You don't look like a shepherd," the old man said, "or a railroad man."

"I'm a diver," Stefanos said.

The old man smiled.

"Could you spare a drink, some food, maybe?"

The man opened a bottle of beer and fetched bread, cheese, and meat. "Why is a diver on a sheep train," he asked.

Stefanos decided he could trust his host, a fellow Greek. "I jumped ship," he said. "when we put in for repairs."

The old man looked up from polishing a glass. His dark eyes narrowed. "This ship, it wasn't the lugger, *Roebuck*?"

"How would you know this?"

The old man flipped the dishtowel over his shoulder, set his fists on his hips, and studied Stefanos.

"What is it?" Stefanos said.

"You were smart not to go back to Darwin. But smarter still to leave that boat."

Stefanos was becoming annoyed with the old man's portentous talk. "You know something," he said. "Tell me."

"You really don't know?"

Stefanos reached over and grabbed the man by his shirt. "Why are you tormenting me this way?"

"There was a disaster," the old man said, so softly that Stefanos made him repeat himself.

The lugger left port after repairs and headed for the Torres Straits. The second day, a storm blew up, and *The Roebuck* was lost. All of the Greek divers and deck hands drowned. Only the Australian captain survived. When he was rescued and brought back to Darwin, the captain claimed it was not his fault that the lugger went down in the storm. The boat was sabotaged, he said, by the Greeks. The divers' wives, hearing this insult on top of the loss of their husbands, took up cooking pots, butcher knives, shovels and hoes and stormed the Pearl Master's office. The Australians responded by drawing guns. There

was a momentary standoff. And no one knows what happened next, maybe a sudden movement by the Greek women, or a trigger-happy Australian. “One of the Aussies fired a shot, and one of the Greek women fell dead,” the old bartender said.

“The woman who was killed,” Stefanos demanded, “what was her name?”

“Give me a minute,” the old man said. “I don’t recall.”

“What happened to the other women?” Stefanos said, growing desperate.

The old man continued. The Australians took the women’s crude weapons. They forced them to stand together as a group. They strung a rope around them as a kind of pen. They posted an armed guard. For hours the women stood in the blazing sun, until finally the Australians told them to go to their homes and pack up their belongings. They were given an hour. Then they were herded onto a boat bound for Perth, where a ship had been located to carry them back to Greece.

“How long?” Stefanos said. “When was the ship to sail for Greece?”

“I’m not sure. A few days ago, I believe,” the bartender said. The old man stroked his stubbled chin, trying to recall.

“Is there a way to get to there from here?” Stefanos said, his mind reeling, desperate to think of how he could find his wife.

The old man seemed not to hear him. He squinted off into the distance. And then he snapped his fingers. “I have it,” he said. “The woman who was killed. Tasoula, Yes, Tasoula is the name I remember.”

Stefanos cried out, then he buried his face in his hands and wept.

The old man asked what was the matter. When Stefanos could not answer, he put his hand on his shoulder. “What is it, son?” he said.

Stefanos looked up finally, but he could not bear to see the old man, nor any man. He reached into his pocket for the pearl. "I am to blame," he said. "Take this from me." He lay the pearl on the bar in front of the now speechless old man and walked out into the daylight.

He followed the railroad tracks out of town, oblivious to anything except the grief and guilt that gripped his heart as tightly as he had held the cursed pearl. Finally, he could walk no farther. He sat on the tracks and wept. He didn't look up when he felt the ground tremble. He didn't turn when he heard the train whistle wail his approaching fate. The cruel mockery of what occurred to Stefanos as the train bore down on him made him smile. The last thought in his mind was this: A man's destiny is no more substantial than a fart in the wind.

One

Epiphany

The old man stalked the crowd like a battle-scarred gray tomcat, circling, probing the edges, doubling back, now and then darting into the spectators already lined up three-deep around the edge of Spring Bayou. Young Victor Lucas, the old man's prey, shouldered his way through the crowd, excusing himself, hoping that his stealth and haste would go unnoticed by the growing numbers of the devout and curious gathering to experience Epiphany. All during the fine, cool morning he had managed to steer clear of old Andreas Kostos.

Except that it kept him from checking out the young girls in the crowd as carefully as he would have liked, Victor was a good mouse. He enjoyed the chase. Not that it was so hard. People kept pulling Andreas Kostos aside and shaking his hand, and the Greek sponge diver, as fond of talking as any Greek, stopped to chat, stealing glances over his friend's shoulder now and then for any sign of the slippery boy who had eluded him for the past week. When Kostos stopped to shake hands with a young priest, Victor took the opportunity to circle back behind and make his way up close.

It occurred to Victor that chilly January morning that perhaps he had discovered his true calling. He could be a spy, like James Bond. Why not? His skill in coming and going without being seen was undeniable. And he was handsome. He'd been told so often. He could be charming when he needed to be, as charming as Mr. Double-Zero-Seven flicking his gold lighter at the tips of cigarettes held to the pouty red mouths of gorgeous women. The rest, the white jackets and casinos and sophistication, he could fake. Imitation was another of his talents. Whether he had the courage and cunning of a

secret agent, how did anyone know such things if they'd never been in an adventure? With the possible exception of a beautiful girlfriend, Victor longed more than anything for a chance to show the world just what he was capable of. For now he was an anonymous dishwasher, just another pearl diver. But that was only temporary. He was still working out the details of how he would make his mark, but he was certain that he was destined for bigger things than Tarpon Springs, Florida.

Slipping up behind Kostos and the young priest. Victor was pleased with his daring, even though it was unnecessary. The old man had become agitated and so loud that Victor—along with most of the Epiphany crowd—could have heard him across the bayou.

“These young people today,” Kostos said. “What’re we going to do? Fancy cars and the long hair and the drugs and stone age music.”

“It’s called rock n’ roll, Andreas,” said the young priest, who sported a modish beard.

“I call it horseshit,” Kostos said.

Victor retreated farther into the crowd as the people nearby the old sailor and his young priest edged away from the bellowing Kostos.

“It’s not as bad as all that,” the priest said. He put his arm on Kostos’ shoulder and guided him patiently away from the people on the waterfront up toward the street. “Look at these boys here today. They’re good boys. They’ll take their places in the boats out on the bayou. They’ll say a prayer and jump in after the cross when the archbishop tosses it into the water. Every one of them will try his hardest. Just as it’s always happened. Maybe traditions are dying in San Francisco or New York. But not here.”

Kostos pointed a bony finger at the smiling priest. “The tradition I’m talking about is work,” he said. “It’s one thing to dive into this puddle and bring up a cross. It’s work to dive down in the ocean and bring up the sponges.” He threw his hands up. “Maybe this is what you don’t understand, father. These American kids don’t want nothing to do with sponges. I have to hire a Greek boy to go out with me, and now I can’t find him. Even a boy from Greece. I’ve had it. I’m too old.”

“Find yourself a nice spot to watch the ceremony. Relax. It’s a holy day, especially for a sailor like you. The Archbishop will bless the water. You’ll find your Greek boy. You’ll go out and bring back a boat full of sponges.” He clapped Kostos on the back. “And then you’ll return and complain. Like I’m telling you, some things never change.”

Victor glanced away for just a second for a glimpse of a dark-haired girl standing a few feet away. When he looked up again, Kostos, muttering and shaking his gray head, was headed directly toward him. Victor did what any secret agent would do. He ducked and hid.

“Excuse me. You down there. Hey, you, do you mind?”

Victor watched through the tangle of legs, but he couldn’t find Kostos. He’d been so intent on avoiding the old man he paid no attention to where he or where anyone else was.

“I’m talking to you back there.”

Only then did Victor turn and realize that his nose was just inches from a girl’s lovely, round, blue-jeaned bottom.

“What do you think you’re doing down there?”

“I’m a spy,” Victor said. He looked lovingly at her pretty ass, and then he felt the sting of her hand slapping his face.

When he looked up, he was relieved to see a smile. And not just any smile. Looking down, the girl’s long, dark hair lifted slightly by the cool January breeze. She had the most beguiling smile Victor had ever seen.

“Where did you come from?” she asked.

“Greece,” Victor said.

She laughed, and Victor hoped it was because she thought he was being clever and not because she figured him for the imbecile he felt like at that moment.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’d be more comfortable talking to you if it was face to face.”

“I can’t stand up,” Victor said.

“Are you hurt?”

“I don’t want him to see me, the old man, Kostos. Do you know him?”

The girl looked around at the crowd. “Are you in some kind of trouble? Maybe you should—“

“Just tell me if you see a man with a blue jacket. He has a black cap and gray hair. His face is long, like a goat.”

She laughed again. “Why are you running from Kostos? He’s harmless.”

“He says I have to go out with him on his sponge boat. He says I owe him because he helped me to come here.”

“But you don’t owe him?”

Victor smiled. “I already got a better job. A pearl diver.”

“There are no pearls—“

“Dishdog, I mean,” Victor said. “A busboy at Nouno’s Restaurant. You know it?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Is he still there?” Victor said.

She looked across the crowd. “I’ve got an idea,” she said. “Stay here.” She pushed through the people behind her.

Victor stood and watched the girl approach Kostos. She spoke briefly, and Kostos nodded. She said something else, and Kostos nodded again. She pointed down the street, and Kostos turned and hurried away.

Her smile turned mischievous, conspiratorial as she walked back toward Victor. “That’s that,” she said. “I told him you asked me to give him a message. You’d meet him at Nounos’.”

Victor turned to see if Kostos had reappeared. Maybe it was all a trick.

“Don’t worry,” the girl said. “It’s cool. I just told him it was a message. Some uptight Greek boy with too much grease in his hair came up to me.”

He ran his hand through his hair. On second thought, she was too thin. Maybe not as much up top as he’d like. Hard to tell with the loose peasant blouse all bunched up in front as she stood in front of him with her arms folded. And he hadn’t been able see her eyes full on. She kept looking away.

“As soon as he heard me mention Nouno’s, that’s all it took. You mention that name in this town and people listen. Anyway, you don’t have to worry about him for a while. By the time he gets down to the docks and back, the Epiphany will already be over.”

“You have been a big help,” Victor said. “Thank you.”

“No problemo.”

He turned and began to walk away, but she grabbed his arm.

“That’s it? I save your bacon, and all I get is a lousy thank you? What’s your name, at least.”

For a skinny girl, her grip was surprisingly strong. He looked into her deep, dark eyes. “Victor,” he said, but beyond that he was speechless.

“See, it’s not so hard. Mine’s Sofia Bazos.”

“It’s a nice name.”

“You think? I always thought it sounded like the clown. I even got called that when I was little. I got called a lot of things.” She stood on her toes and craned her thin neck, looking one way and then the other. “Let’s walk,” she said. They headed toward the far end of the bayou where the crowd was thinner.

“You’re waiting for someone?” Victor said.

“My brother’s diving this morning.” She looked at Victor. “I’m surprised you’re not. Greek and all.”

“I came because I saw the crowd. Why does he dive?”

“You know, the Epiphany. Like the twelve days of Christmas. Every year on January sixth they bless the boats and then archbishop throws the cross in the bayou and the boys all try to dive down and get it. I thought every village in Greece did it.”

“Not where I’m from.”

She laughed but this time he heard a note of bitterness. “Tell you the truth, I think it’s a load of crap. I just came down to watch my little brother. All of a sudden he got

religion. I'm not into it, but all these other boys have moms and dads and uncles and cousins, the whole clan here. I figured Georgie should at least have one person, like for support. He's not got much else going for him, except me."

"You will dive?"

"No way, José. Not this girl. Not in a million years. All that 'Look at us, we're so proud to be Greek' shit. No offense."

"No problemo," Victor said.

"Besides it's only for boys. Another Greek thing." She laughed, and continued in a softer tone. "My brother Georgie's just trying to find himself, so he's kind of into the whole Greek-American thing. He's really a good kid, and I'm kind of all he's got."

"No mother or father?"

"My mom's dead. And my old man probably should be. Worse things could happen."

"I'm sorry," Victor said.

"What about yours? Aren't you kind of young to be on your own in a foreign country?"

"I live with my grandfather in Greece. Before he died, he wrote to his friend here about me coming to America."

"The guy who was looking for you. Kostos"

"Another friend—Papademopoulos. You know him?"

"I told you, everyone knows Nouno Papdemopoulos. Unfortunately."

Victor couldn't decide if Sofia's smirk was directed at him or at Nouno. He was proud to be associated with such an important man. It was his ticket to bigger and better

things. He decided not to dispute the point and pressed on. “My grandfather always had a plan for me. He sent me to school to learn English, and he saved his money so I could come when I was old enough.”

“So Nouno like bought you?” she said. “Figures.”

“I don’t know for sure. He wrote a letter and sent something. I guess money.”

“So, what, now Nouno owns you?”

“I work for him, he helps me. We’re friends.”

“You’re a regular big shot.”

Victor laughed. “Not yet.”

“So why don’t you just tell this guy who’s looking for you that you don’t work for him?”

“Kostos is bad luck. No one will go out with him.”

“How do you know?”

“People talk,” Victor said. “I listen.”

“I wouldn’t pay too much attention to talk. Everything that happens here that people don’t like they call it a curse. Something bad happens, they go, ‘Oooh, the evil eye.’ ” She waggled her hands and laughed. But when Victor didn’t answer she stopped and looked at him, her eyes narrowed. “You don’t believe in luck, do you?”

“Only the good kind,” Victor said.

“I wouldn’t know much about that,” the girl said.

They had circled the water and walked up onto the drawbridge that spanned the narrow neck of the bayou. They stopped and leaned against the iron railing. “So what about your parents?” Sofia said.

“My father was a statue made from a pearl.” Victor said, pleased with himself when he saw Sofia’s appreciative smile.

“Sounds like a fairy tale,” she said. “That must make you Prince Charming?”

“It’s true,” Victor said. “My father and mother died. I never knew them. I was a baby.” He held up his palms and made his voice sad. “So only a statue.”

“They really made a statue of your father?”

“On the docks on my island.”

“A statue of pearl?”

“Of rock. The pearl paid for it. But that’s just what they told me. I don’t remember.”

She whistled two notes. High and low. “A real live son of a Greek hero,” she said. “That’s great, I guess. But sad too. About right for a Greek. What’s it like to have a statue for a father?”

“Maybe not so good,” Victor said. “I can find him if I need him, but a statue doesn’t bring home the bacon.”

Her laughter was something Victor could listen to forever.

“That’s something they say in Greece? I figured it’d be bringing home the lamb or the squid.” She laughed again. “Or the sponge, at least the sponge.”

“I watch a lot of TV and movies,” Victor said. “I’m good at intimation.”

“You mean imitation, like a copy cat.”

“I like that, yes.”

The girl stood on her tiptoes again, straining to see across the water. “So what’s all this about a pearl?”

From a distance came the sound of a marching band.

“The pearl is a long story,” Victor said. “Too long for now. Next time I’ll tell you about it.”

“What next time would that be?”

Victor couldn’t tell exactly if she was teasing. She turned to look out at the green water of the bayou where five small wooden boats were tethered to a line that formed a semicircle across the water. All around the bayou the people ringed the shore.

The marching band grew louder, and the crowd began to cheer when the procession came into view. At the head of the parade was the archbishop along with two priests and an altar boy, all wearing embroidered robes of gold and crimson and bearing jeweled crosses and crosiers. With them was a young woman in white, carrying a cage with white doves. Behind the robed figures marched a group of twenty or so boys in bathing trunks and t-shirts. They huddled, hugging themselves against the brisk morning air, and appeared small, anxious, and slightly embarrassed to be the center of attention. As the archbishop and his attendants made their way to a platform erected at the head of the bayou, the group of boys was led to a spot at the opposite end of the little cove. All the while, well-wishers reached out to clap them on their shoulders or shake their hands.

“I don’t see Georgie,” Sofia said.

“Which one is he?” Victor said.

“There he is. Hey, Georgie,” she shouted. A grim-faced boy looked up at the bridge and nodded slightly. “He looks petrified,” Sofia said. “Jesus, I wish he’d get that stupid cross. Show these little asshole Greek boys something.”

“They’re all Greek?”

“Not really Greek. They’re all born here, like me and Georgie, but in this town it’s all about who you know and what island you came from and what your father does for a living. They don’t have much use for people like us. It probably wouldn’t mean anything to them if Georgie got the cross. There’s no prize of money or anything. But at least for once, people would have to recognize Georgie existed. That’d be worth something.”

The boys were lined up at the edge of the water, crouched and watchful. Across the water, the archbishop had greeted the crowd and extended his blessing. He was praying for a safe and bountiful new year.

Victor looked down at Sofia. She was not like most American girls. She was confident, yes, and the way she talked no girl in Greece could never dream of. But in her devotion to the brother and her defiance and pride of being an outsider was a kind strength that had nothing to do with her firm grip. At the same time something inside her seemed brittle and jagged, not weak exactly, and not anger either, but a kind of rawness, perhaps because she was as impatient with circumstances as Victor was. And yet on the surface she was as serene and lovely as a jewel. He’d never known a girl, or even a woman, as lovely. If it would make her happy, he would dive into the bayou and win the cross for her.

But just as he was admiring the beautiful American girl, he felt a hand clamp his shoulder. He turned and stared into the goat face of Andreas Kostos.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Kostos said.

Victor did what a secret agent would do. He ducked and slipped closer to the edge of the railing. Looking back, he saw the beautiful face of Sofia. She seemed about to call

out to him. And then he dropped into the cold water of Spring Bayou, sucking a deep breath before ducking under the green water and kicking out toward the waiting boats. He had an idea, a half-formed plan to help Georgie be first to the cross. It was a scheme worthy of a secret agent. If he were successful he would win for Georgie a small measure of respect and perhaps for himself a more precious prize—Sofia’s heart.

When he surfaced between two of the wooden boats in which the divers waited, all eyes were on the Archbishop, who was winding up his blessing. Victor clung to a rope connecting the boats and leaned his head back in the cold green water so that just his face rose above the surface. He spotted Georgie in the boat next to the one to which he clung. He watched the divers’ knees, waiting for them to crouch just before they sprang into the water.

A cheer went up on the shore as the Archbishop flung the cross, and at the same moment the divers reacted. Victor pushed hard against the hull of the boat, dumping the divers into the water. Then he turned and swam hard toward the group from Georgie’s boat, heading for Georgie, who lagged slightly behind the others. Coming up from behind, Victor grabbed a handful of the boy’s T-shirt and pulled him down, kicking hard toward the bottom. He saw the cross dimly in the dark water and pulled Georgie toward it. Several hands reached out, but Victor’s was a split second ahead. He scooped up the cross and began to rise toward the surface. He reached out and held the cross out for Georgie, who was about to take it when another hand reached and snatched it away. Victor grabbed at the cross, but the thief brought his knee up hard against Victor’s chin. He was dazed. He let go of Georgie’s shirt and felt himself drifting up to the surface along with Georgie Bazos.

The new owner of the cross held it aloft above the water, and an even louder cheer rose up on the shore. The other divers slapped the winner's back and patted his head in congratulations.

Blood from Victor's split chin dripped into the water. He looked at Georgie Bazos. "I'm sorry," Victor said.

But Georgie didn't seem to hear him. "I had it," he said. "It was right in my hand."

And then Georgie began to swim along with the rest of the group to the edge of the bayou where the Archbishop waited.

The crowd moved toward the podium, eager to hear the name of the diver who had retrieved the cross. Victor pulled himself up onto the grass. He stood in the cold breeze, his clothes dripping, but no one seemed to notice. Attention was focused on the procession of divers behind the lucky one holding the cross high in front as they made their way to the podium.

Victor searched the crowd for Sofia. He saw her walking down from the bridge. She was searching too, but Victor knew it wasn't for him. He hurried over to her, catching her off guard.

"What on earth are you doing?" she said.

"I was trying to help. Tell your brother I was only trying to get the cross for him."

"You were out there with Georgie? I thought you'd drowned or something."

"We had the cross. Ask Georgie. That should be your brother up there."

The winning diver was shaking hands with the Archbishop. Someone had wrapped a towel across his shoulders. A young priest standing next to archbishop leaned

close to the microphone. “Ladies and gentleman, I present to you the bearer of the cross for 1969, Cyrus Kanakis.”

The cross-bearer raised the trophy with both hands to the cheering crowd.

“Now he’s supposed to have good luck,” Sofia said. “Do you know him?”

“No, why? Do you?”

”No, it’s just I thought maybe you were cousins or something. He looks a lot like you.”

“Then it’s true. He is lucky.”

Two

The Way Fate is Written

Once each day, a young man in a white uniform and a red bandanna knotted at his dark throat strode down the sidewalk from Arfaras Boulevard toward Hope Street along the sponge docks in Tarpon Springs, Florida, weaving through clots of tourists. It was easy to imagine such a figure on the deck of a boat, peering across the wide sea.

Sometimes the image was so complete and irresistible that a visitor might follow the handsome young man past the Sponge Exchange where he would pause outside Nouno's Restaurant, and then slip quietly through the kitchen entrance. The tourist, following the trail of romance, might have continued inside, and perhaps, caught up in the moment, ordered an ouzo or a glass of retsina and scanned the bar for the handsome young sailor.

It was the summer of 1969, and there were more polished brass diving helmets on display in front of shops and restaurants alongside the sponge docks than in actual use. The Anclote River provided a tangy backdrop. Idle sponge boats bobbed in the green-black water. Lining the river, souvenir shops stocked Greek fisherman's caps alongside bins of dusty sponges and picture postcards of Greek island villages. But when the tourists looked out into the brilliant Florida sunshine hoping to spot an authentic Greek sailor passing heroically on the street, they were usually disappointed.

When the young man in the white uniform and bandana did appear, it would be with a plastic bucket in his hand. He would gather the dirty plates and glasses and wipe down the tables with a damp sponge, silently, anonymously. And the tourist-dreamer would finish her drink, get up and leave and never mention the silly incident to anyone. Still, perhaps, there were those, who, returning home, would remember in some idle

moment the smooth face, the pure, white uniform, the dark neck and knotted bandanna, and the young Greek would be close enough to the real thing to figure prominently in a private fantasy of sun-washed beaches and fishing boats bobbing gently in a pretty marina. Tarpon Springs still offered at least the prospect of grand romance and tragedy, however fleetingly.

In fact, Tarpon Springs had two stories to tell: one Greek, with its own Odysseuses and Poseidons; another American, the familiar immigrants' tale of risk and reward. The story of sponge diving neatly accommodated both. And it turned out that myth-making was a lot more predictable than the sponges themselves.

That summer, Tarpon Springs still looked much the same as it did at its pinnacle twenty-five years earlier, when three hundred tons of sheepswool sponges passed over its docks at the height of the trade, making sponging more profitable in Florida than either tourism or oranges. But that was before the blight of red tide in the 1950s left a trail of rotting sea vegetation up and down Florida's west coast beaches and decimated the beds of sheepswool, yellow grass, glove, and finger sponges. By 1960 production was one-tenth of what it had been a decade before.

It was only a minor adjustment from selling sponges to selling the story of sponges, but in the myth business a measure of authenticity is essential. And it was a matter of pride that even in 1969 a few working sponge boats sputtered out of the docks along the Anclote River each day that summer, as boats and divers had for seventy years. These holdouts were a few native Greeks who still walked on the bottom of the sea where they plucked their humble catch. They were descended from a line of men stretching back to Poseidon. They had coaxed another few months out of their crafts' tired engines,

caulked the already patched hulls, and prepared to set out into the fickle Gulf. Perhaps hazard kept them at it, a need to seek out Fate and her old, faded call to adventure. What else explained why these men—and sometimes their wives, sons, and daughters—would work so hard and give so much for a string of moldering sponges.

Andreas Kostos was one of those who still ventured out. Sponges were what he knew, what his father knew before him. He did not question his destiny. He had the sea in him, and diving into the ocean was something like being born again each day. There were easier ways to make a living than being a fisherman of sponges. But Kostos wasn't ready yet to trade in his diving gear and hang drywall or paint apartment buildings or sell automobiles to Americans. And he certainly had no interest in being part of the tourist attraction that Tarpon Springs and its sponge divers were becoming.

As Kostos guided the *Leftheriá* out into the channel of the Anclote River and pointed it toward the gulf, Victor Lucas finished up the last of the pots and pans, stripped off his stained white T-shirt, and stepped outside the kitchen of Nouno's Restaurant to smoke. It was four in the morning, and despite the thick sweetness of the Florida summer night, it was impossible, hearing the thumping boat engine and the wake slapping against the dock, for Victor not to think of the life he had left behind in Greece. The freshly painted sponge boat on the river and its captain, so stubbornly Greek. He wanted to call out to Kostos. Make him stop. Tell him that he had changed his mind. That dishwashing was no life. That he was ready to take his place at the head of a long line of Greek divers. But it was too late. Another boy had already taken his place, the little boat was past the sponge docks, and Victor was still outside the kitchen.

He watched until the *Leftheriá* rounded the bend of the river out of sight and then went back into the bleached kitchen. He pulled on his wet, stained T-shirt and went to the deserted office where his boss, Theo “Nouno” Papademopoulos, had left the shoebox-sized package wrapped in brown paper. He said good night to the chef and set out with the parcel under his arm. He remembered the directions—to the bridge, across the river, to the slip where the boat was docked. It was his last chore of the day before he could return to his quiet second-story room and sleep until the midday heat woke him. The night was still and wet as he made his way up Dodecanese Boulevard. The river smelled of decay and diesel, the faint, dark memory of the sponge trade. As Victor left on his errand, he tried hard to see himself as the great American he would be someday, and not the Greek delivery boy he was now.

Though it had been years, longer than most local memories, since a sponge diver last died at sea, the specter of danger remained. Back in Greece, for centuries “naked” divers would glide to the depths weighted by a bellstone. They worked quickly to pluck as many of the valuable sponges as possible before returning to the surface. But then the industrial revolution brought mechanical diving suits to the Dodecanese islands, just off the coast of Turkey. The suits allowed divers to prolong their stay on the bottom at greater depths than ever before, but they also were dangerous—often deadly—when divers ascended too quickly, producing bubbles of nitrogen that cut off blood flow to legs or arms and sometimes to the heart or brain. Thousands of divers who succumbed to the bends never returned home, and still more lived as crippled reminders to their rocky Aegean villages of the risks of the trade upon which their survival depended.

By the time Greeks arrived in Tarpon Springs at the turn of the century, divers knew how to prevent such injuries. Yet even in America, fate or greed or inexperience sometimes still claimed divers. Even with modern equipment, the job was dangerous. And danger made diving interesting to outsiders. These were not only seafaring Greeks, they were noble and heroic, or so the tourists were led to believe. That so few divers still worked the Gulf didn't matter. The Chamber of Commerce hired likely looking characters to sit all day on the sidewalk and sort a pile of sponges into bins and then, when the bins were full, dump them out and start over again. It was a kind of living theater. Like costumed colonists in Virginia or lasso-swinging cowboys in Colorado. It was fiction, and no one got hurt.

But the very real news that summer of a death at sea shocked everyone as it spread through town like an ill wind. Andreas Kostos, captain of the sponge boat *Leftheirá*, knew there was trouble when he signaled he was ready to resurface at the end of the day's final dive but received no response from Georgie Bazos, the young, inexperienced boy he had hired to tend his air line and keep watch on deck. Growing more furious with every slow meter he rose dragging the limp air hose behind him, Kostos was prepared to give the kid hell for sleeping or goofing off in the cabin. But as he breached the rolling surface, his anger turned to dread. He emerged into the remnants of a summer storm that, judging from the wind and the curtain of rain in the distance, must have swept over the little boat no more than an hour before. Kostos pulled himself on board and found the *Leftheriá* intact. The air-compressor motor was still running, but the boy was gone. Kostos dived again and again and had all but given up on the rescue when he saw the body floating face down in the rolling waves less than fifty yards from

his boat. Kostos retrieved Georgie Bazos and headed back to Tarpon Springs, where he immediately contacted the police and told them what happened. The boy's father was notified. The autopsy, mandatory in such a case, revealed what everyone already assumed. The boy had simply fallen overboard in the sudden storm and drowned. His death, the authorities declared, was an accident.

Victor Lucas was eating his dinner over the sink in the kitchen of Nouno's, the sprawling restaurant next to the Sponge Exchange on Dodecanese Boulevard, when he heard of the tragedy. He dropped a piece of bread and stopped chewing when Nouno burst into the kitchen. Victor considered slinking out the back door, knowing from experience that the boss's appearance in the kitchen usually spelled trouble. But it was immediately clear that Nouno was not so much angry as he was distressed. He lowered his great white head and gripped the doorframe as if to support himself. The commotion in the kitchen stopped. The cooks and the other busboys, along with Victor, stared at the old man, eager to know why he had come to the kitchen in such a state. In deference to rank, they turned to the chef.

"Boss, what is it?" the chef said.

Papademopoulos shook his head.

"Trouble?" the chef said. "Is it the lamb? I told that butcher—"

"The lamb is fine," Papademopoulos said. Finally, he lifted his head to stare at them. "The boy Kostos hired. He's dead."

"Kostos the diver?"

"You know another?" Papademopoulos said. "He was on the bottom, and when he came up, the boy had disappeared. Kostos, he's taking it pretty hard."

“That boy should never have been out there,” a waiter said.

“That should have been you.” The chef pointed to Victor, who had instinctively swallowed the bread and grabbed a sponge from a soaking pot to make himself look busy.

Everyone, including Papdemopoulos, looked at the quiet, young Greek busboy. They seemed to be waiting for an explanation.

“He asked me to go with him,” Victor said. “I didn’t want to.” The sound of his own voice was foreign to him. He looked to Papademopoulos to back him. “You said. . .”

The old man shook his head slowly. Victor was on his own.

“Kostos got someone else, the boy who came in here and no one talked to. This is my fault that he died?” Victor said.

The chef glared at Victor, who wanted to disappear. “Show some respect, busboy,” the chef said. “The only reason that boy was on that boat is because you—”

“I respect,” Victor said. “But I’m not sorry to be alive.”

“Enough,” Papademopoulos yelled at the chef. “Leave him alone. He didn’t cause this. But understand this, Victor. This boy was one of us. When one of us goes, we all go a little bit. All of us have our time. This was the boy’s time, not Victor’s. That day’s still coming. For all of us. For now, busboy, you get to wash more dishes. Let’s go,” the boss said, clapping his hands.

The waiters hurried out of the kitchen, following Nouno. Victor turned back to the sink, while the chef attacked a lamb shank with a butcher’s knife.

It was true, however, that if not for Victor, Georgie Bazos would never have been at sea. Kostos had finally tracked Victor down. The local boys were sissies, Kostos said.

Soft, long hair like girls. Even if they could be coaxed away from their TV and loud music, they didn't know how to work. "But you, Victor, you are from Greece."

"From Kalymnos," Victor said.

"I knew it. Born for the sea. You're a diver, like me. If you come with me, I'll teach you what you don't know, and some day you can buy your own boat. This is how it's always been."

Victor still didn't give him an answer. It was true that growing up on Kalymnos, where almost everyone was descended from sponge divers, he had often felt destined to live on the sea. But that was before the accident that had left his grandfather hobbled on crutches. It was his grandfather who told him to seek his fortune in America. And facing Kostos, who was so much like Victor's grandfather before his last fateful dive, Victor felt again caught in the tug between Greek honor and the promise of American success.

"I'll think about it," Victor said when Kostos pushed for an answer.

Victor went straight to Papademopoulos' office to seek the boss's advice.

"Kostos is a fool," Papademopoulos said when Victor told him about the offer. "If you go to work for him, you'll be in here begging for your job back as soon as the boat docks. You were right to come to me. He thinks you're some stupid Greek boy, an orphan he can push around and then cheat out of his wages. Where would you turn if something like that happened? The police? They'd laugh at you. You'd come to me. And you know what I'd say?"

Victor shook his head.

"I'd say I've already given you a chance to work here. I give you extra work to make deliveries. I trust you, even though you don't have the right papers. The police trust

me, and if someone told them you're illegal, they would come and ask me. They listen to me. So you stay clean, you come to work, you remember who your friends are, and you got no troubles. Can Kostos say that?"

"No," Victor managed. "But maybe it's what I was meant to be. Maybe it's my duty."

Nouno came from around the desk and put his arm around Victor's shoulder. "I understand about responsibility. How a young man who grew up with divers would feel bound to help another Greek. But I have an idea. If you want to help, maybe you could find someone else. Someone to work for Kostos."

"I don't know nobody."

Nouno turned him toward the dining room, all but empty that afternoon. At a corner table, a pale, skinny boy with blond hair read a comic book and sipped Coca Cola. Victor didn't know his name, though he came in almost every afternoon and sat at the same table, so quiet and reserved that he became part of the background.

"Him?" Victor said. "A diver?"

"Kostos don't need a diver, Victor. Just needs someone to tend to his lines. A warm body he needs, a pair of hands," Nouno said, motioning toward the boy. "Looks like he could use a little adventure. When it did ever hurt to talk?"

Thus, it was Victor who convinced Georgie Bazos to go to sea in his place, even if it was Nouno Papademopoulos' idea. And it was Georgie who was now dead, beloved and revered, forgiven whatever debts and transgressions may have accrued during his short time. And Victor, the undocumented busboy and dishwasher, was even more in debt to his employer, but grateful still to Nouno and not at all remorseful for not dying.

“I don’t know as much as Nouno,” the chef said, slipping the knife’s sharp blade through the lamb shank. “But this makes no sense. A kid born and raised here lays dead on a slab, and this one from the island of the great divers is here washing dishes.”

Victor wondered if the chef expected a response.

The chef stopped cutting, wiped his hands on the towel slung over his shoulder, and looked over at Victor. “You got a lot to learn, boy. Maybe you think just because this town is Greek you got a free ticket. I got news for you, busboy. This is America. You have to earn your place. People in this town look out for their own. Even if you’re Greek. Even if Nouno likes you, you’ll always be an outsider here. If I was you, I wouldn’t let too many people know you was the one who supposed to be on that boat instead of what’s-his-name.”

The funeral procession began at the river. The six pallbearers hoisted the wooden casket from the deck of Andreas Kostos’ *Leftheirá* and prepared to carry it to St. Nicholas, a long march in their black suitcoats under the midday swelter of a Florida summer. They were all classmates of the deceased, the cream of the recently graduated Tarpon Springs High class of 1969, including the student body president and captain of the football team. They all had known the dead boy for as long any of them could remember. But if any of them had spoken more than a few words to Georgie Bazos in the last four years, it was not likely in friendship.

Georgie was the kind of thoroughly unremarkable kid who populated the lower reaches of adolescent social strata. In any town in America, his personal trajectory would have tended toward the lower fringes of high school life, drawn more to parking lots and

back-street routes to and from school than the football field or the homecoming dance floor.

But Georgie Bazos was remarkable in one way, because he was among a handful of his class who were not Greek, at least not fully Greek, which in Tarpon Springs amounted to much the same thing. Georgie's mother, Maria Velusis, had been born on the island of Symi and came to Tarpon Springs as a child with her father and mother. She had married a blue-eyed, blond-haired young man, Bob Bazos. Georgie inherited his father's surname, his hair and eyes, and growing up in the little Greek corner of America on the west coast of Florida, Georgie was like a stalk of corn in an olive grove. By the time he got to high school he was conditioned to keeping to the edges of hallways and locker rooms, close to exits, constantly planning ahead for his escape. The chief aim of his educational career was to remain safely anonymous, which, of course, was just the sort of goal that made Georgie a tempting target for the kind of boys who bore his casket that summer day.

But Georgie was also remarkable in one other way, and it was his saving grace. What kept him from being utterly outcast was his sister. It was because of Sofia Bazos—whose genes seemed handed down directly from her mother—that even the most popular boys occasionally paid attention to Georgie. When Sofia rejected more overt advances from Tarpon Springs boys, a few of the bolder and more persistent ones calculated a path to Sofia's affections that lay through quiet, pale Georgie. And though the tactic rarely succeeded, and sometimes resulted in the rebuked boy's taking out his frustrations on Sofia's unfortunate brother, it never stopped the local boys from trying. Because Sofia Bazos was a girl who could make even good Greek boys act in ways that betrayed their

better judgment when she chose to. And the fact that she occasionally chose to gave them all hope.

So it wasn't hard to find six boys to serve as Georgie's pallbearers. They knew that Sofia would follow the casket down Dodecanese Boulevard and through the quiet streets toward Spring Bayou, where they would turn up the slight rise toward St. Nicholas. But the boys had also been reminded by practically every adult connected with organizing Georgie's funeral—which included the town's leading citizens—that carrying the casket was an honor of the sort not likely to come their way again. For Georgie Bazos—Georgie *Velusis* Bazos, as he was now being referred to, sometimes with the Bazos omitted—was officially a local hero. Death at sea. A sponger. At seventeen.

Étsi ítan graftó. That's the way fate was written, the old women said, observing the tragedy of precocious death. The men reminded one another that risk and grit were what the town had been built on. Forgotten in the welling-up of community pride and ethnic solidarity was the fact that Georgie's death was likely the result of his own inexperience as a sailor and the tightfistedness of Andreas Kostos, the diver who hired the boy to go to sea primarily because he would work cheap. Georgie wasn't even Kostos' first choice.

The Archbishop, leading the way in his white robe, suffered visibly under the July sun. By the time the procession reached the grand old Yankee houses circling Spring Bayou, sweat was pouring from under His Grace's turnip-shaped purple crown and dripping down his snowy beard. Nouno Papademopolis, recognizable to everyone, was struggling as well. It had been a foregone conclusion that the most successful businessman in town, the owner of Nouno's restaurant and the man most responsible for

Tarpon Springs' rebirth as a tourist attraction, would carry the cross at the head of the procession. Nouno had accepted the duty humbly. And even though each step was a new agony, he held his white head erect and the cross high, though its base dug painfully into his soft round belly.

The pallbearers followed the Archbishop, their occasional lapses into juvenile snickering and private jokes drawing the glares of members of the Ladies' Philoptochos Society dressed for mourning and waiting on the sidewalks outside their homes to join the procession as it passed.

Behind the casket, at the head of the march of Tarpon Springs mourners, Sofia Bazos walked in silence, head up, eyes forward, never even within arms length of her father, who seemed to be embarked on his own death march after the first few blocks. Bob Bazos's face was a florid ruin. His rumpled suit, borrowed for the occasion, rode up at the sleeves and drooped in the seat. More than once he stumbled, looked quickly around, and then down at his scuffed shoes as if they, and not his lifelong path of self-destruction, had betrayed him.

If Sofia noticed her haggard father's faltering steps she gave no outward sign. And though the inappropriateness of her low-slung jeans, moccasins, and a peasant smock drew disapproving stares at the start of the procession, after a while no one, not even the Philoptochos ladies or the high school pallbearers, paid the young girl much attention. Tarpon Springs' sons and daughters of Greece surrendered to the romantic fiction of Hellenic tragedy, the poetic death of a young boy, a young *Greek* boy, for he was by now firmly one of their own. Women lay sprigs of basil on the coffin. A clay pot thrown from a second-story window shattered on the sidewalk. The old customs lived.

The sweetness of the Aegean innocence swelled up alongside the bitter knowledge that it had been left forever in the past.

And then, at the corner of Grand Boulevard and Hope Street, the spell was broken. Sofia Bazos stopped walking. She curled her legs under her and sat down Indian-style in the middle of the street. There was no obvious defiance in the act; her smooth, dark face remained as composed as always. It was clear after she quietly declined help from the group of the Philoptochos ladies who rushed to her aid that Sofia was in no physical distress. She was simply finished with the march, or so it seemed. And for a few moments it also seemed that her decision threatened to foreshorten the elaborate ritual when even the Archbishop himself was unable to convince Sofia to continue. After kneeling by her side and speaking softly with her, the sweating Archbishop arose and held up both palms. Many of the watching mourners, thinking it some kind of benediction, imitated the gesture.

Next to approach Sofia was her father, whose anger caused his face to turn an even darker shade of red when he spoke. It seemed for a second that he was ready to explode. He clenched his fists and bent close to the girl, who remained unmoved and calm, knowing her father would not strike her in the street in front of the town's citizens. Finally the man stomped to the shade of the sidewalk where he jammed his hands into the pockets of his baggy suit pants and muttered to himself.

It was Nouno Papademopoulos who finally got through to Sofia. Handing the cross to the Archbishop, he walked over and sat down next to the girl. He took her hand and patted it. He said something that made the girl smile. And then something else that made her laugh. The crowd behind them had grown impatient waiting in the heat through

the failed attempts to convince the sitting girl to continue on to the church, but they were hushed and then heartened to see Nouno—of course, Nouno—finally talk sense to the dead boy’s sister. When she stood finally and Papademopoulis put his arm around her shoulder and led her to the sidewalk, a murmur of approval rippled through the procession. She was a good girl, after all, and they could forgive her for being overcome by grief for her dead brother.

From the second-story room he rented in the home of an old widow—originally, like he, from the island of Kalymnos—Victor Lucas watched Nouno Papademopoulis, his boss, lead the beautiful young girl to the shade of the sidewalk under his window. He hadn’t seen her for the five months since the Epiphany celebration when she’d helped him escape from Andreas Kostos, but he’d thought about her constantly. Victor didn’t intend to join the procession. He knew he wouldn’t be missed. He was invisible most of the time, even bussing tables and washing dishes at the restaurant. Like the dead boy the town was honoring, Victor orbited toward the edges of the tight center of Tarpon Springs society. There were only a few people in town—most notably Nouno Papademopoulis—who knew that Victor could just as easily have been on the boat on which the dead boy met his death. Perhaps it was the boy’s fault, his carelessness. Maybe in his place Victor would have been more careful. Lots of people speculated on what went wrong, but no one knew exactly what happened. And Victor could not escape the feeling that the coffin being marched toward the church could very well be his, and he, not Georgie Bazos, would be mourned so lavishly. That he wasn’t, he had Nouno to thank. Still, he envied the boy, a little, all this attention.

Victor watched as Papademopoulos motioned toward the crowd and Katrina Demetriou, Victor's landlady, came forward. Nouno bent close to the round little woman, drawing her into his confidence, as Victor had seen his boss do with others a hundred times. As he spoke he gestured again and again toward Sofia. Mrs. Demetriou raised her hand to her cheek, listened intently, nodded her understanding. Then Nouno Papademopoulos kissed the old woman on the forehead and walked back to the Archbishop.

While Nouno explained things to the Archbishop, Mrs. Demetriou took Sofia by the hand and led her to the front door of the house where Victor watched from his window. Papademopoulos gathered the cross and took his place again at the head of the procession. The Archbishop, appearing revived by the break and relieved at having order restored, followed solemnly behind. The pallbearers and the grieving father fell raggedly into place behind them. The march continued. Sofia Bazos was safe in the care of Mrs. Demetriou, and no one missed Victor Lucas, who was watching Sofia enter the house where he lived.

Victor was already dressed in his work clothes, white pants, and a T-shirt with a red bandana knotted around his neck, when he heard Mrs. Demetriou talking to the girl downstairs.

He darted to the bathroom with his toothbrush and comb. He brushed twice, checking his smile in the mirror, then carefully combed back his thick black hair. "Dishwasher," he accused his reflection.

"What finally got to me was how phony the whole thing was," the girl was saying to Mrs. Demetriou in the living room as Victor descended the stairs. "I know what people

will think. They'll all say I was in shock or something. I was overcome with grief." She raised the back of her hand to her forehead and made an exaggerated show of emotion like a silent-movie actress in distress. "But it wasn't grief, you know?"

Having lived in the same house for half a year, Victor knew that Mrs. Demetriou would understand little of what the girl was saying. The old woman lived happily in her own quiet world. Mrs. Demetriou, at the *ikonostási*, lit the charcoal in the bottom of the censer and the sweet, soapy smell of incense began to fill the room. She said a prayer in Greek—"May only good things come through my front door"—and crossed herself.

"I really don't believe in all that," Sofia said.

"I say a little prayer for you, dear," Mrs Demetriou said.

Victor waited a moment silently at the foot of the stairs. He wanted to comfort the girl somehow. But he also felt guilty because he knew comforting the dead boy's sister was also a way to penetrate her carefully composed mask, behind which he imagined dark mysteries and soft pleasures.

"I've already grieved for my brother," Sofia was saying. "I've said my goodbyes. He's better off anyway."

"Such a nice girl," Mrs. Demetriou said.

"She doesn't hear much," Victor said.

The girl turned and, seeing Victor on the stairs, blushed. "Hello again," she said.

"I scared you. I'm sorry. My name is Victor. I live upstairs." The words came tumbling out.

"Yes, I know," Sofia said. "I mean I remember your name. I didn't know you lived here."

Mrs. Demetriou smiled when she saw Victor. “This is Sofia,” she said. And then in a whisper added, “She lost her brother.” She reached down and patted Sofia’s hand. “He is happy now with God,” she said.

“I hope so,” Sofia said, raising her voice. “He deserves it. I know he was never very happy with people. He wouldn’t have liked all that today. It was so phony. Lots of people met Georgie.” She looked at Victor, but he couldn’t tell if she was recalling the Epiphany celebration or if she knew that he and Georgie had known one another before he died.

“Nobody knew Georgie,” Sofia said. “Nobody cared about him but me. Nobody even asked me about any of this. I know they meant well, Mrs. D., and I swear to god I tried to go along, but I kept thinking about that coffin and that *parade* and how no one there really cared about Georgie when he was alive. They only care about him now that he’s dead. His whole life just meant nothing. I just couldn’t go through with it. I hope you don’t think I’m disrespectful.”

“Don’t worry about it, *petháki*, there, there—“

“Because I really do respect traditions and rituals and stuff, even if I can’t believe in them. My mom was Greek, but I didn’t get a chance to learn much from her. So I always felt kind of out of step, you know? I never felt like I belonged anywhere.”

“I’m sorry,” said Mrs. Demetriou, pointing to her ear.

“I said I don’t belong here,” Sofia shouted.

“That’s not true,” Mrs. Demetriou said. “Look at you. Beautiful Girl. You could break a thousand hearts, but you’re a good girl. You will find a good man and *na zísete eftychisméni*. Live happily.” She motioned for Victor to come forward. “This is Victor

Lucas, from Greece. He rents a room from me upstairs. Whenever you're ready, dear, he can take you home."

Sofia's dark eyes were gauging Victor. "I'm fine, really Mrs. D. I can go home by myself."

"No, no. Victor is a good boy. He'll go with you. Victor, you see Sofia back safe, yes?"

"Sure, Mrs. Demetriou. My pleasure."

"See what a good boy. And he speaks such good English. You go on whenever you're ready."

Sofia sized up Victor again and then smiled slowly. "What are you now, a sailor?"

Now Victor blushed. "No, I still work for Papademopoulos."

Sofia's smile suddenly vanished, her eyes tightening slightly. "What you do for him?"

"I thought I told you. At the resaurant. Nouno's. In the kitchen."

"You cook?"

"No, I—"

"What, then?"

"Best boy."

"What?"

"You know, best boy. I wash the dishes. I told you that the day we met."

"Oh, busboy."

"Yes, that's it. Bust boy."

"Okay, then bust boy," she said finally, "you can walk me home."

The streets along the docks were quiet and almost deserted by the both locals and tourists who had joined in the funeral procession.

“You know you really don’t have to walk me home. Especially if there’s somewhere you have to be,” Sofia said.

“No problemo,” Victor said.

“I’m just saying if you have to go to work—I’m guessing from your clothes that’s where you were going. Or maybe you just dress like that all the time.”

“You mean my uniform?”

“You look like Popeye,” she said.

“The sailorman.” Victor danced a cartoon jig.

“They have Popeye in Greece?” Sofia said, laughing.

“I watch TV,” Victor shrugged. “To learn English.”

“Didn’t you tell me you studied English in Greece?”

“My grandfather’s idea. I was always coming to America. I had to. There was nothing for me on the island. That’s what my grandfather always told me.”

Sofia wrinkled her forehead. “So you wound up *here*? I can’t wait to get out of this place. So what do you think? Did you find what you came here for?”

Victor grinned. “Maybe I start to,” he said. “For now. . .” He made a circular motion with his fist like washing a plate. “I work for Papademopoulos.” He puffed up his cheeks, stuck out his chest, and walked a few steps while rolling his shoulders.

Sofia laughed again. Harder this time. “You better not let Nouno see you do that.”

“I’m not afraid,” Victor said.

“Then you don’t know much about how things work around here.”

They were crossing the bridge over the river.

“Is this like Greece?” Sofia said, waving at the boats and the sponge docks.

“No hills here,” Victor said. “And not so many boats.”

“Do you like it here?”

He paused. “I like walking with you. I wanted to that day by the bayou . . .”

She tossed her dark hair impatiently. “Some day I’d like to go to Greece and see the hills. But I’d settle for almost anywhere else right now.”

“But your family is here.”

“My family is dead. My father’s here, but he’s one of the big reasons I need to be somewhere else. Besides, you left your family.”

“It’s not so different as you think,” Victor said. He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one. Without asking, Sofia took it from his lips and lifted it to hers.

Victor lit another. “I mean Greece. It’s not so different there from here. There, everyone is just a person. No one thinks, oh, I’m Greek. Everyone just is.”

“Must be nice.” She tossed the cigarette into the river. “See that boat over there, the white one with the blue trim.”

“They’re all white and blue.”

“The one there. The Left Here.”

“*Leftheirá*,” Victor corrected her.

“Whatever. That’s the one my brother died on.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. But then he paused, trying to find the words to tell her how Georgie had taken his place on the boat. “I should have . . . I’m afraid if I tell you maybe you’ll won’t want to talk to me.” He hesitated, then pushed on. “I was supposed to go

with Kostos. Remember? I was hiding from him. Later he found me, but I still didn't want to go. So I asked your brother and he went instead of me. And so you see, it's all my fault."

Sofia looked at Victor darkly, then touched his arm. "It was just an accident, fate. You can't control it. I loved my brother and I miss him, but I don't blame anybody."

"Thank you," Victor said.

"I almost wish there was someone to blame. It'd be easier. I'm going to have to pass by that boat almost every day that I stay here. I don't know if I can do that."

"Maybe I can help."

"And how would you do that?"

"Maybe I'll buy the boat and we'll take it out on the sea and burn it. Maybe we'll . . ." He flung his hands in the air and whistled like a falling bomb. "Blow it up."

Sofia laughed again. "Maybe you should go on to work and save your dishwashing money, Greek. I'm going home. See you around."

"When?" Victor said.

"Who knows? You'll just have to watch for me."

As Victor watched her walk off, he remembered watching the boats as they headed out to sea and him longing to be grown and on his way. It was that same light-headed feeling that transported him toward the restaurant where dirty dishes awaited.

Three

Luck of the Cross

In the days after Victor saw Sofia for the second time, he thought of little else than the girl who seemed to arrive on his doorstep like an answered prayer and then leave just as mysteriously. He clipped newspaper articles and photographs of the funeral march. His favorite showed Sofia just before she sat down in the street. She was in the center of the photo, her face turned to the side and her head tilted slightly as if she were looking toward the sky. Behind her were the casket and the young pallbearers watching Sofia, and behind them were the blurred faces of the throng of marchers. Victor folded the photo, careful not to crease the image of Sofia, and tucked the clipping into his wallet. He handled it gently when he took it out to look at it, but even so, after a few days the newsprint had become as soft as tissue paper from being removed and replaced so often.

He decided to find her. In the telephone book, he looked up the number for Robert Bazos and called. If someone other than Sofia answered, he would pretend he had made a mistake, that he was a confused immigrant. He wasn't sure what he would say if Sofia picked up on the other end. It didn't matter. The recorded voice said that the phone number was temporarily out of service.

He asked Mrs. Demetriou what it meant.

"Someone doesn't pay their bill," the old woman said. "The phone company . . ."

She drew her finger across her wrinkled throat. "Why, Victor?"

He explained he was looking for a girl, and the old woman took the opportunity to invite to dinner her niece, a quiet, short, round woman who wore glasses with pointy black rhinestone-encrusted frames. She could have been twenty-five, or she could have

been forty. Victor sat through dinner, during which the niece spoke only when Mrs. Demetriou asked her direct questions, and then a long, tedious hour in the living room watching *Bonanza* on Mrs. Demetriou's ancient television. When the niece left, all that Victor could remember of her were her glasses and the silk scarf with which the niece had tied back her coarse dark hair. It was a beautiful scarf, Victor thought, and he wondered if the woman had bought it for the occasion, perhaps to impress the young Greek bus boy. He hoped she hadn't. It made him sad to think of her folding the scarf and putting it away, a reminder whenever she again came across it of how small desires add up to a world of yearning.

He began to rise early—meaning for him before noon—to venture out into the sweltering day, hoping to run across Sofia. He found the house belonging to the address listed along with the disconnected number in the phone book, but it was dark for the three days in a row that Victor visited. No car, no sign of life.

And then he saw her. The first time, she was in the passenger's seat of a convertible driven by a young man—at first Victor thought it was a woman—with long hair and a beard. Then a few days later on his way to work, he saw her leaving a bar on Dodecanese Boulevard. But by the time he crossed the street and made his way through a crowd of tourists, he lost sight of her and reluctantly turned back for Nouno's.

Such a small town, Victor thought. It shouldn't be difficult to find one girl. He thought of asking about Sofia at the restaurant. But ever since the day Nouno announced Georgie's death, the rest of the staff treated Victor differently. It was as if he were under constant surveillance, for what, Victor didn't know. The chef's warning about not drawing attention to himself echoed in his memory. Asking questions about local girls—

particularly the sister of the poor dead Georgie Bazos—would only further provoke his coworkers. He considered turning to Nouno for help finding Sofia, but that would only make more indebted to his boss.

Walking along the sponge docks on his way to work two weeks after the funeral, Victor was preoccupied with these calculations when a loud splash startled him. He looked up just in time to see what appeared to be a duffle bag sail up out of the cabin over the side of a boat and into the green water of the river. A pair of shoes followed. Victor stopped. He realized that the boat was the *Leftheirá*. He considered whether to investigate. When nothing else came from out of the cabin, Victor called out for Kostos. But it wasn't the old diver who emerged from the dark quarters. On the deck of the *Leftheirá* stood a young dark-haired man of almost the same height and build as Victor.

“What're you looking at?” the young man said. “Something I can do for you?” He stared down, knees bent, arms tensed and held a bit from his sides, like he was expected something to be thrown at him. He looked familiar, but it took Victor a minute to remember where he'd seen him before. And then he recalled. At the Epiiphany celebration. On the platform next to the Archbishop. The lucky boy who'd come up with the cross.

Victor understood why Sofia had asked that day if they were related. The man on the boat could have been cousin, maybe even his brother.

The young man came closer to the dock. “I asked if you want something.”

“I was looking for Kostos,” Victor said. “This is his boat.”

“Not anymore,” the young man said. “Kostos is no more.”

“Gone? Where?”

“What am I, the post office?”

Victor was not superstitious, at least not like his grandfather or his ancient landlady, but instinctively, he spat three times on the ground. The young man on the boat laughed, closed one eye, arched his eyebrow, and leered at Victor. Then he turned back to the cabin and said over his shoulder, “Go on, busboy. You got dishes waiting.”

It was only a few blocks to the restaurant, but by the time Victor arrived, he had made up his mind. He needed answers. About Sofia. And now about the young man on the boat who seemed to know about him. Growing up on the little island, raised by a crippled grandfather who talked constantly of America, Victor was a solitary child. Once he got to America, things didn't change. Victor had learned to cope with being an outsider. He revealed little of himself to those with whom he came into contact. He learned to get what he needed simply and discreetly. Perhaps if he'd gone with Kostos things would still be simple. But he'd sought his boss's advice and then sent Georgie out to die in his place. He'd fallen in love with the dead boy's sister. Now strangers seemed to know about him. His life was no longer so simple. He had crossed some line into a swirl of events that seemed to be sweeping him up, forcing him to act. And so he would. He'd go to the one person who knew everything. He'd talk to Nouno.

But when he knocked on the office door there was no answer. In the kitchen, the chef was in a frenzy. “You're late,” he yelled, throwing handfuls of soggy, thawed spinach into a mixing bowl and dumping in a ration of dried herbs from a plastic container.

“I was looking for the boss,” Victor said, tying on an apron.

“Nouno ain’t here.”

“Is he coming?”

The chef looked up from the mixing bowl. “How the hell would I know. Nouno don’t clear his schedule with me.” His eyes narrowed as he looked hard at Victor. “What do you want with him?”

“I need to talk,” Victor said. “About my schedule.”

“How about this? Your schedule is to get to work.” He went to the cooler and came back with a gallon container and a covered bucket of chopped cucumbers. “Mix,” the chef said.

Victor opened the plastic container and dipped a ladle into the soupy white contents. “What’s this?” Victor said.

“Yogurt,” the chef snapped. “Why, something wrong with it?”

“I don’t know.” Victor dipped his finger in the yogurt and tasted. “Is it supposed to be like this?”

“Like what?” the chef said, grabbing the ladle and tasting for himself. “I don’t taste nothing.”

“That’s what I thought was wrong,” Victor said.

“Very funny. Look, kid. Let me set you straight. This ain’t Greece. We don’t use sheep’s milk yogurt. Or fresh *rigani*.” He grabbed a handful of dried oregano. “The people who eat here are tourists. They don’t know goat’s milk from yak butter. But you know what they like? This.” The chef plopped four or five ladlefuls of yogurt onto the cucumbers. Then he sprinkled a handful of dried herbs on top. “They eat this stuff by the tub, kid. You see them. Now mix.”

Victor did as he was told.

“It’s like a friend of mine,” the chef said, wrapping the spinach mixture in squares of phyllo and folding them into triangles that he dropped onto a baking sheet. “This guy goes to Italy. He comes back. I ask him, ‘How was the food?’ He says, ‘Nyeh, so-so.’ I say, ‘You go to Italy and the food is just so-so?’ He says, ‘It wasn’t right. It didn’t taste like the pizza here.’ You understand, kid? People like what they get used to.”

Victor nodded.

“Get some of those little dishes there and fill with them with the tzaziki. Then put them in the cooler,” the chef said. “I’m telling you, kid, for your own good. People want comfort. They’re afraid if they try something new they’ll be disappointed. Or maybe they’re afraid they’ll just want more. So they stick to the tried and true. And I’m not just talking about food here. It’s everything. Here, help me with this.”

Victor took a tray of the spanakopita and put it into the oven.

“Can I ask you?” Victor said.

“Shoot.”

“Do you know a girl, Sofia? The sister of the boy who drowned.”

“The little girl who sat down in the street? What about her?”

“I talked to her. I liked her. I want to see her again.”

The chef threw up his hands. “Jesus, kid. Have you been listening? Doesn’t any of this register? This is exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you. Maybe you think because of all these tourists that people here welcome outsiders. They do, as long as they’re spending money. But let someone come in here and try to open a store or teach school and see how welcome they are. I know, kid, I seen it happen.” He handed Victor the

empty mixing bowl, and Victor put it in the sink and began filling it with water. “That’s what I’m telling you. Even though you’re Greek, it ain’t the same. If it comes right down to it, kid, if you get yourself in a position where it’s you or someone born and raised here, you ain’t gonna have many friends. This girl, does she know you told her brother to go with Kostos?”

“But Nouno said—“

The chef held up a hand. He went to the door and peeked outside. “Kid,” he said, his voice lower, “be careful. Don’t think Nouno’s the answer to your problems. Nouno runs this place, the whole town. Even you must see that. But he also has to live here. And push come to shove, Nouno’s gonna take care of his own first. My advice?” He tossed a couple of heads of garlic on the wooden chopping block and smashed them with the flat side of his butcher’s knife. “Mind your business and do your job. That’s my philosophy. Look where it’s got me.” He deftly chopped the garlic, scraped onto the knife blade, and tossed it into the smoking frying pan.

Victor considered the advice. He could do as the chef said, and try to forget about Georgie and Sofia and concentrate on pleasing Nouno. But look at where the tried and true had gotten the chef. Exactly ten feet from where Victor stood washing dishes. Some day, if he were lucky, Victor could follow in his footsteps. Or he could find Sofia.

“One more question,” Victor said. “Do you know someone who looks like me?”

“What, about six feet, black hair, dark skin? Thin guy, wears T-shirts? Looks Greek, maybe?”

Victor nodded.

The chef laughed. “Only about every other guy you see on the street.”

The next morning, Victor awoke to a knock at his bedroom door. He stumbled out of bed and found Mrs. Demetriou waiting outside with a cup of coffee.

“I’m sorry to wake you, Victor,” the landlady said. “But I wanted to talk to you before you went to work.”

Victor rubbed his eyes.

“I was hoping you could take something to the restaurant.” She held up a sign: *The Family of Georgie Bazos Memorial Fund. A Brave Young Diver Lost at Sea. Donations Welcomed.* “We’re collecting for the Ladies’ Philoptochos. We wanted you to ask Mr. Papademopoulos if we could put this sign up. For the family. The father and the nice girl, Sofia.”

Suddenly, Victor was wide awake. “How much do you have?”

Mrs. Demetriou clicked her tongue. “Not enough,” she said. “Sixty dollars maybe. We’re embarrassed to give so little. That’s why we wanted to ask Nouno.”

“I’ll ask,” Victor said, taking the sign and the container with a slotted top.

“Oh, I knew you’d help,” Mrs. Demetriou said, reaching up to kiss Victor’s forehead. “Are you all right? You seem so warm. You don’t seem yourself lately. Are you eating?””

“Yes, yes. I’m fine,” Victor said.

Victor followed his usual route to work, down to the sponge docks and then on to the restaurant. But as he turned onto Dodecanese Boulevard, he was stopped by a woman in a T-shirt and sunglasses.

“What are you collecting for,” the woman asked.

Victor stepped back.

“Your sign there,” the woman said, pointing to the placard Mrs. Demetriou had given him. “Is this the boy I read about it in the papers? That’s so sad.” She reached into her purse. “Here,” handing Victor a five-dollar bill, “I’m happy to help.”

“Thank you,” Victor managed.

Another woman, seeing the transaction, pushed a dollar into Victor’s hand. And it occurred to Victor that if he collected enough money perhaps he could help Mrs. Demetriou deliver it to Sofia. He walked down the block and approached the next group of tourists he came across.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Would you give?” He showed them the sign, and thanked them when all four handed him money.

Some of the people he passed averted their eyes, but each time he stopped and asked strangers, they gave him bills and coins.

He was within a block of the restaurant and had collected perhaps twenty dollars when a young boy in cut-off blue jeans and long hair came riding up beside him on a bicycle. “Who are you?” the boy said.

“I’m collecting for the Philoptochos. For the boy who drowned. You want to donate?”

The boy glared at Victor. “Hey, pal, I was a friend of Georgie Bazos. I went to school with him. I don’t remember seeing you in school. I don’t remember ever seeing you.”

“I’m from Greece,” Victor said.

The boy snorted. “What’s this money for?”

“For the family. He had a sister, Sofia.”

“Sofia Bazos?” the boy said, smiling and nodding his head.

“You know her?”

“Everyone knows Sofia. Is that what this about? Cause I could help if you want.”

“It’s from the church,” Victor said.

“Hey, excuse me for living. I was just offering to help.”

“Sorry,” Victor said. “Do you know where Sofia lives, where she works, maybe?”

“What the hell?” the boy said. “I knew you weren’t from the church. Wait’ll I tell—”

A car horn sounded, and when the boy saw the Cadillac pulling up to the curb, he jumped back on the bicycle and pedaled off. The dark car window slid down, revealing the frowning face of Nouno Papademopoulos. “What’s this?” Nouno said, pointing at the sign.

“I’m collecting for Mrs. Demetriou,” Victor said. He handed the sign to Nouno.

“That’s nice, Victor, but it looks like you’re a beggar.”

“I was just—“

Nouno raised his hand. “Busboy, we don’t beg in this town. We take care of our own. Get in.”

Victor settled onto the wide front seat of the Cadillac as his boss swung the big car from the curb and down the street toward the restaurant. From the outside, the car windows looked impenetrable, but from inside the tinting transformed the exterior world, softening its edges, soothing its glare. Nouno was silent until he parked at the spot just outside the entrance to the restaurant, the one marked Reserved for Nouno.

“So, how much did you collect?” Nouno said.

Victor counted the bills. “Eighteen dollars and . . .” He examined the coins. “Thirty-five cents. Mrs. Demetriou said she had maybe sixty. She was embarrassed it wasn’t more.”

“So she sent you out to collect?”

“She wants me to ask to collect at the restaurant. On the street was my idea. I was wanting to ask if maybe you would donate?” Victor said.

Nouno laughed. “You’re something, busboy. Sharp, dumb, slick, gullible, I don’t know which. Okay, sure, I’ll give. How much, you think, would make Mrs. D. not so embarrassed?”

“If she had two hundred . . .”

Nouno whistled, long and low. “Pride don’t come cheap, huh, busboy. But you know, Victor, that with this family you’re just pissing that money away. But, okay, I’ll make up the difference. No need to bother the customers. Come with me to the office. There’s something I need you to do.”

Nouno had his keys in his hands to unlock the office door when he noticed it was already open slightly. From behind, Victor watched the boss stiffen slightly as he pushed the door wide. “What are you doing here?” Nouno said to whoever was waiting inside.

“This came in the mail,” the visitor said.

Nouno motioned for Victor to come in. “Close the door,” the boss said, as he settled into a big leather chair behind an ancient oak desk. “Sit.” Nouno leaned back in the chair, holding in front of him a creased document. Without looking up from the page, the boss said, “I believe you two have met.”

Victor's eyes were still adjusting to the dim office, but there was no mistaking who sat across from him. It was his the man he had seen on Kostos' boat.

"Hello again, Victor," the young man said.

"My nephew, Cyrus Kanakis," Nouno said. "You see what I was telling you now, Cyrus?"

"You think this mutt looks like me? Cyrus said.

"Like a mirror," Nouno said.

"That ugly mug," Cyrus said.

"Close enough," Nouno said.

"You're outta your mind, Nouno," Cyrus said.

Victor had never heard anyone challenge Nouno. The old man looked up slowly from the paper, first at Victor and then at Cyrus. He smiled. "Close enough," he said again. He handed the paper back to Cyrus, suddenly serious. "I can't help you with this."

"What are you talking about? You know everyone," Cyrus said.

"This here is different." Nouno leaned back in the leather chair. "This is Uncle Sam, not Uncle Nouno. Washington, D.C., not the Tarpon Springs PD."

"I'll go to Canada," Cyrus said.

"Sure, you'll go and eat whale blubber and play footsie with the Eskimos and polar bears. You think the government's going to just forget? Maybe just kiss all those hippie draft dodgers on the cheek and let them waltz on back when the war's done."

"I'm no hippie, Uncle." Cyrus said. He held up his hands and wiggled his pinkies, both of which crooked at the ends in forty-five degree angles. "This right here's my ticket out. They don't take guys with deformities."

Victor slipped his hands inside his pants pockets.

“Idiot,” Nouno said. “The army don’t give a fig about pinkies as long as your trigger finger works. You get kept out for something serious, a bad heart, maybe. But your heart is fine.”

Cyrus tossed the piece of paper aside. “Fucking war,” he said. “It’s not like when you fought. If some son of a bitch is trying to take over the world, then you stop him. That makes sense.”

“None of that matters much when the shooting starts. When you’re the one getting shot at nothing makes much sense,” Nouno said.

“You know what I mean, Uncle. It’s not like the Vietnam army’s going to come rolling in to Tarpon Springs.”

“Now you *sound* like one of those damn hippies,” Nouno said. “Sometimes you have to do what you don’t want to do, right Victor?”

Caught off guard, Victor managed to nod.

“What does he know?” Cyrus said.

“Do not underestimate our busboy, here, Cyrus. He’s got no one. No family, like you. But he managed to make it here from some rock out in the Aegean. He found himself a job, a place to live. He’s doing just fine for himself. Plus, he don’t have no letter from the draft board. But if he did, it’s my guess he’d go. He’d do his duty. Am I right?”

“I don’t know,” Victor said. “I don’t think about it.”

“Sure. Why would you?” Nouno said. “Greece ain’t at war with Vietnam. You got no worries. Unless. . .” Nouno cocked his white head. “Someone figures out you’re

not exactly legal here. But otherwise, you got no worries at all. At least not about being drafted. That's where you and Cyrus here are different."

Nouno looked at his nephew and a small grin formed at the corners of Cyrus' mouth.

"You know," Nouno said, "back in the old days of this country, during the Civil War times, a rich man could pay a poor man to go fight in his place. Too bad for you, Cyrus, that those days are gone."

"Too bad," Cyrus said.

"Because then it would just be a matter of finding the right person," Nouno said. "How about it, Victor, would you go off and fight for Cyrus if he paid you?"

"I'm not a soldier," Victor said.

"And I am?" Cyrus said.

Victor felt the blood rise in his face. They were playing him for a fool. He stood, prepared to walk out of the office, the restaurant, perhaps back to Greece if need be. But he wouldn't be insulted. The only thing that prevented him from standing up for himself was the sudden thought of Sofia. "I don't need money so much I would die for it."

"Relax, busboy," Nouno said, rising from behind the desk. He came over and put his hand on Victor's shoulder. "We're just talking. That's all ancient history. It'd be a crime in this day and age." Nouno sat on the edge of the desk and exchanged a smile with his nephew. "You see, Victor is nobody's fool. That's why I like him."

Victor sat back down, but his heart still pounded.

"I have a proposition for you. But don't worry, it don't require going to war. A job, working for me, but not in the restaurant. Kind of a promotion, you might say."

Victor thought of the chef, of his watery tzaziki and soggy spanakopita. He thought of how Sofia looked at him in his white clothes and red bandana, like he was indeed a boy. “What kind of job?”

“This and that. Making collections, deliveries. Something like what you’ve done for me already. You’ll be working with Cyrus.

Victor noticed, for the first time, that for all the similarities in their appearance, there were also definite differences between him and Cyrus. Cyrus Kanakis looked like the part that Victor envisioned himself in when he watched American movies or television. He wore a pale blue knit shirt with a wide vertical black stripe on the left side. His black slacks were tapered to the ankle above his gleaming pointed shoes. Dark glasses were pushed back up over his forehead.

“I’ll pay you twice the money,” Nouno said. “If you want, you can still work here in the restaurant for extra money. Of course, if you stay in the kitchen too long, you have to hope no one discovers your little problem with work papers. It’s a small town. People take notice. The other day the chef was asking—“

“What do you want me to do? When do you want me to start?” Victor said.

Nouno smiled. You go on to work now. Meet Cyrus here in the parking lot tomorrow night after your shift. He’ll explain everything.” Nouno stood, and Cyrus raised two fingers to his forehead in a salute. Victor waited.

“The money,” Victor said. “For Mrs. Demetriou.”

“Jesus, I almost forgot.” Nouno laughed as he opened a drawer and pulled out a metal box, opened it, and counted out ten twenty-dollar bills.

“What’s this?” Cyrus said.

“Victor is collecting for the family of Georgie Bazos,” Nouno explained.

“That deadbeat? He must owe you ten times that,” Cyrus said.

“This is different,” Nouno said. “For his loss, from the church ladies. For the girl, too.” He winked at Victor.

“If I know Bazos, that girl won’t see dime one,” Cyrus said.

Nouno looked up at Victor. “Maybe Victor will see to it the girl gets what’s coming to her.” Nouno winked at Victor and handed him the cash. But when Victor reached for it, the boss pulled it back.

“You be careful with this,” Nouno said. “This new job for me, you can’t be drawing attention. You watch your step around Bazos. Especially if you care about this girl.”

When Nouno finally handed over the bills, Victor again felt as if he had crossed some deeper threshold. He knew it was more than charity. Nouno Papademopoulos’ generosity did not come without strings attached. Every gift tightened the knot around the recipient.

Four

For Your Loss

The next morning Victor awoke early and walked to the Department Store on Main Street. Parting with a careful portion of his savings, he bought a new blue shirt, dark, razor-creased slacks, and a pair of narrow, pointed-toe shoes. By the time he returned home, Mrs. Demetriou had finished cleaning the kitchen. She was sitting in the living room counting the money that Victor had left on the kitchen table.

She looked up at Victor in amazement. "I never expected so much. So soon."

"I asked around," Victor said. "Is there enough now? Are you embarrassed?"

"Victor, *yié mou*." She stood creakily and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Are you all right?" Victor said.

"The gout," Mrs. Demetriou said. "I'm too old."

"Do you want me to go and give the money? You can stay here. Rest. I will tell her—them—that it's from you and the church."

"We can go tomorrow. I'll feel better."

"It's no problem," Victor said.

The old lady smiled and patted Victor's cheek. "It's nice, you thinking about my rest." She sighed. "I'm old. Sure, you go. Say hello to that nice girl."

The address that Mrs. Demetriou gave was not the one from the phone book. It was across the river, in a part of town that Victor knew from his late-night deliveries for Nouno. The sun was blazing, and Victor took off his new shirt to save it from sweat stains. By the time he arrived at the address—a sagging trailer with a front yard of barren

sand—sweat was rolling down his back into the new black slacks. The loafers had rubbed blisters on his toes. He fanned himself with his shirt to dry the perspiration before he slipped it back on and knocked on the front door.

“What do you want?” a male voice called from inside.

Victor was about to knock again when the door opened a crack. Behind the safety chain, he could see Bob Bazos peering out. “What the hell are you doing here?” Bazos said.

In all his mental rehearsals, Victor hadn’t prepared for Bazos recognizing him. “I have something for you,” Victor said.

“I bet you do. I told you last week I’ll have your money. So you tell your uncle he can go—“

“Mr. Bazos, I don’t come for Papademopoulos,” Victor said, when he realized that Bazos had him confused with Cyrus. “I come for Mrs. Demetriou and the church.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Who are you?”

“I’m Victor Lucas. I help to collect money. For your loss. For your son. I have it here.” He held up an envelope.

“Money?”

“Two hundred dollars. A memorial for Georgie.”

Bazos was silent, waiting.

“It’s for you and your daughter, Sofia. Two hundred dollars.”

“I heard you the first time,” Bazos said.

“Is she here, Sofia?”

Bazos shook his head.

“I hoped I could give to you both.”

“She won’t be back for a while.”

“If she’s at work maybe I could go there. With you.”

“Look, I don’t know where she is or when she’s coming back. So why don’t you just give me the money, and I’ll make sure she knows about it.”

“I don’t mind going to her,” Victor said. “Or I could come back.”

“I told you I don’t know where she is. But I’m beginning to think this all a load of bullshit. Someone I don’t know from Adam shows up on my doorstep asking questions about my daughter and I’m not going to suspect something? What kind of father do you think I am? Look, boy, if you came to give me money, hand it over. Otherwise, get the hell off my front porch, and I better never find you sniffing around for Sofia.”

Broken capillaries across the tip of Bazos’s nose blossomed in tiny red stars. His eyes were puffy and raw. Victor wondered how Sofia could share anything with such a man. He remembered the last time they had talked. He could see now why Sofia was so eager to distance herself from her father. He considered tucking the envelope back into his pocket and walking away. But he knew that Bazos already considered the money his, and that he would not easily part with it. Foolish, Victor thought. He should have made sure Sofia was home, alone, when he came. He had no choice. He delivered the lines, intended for Sofia, that he’d so carefully rehearsed in his head. “Please accept this memorial for your son, Georgie, from Mrs. Demetriou and the ladies of the church. Please tell Sofia we are thinking of her.” He bowed slightly as he handed the envelope to Bazos, who stuck his hand from out of the gap of the still-chained door to accept it.

“Thanks,” Bazos said, and he closed the door.

Victor walked to the corner and sat with his back against the trunk of a big live oak outside of a small grocery. He watched the house for an hour until Bazos emerged from the front door, got into a battered Ford, and left. Victor walked down the street and around the side of the house. He peered in the windows, but the shades were pulled. In the back yard a wooden boat with a gash along its hull rested on four cinder blocks. A bicycle with flat tires leaned against the house. Victor didn't know what he expected to find, but there was no trace of a female anywhere. He walked up and down the block twice, checking every passing car for Sofia, until it was time for him to head back for the restaurant. He considered leaving a note on the front door, but saying what? The Greek busboy was here? He left money? He wants to see you? If Bazos found such a note, there was no telling how it would complicate matters. Then he had an idea.

He went back to the grocery and bought a can of spinach. He asked the clerk for a pen. Across the label he wrote, *Popeye was here. Toot Toot*. He left the can next to the front door.

Ten hours later Victor sat in the passenger seat of a panel truck next to Cyrus outside of a warehouse in Tampa. Cyrus had explained Victor's assignment during the forty-five minute ride from Tarpon Springs. He was to wait outside the building while Cyrus went inside. At any sign of trouble, especially the police, Victor was to run to the van, honk the horn twice, and then drive away. If the police stopped him, he was to answer in Greek, pretend he didn't understand English. If they took him in, Victor was to remain silent and wait. Nouno would take care of it, Cyrus said. Nouno knew how to make problems go away.

Cyrus had reached behind the seat for a black duffle and a key ring with perhaps twenty keys. “Stay sharp,” Cyrus said to Victor as he left the van.

After a half-dozen attempts, Cyrus found the right key and opened the door. “Remember,” he said, “if anyone comes by, you get to the van.” Just before he entered, Cyrus pulled a pistol from the bag. He held it in front of him as he went inside.

Victor thought he understood how Nouno planned to make use of his resemblance to Cyrus. Victor the busboy was a decoy, an expendable scapegoat. This is what Nouno was paying him for. Someday, he would return to Greece, perhaps with a girl like Sofia, and he’d be a rich man. With enough money he could change things on the island. He could bring what he learned in America about money and power and create businesses and jobs. He could save young boys like himself from having to go somewhere else just to be able to survive.

But it wasn’t the money alone that convinced Victor to go along with Cyrus. He looked up to Nouno with the same kind of fear and awe with which he regarded the old priests in Greece, as if they were living embodiment of the fearsome saints of the church icons.

And he also knew that if he refused to go with Cyrus, with a phone call, Nouno could send Victor back to Greece. It was the idea of never seeing Sofia again that ultimately convinced Victor to do what Nouno asked. But guns were never part of the deal.

Cyrus threw the door open. “Victor, get your ass over here,” he said. He carried two cardboard boxes with one arm. He was still carrying the gun. “Put these in the van,” Cyrus said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Victor got out and opened the van's rear doors and put the boxes inside. He heard the car pull up before he saw it through the van's windshield. The car's headlights were off. A single figure emerged and walked slowly toward the van, a gun in his hand. There was no time to signal Cyrus. Victor crouched, and when the man with the gun walked toward the driver's side of the van, he crept around to the opposite side. Through the passenger-side mirror he could see the shadow of a large man peering into the driver's window. As the man continued toward the back of the van, Victor circled toward the front, trying to think of a way to alert Cyrus to the awaiting danger without getting himself killed.

When the warehouse door clicked, the man pressed his huge back flat against the side of the van. Cyrus emerged from the door, with two more boxes on one arm and the duffle bag swinging from the other. Victor saw the lurking man crouch and extend the gun in his hand as he moved cautiously around the opened rear door.

"Victor, where the hell are you?" Cyrus called.

The man dropped to one knee and took aim.

"Get down, Cyrus," Victor shouted. He charged toward the kneeling gunman.

The man couldn't swing his bulk around before Victor pounced. The momentum of the tackle pushed the large man's face into the pavement. The gun skittered across the concrete. Victor pressed his weight on top of the man's broad shoulders. He could feel him struggle for breath. Unless the man was out cold, he couldn't hold him for long. He looked up in time to see Cyrus run to the back of the van and throw the boxes in, saw him fumbling in the duffle bag. Victor had to do something before Cyrus found his gun. He reached for the pistol lying a few feet away on the pavement. He raised it and swung it

down hard against the back of the gasping man's head. He saw Cyrus still searching for his weapon. Victor pointed the barrel of the gun toward the ground. He took aim, focusing on the sand at the edge of the pavement a few feet beyond the man's head. He pulled the trigger.

The shot jerked Cyrus to attention. "Jesus Christ," he said. "Victor, what the hell did you do?"

"Get in," Victor said.

Cyrus walked over. "Jesus there's blood all over the back of his head. You shot him in the back of the fucking head? Jesus."

"Let's go," Victor said. He tucked the gun into the waist of his new slacks. He hoped he wouldn't need it again. He would figure out later how to get rid of it.

Cyrus gunned the engine and whipped the van around the end of the warehouse and onto the deserted street.

"I couldn't signal," Victor explained. "He came up too fast."

"He would've killed me," Cyrus said. "You saved my ass. And then you blew that piece of shit away. Wait till Nouno hears about this."

"I didn't shoot no one," Victor said.

"But I saw—"

"The blood was from when I hit him with the gun. I shot into the ground."

Cyrus looked over at him.

"I'm no killer," Victor said. He looked down at the gun. His hands shook now, but he was surprised by how calm he'd been. Like James Bond. It had been easy. He tucked the gun under his belt. He'd get rid of it later.

Cyrus turned the van around in the middle of the street and headed back in the direction of the warehouse. “That guy saw us,” Cyrus said. “We have to finish it.”

“It was dark. He saw someone coming out of a door. You got what you came for?”

Cyrus flicked off the headlights as the van lumbered around the corner of the building, and raced toward the warehouse entrance. But there was no car. No body. Victor breathed deeply, exhaled slowly, felt his heart crawl back down from his throat.

Cyrus banged his hand against the steering wheel. “Fuck.”

“Who was he?” Victor said. “Why was he here with a gun?”

“Who knows, some punk. In case you didn’t notice, busboy, this is a little messier than the kitchen.”

“He’s your enemy? A bad guy?”

Cyrus laughed. “Just like the movies. Now he’s your enemy, too.”

Two days later, Cyrus was waiting in the parking lot, sitting in the driver’s seat of his shiny new Mustang when Victor finished in the kitchen. He reached into his pocket.

“Hey, busboy, I got something for you.”

Victor froze.

“Relax,” Cyrus said. “It’s just a note. From Nouno.”

Victor unfolded the paper and read the words, *Stagger Inn*, followed by an address. *For your cool head and fast thinking, Nouno.* Victor looked at Cyrus.

“A little gift. A bonus. Nouno said to tell you thanks.”

“What’s Stagger Inn?”

Cyrus ran a hand across the smooth part of his hair, checking his reflection in the driver's side mirror. "It's where you can find your girl. If I don't get there first." He grinned at Victor, and the Mustang's engine growled as Cyrus stomped on the gas pedal.

The bar was long and narrow with a bare concrete floor and stuffed deer heads and lacquered fish hanging on the walls, which rattled to the bass-heavy thumping of a live band. Victor recognized the long-haired, bearded singer as the driver of the convertible in which he had seen Sofia. Victor sat at the bar and scanned the few tables, but he didn't see Sofia. He turned to the barmaid and ordered a Budweiser. When he turned back to the band, Sofia was in front of him.

"Hiya, sailor man," she said. "I hear you've been asking around about me."

She was not so skinny as he once thought. Victor had to consciously resist the temptation to touch her smooth face. "I was helping Mrs. Demetriou raise the money. I wanted to help."

She leaned close to shout over the band. "What money?"

"From the church ladies. I gave it to your father."

"Oh, Jesus," Sofia said. "When did you see him?"

"I went by your house last week. I asked for you. Then I gave him the money Mrs. Demetriou raised for Georgie. He said he'd tell you."

The band struck a final deafening chord and announced it was time for the next band.

"Thank god," Sofia said, nodding toward the tiny stage.

"You didn't get it, the money?"

“All I got was a can of spinach. If you gave money to my old man, you may as well have thrown it in the river. But you didn’t know that,” Sofia shrugged. “So you wanted to give me money. And then what?”

Victor didn’t understand.

“Was I supposed to be impressed? Did you think I’d fall all over you or something because of your charity?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Victor said.

“Calm down. I’m pulling your leg a little.”

“Pulling my—”

“I’m teasing.”

“Oh,” Victor said. But he remained on guard.

“Look, start over. You were asking around about me?”

“I need to tell you something.”

“That’s better.” She waited. “So, what did you want to tell me?”

“I’m afraid,” Victor said.

“Why don’t we just cut out all this bashful Greek-boy stuff. You’re not that shy.”

Victor looked into her brown eyes. “When I told you about Georgie taking my place on the boat, you said it didn’t matter, you didn’t blame me. Do you still think that?”

Sofia backed away and ran her hand through her dark hair. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I think maybe you don’t want to see me.”

“This is what you came to tell me?”

“I wanted to explain about Georgie, why I asked him to go with Kostos. Then maybe you’ll change your mind.”

“I doubt it’ll change anything,” Sofia said. “But, hey, go ahead, get it off your chest.”

“Kostos came to me first. He asked me to go with him, so I went to Nouno.”

“Papademopoulis was involved in this?”

“He told me to find someone else for Kostos. I told your brother because he was always in the restaurant. I didn’t know . . .” He watched the girl’s face. But if she was upset, she didn’t show it. There was no telling what she was feeling. Just then the bearded singer came up and put his arm around Sofia.

“We’re done for the night, babe,” he said. “You ready?”

“In a minute,” Sofia said.

The singer glared at Victor. “You all right here?” he asked Sofia.

“I said give me a minute.”

The singer threw his hands up and headed over to the stage.

“Are you saying you’re to blame for my brother?” Sofia touched Victor’s arm.

“Oh, Victor, you’re so . . .” When she laughed, Victor felt a weight lift from him. “Just because you told Georgie about a job doesn’t mean you killed him. Or maybe you think you’re so important the gods are going to punish you for messing up the big plan or something. If there were gods, they sure as hell better have bigger things to deal with than you or me. We’re all just doing our thing here the best we can here. What happened to Georgie was an accident. Period. Maybe if you’d been on that boat instead, it wouldn’t have happened. Who cares? I don’t, Victor. But I appreciate you telling me. That’s more than most of the guys I know would’ve done.” She rolled her eyes toward the singer, who sat at a table, brooding.

“I’m sorry,” Victor said. “That’s what I wanted to say.”

She leaned over and kissed Victor softly on the cheek. “Thanks. But now I’ve really got to go.”

Victor stood while Sofia gathered her purse. “You got this?” she said, pointing to the empty glasses.

“Sure,” Victor said. “But I want to see you.”

Sofia smiled. She reached into her purse and pulled out a pen. She grabbed Victor a napkin from the bar. “Give me a couple of days to let Dorian down easy,” she said looking over at the preening singer. “Jeez, what a moron. Give me a call at this number.” She picked up the napkin, but didn’t give it to him. “I don’t know, a Greek busboy, practically shadowing me. It sounds like a movie. And I hate movies.” She turned to the singer. “Let’s go, Dorian.” She looked back over her shoulder and rolled her eyes. Then she handed him the napkin.

Victor was in a rush. The dining room was packed, and he couldn’t concentrate. He bumped into several disgruntled waiters and twice spilled half-empty water glasses. His mind kept turning toward the phone conversation he’d had with Sofia that afternoon. It had been two days since they’d talked at the Stagger Inn, and Victor, encouraged by Sofia’s attention, had counted the hours until he could call. But the conversation he had so eagerly anticipated was cold and abrupt. Sofia wanted to talk, she said, but not on the phone. She would come into the restaurant. There were things she wanted to know.

He couldn’t keep from wondering whether she was all right. And then, as he loaded his plastic bucket full of dirty dishes, he looked up and saw Sofia and her father at

the hostess's stand. She looked small, unprotected next to the bloated figure of Bob Bazos.

“Are you going stand there all day?” a waiter said. Victor turned and quickly picked up the dirty plates and glasses.

He watched as Sofia and her father were led to a booth near the kitchen and continued to watch as he carried his bucket back through the crowded tables. When he caught Sofia's eye, he shifted the bucket under one arm and raised two fingers to his forehead in a salute. The girl smiled briefly. Bob Bazos motioned for Victor to come over.

“Victor, sit with us, please,” Bazo said, craning his neck to look toward Nouno's office.

Victor glanced at Sofia, who shook her head and looked away.

“I have a break in fifteen minutes,” Victor said.

“Please, go put away those dishes and come sit with us. I'll clear it with Nouno. Is he in?”

Victor motioned toward the office.

When Victor returned, Sofia was alone. “Go ahead, sit,” she said. “Look, I just want to know one thing. Are you mixed up in Papademopoulos' bullshit?”

Victor sat stiffly across the table from Sofia.

“I know a little about Nouno's business, Victor. More than I want to. My old man's been on the fringes of it for as long as can remember. I saw what that did to him. It was him, sure, but Nouno Papademopoulos and his friends didn't help. I hate what's happened to him. It scares me, Victor.”

“Are you all right,” Victor asked. “Did he hurt you?”

“I can take care of myself,” Sofia said, her voice rising slightly. “I don’t need you to protect me.” She exhaled slowly.

“What do you need?” Victor said.

“I thought you were different. Maybe it was the accent or the stupid uniform. I thought you were, I don’t know, purer, or something. Sounds stupid, me saying it like that. But I thought that there was something different about you from the rest of the people around here.”

“I do some jobs for Nouno, nothing bad.”

“Are you sure it’s that simple? My father seems to believe that you and Nouno are like best friends. He’s been asking about you. I think he’s been following me. He has some crazy idea that if you and I are friends, then he’ll have an in with Nouno. It’d be funny if it weren’t so pathetic. My father, the matchmaker. That’s why he wanted to come here tonight.”

“Why did *you* come?”

“Trust me, it’s easier this way,” she said.

Bazos returned to the table with a drink and sat down heavily next to Victor. He ordered another from the waiter, who brought a bowl of bread and tzaziki.

“You two having a nice chat?” Bazos said.

“I have to get back to work,” Victor said.

“No. Sit. We’re all friends here. You, me, Sofia, Nouno. This is on me, Victor.” He raised his glass. “With thanks to the church ladies.” He drained the glass.

Sofia looked at her father. “He said he has to go.”

Bazos motioned to the waiter for another drink. He leaned over the table. "I just want to have a nice dinner here with my daughter. Is that too much to ask?"

He pushed the plate so that it rattled the silverware and still-full water glasses.

"Excuse me, please," Victor said.

"Come on," Bazos said evenly. "Sit. We'll all have dinner together."

"Not me," Sofia said, sliding out of the booth.

Bazos reached over the table and grabbed her arm. Victor, sitting beside Bazos, tensed until Sofia stopped struggling and settled back into the booth.

"Daddy," she said. "Don't. These people don't want you here. You keep thinking you'll find a way inside. First when Georgie died and now through Victor. But it's never going to happen. When are you finally going to see that we're nothing to these people?"

Bazos stared at his daughter. "You think we're nothing?" His voice was flat, empty. "I buried a wife and a son in this town, and I'm nothing?" He laughed, dry and brittle. "Maybe I'm not smart enough, huh? Or Greek enough? Is that what you think, you little bitch!"

He picked up the bowl of tzaziki and dumped it on the table. Then he lunged across the booth for the girl, who leaned back to avoid him.

Victor wrapped his arms around Bazos's thick trunk and pushed him out of the booth. The two of them landed on the floor. Customers from nearby tables leaped up from their seats. A middle-aged woman screeched.

"What the hell's going on out here?" said Nouno, rushing from the office.

Victor released Bazos, who struggled to his feet. Victor moved to stand between the panting, sweating man and Sofia.

Bazos snatched a glass from the table, swung wildly, and broke it against Victor's head. Victor collapsed into the empty booth.

Two waiters had grabbed Bazos by the arms when Victor managed to right himself. Nouno shouted, "Get him the hell out." He followed Bazos to the door. "You'll never set foot in here," he yelled.

Sofia sat beside Victor in the booth. She held a wad of napkins to his head. "Are you okay?" she said.

"Let me up," Victor said.

He stood, but when Sofia removed the napkins, a stream of blood poured down Victor's face. Nouno came over and took a look at the wound.

"You'll be all right," he said. "Let's get him outside."

Victor felt arms lifting him toward the door.

Again, he smelled the warm, wet night, the diesel and the decay of the river. Still foggy, he wondered if Sofia would be okay. And then, from the darkness, he heard her voice softly, as if from a dream. "I'll stay with him," she said. Victor turned toward the river, and it felt as if he were falling over a cliff or plunging into dark waters. There in the shadows of the sponge docks, the last thing he saw was Sofia.

Five

When Men Walked on the Moon

She sat near the window, peering out the barely parted curtains. A narrow slice of sunshine bisected her smooth face, blank and unguarded, except for the idle way she drew the corner of her lower lip between her teeth. Victor fought back the urge to speak, to ask how long she had been sitting at the foot of his bed. For that matter, how he had come to be in his bed? He wanted to preserve the moment, to have her to himself without her aware of being possessed by his thoughts. She hugged her knees to her chest, staring out as if something far off on the horizon drew her attention, and Victor was cast back to his childhood bed watching another young woman, his mother, in almost the same repose, sitting watchfully at a window staring out over the blue waters that had carried away his father, forever, it would turn out.

“I know you’re awake,” Sofia said softly. She turned, and Victor closed his eyes. She was back looking out the window when he opened them. “You’ve been watching me.” She smiled briefly. “That’s okay. I’ve been watching you all night.” A dark stain ran down the shoulder of her blouse, blood, Victor realized. He sat up, saw his reflection in the dresser mirror. He raised his hand to his forehead, felt the bandage above his eye. His head swam, and he remembered hazily the night before at the restaurant.

“You did this?” Victor said. “This,” Victor said, touching his head again. “You put—“

“Hospital,” she said. “You were bleeding pretty bad, so Papademopoulos drove us.”

“Us?”

“I felt responsible, okay?”

“Thank you,” Victor said.

“All I did was hold a towel. Nouno took care of the rest. A couple of words to the doctor, and in you go. Jeez, the way people in this town fall all over themselves for that man.”

“You stayed?”

She nodded, pushed the dark hair back from her shoulder. “He had to get back, so I told him I’d get you home. I called a cab. But Mrs. D. wasn’t home, so I got you up here and into bed.”

Victor looked around the room. His white uniform, speckled by dried blood piled in a corner. Keys and wallet on the nightstand. He pictured Sofia taking the keys from his pocket, unlocking the front door, guiding him up the stairs. He realized he was wearing only a pair of boxer shorts. He raised the white sheet just a little to make sure. Had she undressed him? Did she search in the dresser for something clean for him wear?

“Don’t worry,” she said. “You were flying pretty high on whatever they gave you at the hospital, but you were still with it enough to get yourself undressed.” She came over and sat on the edge of the bed. She brushed his hair from his forehead and grazed her fingertips over the gauze above his eye. “I’m sorry about all this. Does it hurt?”

He shook his head. “I’m fine,” he said, though even the small movement caused his head to throb.

“Where’s Mrs. D.?”

Victor had to think for a moment. “What day is it?”

“Monday.”

“She went to her sister’s house,” he said. “She was afraid. She didn’t want to be alone. She thought something bad was going to happen. She wanted to be with family. She’s going to stay there until the astronauts get back.”

Sofia leaned back on the bed, her arms stretched behind her so that the gauzy fabric of her blouse was drawn taut against her firm breasts. “Who was she afraid of?”

“Walter. From TV.”

“Cronkite? The newsman?”

“She said when Walter came on instead of the *As the World Turns* it was very bad. Walter in the daytime means only the worst, she said. When Walter said the spacemen would walk on the moon, she was afraid. Not for them. They want to be heroes, let them, she said. But for men to be on the moon was too much. It’s not nice to make God angry. He may try to teach you a lesson for it. She didn’t want to be alone if that happened.”

Sofia shook her head.

“Did they do it? Did they walk on the moon?” Victor said.

“Last night when I was waiting in the hospital, everyone was huddled around a TV. It was just a little TV with a fuzzy picture. You couldn’t tell much, but when the astronaut set his foot on the ground, everyone cheered. The doctors and nurses and patients together. But pretty soon everyone drifted back to their mops and bed pans and bandages, and life went on.”

“Poor Mrs. Demetriou.”

“I wonder if she was relieved or disappointed when nothing happened? No earthquakes or lightning bolts or whatever.” She sat up. “It’s always like that, isn’t it?”

“Always when men are on the moon?”

“I mean when you really want something. When you wait and wait. And then when you get it, it turns out to be not such a big deal after all. No earthquakes or lightning bolts.” She got up and stood again by the window. “There wasn’t much to do all night but think,” she said. “But I wanted to be here when you woke up so I could thank you. No one in my whole life has ever stood up for me like that. I guess I feel guilty for putting you in that position. My old man would do anything to get in good with Papademopoulos, and he thought if you and I were . . . well, you know, if you liked me then he’d have an in with the big boss man.”

“I’m just a busboy,” Victor said.

Sofia smiled again, but Victor knew she wasn’t amused. “I know you’re more than just a busboy for Papademopoulos, Victor.”

Victor shrugged, and even that caused his head to hurt.

“Someone came looking for you last night,” Sofia said. “A car drove by. And then I saw it again. They parked across the street. I didn’t recognize him at first. But it was the guy who got the cross from Georgie at Ephiphany. You know the one, I mean?” She moved closer to the window, pulled back the curtains and looked up and down the street below. “He had a message.”

Victor sat up and felt his head swim. “He came in? You talked to him?”

“He knocked on the door. I didn’t know what else to do, so I went down and grabbed that thing.” She pointed to the corner of the room where a three-pronged rake with a short wooden handle was propped next to the door. “It was the first thing I could find. Why does Mrs. D. keep a rake in the living room?”

“It was her husband’s. He was a diver. The hook is for scraping the sponges.

You’re okay? This guy did something?”

“Actually, he was kind of polite, in a creepy kind of way. He said he was friend of yours. He heard what happened and wanted to make sure you were all right. I told him you were sleeping, and he asked me to tell you to meet him at the boat tomorrow night. He said you should remember to bring everything.” When she turned there was a flicker of fear in her eyes.

“He’s one of Nouno’s boys, isn’t he? Why else would he show up here in the middle of the night?”

“He was from the restaurant. Probably he don’t want to lose his best busboy.”

Sofia put her hand on her hip. “Cut the shit, Victor, all right? I’m not buying that dumb, innocent immigrant crap. What it is you do for Papademopoulos?”

“I told you. It’s nothing.”

Sofia came and sat again at the edge of the bed. “Look,” she said, “It’s none of my business, maybe. But do you know what you’re getting yourself into? I’m not saying Nouno’s Murder Incorporated, but what do you think you’re delivering for him, stuffed grape leaves, baklava? When do you make these deliveries? Where? What kind of people are you dealing with?”

“I don’t ask. They don’t say nothing.”

She walked over to the chair and picked up her purse, draped over the armrest.

“Where are you going?” Victor said.

Sofia smiled and reached into her purse and held up a pack of cigarettes.

“Smoke,” she said. She lit the cigarette and blew the smoke toward the open window.

“I’m not going anywhere. I can’t leave. At least I can’t go home. I don’t ever want to see my fucking old man again.”

“You can stay here,” Victor said. “With me.”

She blew a plume of smoke ahead of an explosive laugh. “Right. We’ll bunk together up here while Mrs. D. keeps house for us.”

“We’ll go away.”

“Sure. I’ve got about fifteen dollars to my name. How about you? You don’t even have a car. How far do think we’d get?” She tossed the cigarette into a water glass on the dresser. “Besides, why would I go anywhere with you?”

“I could get money,” he said.

“From who? Nouno? I probably don’t have to remind you that Papademopoulos isn’t the kind of man who gives money away. But he is the kind of man who sends goons out in the middle of the night to protect his investments.”

“Please,” Victor said. “We’ll find a way. For weeks now, I am thinking only of you. The reason I don’t leave Papademopoulos is because I don’t have papers. He could tell the police, and send me back to Greece. I’m not afraid of the police. But I am afraid only that I will lose you. I would do anything to make you safe.”

Saying the words to Sofia that he’d held inside for so long released a confusing flood of relief and fear inside his chest. His heart pounded while she stood before him for a long moment, studying the hand-braided rug beside Victor’s bed.

“I don’t need you to protect me,” she said. “I can take care of myself.” She lit another cigarette. “But let’s just say, for the hell of it, that you and I . . .” She sat back on the edge of the bed and shook her head. “What happens if it turns out like the men on the

moon? If you find out that what you wanted isn't worth so much after all, once you've gotten it?"

"I've traveled across the world. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I know I have found it."

"Oh my God," she said. She threw her head back and laughed.

"So you'll go away with me?"

"Not so fast," she said. "There's something else. Something I found in your drawer over there." She nodded toward the ancient armoire.

Victor swung his legs off the bed onto the floor, bringing Sofia to her feet. But he didn't get up. The effort set off a starburst of pain inside his head.

"What did you see?" Victor said.

Sofia stepped back. "I'm a snoop, okay. I was looking for clothes last night and saw something. I think you know what I'm talking about. At first, I didn't pay much attention. But then the guy shows up. And I remembered the strange package, and I thought maybe that's what this guy's come snooping around for."

"You shouldn't—"

She raised her hand to silence him, and Victor could see she was trembling.

"When he left I was scared. I know I shouldn't have—I mean, what's it to me, right—but I opened it. Since when did Papademopoulos get mixed up in drugs? Did you come across the world to become some kind of drug dealer? And why do you have a gun?"

Victor sat back heavily in the bed. That James Bond fantasy in his head, a hidden part of himself that he now cursed, had liked the idea of having a gun. Now he wished he had tossed the gun after he and Cyrus sped off from the Tampa warehouse.

Sofia came and sat next to him. "I've been thinking all night, okay," she said. "From the start with you and me, it seems like every time I see you, there's trouble. Like you and me together are some kind of magnet for trouble."

"I don't want trouble. I kept the gun because I was trying to stay away from trouble."

"You're just a sweet guy. You don't want to hurt anyone. I know you think you want me, maybe you even think you love me. But I ask myself why. You don't know anything about me."

Victor felt the blood rise in his face. "I know what I want."

She drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "One way or another, Georgie, my father, most of the trouble in my life, in this town, is because of Nouno Papdemopolis. And I'll be damned if I'm going to let myself get tangled up with a man who's got himself tangled up with Nouno. Even if you aren't now, it'll happen. It always does."

He reached for her, and she didn't resist when he held her tight. "I'll leave," he whispered. "We'll go together. I'll find a job. I'll work hard every day and then come to you. You won't have to lift a finger." He kissed her ears, her neck. But when he ran his hands down her sides, she held his wrist to stop him.

"I like you, Victor," she said. Her eyes narrowed. "I may even want to sleep with you. But that doesn't mean I want to be a housewife. If anyone needs someone to look after them, it's the guy holding Nouno Papademopolis' bag of dope."

"That's it," Victor said. "We sell the drugs and use the money to go away."

"Are you nuts?" Sofia said. "I was just saying that maybe I could help you get away from Nouno. I didn't mean we should steal from him."

“What would he do? Call the police?”

“He’d come and kill your ass, and mine too.”

“He’d have to find us first.”

“Or maybe he calls the police and tells them you’re some kind of dangerous Greek without a passport or whatever. He wouldn’t have to say anything about drugs.” She extended her thumb and pinkie and raised them to her face. “Hello, FBI? I want to report a communist spy. That’d get the cops’ attention.”

“Then marry me,” Victor said.

“You are nuts. I just told you—“

“If we were married I’d be an American. That’s the law.”

She groaned and let herself drop back onto the bed and lay with her mouth open and her arms spread at her sides. Victor lay down gently beside her and kissed her. He ran his hand over her breasts. He felt the slight roundness of her hips and pressed her body close. Soon she returned the caresses and the kisses.

“You’re crazy,” she said.

Victor smiled and looked down at the rise in his shorts. “Maybe I’m not alone,” he said.

She laughed and sat up. “I’m afraid.”

“I’ll go slow. I promise.”

“Not of that,” she said. “And right now you’d promise me anything.”

“I would mean it. I keep my promises.”

“Then promise to let me take the package. I know some people. I’ll set the whole thing up. In a day or two we’ll have the cash and we’ll split.”

“It’s wrong,” Victor said. “You can’t do this to Nouno.”

Sofia pulled her knees up under her and kneeled in the sheets. “A few minutes ago, you’re all hot on the idea. Now it’s wrong? Look, I don’t think of this as stealing. Nouno Papademopoulos screws over anyone he wants whenever he wants. Just this once, I’d like for that fat bastard to see how it feels.”

Now Victor lay back on the bed. He wasn’t convinced that Papademopoulos’ heart was as black as Sofia made it out to be. But if he loved her, how could he allow her to take such a risk? He was convinced he loved her, and while the prospect of running away with her made his heart feel as if it would burst, he couldn’t let her do it. And so he decided he had to let her go. He looked at her, trying to capture in his mind an image that would stay fixed forever in his memory. And then he took the step, like the astronauts, into the dark. “No,” he said. “I only said those things because you were here on my bed. But I don’t need the trouble. I have money. I’ll give it to you. I owe you for Georgie’s death. You can go away. Now.”

She sat up and straightened her clothes. A breeze blew back the curtains, and Sofia watched them billow like sails in the wind. “I see,” she said. “You’ve done all this just to get into my pants. Okay. I guess I should be flattered. But I want to tell you something before I go. I’ve spent all night thinking about this. Maybe I’m more Greek than I ever wanted to admit. Maybe I’ve been waiting, not knowing that I was waiting for you.” She bent and kissed Victor’s lips. And Victor returned the kiss deeply, searching the darkness, knowing it was also a promise. And then Sofia broke away, nuzzled into his shoulder. “If you want to be taken seriously, you’re going to have to work on being a better liar.”

The first time was languid, soft deliberate touches building one on the other, kisses accumulating like rain drops in a well. Sofia's tenderness soothed Victor. It seemed as if the pain dissipated through the pores of his skin. It was absorbed by her softness, consumed by the glow of their steadily building heat and slow friction until it became a different kind of ache that arose from his middle and spread through his chest, filling him up like a balloon that strained against his heart, his lungs. It was like being submerged, except that the pressure came from inside. The flood of his hunger for her, stemmed until now by distance and caution, lapped at the rim of the small vessel he had made of himself, a surge that threatened to inundate him, obliterate him, make him not Victor, not Greek, not foreign, but something else, something bigger and exposed. He struggled against it the way he imagined a drowning man resisted the inevitable. And then Sofia's ragged breath, her beating heart, her ripe lips. She closed her eyes and arched her back, and Victor felt the flood wash through him, convey him to a place where there was only he and Sofia, and not yet the two of them, but their original spark that connected and grew and regrew as he lay in the white sheets holding her, waiting to see what would become of them.

They stayed in bed all that day and the next, rising only to fetch bread, cheese, olives, and peanut butter from Mrs. Demetriou's kitchen or to use the upstairs bathroom across the hall. They drank a bottle of sweet wine Mrs. Demetriou kept above the refrigerator for special occasions. They smoked four or five tight little joints that Sofia rolled from the pot she kept in a plastic bag in her purse. They made love, slept, awoke and ate, looked at one another and laughed, and then made love again. But they did not

talk about the contents of the package or about Sofia going to see Papademopoulos.

Victor hadn't forgotten, and he knew Sofia hadn't either. But in the warm, sex-perfumed bed, he was content. Anything seemed possible.

Sofia rolled over and nestled close beside him, resting her cheek against Victor's damp chest. "What are we going to do?" she said.

"Rest," he said, throwing his arms back up over his head.

"But if we're going to do what we talked about, you know, I need to make some calls."

"Maybe we should just go to Nouno," Victor said. "Maybe he's not so bad. Maybe—"

She buried her face in his chest and began to sob. "I want you to get out of all this," she said. "I want . . ."

He stroked her hair. "What is it? What do you want?"

She looked up, sniffed back her tears. Her bottom lip trembled when she spoke. "It's not supposed to work like this," she said. "Except for Georgie, I never felt connected to anyone or anything. And then you come along and go and get yourself beat up for me . . ." She got up and pulled the sheet around her, stood looking like a statue. "I felt sorry for you, okay. That's why I came here. But now. . . I don't know, I don't like feeling this. But I can't help it. I guess what I want is you."

Victor went to her and wrapped her in his arms.

When the car door slammed, both Victor and Sofia turned to the window. Victor scrambled to the dresser, tore open a drawer, found a T-shirt, and gathered Sofia's skirt from the floor. "Here," he said, tossing the clothes to Sofia, who was peering outside.

“It’s a green car, a Ford, I think,” she said. “They’re leaving. But someone’s on the front porch.”

“Stay here,” Victor said. He slipped on his boxers, opened the bedroom door, heard someone at the front door.

“Wait,” Sofia said, slipping into her clothes. She picked up her purse from the floor and removed the gun. “Take this.”

Victor considered it for a second, but then said, “Put it away.” He reached for her, held her close and kissed her. “But not too far away.”

From the kitchen came a clatter of dishes and the clap of cupboard doors being opened and shut. Victor edged along the living room wall, staying out of sight. Then he paused. Whoever was rattling through the cupboards was muttering, in Greek, Victor realized. He began again to creep toward the doorway but was stopped short by a shriek. It was then he knew whom he was dealing with.

His landlady was in the middle of the kitchen flailing in the air with a dishcloth. With each swat of the towel she hopped, though the great effort only succeeded in raising her squat frame an inch off the floor.

“Mrs. Demetriou, what is it?” Victor said from the doorway.

The woman turned suddenly, and Victor thought she might be about to collapse with the effort of beating the air and the shock of his sudden appearance. She clutched the dishtowel to her chest. “Oh my God,” she said.

“It’s just me, Victor. Tell me what’s wrong.”

The old lady opened her mouth but her fear apparently stifled her voice. She lifted her arm slowly toward the wall. Victor stepped into the kitchen and looked up to where

Mrs. Demetriou pointed. Along the wall, just above the icon of St. Nicholas, a two-inch long Palmetto bug twitched its spiny antennae. Victor reached up, and just as the giant cockroach unfolded its wings, he caught the bug and crushed it in his fist.

Mrs. Demetriou regained her voice, and while Victor opened the back door and tossed the remains of the cockroach into the back yard, his landlady was threatening him with all manner of retribution. Victor went to the sink to wash the insect slime from his hands, but first he had to move aside a stack of dirty dishes.

“You see,” Mrs. Demetriou said. “You see how you treat my house. I leave for two seconds and I come back to a pigsty. Cockroaches. In my house. I never have a fly in my house and now I got cockroaches the size of a bus. It’s this filth,” she said, using the dishcloth to push aside a bowl of olive pits. “Is this the way you—”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. D.,” Victor said. “I’ll clean it all up.”

And then, as if seeing him for the first time, the old lady shifted rhetorical gears without letting up on the throttle of her indignation. “What happened to you?” she said. “Why are you in your underpants? It’s the middle of the day.”

“I was asleep. I heard you come in.”

“Your head?” she said, calming a degree. “How did you do that?” But then, as if her mothering instincts threatened to betray her righteous fury, she reclaimed the offensive. “If you broke something in this house, I swear, I’ll—“

“An accident,” Victor said. “At work. I slipped. Why are you back so soon? I thought you were going to spend the week.”

“Oh, I couldn’t stand another minute in that mad house.” It was a fresh avenue of annoyance, and Mrs. Demetriou was off and running. “First my sister going on about the

moon men and then the grandkids. In and out. In and out. I would lose my mind. I told her to bring me home. And now this.” She spread her jiggling arms wide. “A bump on the head didn’t hurt your appetite.” Like a prosecutor flaunting the murder weapon before the jury, she held up the empty wine bottle. “Or your thirst. Now go put on your pants.” She shooed him toward the door.

When Victor heard the creak of floorboards on the stairs, he knew it was Sofia. He turned to see if Mrs. Demetriou had heard it too. Mostly deaf, she was already busy with the dirty dishes. Victor leaned back through the kitchen doorway and saw Sofia tiptoeing across the living room. She would have heard the yelling from upstairs, and now she held the gun out in front of her with both hands. Even from several feet away, he saw her hands shaking. When she looked toward him, Victor shook his head quickly.

Turning from the sink, the old woman realized Victor had ignored her commands to get dressed, and she wound up again. “Do I need this?” Mrs. Demetriou yelled. “I should have to put up with this in my own house? Maybe I should go to Nouno, tell him how you treat me.” Victor saw Sofia slip the weapon into her purse and turn toward the front door.

Victor looked back in time to see the little woman waddling over. Her sudden change in mood left tread marks on his aching brain.” I almost forgot,” she said. “I have something for you. You treat my like this, and still I thought about you.” She looked around the kitchen. “Now where did I leave that? Oh yes, in my bag.” She started for the living room.

“No,” Victor said. He reached for Mrs. Demetriou to stop her.

“What?” Mrs. Demetriou said. “You raise your hands to me?”

“No, Mrs. D., I’ll get it.” He hurried into the living room just as Sofia slipped out the front door. He watched her skip down the walk and onto the street. He called to her to stop.

“What?” Mrs. Demetriou said in the kitchen.

Victor turned, frozen with uncertainty. He wanted to run after Sofia and bring her back to the sanctuary of the simple room and the bed they had consecrated. But he was in his underwear, and Mrs. Demetriou was in the kitchen still muttering about Papademopoulos and lack of respect. Running nearly naked down the quiet street where his landlady knew every neighbor would elevate her litany of complaints to a level that would drive her straight to Papademopoulos.

He hoped, as he looked out the front door, that his lasting image of love wouldn’t be Sofia’s back as she walked away. But then he noticed what Sofia had tucked under arm. And he knew, for the moment, it was too late to do anything to stop her. He closed the door.

Mrs. Demetriou came out from the kitchen. “I found my purse, on the kitchen chair. Here—” She stopped when she saw Victor. “Someone here? Why are you at the door?” She threw up her hands in disgust. “And still no pants!”

“It was nothing,” Victor said. “Just the wind.”

His head hurt as he climbed the stairs. It was throbbing by the time he opened his bedroom door. He looked around, opened the drawers, pulled back the bed sheets, but there was no gun. He saw, just as he expected, the armoire doors wide open. He didn’t have to look to know that the package was gone.

Six

California, Maybe

When he went to Sofia's trailer and again found it empty, Victor turned over in his mind a dozen alternatives, from buying a bus ticket to simply going back home to bed, but in the end, reason compelled him to choose the most difficult course, confronting Nouno and confessing that he'd lost the package. He'd take the blame if it would protect Sofia.

He walked to the restaurant and felt a wave of dread flow through him when he saw Nouno's black car in its usual parking space. He walked in the front door past the hostess and waiters and proceeded directly to the office where he knocked and then waited nervously. Nouno called for him to enter, and he came in and stood before an expansive dark desk covered with piles of invoices, cash register receipts, and bills. Nouno Papdemopolis sat with a pair of reading glasses balanced on his nose, punching an adding machine. He looked up briefly and then back down at the papers on his desk. "What is it, busboy?"

"The package," Victor said.

"What package?"

"The one Cyrus came for."

Nouno sat back. "Close the door," he said. "Sit." He removed his glasses.

"Explain. You say Cyrus was looking for something? When?"

"Last night," Victor said. "He came by Mrs. Demetriou's."

"After the trouble here, he came to see you?"

"Mrs. Demetriou was away. I would have given it to him, but I was asleep."

“Then how do you know he came by?”

Victor was suddenly stumped. He hadn't thought this through at all. “He knocked, and I woke up, but I was hurt too bad to come down. I saw him leave. From the window.”

“I see,” Nouno said. “And now you come to give the package to me?”

Victor hesitated. He had planned to confess, but now in front of Nouno, words escaped him. “I lost it.”

“Last night this package was in your room, and now it's not. Did you drop it on the way here?”

“I don't know where it went. I woke up and it was gone.”

Nouno leaned forward on the desk. “This is strange. This package, where did it come from?”

“From Tampa when Cyrus and me—”

“But I got the delivery from Tampa.”

“I was holding it for Cyrus.”

“Then maybe Cyrus is up to something I don't know about.” He considered this. “What was in this package?”

“I'm not sure. Drugs maybe.”

Nouno frowned. “You're saying my nephew is a drug dealer behind my back?”

“Maybe not drugs. I don't know.”

“But you're sure you don't have it, whatever it is?”

Victor nodded. “I think maybe I could find it.”

Nouno sat back again. “I think maybe you should. And I think I need to talk to my nephew. I don't like drugs. I don't want them in this town. But I also don't like people

who work for me to lose things that don't belong to them. You find the package and bring it to me. I'll talk to my nephew."

As Victor left the office he heard Nouno pick up the phone and dial.

The bar was dark and empty except for a stoop-shouldered wreck of a man asleep on a barstool in front of a half-empty glass of beer, his gray head slumped forward, his chin on his chest. At a table near the entrance, a couple in soggy Bermuda shorts and T-shirts sipped Cokes, waiting out the daily summer afternoon rain. Victor was soaked, too, having arrived on the rusted antique of a bicycle that he found in Mrs. Demetriou's garage. He had stopped twice at gas stations to fill the wobbly front tire with air, while criss-crossing town in search of Sofia. He rode slowly past the souvenir shops, cafes, and bars on Dodecanese Boulevard, nearly deserted on a Monday afternoon as the clouds piled up ahead of a thunderstorm that provided a small, temporary break in the sweltering day. Twice he had ridden out to the Linger Longer Motor Lodge and past Sofia's father's rusting trailer. Both times there was no answer when he knocked on the door and no sign of anyone inside when he went around back and peered in the window.

All the time he was looking for Sofia he also kept an eye out for Cyrus. Finally, running out of daylight and any other ideas, he rode back over the bridge and across town to the Stagger Inn, the bar where Sofia had dumped the singer.

"You again?" the scruffy bartender said. "I gave you what I owe for this month. That was just last week."

"I don't want money," Victor said, confused by the bartender's suggestion.

"Well, that'll be the first time. What's with the accent. What are you—"

“It wasn’t me,” Victor said, realizing that the bartender thought he was Cyrus.

“It sure looked like you.”

“I’m looking for a girl, Sofia.”

The bartender held up his hands. “I can get you a drink.”

“Beer,” Victor said.

The bartender popped the cap of a Budweiser and sat in front of him. “Hey Ari,” he yelled toward the sleeping man, who snapped to attention. “Hey, you napping or drinking, buddy. I don’t need no more local color.”

The tourists near the door gathered their camera and shopping bags and left quietly. Ari muttered into his beer.

“She’s nineteen, twenty,” Victor said

“I don’t serve underage,” the bartender said. “It’s against the law.”

“Dark hair, brown eyes. She was friends with the band.”

“Oh shit,” the bartender said, pouring another beer for the now-awake Ari. “That bunch of hippie faggots. I kicked those freaks out of here two, three weeks ago. They didn’t show up for three nights in a row and then they come waltzing in asking to get paid. I nearly jumped over the bar.”

“Have you seen the girl?”

“Wait, I know who you’re talking about. Pretty little thing. Yeah, she was in here a couple of days ago asking about the dirt-bag band. She said the singer owed her money. I’m not surprised.”

“But you haven’t seen her since then? She didn’t come in today?”

“Sorry.”

“I seen her.” Both the bartender and Victor turned to Ari.

“You ain’t seen anything but the bottom of that glass,” the bartender said.

“You’re talking about the Bazos girl. She was at the stop sign out here not fifteen minutes ago. She was in a convertible. One of them little foreign jobs.”

“Which way?” Victor said.

“Uptown.” He pointed.

“Was she with anyone?” Victor said.

“Some long-haired guy. Used to come in here sometimes.”

“You talking about the singer, Ari?”

“Shee, you call that singing.”

The bartender looked at Victor and raised his hands.

Outside the shadows were lengthening. It wasn’t like the Aegean where daylight softens slowly into evening. In Florida, the sun set quickly. It would be dark soon. Victor gave the bartender a five-dollar bill. “If she comes by, tell I’m looking for her,” he said. “Tell her to meet me . . .” But he couldn’t think where he could go. “Just tell her I’m looking.”

“Sure,” the bartender said. “But hey, you better be careful, pal. You look a lot like someone I know. And this guy. . .” He shook his head. “He ain’t so nice.”

He saw the red MG under a streetlight in the parking lot of Publix, and he was sure it was the same of car he’d seen Sofia riding in with Dorian, the singer. He sat on the hood and waited, and fifteen minutes later, she came out alone with a bag of groceries.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” Victor said.

She set the groceries in the car, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pulled him close for a kiss. “How do like my new car?” she said, stepping back and admiring the little red convertible.

“Your car?”

“I’ve been doing some business. I couldn’t wait to come and tell you. This is the answer to everything we talked about.”

“We talked about a lot of things. We talked about getting Nouno his property. You shouldn’t have taken it. But now I have to give it to him. That’s why I’ve been looking for you.”

“No, listen, I’ve got it worked out. We have a car. We can go. Just you and me.”

“Where would we go?”

“California, maybe. San Francisco, L.A., anywhere away from here. Nouno’s got a long reach, but not that long.”

Victor didn’t know cars, but it certainly appeared that this one had been used hard. Rust pocked the fenders and padding blistered up from the upholstery. He thought about being in such a car with Sofia, riding down the endless American highways, seeing the Mississippi River, the cowboy desert, the Grand Canyon. And California. Movie stars and gold mines, and all that it evoked tempted him to jump in the little car and ride off to pursue it. There was also Nouno and the question of his reach, of course. How far could they expect to go before he caught up with them, especially now that he knew about the package? But it more than fear made him tore at him. He owed Nouno for bringing him to America and for offering him a chance to succeed. And though the kind of success he dreamed of seemed far from his grasp, he wasn’t quite ready to give up on it. For all

Nouno's flaws, he was still was a great man, if not exactly great in the kind of way that Victor wanted to be. How many chances would he get to be in the company of such a person?

"Nouno knows about the package," Victor said to Sofia. "It wasn't his. Cyrus was hiding it from him. I told him I would get it back. You have to give it to me."

Sofia's face darkened with anger. "We're not talking about the family silver here, Victor."

"I don't care what it is."

"You really buy Nouno's high and holy act, but he's nothing but a criminal. And if you think I'm going to feel guilty for stealing from a thief, you're wrong."

"Where is it?" Victor said.

"I don't have it," she said.

"How did you get this car?"

Sofia stared defiantly. "I traded for it. I gave Dorian the drugs. He gave me this."

Victor looked across the parking lot and shook his head. "All of it?"

"Not all. Not even half. I did it for us, Victor. I wanted to get out of here, me and you together." She was on the verge of crying.

"I believe you," Victor said. "But now we're both in trouble. Nouno is looking for Cyrus. And Cyrus will be looking for us." He walked over and hugged her, and he could feel that she was trembling.

"I was stupid," she said. "I was thinking about us, I swear."

He stepped back. "We can still fix this. But we have to get what's left to Nouno. He don't blame me, he blames Cyrus. We have to get the package and take it to him."

When Sofia looked away, Victor hoped that she would see the simple logic of what he was telling her. If she didn't, if she refused to give up the drugs, he didn't want to think of what he might have to do to convince her. When finally she turned to him and nodded and got in behind the wheel, he wanted to hug her. But instead he hurried around to the other side before she could change her mind.

A twanging song about surfing came on the radio when she started the engine, and as she backed out of the parking space without turning on the headlights, there was a squeal of brakes when she almost collided with a passing pickup truck. Her mind was clearly not on driving.

"You did the right thing by going to Nouno," she said, as they left the parking lot. She lit a cigarette, taking her hands off the wheel. She wasn't at all herself. "This'll work," she said. "We'll get the rest of the drugs and take them back to Nouno. And then we'll take off. We won't have to worry about anyone looking for us."

"How will we take off," Victor said.

Sofia turned and stared at him in a way that made Victor wish she'd keep her attention on the road. "We'll take this car," she said, as if the answer was so obvious she couldn't believe that Victor had to ask.

"But you used the drugs to buy the car. We have to get it back."

Sofia laughed. "I wouldn't count on that," she said. "Those boys are probably so stoned by now that they don't even know where they are."

"Then we'll sell the car, or give it to Nouno."

"Victor, relax. If this was Cyrus' deal and Nouno didn't even know what was in the package, he won't know if anything's missing. We'll give back what's left, make him

happy, and we'll be ahead one red convertible and halfway to California before Nouno knows that we only gave him part of it."

Just past the bridge over the river, she turned hard onto Anclote Boulevard, downshifted, and hit the accelerator. The MG roared. "I love this little thing," Sofia said.

Victor tried to tell himself that Sofia was right, that Nouno wouldn't care so much about anything missing from the package as long as he had it in his possession and off the street. Cyrus might not be happy, but Nouno wasn't happy with Cyrus, and Nouno could deal with his nephew. Seeing her hair blow in the wind, the joy the car gave her, the hopefulness that lit up her face when she talked about going away together to California, yes, Victor thought, things might work out, just as Sofia said.

But when it became clear they were headed to the Linger Longer Trailer Court and the Bazos' family home, a feeling of foreboding clouded his sunny California daydream. "You left the package at your father's house?" Victor said.

"Stop worrying," Sofia said. "He wasn't here this morning when I came back. He's been gone since the run-in at the restaurant. He's probably afraid Nouno's out looking for him. He's more scared of Papa than you are. He's off with his fishing buddies or over in Tampa. He's got a Cuban chick over there who takes him in until she gets sick of him and kicks his ass out. When my old man takes off, he finds a hole somewhere and crawls in it for three or four days. He won't be back." She pulled up in front of the trailer, leaned over and kissed Victor's cheek, and opened the car door. "In and out," she said. "I won't be a minute." She reached for the bag of groceries and got out of the car.

The trailer was dark and showed no sign that anyone was inside. Partly out of curiosity Victor said, "I better go with you." He was eager to see Sofia's room and

discover, if he could, some kind of key to the inner person through the things she chose to surround her. But Victor's memory of Bazos' temper was the other reason he decided to go in with her.

At the front door, Sofia handed Victor the grocery bag and rummaged through her purse in the dark for the house key. And then, as if on a whim, she set the purse down and tried the knob. The door opened. She looked sheepishly at Victor and shrugged. "I forget sometimes." She reached for her purse, and it wasn't until then that Victor saw the gun. He wanted to take it from her there and then, but it was too late. She opened the door, went inside and flicked on the lights, but then stopped abruptly in the middle of the dingy living room, her eyes wide with alarm.

"What is it?" Victor said hurrying behind her.

Bob Bazos was rising from a stained, plaid couch, stammering and blinking away sleep. When he saw that he wasn't alone, he seemed bewildered for a moment, as if his brain hadn't quite caught up with his vision. But then recognizing who was standing before him, his eyes narrowed to slits, and he stood, knocking over a bottle on the coffee table.

"You," he said, pointing at Victor. "You didn't have enough at the restaurant?"

Victor looked at Sofia, wondering whether he should take her arm and lead her back to the car.

"Don't start," Sofia said sharply. "I just came back for something. We'll be gone in a minute."

"Like hell you will," Bazos said. "You come waltzing in here with your greasy little boyfriend like some little tramp. This still my house—"

“Shut up!” Sofia said.

“What’s in the bag, busboy? You planning on a romantic little supper. Loaf of bread, jug of wine?”

“You’re disgusting,” Sofia said.

Bazos came over and snatched the bag from Victor and looked inside.

“I bought some groceries,” Sofia said, taking the bag from her father. “There’s never a thing in that refrigerator, unless you’re on the liquid diet.”

“Speaking of which, why don’t you do something useful and get me a beer. Want one, busboy?”

Victor shook his head, and Sofia stomped into the tiny galley of a kitchen.

“This place is a pigsty,” she said. She began putting away the groceries, boxes of cookies and bags of candy, food for a road trip, Victor realized.

“Whose fault is that,” Bazos said. “I pay the rent. The least you could do is pick up once in a while. But you’re too busy running after every Tom, Dick, and busboy in this fucking town.”

“Fuck you,” she screamed. “Fuck you, you hypocritical drunk. Victor never did anything to you.”

“What did you say to me, you little cunt?” Bazos said. He was already moving toward the kitchen.

From outside, Victor heard a car door open and close.

“You think you can come in to my house with this little goat shit and tell me to get fucked?” He reached out and slapped her face.

“Leave her alone,” Victor said. “Don’t touch her.”

Bazos wheeled and staggered toward him.

“Get out,” Victor called to Sofia, who had slipped behind the lumbering father into the living room. “Go,” Victor said. But he saw that Sofia was reaching for her purse.

“This is my house, goddamn it,” Bazos said. He swung wildly. Victor leaned away, and the blow glanced off his shoulder. But Bazos’ momentum sent him sprawling into Victor, and the weight of his thick body threw them both against the kitchen cabinet. The entire trailer seemed to rock on its moorings. The dish strainer next to the sink was upended, sending dishes, cups, glasses, and silverware crashing to the floor. Victor struggled beneath Bazos’ bulk. And then he saw Bazos pick up a knife from the floor.

“Stop!” Sofia screamed. She stood over them, extending the gun in her shaking hands. Bazos looked up.

“Get off of him,” Sofia said.

Victor scrambled to his knees and then stood. Bazos rolled up to a sitting position and leaned back heavily against the refrigerator, trying to catch his breath.

“What the hell?” Cyrus Kanakis stood in the doorway.

Sofia turned at the sound of his voice, and from the corner of his eye, Victor saw Bob Bazos stand and, knife in hand, lunge at his daughter. Victor called Sofia’s name as he leaped toward Bazos. In the same moment, he saw Sofia turn and then heard the gunshot. Bazos’s head jerked back, and then forward, his right eye opened wide in surprise, the left gone, a neat, red cavity where the bullet had ripped through. He looked merely stunned. Then he slumped to his knees and pitched face first onto the floor.

Victor looked up. Sofia still held the smoking gun. The smell of sulfur hung in the air. Cyrus stood still in the doorway, a look of awe on his face as he regarded the

daughter who had just killed her father. “Jesus,” Cyrus said. Sofia wheeled and pointed the gun at him, and Cyrus raised his hands. “Let’s just cool out here,” he said. He closed the door. “Let’s just take a minute to reflect on the situation.”

Sofia slowly lowered the gun and sank down onto the sagging couch. Victor got up and sat beside her and stroked her hair as she stared at the body of her father. “It’s all right,” Victor said, though he knew it was about as far from all right as possible.

Cyrus went to the window and looked outside. Then he looked down, cocking his head one way and then the other. “Whoa,” he said.

Sofia let the gun drop to the floor and covered her face with her hands. She wept, nearly doubled over. Victor reached for her and drew her into his arms. “I didn’t mean to,” she said, sobbing. “I thought he was going to hurt you and I turned and . . .”

“It’s okay,” Victor said, holding her tighter.

“It’s not okay. He’s dead.” And then as if thought just occurred to her, “They’ll put me in jail.”

“He attacked,” Victor said. “No one will blame you.”

“What are we going to do, Victor?”

Cyrus came over and picked up the gun, and Victor made no effort to stop him. Cyrus tucked the gun in his belt, sat down in the recliner, and lit a cigarette. “Trouble,” he said. “It’s always something. I know this isn’t at the top of your list right now,” he said, “but I think you have something of mine.”

Sofia looked up at him blankly.

Cyrus leaned forward. “I can help you here,” he said. “But you’ve got to cooperate. You’re not exactly in a position to turn down help. So?”

Sofia looked at Victor. “I think we have to,” Victor said.

But she wasn’t listening. She was pitched forward, rocking on the couch, staring at her father’s body. “How did this happen?” she said. “How?”

“Fuck it all,” Cyrus said. He combed his fingers through his black hair, rubbed his chin with his hand. “All right,” he said, finally. “Sofia, I know this is bad, but you have to try to pull yourself together. Where’s my property?”

Sofia blinked then closed her eyes, as if to concentrate, or perhaps to simply to blot out the awful scene before her. “In my room,” she said finally. “I’ll get it.” Her voice was a ghostly whisper.

“No, you stay here,” Cyrus said. “Victor, you go.”

“It’s in the top drawer,” Sofia said.

Victor went in the room, opened the dresser drawer, and found the package beneath Sofia’s folded underwear. Despite the circumstances—perhaps because of them, since it wasn’t likely he’d have the chance again—he took a look around the room. On one wall was a poster of four beaming young men in matching red shirts with double rows of buttons. One of the young men wore a wool cap. Across the bottom of the poster the word “Monkees” was printed in the shape of a guitar. On another wall was a poster with a photograph of a rifle barrel from which protruded a single daisy. Beneath the picture was the word “Peace.” On a shelf in the corner a few tattered dolls sat next to a portable record player and a stack of records. An American girl’s belongings, humble and typical. It pained Victor to look at them.

He returned to the living room and handed over the package. While Cyrus opened it, Victor sat back down next to Sofia, who still was staring down at her dead father.

“Some is gone,” Victor said to Cyrus.

“I noticed,” Cyrus said. “Any ideas where?”

“I traded for a car,” Victor said. Sofia didn’t speak up to correct him.

“That little piece of shit convertible out there? That thing’s worth maybe a grand. There’s a hell of lot more missing here than a thousand dollars.” He stood and paced. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you got suckered. Jesus, that car isn’t even American.”

Victor looked at Sofia. “Maybe we should think about what we’re going to do now,” Victor said to Cyrus.

“Okay,” Cyrus said, regrouping. “Here’s the deal. I’m out five, six thousand dollars. Which means my uncle is also out, because it was his money.”

Victor started to object. But Cyrus waved it away.

“I know you talked to him,” Cyrus said. “So you know this was my deal, but it was Nouno’s money. He may not care for drugs, but you better believe he cares about his money. If I go to Nouno and explain things, he can take care of this mess. When I talked to him a couple of hours ago, he wasn’t very happy. If he finds out his money’s missing it’s going to improve his mood.”

“I’ll sell the car. Or you can keep it,” Victor said.

“I don’t need a car, especially that heap. You’re still about five grand short.”

“I’ll get the money,” Victor said.

“Good boy,” Cyrus said.

“No, Victor,” Sofia said, surprising him. “All of this is my fault .All you did was try to protect me. I took the package. I bought the car. It was all my idea. Victor didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“It’s not true,” Victor said.

“Look, explain that all to my uncle,” Cyrus said. “Maybe he cares, but I don’t. I just want my money. I’m not picky who pays what.”

“Why do we have to explain to Nouno?” Victor said.

“Because that’s where we’re going.” He looked around the trailer. “Let’s get a move on. Get some clothes together.”

Cyrus went to the phone and dialed while Victor led Sofia to her room. He could hear Cyrus explain what had happened while Sofia, zombie-like, grabbed clothes from the dresser and closet and threw them on the bed.

“How much should I bring?” she said.

“I don’t know,” Victor said. “We could come back later maybe.” But he was only guessing.

Sofia looked at him and began to sob. “Oh Victor,” she said. “What’s going to happen to us?”

He knew she didn’t expect an answer, which was just as well because whatever he would have said, it would also have been just a guess.

Seven

These Things No One Wants

The thick gray hair on Nouno Papademopolis' chest and shoulders was matted to his brown skin. One knee crossed over the other, a thonged sandal dangling from his foot, he sat on a wicker chair on the patio beside a sparkling blue swimming pool. He peered down through thick reading glasses at a newspaper, blinking through the smoke from the fat cigar clenched in his teeth. If he was even remotely concerned that Victor or Sofia would slip out of the house without him noticing, he gave no sign. Nor, as far as Victor could tell, was anyone else watching. The big house on Spring Bayou appeared occupied for the moment by only Nouno, Victor, and Sofia, whom Victor had left still soundly asleep in the downy bed in which he had awakened.

Victor stood at the foot of a graceful staircase, watching Nouno on the patio through a set of French doors along one wall of the high-ceiling living room. White statues of mermaids with long, flowing hair flanked a brick fireplace, above which, a brass diving helmet gleamed from the mantel. Dark, thick-limbed tables and chintz-upholstered couches were arranged on a floor of tile the color of pumpkins. It was a room designed to impress and intimidate. It was as close as Victor had ever come to such self-assured wealth, and he didn't find it inviting.

Outside, in the shade of huge umbrella, Nouno raised a tiny cup to his lips with hands that seemed far too thick and coarse. Without looking up from his paper, Nouno set the cup down, flicked the ash from his cigar into a crystal ashtray, and then motioned with the crook of a thick index finger for Victor to come outside.

"I'd say good morning, but it's passed," Nouno said. "Is the girl up?"

Victor shook his head.

“Hot enough for you?” Nouno said.

The afternoon sun bore down from a cloudless blue sky, but Victor shrugged.

“I never know why people leave here in the summer,” Nouno said. “I love it. The hotter, the better.” He swiped the sheen of sweat from his forehead with an index finger and flicked the accumulated drippings to the brick patio. “Sit,” he said, patting the cushioned chair beside him. “Coffee?” He got up and took a cup and saucer from a cart behind him and poured thick black coffee from a long-handled brass briqui. He came back and set the cup in front of Victor, who, though he preferred American coffee to the boiled-earth Greek brew, thanked Nouno and lifted the cup to his lips and sipped. Nouno went back to the cart and brought Victor a tray of pastries.

“Try one,” he said. “They bring it over from the bakery every morning. I used to be able to eat it by the handful, but the doctor. . .” He patted his big belly. “I got to watch out. Have to be more careful in my old age.”

The papery crust melted into honey on Victor’s tongue. He devoured the first piece and reached for another. He couldn’t remember when he had last eaten, and now, having started, he couldn’t get enough. Crumbs of the papery crust spilled down his shirt.

Nouno laughed, and Victor looked up, aware suddenly of his piggish attack on the pastry tray. “No, go on,” Nouno said. “I like a healthy appetite. You’re young, You got no worries.”

Victor sipped the coffee, finding it surprisingly smooth and sweet. He took another piece of baklava, but this time he set it on a napkin, and despite his still powerful hunger, ate more slowly.

“Just reading the paper,” Nouno said, sitting again. “Do you keep up on the news, Victor?”

His mouth was full. Victor shook his head.

“I like to stay up on things,” Nouno said. He spread the paper open. “Big things and little things. Like today, the astronauts are coming back from the moon. First time. From little Greek villages to mud huts in Africa, people all over the world know this. But then there’s this.” He pointed to an article. “This stupid war in Vietnam. On and on. No end in sight. Every day more dead. For what? No one believes in this shit. If they didn’t have this draft, who would go?”

But Victor wasn’t interested in world events. While Nouno turned the pages of the paper, Victor scanned the headlines for any report of what had happened at the Linger Longer trailer park.

Nouno stopped. “What is it?” he said. He looked down at the paper and then back at Victor.

Victor cleared his throat. “I wanted to thank you,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Thank you for helping us,” Victor said. “It was an accident. But we didn’t—“

“Cyrus told me everything,” Nouno said. “Water over the dam.”

“It’s what?” Victor said.

“It’s taken care of.”

Victor looked down and studied a lizard on the patio. “I—we—are in your debt.”

Nouno laughed. “Well, that’s another story. Right now, we won’t talk about debt, all right. I’ll just say I’m taking care of family, Victor. You’re like a son to me. And

Sofia, I feel for her, with her brother and this . . .” He shook his head. “Bob Bazos was not much of a father. Not much of a man. These things, guns and killing, no one wants. But you live by the sword and you’re going to get burned. Which is what Bob Bazos is doing right now.”

Nouno got up and poured more coffee for Victor and then himself.

“I shot him,” Victor said, though the words came spilling out so quickly he knew Nouno probably wouldn’t believe them. “I also lost your money.”

“Stop,” Nouno said, laying his big hand on Victor’s shoulder. “I know more or less what happened. I also know that my nephew is up to his neck in all of this.” Nouno tapped his temple. “He doesn’t think I know. But I know.” The old man sat back down and seemed to be studying Victor’s face. “It always amazes me,” he said, “how the two of you can look so much alike and be so different. You want to know the truth, Victor? I only wish that Cyrus was more like you.”

The old man stared off over the pool and twirled the cigar in his fingers. He seemed lost for the moment, remembering. Victor felt the sudden urge to comfort him. “I think maybe he’s afraid,” Victor said. “He said he was going to have to go to Vietnam.”

Nouno puffed at the cigar. “Maybe that’s what he needs,” he said. “Make something of him. My nephew has had an easy life. He goes to a good school, my sister worships him, and all he does is get into trouble. They send him down here, more of the same. You got to ask yourself, is it trouble following Cyrus or Cyrus following trouble?”

Sitting there, watching Nouno Papademopoulis run his hand through his white mane, listening to him share the kind of intimacies normally not discussed outside of family circles, Victor felt drawn to the old man, felt he was being invited to see another,

private side of him that few of those who both feared or revered him ever knew. Victor began to relax. “Some people are just not lucky,” he said.

Suddenly, Nouno’s demeanor changed. He slapped his palm flat against the table and shook the china. “Luck’s got nothing to do with it,” he said. “Luck is for little old ladies and losers. Look at you, Victor. You got no parents since you were just a boy. Your grandfather dies and sends you to live among strangers. But you don’t complain. You don’t say it’s bad luck. You work hard. You do what you’re told. I only wish Cyrus was half the man you are.”

Victor was touched. He felt as if Nouno was the father he never knew.

“But Victor,” Nouno said, “no matter how much I like you, you’re not family. Cyrus is family. And family is everything. You understand?”

Victor nodded.

“And if I help you and the girl it’s because I have to look out for Cyrus, even if he don’t deserve it.”

“I understand,” Victor said.

“Do you, son?” Nouno said, leaning forward. “Because there’s more to it than that.” A kind of hardness seemed to settle behind his dark eyes. “Now we talk about what you owe.” He stood, waiting. “I want to show you something.”

Nouno led the way into the living room, but Victor paused at the foot of the stairs. “I should maybe go check on Sofia,” he said.

Nouno continued on. “She’s fine,” he said. “She’s not going nowhere.”

Nouno sat behind a desk as massive as the one in the restaurant office. But this one was varnished like glass. The room was dark, paneled walls and bookcases with

framed photos—a young Nouno in a Navy uniform; a bit older Nouno, shirtless on the deck of a sponge boat; middle-aged Nouno, beaming in the center of a group of men in business suits; a more recent shot of the white-haired Nouno receiving a blessing from the Archbishop. A record of achievement, Victor saw. Proud moments from a good life.

“I like this room,” Nouno said. “I can think here.” He shuffled through a stack of mail. “Business,” he said. “Have a seat.” Nouno moved on to a pile of hand-written notes. “Phone calls,” he said, scanning through the messages. One of the slips of paper caught his attention. “Detective. . .” He held out the note for Victor. “Can you read this?”

The message asked Nouno to call the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Department regarding Bob Bazos. The detective’s name was not difficult to make out. “Patterson,” Victor said.

“Oh, sure, I know that guy,” Nouno said. “Probably heard about the other night at the restaurant,” Nouno said. “How’s your eye?”

“Fine,” Victor said.

Nouno picked up the phone, looked at the message, and began to dial. He had completed four numbers when he stopped, looked up, and snapped his fingers. “If this guy wants to know about last night, what the hell am I going to tell him?”

It was obvious to that it hadn’t just occurred to Nouno that the authorities might be interested in Bob Bazos’ death rather than his drunken outburst at the restaurant.

Victor wondered what the old man’s ploy was, what answer he expected.

“I know,” Nouno said, when Victor didn’t respond. “It’s a tough one. I could say I don’t know anything about it, but then they’d still want to talk to Sofia. And you too, probably. And that means that Cyrus’ name could come up.”

“Not from us,” Victor said.

“You wouldn’t mean to, but these cops have their ways, Victor. And with the girl, I couldn’t take a chance she wouldn’t say something.”

“I’ve been thinking maybe I’d like to go back to Greece.”

“I was just reading in the paper they got a bunch of thugs in charge there. Americans aren’t exactly welcomed with open arms. Besides which, it takes money to travel. And I believe you already owe Cyrus a big sum, which means really you owe me.”

“I’ll get your money,” Victor said.

Nouno leaned back. The friction of his bare skin rubbed against the smooth leather produced a flatulent groan. The old man’s big belly shook when he laughed. “How’s a busboy going to come up with five thousand dollars?”

The thwang, thwang of the diving board announced that they were not alone in the house. Victor looked out through the window behind Nouno’s desk in time to see Cyrus’ lean figure push off the board and jackknife into the water.

Nouno paid no attention to his nephew. He folded his arms across his flabby chest and stared contemplatively at the beamed ceiling, as if Victor had come to him seeking advice and Nouno was pondering his response. Outside, someone was speaking, an unfamiliar male voice, muffled so that Victor couldn’t make out what was being said. Nouno closed his eyes, as if to concentrate, either on Victor’s problem or the voice outside his window. But then the voice was followed by plunk of electric guitars and Victor realized it was the radio.

Suddenly, Nouno sat up. “It isn’t the money,” he said. “Your problem, busboy, is fate.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in that,” Victor said.

“Luck is what I don’t believe in. Fate I believe in very much. Big difference.” He went to the bookcase and brought down a wooden box with a glass lid. He set it on the desk, opened it. “Recognize?” he said, standing and admiring the gold-painted cross. “It’s the Epiphany Cross. I was fifteen. Back then anyone could dive, boys, men, didn’t matter. There were guys had been diving all their lives, and I came up with it. It brings you luck, they said. And so I believed, and things have worked out so-so ever since.” He wagged his hand. “But what I know now, busboy, is it’s more than luck. It’s fate. This cross was my fate. All this . . .” he spread his arms “. . .this was my fate. I survived the war and came back here, and when before the sponge business went bust, I started up the restaurant. I’m important in this town. People look to me. Fate.” He sat at the desk and leaned back. “What about you, Victor? What do you think fate wants with you?”

Victor shrugged. He didn’t want to get tripped up in Papademopoulos’ ramblings.

“*You* didn’t come up with the cross. Was that just bad luck? When that boy went out in your place on the sponge boat and drowned. Coincidence? Sofia? You finally get her to notice you, and you wind up in this mess. You know what I call that, busboy?”

“Fate?” Victor said softly.

The old man slapped his hand flat on the desk. “Cursed,” he shouted. “Born loser.”

Victor felt the anger well up in him.

“But it doesn’t have to be like that, son,” Papademopoulos said, more calmly. “You get to choose. You can take it, and go on being a loser. Or . . .” His smile showed a row of big, yellow teeth. “You can fight. I can show you how. Interested?”

Victor nodded. He had no choice.

“You owe me five thousand dollars. That I won’t forgive. But even so, I like you. So here’s my offer.” He patted the breast pocket of his thick terry robe, as if looking for a cigar that wasn’t there. “Cyrus is supposed to report to the army in three weeks. He don’t want to go to a war. I don’t want him to go to a war. Like I said, he’s family. And besides, I need him. You, I don’t need. I got connections. People are happy to help me. But this is the United States government, and they don’t owe me or nobody jack squat. So here’s the deal. You take his place. Take his papers, his name. You go to the draft board and say, ‘Here I am, Cyrus Kanakis, reporting for duty.’ You look like him. They don’t care. They just take. They won’t ask questions. You do this, and I forget the five thousand dollars.” He slapped his hands together as if brushing off dust.

“Give up my name?” Victor said.

“You know what they say,” Papademopoulos said, finding a cigar in his desk drawer and lighting it. “Change your name, change your luck.” Nouno, who didn’t believe in luck, grinned at his self-mocking joke.

“I can’t,” Victor said. He stood with his fist balled at his sides.

“Can’t, or won’t?” Nouno said.

“I can’t leave.”

Nouno stood and came around the desk. He put his hand on Victor’s shoulder, and Victor sank back down on the chair. “Don’t worry about the girl. We’ll look after her. Serve your time, come back, and she’ll be here, safe and sound. You’ll be an American. A hero. She’ll love you.”

“She loves me already. She needs me.”

Nouno put his hand over his heart. “She’ll get what she needs. You don’t have to worry. I’ll guarantee it personally.” He moved back around the desk “But all right. Let’s just say she does need you. There’s still the police. What do I tell Detective . . .” He picked up the slip near the phone. “Patterson. What should I say when he asks if I’ve seen the girl?”

Victor lowered his head and stared at the interlocking circles in the pattern of the carpet. A weight had descended on him.

“I could say that when Bazos was killed his daughter was right here in my house nursing one of my poor busboys that her father cold-cocked in my restaurant. Or I could say, ‘No, I haven’t seen her or the busboy since that night in the restaurant, but I heard they were on their way out of town, back to Greece, maybe. I also heard if you look such and such a place you might just find Bazos’ body. And the gun that killed him. And you might find the girl’s finger prints on that gun.’”

Victor couldn’t raise his head. He couldn’t bear to see Nouno’s big yellow smile. “You tricked me,” he said.

Nouno laughed. “What trick? You think I’m so smart that I can just, whoof . . .” His hands danced in the air. “Make this all happen. You flatter me. Nobody I know of has that kind of power. No, *I* didn’t cause any of this. But maybe . . . You know what I think it is?”

Victor waited.

“It’s fate,” Nouno said. He laughed at his big joke.

Victor stood and took a step toward the desk. He picked up the cross. “I should kill you right now, maybe,” Victor said. “See who’s cursed.”

“But you won’t,” Nouno said. “Calm down, busboy. Think it through. We’re talking about a deal, an arrangement. You help out Cyrus, I forget about the money you owe. How’s this? Even better. I’ll pay you. For every month you’re away, I’ll give you, what, five hundred dollars. Sound good? You come out of the army, you got a nice little nest egg. I’ll give it to the girl if you want, just so you know you can trust me.” He put his arm around Victor’s shoulder, and Victor could smell the sweat and cigar. The room grew small. He heard someone moving around in the living room. He was trapped. He would say or do anything to get out from under Nouno’s thick arm.

“Deal?” Papademopoulos said.

Victor closed his eyes and nodded.

Papademopoulos clapped his shoulder. “Good man,” he said. “Now go see about your girl. Leave the rest to me.”

Eight

The Least He Could Do

At the induction center in Tampa, Victor boarded an army-green school bus headed for Fort Benning, the sprawling army base just outside Columbus, Georgia. He settled into a seat near the back of the bus and watched the palmettos and palms give way to pine and kudzu, but his thoughts were never far from Sofia. Despite her pleading with him to stay, he was convinced he had done the right thing by leaving. He had no doubt that Sofia was better off under Nouno's protection than if the two of them had tried to outrun their trouble.

They had six weeks together in small apartment that Nouno had arranged. It was small but clean, and Victor liked picking up after Sofia, who had a habit of leaving half-eaten sandwiches and empty Coke bottles lying around. They fell almost automatically into a domestic routine, and at times it was easy to imagine that they were typical newlyweds, particularly in bed. But there were other times when they thought about nothing other than the future. They didn't talk much about the dangers that awaited Victor. But their desperation only drew them closer. In those anxious moments their love was even more intense and passionate, as if they were trying to enter one another's skin.

After three weeks, Sofia confided to Victor that she had missed her period. She had a strong suspicion, she said, that she was pregnant. And the news removed any doubt in Victor's mind that he had to go through with his deal with Nouno. If they ran away, he and Sofia couldn't very well raise a child while looking over their shoulders every minute for the law or Nouno or who knows what else. A baby was even more reason Sofia should be safe and settled in a place where she would be looked after. They had seen

first-hand what Nouno could do. Far better to be on his good side. Which is why Victor had delivered Nouno's letter to the woman at the draft board. He would fix it so that Victor never got close to the war. Victor trusted Papademopoulos's word. What choice did he have?

It was better this way. Victor would put in his time in basic training, and if he was lucky, serve out his tour of duty in some kind of clerk's job or in a warehouse or as a cook—anything that didn't include being shot at—and afterward he and Sofia would be free to do as they pleased. That's what they told themselves. They were young and free. It wasn't as if they were in Greece or even in Tarpon Springs in the old days. It was whole new decade. What mattered between a man and woman was what in their hearts, not on a piece of paper. They could even get married after their debt to Nouno had been repaid and the threat of deportation no longer hung over their heads. Yes, he thought, as the bus pulled up to the reception barracks, everything was going to work out just fine.

For most of the first few days at Fort Benning, Victor stood in lines—to have his head shorn clean to the scalp; to fill out dozens of forms, questionnaires, and tests, few of which seemed to have much to do with soldiering; to pick up a rifle, gear, and uniforms; to eat. The army was one continuous waiting room. And then he was sent off to his drill instructor, who for the next two months marched, pummeled, and humiliated him and his squad into the ranks of young men who, except for height and skin color, would become indistinguishable and interchangeable parts in the vast American killing machine.

The drill instructor was a badger of a man with a head like a cinder block and an accent from the mill workers' streets of Lowell, Massachusetts. His name was LaVeck, but no one ever called him by his name. Names weren't important. The trainees were

referred to by their distinctive physical features—Donkey Dick, Pinhead, Lard Ass—or by their nationality—Frenchy, Polack, Spic. Those without obvious identifying characteristics were called Piece of Shit or Worm or Fuck, the most common and useful word in the soldier’s lexicon. Victor hated every minute of it. And at the lowest, foulest, dirtiest moments, he couldn’t stave off pin pricks of doubt about his decision to take on this insanity. If he were honest, he would have to admit at times he questioned whether his love for Sofia was worth all this misery.

Victor’s relationship with his drill instructor was unambiguous. The sergeant screamed orders, and Victor carried them out as best he could. Sergeant LaVeck would come into the barracks in the dead of the night, snap on the lights on, grab footlockers, and spill their contents across the floor. He screamed for the soldiers to get up and sort things out. Then he wheeled smartly on his heel and left the wooly-brained trainees on their hands and knees cursing vows of revenge. But not Victor. He did as he was told without question or complaint.

It wasn’t because Victor liked the army or even respected the sergeant. He hated LaVeck’s bullying, his petty humiliations, the joy he seemed to derive from manipulating powerless, confused young men who’d come to Georgia and the army only because they were too lazy or guileless or dumb or poor to avoid it. The sergeant was passionate about his role in life: “to jerk you little dickweeds into warriors.” This apparently gave him license to terrorize the nervous young trainees, not only so that they would submit to authority, but beyond submission, to the point where their spirits shattered and their minds shut down. The army was in the killing business, the sergeant constantly reminded his trainees. “Only two things you need to know about the Viet Cong. One, they’re the

enemy, and two, they're better off dead," the sergeant said. "Kill a gook, you're doing them and everyone else a favor." This was as close as the army ever got to explaining to the young men the reason they had been called to the defense of their country.

Victor knew better than to take the sergeant's sadism personally. He was simply doing the job the army paid him to do, his MOS, military occupational specialty. Some of the trainees, too dim or stubborn to grasp this right away, resisted, and for their recalcitrance they suffered even more creative psychological and physical torment, for the sergeant truly was a gifted ballbreaker. Victor was too smart to fall into his trap. It was far better simply to surrender at once, which is what Victor did. It saved everyone involved a lot of time and trouble because sooner or later everyone fell into line.

During his basic training, Victor didn't seek out friendships, and no one sought his. When he was told to do something, no matter how trivial or purposeless the task, he tried to perform perfectly, not because he sought praise or affirmation of his soldiering skills, but because mistakes, inattention, or incompetence were what got noticed. Victor sought anonymity. Had he the power, he would have turned himself the same institutional puke green color of paint that covered every interior surface at the sprawling base, so he could melt into the background. Get through this, he told himself. Get through this.

So unless directly ordered to participate with others in some drill or group exercise, he remained apart. He existed alone. Trainees were denied communication with the world outside. No letters in or out. No phone calls. Most of the young men turned to one another for support and comfort. They commiserated about the instructors, complained about the chow, swapped stories about the girls and families they left behind. But mostly they talked about Vietnam, trading second- and third-hand war stories they

had gotten, they swore, from guys who had been there and survived, stories about burning babies and necklaces of human ears or smiling children bearing booby-trapped gifts for the GIs or prostitutes with razors in their pussies or American soldiers who shot their own officers in the back to keep from being ordered to their deaths. Victor knew the stories were lies, maybe even intentionally passed down by the army so that the new soldiers would learn to bond, to become a team, to fight for one another and die for each other if they had to. This was just the kind of thing the army would do. Mindfuck, the army called it. But Victor was not fooled so easily. He had Nouno's letter in his file. He wasn't going near a place where children blew up soldiers and soldiers blew up their own officers. He remained determined to keep his distance from the sheep-like trainees who surrounded him, even if it meant falling deeper and deeper into a gulf of isolation.

In the brief moments every night before he fell into a hard, dreamless sleep, lying in his bunk, exhausted from the training, he thanked his lucky stars for Sofia. Imagining seeing her again was the one thing that sustained him. She knew that he had acted only out of love, he was sure of it. The crucible of basic training had cleansed his mind, and now he could see through to the clear, hard truth—he loved Sofia. He would grow old with her. Next to being with her, he wanted more than anything for her to be pregnant. He wanted her to have a dozen of his kids, the more the better. He would do whatever he had to do to get through the next year so he could return to her. He would do it all for her. Any doubt about his feelings for her seemed absurd and contemptible. He fell asleep, mentally composing a long, passionate letter promising her his love and dedication.

When the sergeant announced that the first phase of their training was complete and they would be allowed certain privileges, among them access to the U.S. mail, Victor

sat down and wrote and wrote until he had filled six pages. Tell me everything, he said. I think of you always.

A week later he received her reply. It was thoughtful and sincere, but not exactly what Victor had expected. He read and re-read the letter, each time finding significance in the turn of a phrase or the choice of a word, but even more meaning in what she didn't say. She made no mention, for example, of pregnancy. I love you, she wrote. Be safe. I can't wait to see you again. Kind and caring, but with a certain emotional distance, a disheartening flatness, certainly not the life raft he had yearned for. When he tried to picture her, the image was incomplete. She was fading from his memory. When he wrote back he had to resist allowing his desperation to come spilling onto the page. He didn't want to worry her. Send a photo, he wrote.

And then basic training was almost finished. The sergeant announced that orders for AIT, Advanced Individual Training, would be handed down the next day, and it was almost as if it were Christmas Eve. No one could sleep for the anticipation. Most of them would be headed for infantry training, which meant their next stop would be Vietnam. A lucky few would be spared. It was a crapshoot. But Victor was rolling loaded dice. He had Nouno's letter in his file. He wasn't going anywhere near Vietnam.

The next morning the sergeant gathered them in the barracks. "Ahearn, infantry," the sergeant said. "Burns, cavalry. Cairo, infantry." On and on. "Fournier, infantry. Grogan, infantry. Heur, signal corps. Harris, infantry."

Victor followed the alphabetic progress, watching the faces of the young men. Some betrayed panic and fear when their ticket was punched for the war. Others remained stone still. The faces of those ticketed for less lethal destinations—the signal

corps, engineers, even language school—invariably smiled and kept on beaming even as their comrades' worst fears were confirmed. Better them than me. The lucky few couldn't hide their joy, an unintentional cruelty toward the doomed. Victor made a silent vow that when his duty was announced—he was hoping for something that would keep him indoors, but he wasn't really particular—he wouldn't smile like an idiot and rub salt in the fresh wounds of those soldiers sentenced to combat. He didn't have any friends among the others, didn't really care for them even in a general way, but he was a decent man. He wished no one ill. Not gloating was the least he could do under the circumstances.

“Johnson, engineers,” the sergeant said.

Johnson whooped.

“Asshole,” someone muttered.

The sergeant glared up from his list. Victor felt sympathy with whoever called Johnson, the engineer, an asshole. Have a heart.

“Kanakis,” the sergeant said, “infantry.”

Victor's heart leapt. “No,” he said. “It isn't right. It's not right.”

“Asshole,” someone said.

Even in March, Fort Polk, Louisiana, was hot and dirty, steeped in a gloomy resignation to a terrible, inescapable predicament. It was what a prison yard must feel like, Victor thought, or a tuberculosis ward. Men trained here for death, both to inflict it and avoid it. But it seemed the very stink of it rose up inescapably from the surrounding swamps.

Victor had been sent south along with most everyone else in his training squad from Benning, which in hindsight seemed almost idyllic compared to Fort Polk. They all knew they had landed at the last stop on the way to Vietnam.

Perhaps when young men destined for France or islands in the Pacific came here twenty-five years earlier the place was different. Not in appearance—the barracks and PX and mess halls were largely unchanged from World War II—but certainly in outlook. The young men sent here, unlike their fathers before them—had no sense that their fellow citizens valued their duty, and thus their lives. They were fodder, nothing more. In the dismal swamps of Louisiana, they were being offered up to a war that few understood and even fewer thought necessary.

When they arrived, they fell out to the parade ground where they were greeted by their drill instructor. There had been an outbreak of spinal meningitis, he announced. They were in luck. In order to avoid being incapacitated by the disease-infested waters, and useless to the army they would forgo the usual humping through the swamps and be trucked to the make-believe gook village “Don’t worry, though,” said the sergeant, a drawling, stiff-spined Georgian “I will make sure you leave here ready to fight.” The sergeant signaled to a soldier who had been standing behind him carrying a large metal bucket. The soldier moved alongside, and the sergeant reached into the pail and held up a handful of what looked like sawdust. “You all are going to take a big ol’ handful of this training aid here,” the sergeant said.

The soldier with bucket moved down the line, offering it to each man. They scooped their hands in, and Victor saw that it was indeed sawdust they pulled out. “That’s it. Make sure you get yourself a great big fistful,” the sergeant said. When Victor,

the last man, reached into the bucket, the sergeant faced them. “Now, take that and stick it down your drawers, ladies.”

Victor thought that he’d misunderstood.

“That’s it, down deep,” the sergeant said. “Work it down in there. You’ll get used to it. You’ll to do it every day to remind you not to take anything for granted. You’ll get used to a hell of lot worse.”

The men turned and looked at one another. Murmurs of complaint passed through the ranks. But Victor stood with his hand, still full of sawdust, stretched in front of him. When the sergeant saw this, he marched over. “Do have a problem, private?” the sergeant bellowed.

“No sergeant,” Victor said.

“Then why is that training aid in your hand and not on your balls?”

Victor didn’t answer. He had no answer. Trying to process such stupidity, his brain had seized up.

“I am not asking, private,” the sergeant said. “I am ordering you to shove that goddamn sawdust down your goddamn crotch.”

Despite his stupefaction, Victor managed to make his limbs comply with the sergeant’s order. His scrotum began to burn immediately as the particles of sawdust bore into his moist skin.

“You will not go soft on me,” the sergeant said, “just because of some fucking spinal meningitis. You will wish for fucking spinal meningitis before you leave here.”

The sergeant turned neatly and marched away, leaving the corporal, who still carried the sawdust bucket, to dismiss the squad. The group of soldiers cursed as they

hobbled away, hurrying despite their agony, as best they could, presumably to somewhere they could relieve their burning and itching private parts. Only Victor remained on the parade grounds, alone in his misery.

That first night, lying in his bunk on top of the sheets so that air could circulate around his raw testicles, Victor for the first time since leaving Tarpon Springs began to cry. It was a relief at first, but once his emotions uncorked, he felt like he was drowning. He had to bite his pillow to keep from bawling like a baby. He had been a fool to believe Nouno. The old man and Cyrus had played him like a bouzouki. Maybe Sofia had been in on it too. Maybe she had known all along what was in store for him. He was a fool to believe the old man. He should have looked at the letter he gave him, should have torn it open in front of him and seen that the envelope contained a blank page, or perhaps one that said, "Here's a fool. Do with him whatever you like." He had had enough of protecting others. It was time to look out for number one. Even if that meant going back to Greece with nothing but the clothes on his back.

And so, drying his eyes, he decided to find someone to explain his situation to. An officer, someone with authority to whom he could appeal, make it clear that he was not who the army thought he was, someone further up the chain of command from the bullet-headed sergeant with enough intelligence to recognize injustice and enough courage to do something about it. If he could find a sympathetic ear, he would explain that he was the victim of a mistake. Unlikely as it sounded, it was all too real. The man the army had called was in Tarpon Springs, Florida, living carefree while Victor paid the price for this imposter's freedom. He would point fingers. He would name names. He would swear on

a stack of Bibles. He would pick photos out of a book of mug shots. This one, he would say, this is your man, this criminal and draft-dodger. The man standing before you is not a soldier. I'm not even an American. He would explain it all, carefully, so they would make it right.

But it was a week into his AIT before he had an opportunity to talk to anyone higher in rank than the drill sergeant. And the sergeant was clearly not the kind of man one went to for comfort. It wasn't until one day when he saw an army chaplain hurrying across the compound, head down, looking as if he were late for an appointment, that Victor finally saw a chance to speak up. Victor ran over to the man, who looked up, startled. "Please, sir, can I talk to you?" Victor said.

The chaplain looked at his wristwatch. "Not now, private. I'm late."

"I'll only be minute, sir," Victor said. "I need help. Bad."

The chaplain pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up on his forehead and kneaded the bridge of his nose with two fingers. He was unsuited for the climate or for a uniform. He was pink-skinned and what hair he had left was almost white, and yet the chaplain was, at the most, in his thirties. "What is it?" he said. "Why are you out here?"

"There's been a mistake. I'm not supposed to be here."

"Get back to your duty, private."

"Sir, no. I mean I'm not supposed to be in the army. I'm not who they think I am, the army, I mean."

"The army doesn't make mistakes, son," the chaplain said.

"No, father. But this time they did. I thought I'd ask you for advice. I thought that was a priest's job."

“I’m not a father, son, I’m a Methodist.”

“Sorry, sir. The Greek church only has fathers. You can help me, though?”

The chaplain rubbed his bald head. “It’s not really a spiritual problem, private, is it? Maybe you should speak to the AOD. Over there.” He pointed to a building across the compound. “But I doubt you’ll get very far, son. Maybe if you’d shown up at the draft board in a diaper and a bowler hat. Maybe they would’ve believed you’re bonkers and let you go. Here, I’m afraid crazy’s common as dirt.”

“I’m not crazy, sir,” Victor said. “I’m just not supposed to be here.”

The chaplain smiled slightly. “Then I guess you’re not crazy,” he said. “Go on, plead your case.”

After the third time through, Victor had honed his story to its essentials. Deception, fraud, mistaken identity. It was necessary to get to the point quickly, Victor decided. Starting with a young lieutenant, each person he talked to had listened only briefly before passing him on to someone of higher rank. Finally, he was sent to a Captain Knobloch, who limply returned Victor’s salute when he entered the captain’s office.

“What is it, private?” the captain said.

“Sir, I was blackmailed into taking another man’s place in the army, sir,” Victor said.

Captain Knobloch looked up from a pile of papers on his desk. His belly lapped over the belt of his pants, and when he spoke he bared small, sharp teeth. Victor felt that he had seen the man before. “What’s your name, private?”

“That’s the problem, sir.”

“Not knowing your own name is definitely a problem.”

“I know my name, sir. But it’s not the name on my records. The army thinks I’m Cyrus Kanakis. But really I’m Victor Lucas.”

Captain Knobloch laced his fat fingers behind his head and leaned back in his creaking chair. He spoke out of the side of his mouth. “And why would the army think that?”

“Because I took this other man’s letter and identification papers to the draft board and said it was me. Or I mean I said I was him.”

“Which is it?”

“I said I was the other man, sir.”

“So then what you’re really saying is, really it was your mistake. The army wasn’t confused, you were.”

“I wasn’t confused, sir.”

“Well, you sound confused, soldier.”

“I was tricked.”

“Excuse me, private.”

“I was tricked, sir.”

The captain shifted forward in his chair and glanced at the papers on his desk. “You just walked into your draft board back home and gave them someone else’s name and they believed you? No one checked your ID, ask for a driver’s license?”

Victor felt the sweat roll down his back. “There’s no picture on the ID, sir, and besides, we look alike. That’s why—”

“I find this fascinating, private. Tell me, did this other person hypnotize you?”

“No, sir, he—“

“Did he put dope in your coffee?”

“Sir, he—“

“Maybe he threatened you, tortured you? Said he would rape your mother.”

“My mother’s dead, sir.”

“That’s not the point!” The captain snapped back, his face suddenly red with anger. “Just how the hell did the army trick you?”

Victor could feel his hope fading. “I’m sorry, sir. The army didn’t trick me. Someone else did. This person made me go in someone else’s place.”

Captain Knobloch flipped through a file folder open on his desk. “This other Cyrus Kanakis?”

“Yes sir. Him and his uncle.”

The captain stared at Victor for a moment, Victor thought that maybe he’d found the sympathetic ear he’d hoped for. And then the captain stood and continued in a level voice.

“Private Kanakis, you understand the term court-marshal? Do you understand that misrepresenting yourself to an officer is the kind of thing that could get a person screwed three ways from Sunday?”

“Sir, I wasn’t—“

The captain raised his hand for silence. “I’m just trying to understand why a young man would do such a thing as you described here to me today. Can you give me a simple explanation?”

“I guess I was scared, sir,” Victor said, his resolve seeping away along with his hope.

Captain Knobloch sat back down, leaned his elbow against the table, and rested his double chin in his palm. “Let me tell you something about fear, son,” he said. “I’ve been around the block once or twice. Even here, training young men like yourself, you learn something about fear. One thing I’ve learned is being scared makes people think some god-awful things. Sometimes just the thought of firing your weapon at something that’s shooting back can do strange things to man. But I have some advice.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What I always tell new soldiers. It’s all right to be scared. Keeps you alert and alive. It’s not a good thing to try to con your way out of your duty. That only leads to trouble no one wants. You agree, private?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right then, Private Kanakis. It’s Kanakis, right? We’re agreed on that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then unless you have something to add, I believe we’re done. Do you have anything to add?”

“No, sir.”

“There’s a saying in the army. Cooperate and graduate. We’re not going to let you go anywhere without preparing you. Listen to your sergeant and to the officers. You’ll be fine, private. Good day, and good luck.”

Victor turned to leave and suddenly realized why Knobloch looked familiar. He stared at the captain for a second, took in his crisp profile and big belly protruding

assertively over the shining brass of his belt buckle, and it was as if he were looking at Nouno Papademopoulos, minus twenty years.

Nine

The Taste of a Name So Sweet

Private Cyrus Kanakis arrived in Vietnam on April 1, 1970. He had no idea where he was nor why he was there. At the Combat Center, he did as he was told without question. He knew not to expect explanations. For the next few days he was led—combat training, survival procedures, standard tactics—and he followed, a good dog. After a week he was herded onto a truck and taken to join an infantry unit that operated from a wire-encircled encampment in a bleak, cratered region. The next day he was loaded onto a helicopter and flown over the treeless, scorched landscape it seemed insane anyone would risk his life fighting for.

None of the soldiers on the helicopter spoke during the flight. Some smoked, some slept, others studied the floor or stared out into the empty space of the sky. Victor worried about his boots. He tucked his feet up against his thighs so that his clean, polished boots would be less conspicuous, and he less obviously brand-new to the war. Focusing on this trivial preoccupation suppressed the involuntary responses to the situation that threatened to betray much more than Victor's newness. His hands trembled. His skin seemed electrically charged. When he swallowed he could taste the bilious contents of his stomach at the back of his throat.

Then the helicopter began to descend, and a soldier leaned into a machine gun mounted in the door and began firing. Even before they had landed, the squad leaders were screaming for the men to get out, to hit the ground, to find cover. Before he could stand, Victor was knocked over on his side. "Fucking new guy," someone said. Victor felt someone grab him by his flak jacket. He struggled to his feet. He was caught up in a

kind of animal rush to daylight. He was out of the helicopter and on the ground in a clearing of tall grass that rolled in the wash of the helicopter blades like waves on water. While the helicopter began lifting off even before the last man spilled out, the machine gunner continued to fire through the open door a continuous onslaught that faded into the sky as the helicopter rose up and away.

Squatting in the bent grass with no point of reference to fix on, Victor might as well have been on the bottom of the ocean. He wished he were. He cursed his drill sergeants in Georgia and Louisiana. They had taught him nothing useful. He was defenseless. They'd done nothing to prepare him for anything like this. It was if the air were full of metal and fire. Rockets exploded and split the ground. Squad leaders shouted orders that got chewed up in the noise and chaos. Victor was convinced his first day in the war would be his last. He made himself small and waited, hoping only that he would die quickly and not suffer.

Victor sensed movement behind him, and he turned to face his fate.

“Get up and move out, dumb ass, before you get it shot off.”

Victor did not know the man's name; he knew no one's name in the entire country. From the stripes on his sleeve he knew the man was a sergeant. He followed him.

The sergeant's name was Ackles, but most of the men under him called him Shade. He was the company's leader, a lean man whose movements were fluid, almost feline. He grew up in Louisiana, a place called the Crossroads. He was perhaps in his mid-twenties, a couple of years older than Victor, but among the members of the squad he was

considered a wise old man. Ackles had an uncanny skill for spotting booby traps. But he was the leader not only because he was good at soldiering. He was lucky, yes, and luck was also a big part of it. He had survived longer than anyone else in the squad. But it was more even than luck. Among the squad, there was an unquestioned belief that Ackles had a unique place in the bush, a kind of connection. They all said that everything about the man, his cool, his talk, his attitude, was black, except for his skin. The men of his squad said that he was made for the dark. It was his element.

They stopped to rest and eat. Ackles came and sat down beside Victor. “Keep your head up and your ass down, new guy,” he said. “Don’t go tuning out on us back there.” It was the first time in two days the squad leader had spoken to Victor. It was also the first time in Vietnam that anyone had acknowledged that he was anything other than a warm body. Immediately, Victor was suspicious of the sergeant’s motives.

“You holding up?” he said. “Catching on?”

“Yes, sergeant,” Victor said.

The sergeant laughed. “You will. First thing is, there’s rules and there’s rules. You learn which ones matter and which don’t. Only thing is staying alive. Yes sir, no sir, all that regulation shit don’t count for much out here.” Ackles stood and slapped the dust from the seat of his pants. “For now just concentrate on keeping up.”

Victor watched Ackles amble over to a group of young soldiers who were passing a joint. Ackles took it when it was handed to him. He took a long hit and then passed it on. Victor wondered how things had gotten so completely turned around. How could the men in charge here in the war seem more like the students protesting the war back home, while the men back in Fort Benning and Fort Polk who were supposed to be training

soldiers to stay alive were sadistic tyrants? He wondered what the tough old Sergeant LaVeck back in Georgia would say if he saw his colleague Ackles here in Vietnam. Maybe, Victor thought, LaVeck hadn't been such a monster after all. You could argue with his methods, maybe, but not his insistence on discipline. Victor would show Ackles that he could keep up. He may not be the world's greatest soldier, but he'd learned a thing or two about what mattered and what didn't.

After that, keeping pace in the march became a matter of pride. Victor began to fall into the rhythm of the patrol, and soon his boots were as creased and cracked and as stained the same rust color as everyone else's, as everything in Vietnam. Twice, they encountered the enemy. The first time just outside a village along a muddy, little river, and the next time in the hills above a small, abandoned farm. In each case, Victor saw no sign of the soldiers on the other side. Shots were fired at them, and so the company—along with Victor—returned the fire. Soon, helicopters arrived, and the area was secured. The first time, no enemy casualties were found, but the second time, Victor's squad discovered four dead North Vietnamese soldiers.

Looking at the small, gray, broken figures fallen into awkward poses, Victor had no sense that he had contributed to the battle. It seemed an exaggeration to even call it a battle. But later, as they marched away, Victor allowed himself a brief valedictory moment. He had been shot at and had survived. He had fired his weapon and hadn't hesitated. Enemy soldiers had been killed, and perhaps he hadn't killed them, but then again, it could have been him.

It was not right that he was here. He was no soldier. And yet he had done a soldier's job. There was something to be said for that.

On the march, Victor settled into a place in the middle of the group. Ackles was always in the lead. One day, just after dark, they left one village and were marching to the next when Ackles froze slightly ahead of the others and raised his hand and whistled to signal a halt. Everyone froze, everyone except a baby-faced soldier named Fisk.

Everything was still for a moment, and then there was a dull discharge, not much of an explosion, really, but enough so that Fisk was dead. They wrapped his body in his poncho and called a helicopter to come and take him away. Later, when the others talked about it, it wasn't to lament the loss so much as to reconstruct the banality of the thing. They concluded that Fisk had died of stupidity. This was, Victor would soon learn, almost always their conclusion. Fisk had forgotten for one fatal moment a basic law of survival.

"In Sarge we trust," someone said.

"Amen," someone said. There was agreement all around. And once again it was confirmed that Ackles was their best hope. Remember the laws of the playground. Follow the leader.

Just as he had all through training, Victor kept to himself. He was different. The others—the wide-eyed small-town boys, the big-city losers, the resentful blacks and Latinos, those in the army by choice and those there because they were called and were out of ideas about how to avoid it—they had nothing in common with Victor, not even the only thing that they all had in common with each other. They were all at least American citizens. Victor wasn't sure that he was Greek anymore. But he was certainly not an American. After the humiliating interview with Captain Knobloch, he had learned to carefully choose whom to confide in. His silence made him different from almost

everyone else. And he knew that being seen as different made him suspicious. But he didn't care. It was his business. But his aloofness had earned him an apparently permanent nickname. He couldn't remember who first called him Ogee.

"What does it mean, Ogee," Victor asked.

"O-G. Other guy," the soldier said.

The name stuck, and Victor did nothing to discourage it. Not that he could have done anything. In fact, he took a private pride in the fact that he was distinguished from those around him, even by anonymity.

They had stopped to rest. Victor sat with his back against a tree, eating a can of peaches while the rest of the squad repeated much the same conversation and the same jokes that Victor had already heard enough times so that he could predict who would say what. Ackles came and plopped down beside him. "So, Ogee, how're you enjoying your war?"

Victor chewed. He avoided looking at the sergeant directly. Something about his dark eyes unnerved him. They sat deep in his tanned face and seemed to glow even in the dark. Victor looked down at Ackles' dirt-creased hands, concentrating on a fleck of something red on the base of his thumb. He hoped that Ackles would get the message from his silence and go away.

But Ackles didn't budge. "Yeah, hell of a war. Always something new and exciting. Where you from, Ogee?"

"Greece," Victor said, mumbling through the peaches.

"Where?"

“The country.”

“With the temples and gods? No shit? I thought maybe you were a gypsy or something. I didn’t know the Greeks were mad at the Vietnamese.”

“I was living in Florida, Tarpon Springs.”

“How’d you get to Florida from Greece?”

“It’s a long story,” Victor said, sitting back and drinking down the syrup from the peaches.

“Where am I going?” Ackles said.

It could have been easy to be taken in by a guy like Ackles. No one else Victor had come across in the army seemed remotely like a comrade. Not like the soldiers in the old war movies. He was no John Wayne, but it was easy to see why most men were drawn to Ackles.

But Victor wasn’t like most men. Ackles’ ease and familiarity only made Victor more suspicious of his motives.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Victor said.

“I’ve heard a lot of stories.”

“I’m not supposed to be here,” Victor said. And having finally said the words that he had repeated so often in his head, he prepared himself for Ackles’ ridicule

But Ackles didn’t laugh. He didn’t seem amused or even particularly dubious. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, tapped one out, and lit it. He shook his head slowly as if considering a thoughtful response. “Roger that,” Ackles said.

It was the stupid language that made Victor suddenly want to grab the man and shake him. He had grown to hate all the made-up names and words. Other Guy. Grunt.

Hump. Click. Gook. Slant. Slope. Spook. Nigger. Roger. Affirm. Negative. Frag. Motherfucker. Motherfucked. Motherfucking. Motherfuck. The language of the soldier was like the language of twelve-year-old boys who suddenly discover that when adults aren't around they can use adult words. In many ways, it seemed to Victor, that for most of his fellow soldiers, Vietnam was a kind of second puberty. It seemed to awaken in them a latent potential for brutality and coarseness they had forgotten they possessed. And once awakened to the possibilities, soldiers like Ackles took to their new personas with gusto.

“A mistake was made,” Victor said.

Ackles grinned. “There’s a lot of that around here.”

Victor decided the whole conversation was a mistake, like his meeting with Captain Knobloch. “I took someone else’s place. He’s the one who’s supposed to be here talking to you.”

“The other guy?”

Victor again fought the urge to do some physical harm to the man. “I told you you wouldn’t believe it.”

Ackles smiled disarmingly. “What I believe doesn’t matter. It’s enough just staying in one piece here. You say someone else is supposed to be here. I say damn right. Everyone here’s in someone else’s place. Think I want to be here? But here I am. And here you are right beside me. We’re soldiers. We hump and we grunt. The world goes round.”

“I’m not much of a soldier,” Victor said.

“Scared shitless?”

Victor nodded.

“Confused?”

“I’m cursed,” Victor said. And suddenly he thought he was going to cry.

“Always. I didn’t want to believe it. But now I do.”

“You’re not cursed,” Ackles said, slapping Victor on the shoulder as he stood and stretched. “You’re just a soldier.”

“But you’re not scared.”

Ackles’ grinned. “Maybe I just hide it better. You’ll learn. I know it don’t seem possible right now, but you get used to it. Not all of it. But so much of it is out of your control you learn to take care of the stuff is. All that training you did wasn’t for nothing. The army may be crazy but it ain’t stupid. They been fighting wars long enough to learn a thing or two about it. Where’d you do AIT?”

“Fort Polk,” Victor said.

“No shit. You ever get around to any of the little towns around there? Ever hear of place called Fulsome?”

Victor said he hadn’t.

“Not surprised. It’s way back in the woods. Too bad, though, cause you would have seen one of the natural wonders of Louisiana.” He reached into his backpack, took out a photograph, and showed it to Victor. A slender white teenager had his arm draped over the shoulder of a lovely light-skinned black girl. The boy wore a dark suit that hung on his skinny shoulders. The girl posed stiffly in a white dress. They seemed like two kids dressing up in adult clothes. Both wore radiant smiles. Then Victor saw that the girl was holding up her left hand, showing the camera the ring on her finger.

“You and your wife?” Victor said.

Ackles smiled and nodded. “Tying the knot,” he said. “About a month before I went in. That’s not twenty-five miles from Fort Polk. Area they call the Crossroads.”

“She’s beautiful,” Victor said.

Ackles took the photo, studied it for a minute, and then secured it away in his backpack. “Her name’s Janna. When I get back I’m thinking about going to school. College, you know. Find a way out of that little town. She deserves better. First things first, though.”

As he watched Ackles walk away, Victor smelled the animal smells of the nearby village, felt the dank, damp air, saw the red mud caked on his boots. And to his amazement, none of it seemed so foreign. Somewhere along the march, the strangeness of the place had faded. Somehow, Vietnam had sunk deep into his skin and filled his lungs. It was frightening. But it was also a comfort. Like being lost in an unfamiliar city and coming upon a doorway you realized you passed a few minutes before. You’re still lost, but you have something recognizable to fix your bearings to.

Ackles turned. “What’s your real name?” he called back.

“It’s. . .” He caught himself before he said Victor. “It’s Cyrus,” he said.

Ackles shook his head, grinning. “Roger that, Ogee.”

Later, watching Ackles leading the squad through the bush, Victor decided he had been wrong to set himself above the other soldiers. Ackles was right. No one wanted to be here. Someone apparently thought the war was a good idea, but none of those people were alongside him now. They were all were serving someone else. Victor looked around at the young men in his squad. They seemed different. They were more than just simple-

minded grunts. They were men, each with his own history and story. But they were also related, not by blood, but by shared routines, habits, and fears. They ate the same rations, smoked the same dope, spoke the same language. At night in the bush, they slept in the same holes. They knew each others' secrets, who was married, whose girlfriend wrote a Dear John letter. They fought about the same petty irritations and laughed at the same stale jokes. When one was sick they all knew it. And, of course, when one died, they knew that too. A wave of emotion flooded his chest as he watched these men. It wasn't love, exactly, but something close. And Victor wasn't even sure if he would recognize love if it came to spit in his face. Sofia maybe.

He had changed. He had begun let go of the resentment and self-pity that had eaten at him ever since basic training, perhaps ever since he had been left parentless to be raised by a feeble grandfather. There were still times that the petty, numbing world of military life fueled a red-hot contempt for Nouno and Cyrus. But other times, he could be climbing up a trail in the moonlight while the jungle around him seemed to be alive with danger or slogging through the stinking mud of a rice paddy when, and his thoughts turned to Sofia. And occasionally, if the wind blew a certain way and he began to weigh the cost of his devotion against the burden of his debts, the balance tipped toward resentment for Sofia as well.

He *had* felt trapped, eager for a clean break from the trouble in Tarpon Springs. But looking back, he saw that it had all been too easy. Too many coincidences. He'd been used. In those terrible moments, he wondered if Sofia was worth it, if anyone could be worth his wretched situation. These doubts didn't happen often. Most of the time, his love for Sofia sustained him.

And those few times, in his paranoia and self-pity, when he questioned his love, he later felt a terrible guilt for allowing his gloom to get the better of him.

But now, in the warm glow of his new respect for his fellow soldiers, that old kind of love was like ice cream or aftershave lotion, such a frivolous luxury he couldn't remember what it felt like. It seemed impossible that love had once made him lightheaded and feverish and then, in the blink of an eye, morose and despondent. Romance belonged to another person, another life. He doubted whether he would feel such things ever again.

He wouldn't tell Sofia any of this, of course. He didn't want her to worry, but he also didn't want her to have to respond to the details of his trouble. I'm fine, he would write. I'm getting used to the army. I'm learning the routine. Just tell me about what you're doing. All the little things, like I was coming home from a day at the office. He was happy he hadn't explained to Sofia how terrified and lonely and angry he was. He had considered pressing her to try to find a way to bring him home. Maybe she could find someone, a lawyer or politician, who would know how to go about explaining his situation. Maybe Sofia could succeed where he had failed. But he had changed now, and it was too late for all that.

He looked up and discovered that he had been so lost in his thoughts that he had fallen behind the others. He hitched up his pack and began to trot, looking for Ackles and the others.

When they returned to camp, a letter from Sofia was waiting for him. She had written to tell him that a doctor had confirmed that she was pregnant. "Three months, but I already knew," she wrote.

The letter was dated March 7, 1970. It had taken almost a month for it to catch up with him. He tried to picture Sofia with a belly.

“I knew the moment it happened,” she wrote. “But now it’s official. Signed and sealed. Ha. Ha. I feel different now. As soon as the doctor told me, the whole thing became more real. There was a tiny person growing down there, pure and innocent and perfect. So now you have one more reason to keep yourself safe. I hope you’re as happy about this as I am. I know you didn’t want to go. I know you did it for me, but I also think you did it for us—the three of us now. I have to think so. Otherwise how selfish would I be? Please tell me you’re happy about the two of us making a new life together. Tell me it gives you as much hope as it does for me.”

If Sofia had been standing next to him, it would have been impossible for him to tell her how hopeful the news made him. Just when he was beginning to doubt his feelings for her, here was proof of their love. He realized that those doubts were not about Sofia, but about the war. He’d begun to grow a protective shell to protect himself from the demons that chased him constantly.

She continued the letter in a more casual, lighthearted tone, including details about the doctor’s visit, the vitamins he’d prescribed. “No more smoking!!!” she wrote. It killed him to read this.—He didn’t have the words to express his joy, fewer still to convey the wrenching agony the emotions stirred because he was so far away and had so long yet to go before he could return.

He thought for a long time about how to reply. And then he wrote: “Tell me everything about the baby and about you. I’m so happy for you. For us. If there’s one thing I’ve learned here it’s . . .”

But nothing came. He couldn't think what to say, so he crossed the last sentence out and told her about the weather and about Ackles and about the march, leaving out the parts about Fisk or the dead Vietnamese soldiers. "It's nice to think about you getting big and round," he concluded. "It's hard to think about the future right now, but the future is all I think about. I know this makes no sense. But nothing does here.

Love,

Victor (O.G.)

He carefully folded his letter to Sofia, put it in one of the airmail envelopes he had borrowed from a stunned, and freckled, big-eared private named Tucker, and wrote Sofia's address in Tarpon Springs on the front. He kissed the flap before he sealed it.

And then slowly, word-by-word, he ate her.

They were on the move constantly in the next few months. And for a while the letters from Sofia came regularly, finding their way to Victor wherever the army sent him. How the army got the letters to him was a mystery as unfathomable as men walking on the moon. But Victor was growing used to living with the unexplained. The war imposed a daily lessening of a soldier's expectations.

It was bad luck to be happy. Everyone knew this. Invariably, happiness led to disaster. It wasn't just superstition but a matter of verifiable fact. Happiness came about so seldom in such a miserable place that when it did, it always brought retribution. In a bad world, good carried a big price. And so, Victor developed a ritual to keep from being too happy when he read Sofia's letters. He found a quiet place where he could be alone. Before opening the envelope he reminded himself that even though Sofia's letters

comforted him, they also expanded the impossibly wide gulf that separated him from her. It was this bitter yin that balanced the yang of joy. He opened the envelope and unfolded the pages and read the letters as if they were sacred. The word made flesh.

He took the letters with him on patrol. When they stopped to eat or rest or sleep, he took them out, and reread them, and still that wasn't enough. So to complete the communion he tore a corner of the page and placed it on his tongue. He imagined tiny pieces of her, molecular bits of her skin that clung to the paper, entering his skin, slipping into his blood, and coursing in his veins. He consumed the margins first, where her fingers must have held the page. Then he tore the lines of words, already committed to his memory, into strips and then the strips into single words. He ate her up, pronoun by noun by verb. He consumed her subject and object. He smelled her scent on the paper, savored the loops and swirls of her handwriting. He was a connoisseur of the written word. He had an educated palate for ink on paper. It got so that he could taste her vocabulary. He could distinguish the tang of her "darling" from the salt of her "sorry." "Baby" was soft and viscous, like heavy cream. "Doctor" was as sharp and metallic as sardines. He consumed each pronoun, participle, conjunction, and article. The only words he didn't eat were "Nouno" and "Cyrus." These he placed aside and burned. The smoke smelled of grease and sulfur.

He saved "love" and "Sofia" for last so he could remember their complicated tastes, like wine. Smoke and flowers and fruit and mist and sun and moon.

The ink turned his tongue blue, and even this he imagined was her marking him. He carried her with him always, more often than his helmet or rifle. He felt her inside of him, protecting him far better than any armor or weapon.

Once, on patrol, just as he placed the last word from Sofia on his tongue, Ackles happened upon him. They had been on the march for three days, traversing a trail of dried, cracked red earth. Victor habitually kept close to Ackles. He knew by then to be wary of the danger of marching on trails. They were ordered to do so only for the sake of speed. And although they were easier to cross than the sucking despair of the paddies or the foreboding shadows of the brush, the trails guaranteed the constant danger of booby traps.

But this day had been uneventful with no sign of the enemy. They had stopped to rest, and Victor allowed himself to relax as much as that was possible. He found a little clearing between two tall trees, took off his pack, and lay down. A cool breeze lifted the leaves above him. He never took note of the weather in Vietnam before except when it was bad. But now, in this almost blessed moment, he pulled Sofia's letter out, re-read it and then began tearing the words from the page. He performed this ritual carefully. It was important to him to keep the ritual private. He could only imagine the ridicule he'd be subjected to if anyone found out.

Here, all weakness, even the ultimate weakness of dying, became a joke. A soldier called Fritz Pringle had been shot dead by a sniper immediately after he lit up a joint one night. The round went through his throat, and there were those who later swore they saw the pot smoke come seeping out the exit wound. It was a clear breach of both standard army protocol as well as the unofficial but more important common-sense rules of the foot-soldier, and Fritz Pringle paid for his mistake with his life. Always after, if someone bummed a smoke or a toke, someone else would say something like, "Hey,

didn't Fritz tell you? That stuff'll kill you." Or, "Yeah, you remember Fritz. Died of smoke inhalation."

There were constant references, too, to mothers and girlfriends, ethnicity and geography. A guy from Indiana showed a photograph of his girlfriend to a soldier from Illinois, who asked him if it was his girl, or did all Hoosier girls have buck teeth so bad they could eat corn through a picket fence.

A white soldier, known only as Doublemint because he once mentioned he had a twin sister, was bathing next to a black man. Doublemint asked if he ever had to apologize to girls. What for, the black soldier said. You guys are always supposed to be packing such big meat, Doublemint said. Yeah, the black guy said, I did say I was sorry once. But your sister said it was all right.

It was crude and coarse and entirely inoffensive to the participants. They were all young. All bewildered in their youth by the entirely unforeseen sets of circumstances that had brought them together. The jokes and insults were repeated until they became a currency by which the young men, lacking other resources, transacted the business of being soldiers.

"What the hell are you eating, Ogee?" Ackles said.

Victor jumped up, rattled. He could feel himself blush. He stammered something, trying to hide the rest of the letter. But there was no use in pretending. "I'm crazy," he said. "But I can taste her."

Ackles held up his palms and smiled slowly. "We're all in one big glass house here," he said. "Far be it from me to cast stones."

“I feel safe,” Victor said, “with her inside of me.”

“Amen to safe.”

Victor had never told anyone in Vietnam anything so personal. He hadn't even told Sofia. But who could he trust, if not Ackles? Anyone else would turn the whole thing into a joke.

Besides Victor, Ackles was one of the few who neither repeated the same worn lines nor was the target of such insults. It was unspoken, but he was held above verbal abuse and name-calling. It was not that he sought a special status. He never had to defend himself. And he wasn't intimidating. But he had a natural grace and gravity that drew others into his orbit. This included Victor. He was happy that Ackles knew about his ritual because it made him a part of it.

“Tell me about her,” Ackles said. “What's a girl like who makes you want to eat her up?”

“She's why I'm here,” Victor said. “Why I stay. Why I want to leave.”

“That's a lot,” Ackles said.

“It's all I've got.”

Ten

Bubbles in the Blood

The next day they marched to a village with a well, a couple of huts, and a pagoda. There were only women, children, and a couple of old men there when the Americans arrived. It was the kind of place Victor had seen dozens, perhaps hundreds of times. And each time reminded him that being from a small Greek fishing village, he probably had more in common with the Vietnamese than he did with his fellow soldiers or the Greeks in Tarpon Springs. But as they searched the huts, Victor noticed an old man calling to a young boy. The old man squatted on his haunches in the shade of tree while the boy edged closer to the huts where the soldiers moved about their tasks. The old man was obviously telling the child to come back, not to get too close. But the boy kept inching away.

They finished their sweep and left without incident, but Victor couldn't shake the image of the old man and the boy. When they stopped to rest outside the village, Victor threw off his pack and helmet and looked up at the blue sky.

"Not hungry," Ackles said, sitting beside him with a can of some kind of brown meat.

"I was thinking about Greece," Victor said. "And my grandfather."

"What kind of a place did you grow up?" Ackles said. "City, small town."

"An island in the Aegean," Victor said. "Kalymnos."

"What did your grandfather do there?"

"Sponge diver, like almost everyone on Kalymnos. But before I was born he got crippled from the bends. Back in those days divers were killed every season."

“They drowned?”

“When they first started using the mechanical suits, they didn’t know about the bends. They come up too fast and bubbles get in the blood. Like a cork in a bottle. No blood in your leg or arm, you’re crippled. No blood in your brain or heart, you die.”

“Why were you thinking about your grandfather?”

Victor looked across the hillside at terrain that was familiar, yet unmistakably foreign. “There was something about the old man with the boy that reminded me of him. The old man kept calling the boy back from the huts because of the danger. But the boy wouldn’t listen. He kept getting closer and closer. He got so far away that the boy couldn’t hear him anymore. But the old man kept calling to him. And finally he just turned and came back.”

“The old man was worried about him getting hurt,” Ackles said, tossing aside the empty can.

“Sure,” Victor said. “But the boy wouldn’t listen.”

“My mom’d whipped my ass.”

Victor laughed. “The old man didn’t yell when the boy came back. He hugged him.”

“My mom whipped first and hugged later.”

“Good for you,” Victor said.

“Yeah, good for me. We got to get moving.”

Victor rose and replaced his helmet and pack.

“You know, I think I’d like to visit your island some day. Sounds nice.”

“It is,” Victor said. “Maybe I’ll see you there.”

Another letter had arrived when they returned to camp, but this time Victor didn't need to worry about being too happy. The name above the return address on the envelope promised bad tidings.

My Friend.

It is never a pleasant thing to deliver bad news. But I guess I have to be the messenger. Sofia says she wants you not to write to her because her nerves are shot. She asks me to say that she doesn't want to lead you on no more. So don't go on thinking she will be waiting for you when you return. She doesn't want nothing bad for you, but she thinks this is best. She is fine. The baby is fine. I am taking care of her like I promised. But now she wants to go on with her life. She thinks alone is for the better. She hopes you understand.

As far as you and me. Even Steven. No debts. You lived up to your part. You are a man of honor. I am a man of honor. I will reward you like I said when your time is finished. I don't forget.

Again, I am sorry to have to be the one to tell you this. But you must not let it bother you too much. These things happen. Who can say why. I wish you safety and God's protection.

T. Papademopoulos

Victor read the letter. Once. Twice. Three times. The words swam on the page. At first, he could see Nouno, leaned over his big desk licking the pencil lead, struggling with the words. He searched the lines for something he had missed. There had been no indication of trouble in Sofia's letters. She said nothing of wanting to go on with her own life. Victor believed that if there were such trouble and Sofia hadn't mentioned it directly,

Victor would have tasted the deceit in her words. Until he heard from Sofia directly, he would never be convinced that it wasn't another of Nouno's tricks.

A current of wild panic shot through him. He wanted a car, a boat, an airplane. He wanted to run, if need be, all the way to Florida. He wanted to confront Sofia and hear the words from her. He didn't trust Papdemopoulis. He smelled his treachery. He wanted a telephone, a telegraph, smoke signals. He wanted to turn back time. He wanted to erase history. He wanted to obliterate. Search and destroy. He picked up his rifle and went stalking the compound. He thought of the drill sergeants and their stupid brutality. He thought of the spineless chaplain. He pictured the mocking Captain Knobloch.

He reached the wire that encircled the edge of the fire base. He looked out into the night. He began firing aimlessly into the teeming abyss of darkness. Almost immediately, flares lit up the barren distance. He was weeping and shooting. And then he felt a hand on his shoulder. He spun around and saw Ackles.

Ackles said nothing. He took the rifle from Victor, put his arm around his shoulder, and led him back to his hootch. Ackles waved away the others who came out at the sound of gunfire.

"Talk," Ackles said.

"I'm sick," Victor said. "Sick of words."

Ackles wrapped his arms around him. Victor pressed closer and buried his face into Ackles' neck.

"This doesn't mean anything," Ackles said. "I like you and all, but this doesn't mean we're a couple."

Victor managed to laugh.

He had been happy. He had allowed himself to see the future, see himself as he would like to be. That's what the letter was all about, not abandonment or rejection or even Nouno's dirty tricks. It was about retribution. It was the price of being happy. The bill was being settled. What else would the brief moments of transcending this wretched place cost him? Maybe it didn't matter anymore. This time when he went out on patrol, he carried Nouno's letter, the opposite of happiness. He would not tempt fate any further.

But he knew that just because sorrow was the opposite of happiness it didn't have the opposite effect. The letter would not protect him. Happiness brought danger, but sorrow didn't ensure safety. If it did, the war would have been over long ago. Here, there was only more sorrow. But Victor wasn't afraid. If he had to pay more for his happiness, he wanted to get it over with. He felt strangely comforted to be back in the bush, one stop closer to oblivion.

The march was led by a young lieutenant whose name Victor didn't know. The few times he had addressed him, he called him Sir or Lieutenant. He was probably younger than Victor, but he was a serious soldier, smart and, according to some of the men who didn't like him, ambitious. The soldiers complained that the lieutenant drove them too hard. Some threatened retaliation when he ordered them to conduct searches they considered unnecessary and dangerous or when he reprimanded them for laxness in the way they wore their hair or cared for their weapons or smoked dope or dropped ammunition or trash that the enemy could use for making booby traps.

Victor didn't pretend to be a good soldier, but he knew the lieutenant didn't deserve their malice. He was hard driving because it would help keep them all alive. And though Victor never defended the lieutenant when others complained about him, he never

joined in the complaining. Now, however, it was Victor who complained loudest when the lieutenant ordered them to search the village.

“The whole place is probably booby trapped,” he said to no one in particular. “We should just burn it down. He’s going to get us all killed for nothing.”

It was Ackles who spoke up on behalf of the young officer. He was just doing his job, the same as the rest of them, Ackles said. “Come on, Ogee. This too will pass.”

When others took up Victor’s complaint against the lieutenant, Ackles cut them short. “You all sound like you invented the damn war,” he said. “Man’s got thirty men to think about. You can barely look out for yourselves. Any of you experts want his job?”

They all fell in and began the search. A few minutes later, they found the man in black pajamas at the bottom of a well.

It was Ackles who actually heard him and pulled the cover off the well while the rest looked on with their weapons poised. Ackles pulled him up. It was the first time any of them had ever seen a living, breathing member of the other side.

The prisoner looked like a lost child as he stood blinking at the blazing sunshine and smiling an awkward, almost innocent smile. He was thin and bald, all alone in the deserted village. But there was also a cache of rice, explosives, and tools for making booby traps, clear signs that he hadn’t been alone for long and that whoever had been here had left in a big enough hurry they didn’t bother to take along their food or ammunition.

The lieutenant spoke to the prisoner in Vietnamese, but the little man amazed everyone by answering in surprisingly good English. “I am not Viet Cong,” he said. “I am a spy.”

“Sure, sure, Papa San,” the lieutenant said. “You’re James Fucking Bond. And I’m Charlie Chan.”

“I am no VC,” the man said. “I hide from them. I know where they are. I can take you.”

“Why don’t you just show us where they are? Save us all the trouble.”

“I cannot show,” the little man said. “I must take you.”

Even Victor could see that the prisoner was lying. But the lieutenant kept pressing the little man to tell him where the Viet Cong were. Occasionally, when the little man got excited, he reverted to Vietnamese, speaking in long staccato bursts. But the lieutenant wasn’t hearing what he wanted. “Put your weapon in the man’s ear, sergeant,” he told Ackles, who raised his rifle against the prisoner’s head. But even then the little man didn’t look scared. He talked faster and louder.

“Shoot the bastard,” someone yelled out. “Waste the VC liar.”

The lieutenant barked something at the prisoner in Vietnamese, words that sounded to Victor like some kind of ultimatum. The prisoner was silent. The lieutenant repeated the phrase. Nothing still from the man. The lieutenant nodded toward Ackles, who pressed the barrel of his rifle at the man’s head. The little prisoner began to cry. He put his face in his hands. He was begging, Victor could tell that much. “I take you to VC,” he said. “I take. Please. I take.”

The lieutenant didn’t speak for a long time. “All right,” he said finally. “You take. Ackles, you and Ogee go with our man here. He’s going to show you where the ghosts are hiding.”

But then Victor spoke up. “Find someone else, lieutenant,” he said.

Ackles, still holding the rifle on the prisoner, turned and glared. “Ogee! The man called your name.”

But Victor had had enough. “You follow this mangy little liar. Go ahead. I’ll bet they’re out there right now waiting for him to lead us to them. Shoot him. Burn this place. I don’t care. But not me. Hell no. I won’t go.”

The lieutenant looked at his wristwatch, and then he walked slowly over to where Victor was standing next to Ackles. He appeared composed, not even mildly irritated. “Seems like there’s two schools of thought here,” the lieutenant said calmly. “There’s you saying our prisoner here is a liar so we should we should go ahead and throw him back in the well and then torch the place. If you’re right, then his VC buddies get to slip away and go on back to business, ambushing, booby-trapping, that sort of thing. Then there’s me who’s saying, probably not, but just maybe our friend here does know something. Then the thing to do is send scouts out to check it out. So it’s the two of us disagreeing, is what it comes down to.” He smiled as he reached for Victor’s rifle. “Here’s how we’re going to settle this.” He handed the gun to Victor. “You’re going to decide. You can go ahead and shoot this prisoner. But then I will see to it that you are charged with murder. Sergeant Ackles here is a good man. He’ll be called as a witness. He’ll tell it like it is, just what he saw. You’ll go to jail, maybe be put in front of a firing squad. Our prisoner will be dead and gone to wherever it is dead prisoners go. And you’ll be paying for it. You decide.”

The lieutenant sucked at his teeth. “So, what are you gonna do?”

Victor stared at the lieutenant. He could feel the frustration welling up inside him. The letter in his pocket seemed to burn with mocking humiliation. He could feel the other

soldiers watching, waiting for him to respond. His hands shook when he gripped the rifle. He turned and leveled the weapon at the little man in black pajamas. The prisoner covered his face with his hands.

“It’s not worth it,” Ackles said.

Victor lowered the weapon. He grabbed his pack and slung the rifle up on his shoulder. “Let’s go,” he said.

Eleven

Now I Am Nobody

They followed the little man in black pajamas through a paddy and on toward a trail that led up into the hills. When they stopped to rest, the prisoner pointed to his mouth and rubbed his stomach. Ackles gave him a can of peaches. Still the man was hungry. Ackles gave him a chocolate bar, which the little man devoured. He then smiled at them with chocolate smeared over his thin lips. Another merchant, Victor thought. Another con pushing his advantage. Supply and demand. He had something; they wanted it. It was how the world worked.

Ackles nudged the little man with his rifle. "Time to move on, Charles."

Up into the hills, Victor moved step by step. He felt nothing. He didn't care about the prisoner or the enemy he was supposed to be leading them to. He didn't care where they were being led. He didn't care about the trail or booby traps. He felt as if he were the prisoner, and not the hungry little man in black pajamas.

"Keep up," Ackles told Victor. "Stay alive."

"Where is he supposed to be taking us?" Victor said.

"I don't know, but I don't like this. Charles here doesn't strike me as particularly trustworthy."

They continued on for an hour. Every few minutes, the prisoner smiled back at them, waved them forward. Finally, Ackles held up his hand for the prisoner to stop. "Watch him," he told Victor, "I need to radio in our position."

Victor motioned for the prisoner to sit, and the little man stopped in the middle of the trail and squatted on his haunches. Victor sat against a tree in the shade while Ackles

studied a map, figuring coordinates to report back to the lieutenant. Victor had tucked the letter from Nouno into his uniform shirt pocket. He touched the pocket now, checking to make sure the paper was there. Feeling it, the single page seemed to grow thick and substantial. He couldn't resist taking it out and reading it again in case somehow it had all been a misunderstanding. He heard Ackles on the radio. He heard the lieutenant on the other end. He was warning about the possibility of an ambush. He took out the letter, unfolded it, read it again. The same lies. Papademopoulos' treachery. He crumpled the pages into a hard, little ball and shoved it into his pocket.

He reached for his rifle. He had had enough deceit. Enough manipulation. He was a soldier. Not a good one. Just a grunt. Another hump. There wasn't much he could do to change things. He controlled very few of the forces that shaped his world. But he could do this one thing. Quick. Gratifying. He could ensure that he and Ackles could return to the unit. He could spare them having to traipse around the jungle with this spooky little man in black pajamas. He could make sure the prisoner wouldn't cause anyone any more trouble. He was escaping, Victor would say, so I had to shoot. No one would miss such an insignificant raisin of a man. He raised the rifle to take aim at the smiling little man. He squinted and brushed the sweat from his forehead, then steadied his aim again. But the prisoner had vanished.

Victor yelped, and Ackles turned.

"He's gone," Victor said. "I looked away for a second."

"Where?" Ackles said, springing to his feet, gathering his gear. "How long has been gone?"

"I looked up and he wasn't there."

“Jesus,” Ackles said. “He didn’t just disappear into thin air. He knows there’s a company following just behind us. If he’s VC and he gets back to his unit . . .” Ackles didn’t have to complete the thought. He got on the radio and explained the situation.

“Find him,” the lieutenant radioed back.

They set out through the forest down a steep hillside. They figured the prisoner wouldn’t climb. Twice, they sensed movement, once behind them and then again up ahead. Each time they stopped and crouched in the underbrush. Seeing nothing, they pushed on in silence. At the bottom of the hillside, beyond the dense foliage, sunlight blazed. The sound of water lapping against earth rose from below. They had come to a river. Through the trees they could see the diamond-sparkle of sunlight against the green water through the trees.

“This is bullshit,” Ackles said, searching the encircling forest. He reached for the radio.

Victor made his way alone down the sloping bank, cautiously, his rifle raised. He crouched in the brush at the edge of the water. He looked one way up the river and then turned to look the other. There on a spit of sand where the stream bent, the prisoner knelt to cup water from the stream. Victor crept closer. By now he had come to know the man, the way he walked through the jungle in thin-soled sandals seeming not even to make contact with the ground, the way his teeth looked, square and uniform, when he smiled, the faintly airy quality of his laughter, the way he smelled of some kind of vaguely familiar spice. There was no time to alert Ackles. Victor was upwind of the man in pajamas. He removed his pack and moved forward as silently as he could, stopping at every footfall, every brush against a leaf. He made his stealthy way down the bank until

he was poised just above the sand bar. He was no more than three or four steps from the little man. And then he pounced, grabbing the prisoner by the back of his loose shirt, feeling how slight, how insubstantial he was beneath the black pajamas. And then feeling nothing. The prisoner had slipped away, like a snake shedding his skin, and dove into the water.

Victor jumped in after him. He could see only a few feet into the muddy river water. He dove down, reaching out to feel for the bottom, but instead he felt the prisoner swim into his open arms. He hugged the little man and drew him close. He could see his face. The little man had his eyes closed. It wasn't difficult to keep the wiry little figure from thrashing away. Victor knew that he wouldn't escape again. Time was on his side. They floated together for a moment, and then the prisoner opened his eyes wide. Victor could see the panic there. He waited until the little man couldn't hold his breath any more. Waited until the idea of breathing the dirty river water was indisputable. The man didn't resist. He seemed to crumple in submission. Victor kicked up to the surface, where the prisoner wheezed and coughed and sucked at the dry air. Victor forced him to his feet and then pulled him to the bank and then up toward the hill. Only then did he call to Ackles. "Look what I found," Victor said.

Ackles started down the slope to meet them. "Lucky bastard," he said. When he emerged from the trees, he was smiling. He was about to say something more. His held his rifle by his side. And then Victor heard the snap of the booby trap trigger.

"Don't," Victor said. But it was too late. For a split second he saw Ackles' face, still smiling, just before it changed. Then the small thud of an explosion, a sound like something heavy falling from a height, an almost underwater sound. Then Ackles was

thrashing, but only for a moment. One foot was gone. Blood covered the front of his uniform. The little prisoner, still kneeling, still in Victor's grasp, looked on blankly. Victor dragged him over to Ackles' side.

Victor looked for the radio, but it was gone. He turned on the prisoner, who put his hands together in a prayer and bowed.

Victor tore open Ackles' pack, feeling around for bandages or a clean cloth to wrap around the bloody stump of leg. He held the other hand to Ackles' neck and felt a strong pulse, but Victor knew he had to do something to stop Ackles from bleeding to death. He whipped off his belt and cinched it tight around Ackles' thigh. And then he felt a light hand on his wrist.

"I can help you," the prisoner said.

Victor reached for Ackles' weapon and aimed it at the little man. But the prisoner didn't flinch. He reached slowly into a pocket of his pajama pants. Victor ordered him to stop.

"I won't hurt you," the prisoner said. "I have something. A letter—like yours."

He took out a card wrapped in plastic and began to read: "Every soldier is personally responsible for the enemy in his hands. It is both dishonorable and foolish to mistreat a captive. Not even a beaten enemy will surrender if he knows his captors will torture or kill him. He will resist and make his capture more costly." The man in black pajamas handed the card to Victor. "Look," he said. "From Lyndon Johnson, the president."

Victor looked up briefly from Ackles' raw leg, but didn't take the card held out to him.

“I find things,” the little man said. He smiled at this explanation.

“The sergeant is hurt bad. I can show you.” He knelt down over Ackles and began to loosen the belt around his thigh.

“Get back,” Victor said.

“It’s not right,” the man said. “Needs to be here.” he slipped the belt up higher on Ackles’ thigh and tightened it. “Please,” he said, motioning for Victor to come closer.

Victor knelt beside him, still holding the rifle. Ackles’ face was ashen. He moaned, and his eyes flickered open, and then he was still again.

The prisoner held Ackles’ leg and examined the bloody stump. “The shirt,” he said. “Remove, please.”

Victor began unbuttoning the shirt, transferring his rifle from one hand to the other.

“Quicker to put down your weapon,” the prisoner said. “Don’t worry. I escape before if I want. But now is important to hurry.”

Ackles moaned again, and Victor set down the rifle and stripped off his shirt.

“Tear,” the prisoner said.

Victor used his teeth to start, and then ripped the shirt in two. The little man took one half and told Victor to tear the other half into strips. He wrapped Ackles leg in the cloth and then bound the crude bandage with the strips that Victor handed him.

“Shouldn’t you wash it or something? I’ve been wearing that for weeks. Won’t it get infected?”

“Only a clean bandage would stop infection,” the man said, tying the last of the strips onto Ackles’ leg. “Medication. Antibiotics. Even then, he could lose his leg.” He

stood and put his hand on Victor's shoulder. "Come. Now we find wood and make a litter." He headed toward the forest.

Victor grabbed his rifle. "Wait. What are you talking about?"

"Litter. A bed to carry the sergeant."

"But how do you know these things?"

"I am a doctor," the little man said. "Trained with the French long ago."

"How do you know English?"

"I studied. Very hard."

"You said you are a spy."

"I am that too. You see what you see, believe what you want to believe."

"I believe you're a liar. Maybe I should just kill you and that would be the end of it."

"You would have to get the sergeant back by yourself. I wouldn't be here to help you."

Victor lowered the rifle. The little man laughed, a high, metallic sound.

"Come," he said, disappearing into the woods. "We waste time."

They walked all day. The prisoner would leave Victor with Ackles and hurry ahead to scout for trouble. Then he would return and lead the way. They made slow progress, following, it seemed to Victor, a roundabout way. Victor had given up the assigned mission and now followed the little man, whom he no longer thought of as a prisoner, because he was lost and because he wanted to save the dying man he realized now was his best friend. Ackles was in and out of consciousness, but even when he

opened his eyes, he wasn't there. Victor watched his chest, monitoring its shallow rise and fall.

"How much more?" Victor asked the little man.

"Not far, but we have to be sure no one sees."

"Why don't you just go on? You could, you know. I wouldn't stop you."

"Where would I go?"

"Back to your home? I don't know."

"I used to have a good house, money, servants. I was a doctor. The army came and said, 'We need doctors.' They tell me, 'Now you are officer. You go to the war. But I don't want to go. You know why?'"

Victor shook his head.

"Love." It was as if the word were a song. The little man tilted his head. A little smile, almost as if he were embarrassed, played across his face. "A beautiful girl. She say, 'You must go. The government will find you and throw you in jail. Worse than that even.' So I go, but not to the war. I go far, far away, but I can never go far enough to escape the war. One day, I am captured by the army of the south. They hear me talk, say you not from here. They say I am a spy from north. I say, no, I am running away. They say, okay, now you fight for us. I don't want to fight for north or south. I say, I will spy but I will not fight. And then when I go back to the north. Same thing. I am captured. I say I will spy. So now I am nobody."

"So you are a spy?"

"Yes, but no."

"For once just speak plain. No circles."

“I am a spy like you are a soldier.”

“That’s plain?”

“You are a good soldier?”

“Good enough for this war.”

“That is plain?”

Victor laughed. “I’m not a good soldier, but this is not a good war.”

“Yes, excellent. Not good is very good. And so I am not a good spy. I work for both, north and south, but I don’t help north or south. I tell them this and that. Nothing important. Nothing to help with the war.”

“Both sides think you’re someone you’re not? And they trust you?”

“People trust what they think they see.”

Victor saw that this little man wasn’t very different from him. For the first time since he landed in this country, for the first time in a long time, he felt he’d met someone capable of understanding what he’d been through. It was too bad his comrade was his prisoner. “Why should I trust you? If they will catch you. . .”

“Yes?”

“They’ll punish you.”

“Probably.”

“And then?”

“I will die. But no matter. I am already dead. My spirit is lost. I will never get it back.” The little man stopped and held up his hand. He signaled that he was going ahead.

An hour later he returned. The sun had set, and in the moonless night Victor didn’t see or hear the little man’s approach. He turned and there was the prisoner.

“Only a short way,” he said. “Two more hills. But not tonight. Too dangerous.”

They shared the last of the rations and then it was time for sleep. “One, two hours,” the little man said. Victor was weary from the long day. He closed his eyes and was almost asleep when the prisoner spoke.

“Sorry,” he said. “But I want to ask you now. Why do you stay here with the sergeant?”

“He’d stay if it was me,” Victor said wearily.

“He is your friend?”

“My only friend.”

“No one for you at home? No girl for you? You must have girl in your home.”

“No girl. No home.”

“We are the same. I have nothing.”

“I never did, not houses or servants.”

“I would give a thousand houses to have back my spirit. I thought I was special. That is why I lived and others die because I was a healer, not a killer. God protects me. But no. I should go back. But now she is gone. The girl I left. Dead. So many dead.” There was silence, and Victor thought the prisoner had fallen asleep. But then he continued, almost a whisper. “Not too late for you. You can still find a way back.”

“Back where?” Victor said. He waited, but the little man was silent.

Victor decided it was all mumbo-jumbo, more circles. He needed sleep, not more words. He let go of his thoughts, allowed them to float up into the dark night, and then he slept.

When Victor awoke, the prisoner was gone. He thought of going after him, but Ackles had to get help soon. When he checked Ackles, he feared it was already too late. Victor was no doctor but it felt as if Ackles was already growing cold.

One day, much later he would read about a dying Greek soldier and his comrade who told his wounded friend, “Was there ever a luckier man than you? Will there ever be? You were the one. You’ll always be.”

And the hero replied: “None of your smooth talk of dying. I’d be better off as some poor sod-busting farmer. There are no heroes. Only the tired. Only the dead.”

When Victor read that, he wished he’d said the same words to Ackles.

Maybe if it had been a war like the ones he saw in the movies. But Victor’s war wasn’t like that: heroes and bad guys. People died everywhere, good people and bad people. And by the time he thought of the right words, it was much later, too late, as always, to say just the right thing.

At the moment, Victor’s only thought was seeing that he get his friend some help. Ackles may have been almost a part of the bush, but Victor would not leave him to rot in there. The prisoner was gone. Victor would bring Ackles back on his own. Just over the hill.

Dragging Ackles up the hill, it occurred to Victor that the little man in the black pajamas had been lying to him all along. There was a part of him that had understood this all along, even as the little man had spun his web. Now, who knew what treachery the sly little imposter had in store? He should have killed him when he had a chance. Fuck the lieutenant and his idle threats. If Victor had stood up to him, Ackles would be unharmed, and the lives of dozens of men wouldn’t now be in jeopardy, as they were now.

Just as Victor had suspected, the prisoner was VC and by now he was on his way back to his unit.

The little man was smart. He knew the U.S. Army didn't abandon its own. The lieutenant was not the kind of officer who would walk away from his duty to his men. When they lost radio contact, he would have sent patrols out to search for them. Maybe the little man had already spotted the Americans when he went ahead. This is why the prisoner had been so cooperative, why he helped keep Ackles alive. This is why he had led them in such a circuitous course. The ambushers were out there at this moment watching and waiting for Victor to make contact with his unit, and then they would tighten the noose.

He had to get back to warn the lieutenant. Victor had to take care of the men still safe and whole. He stopped to try and get his bearings. The woods around him seemed almost to murmur in a kind of muffled, underwater voice that had no visible source or rational purpose. But then there was a decidedly different sound, a metallic click from not far away so clearly distinguishable from the sighing jungle that it could only have been made by a human. Victor froze for a moment. He considered his options. He could perhaps hide himself, but he couldn't conceal Ackles too. He could call out in hopes that the noise he'd heard came from soldiers searching for him. But he knew that it was just as likely that he'd heard enemy soldiers. He could wait and hope that whoever was out there would simply pass them by. But he knew this wouldn't happen. Whoever it was, friend or foe, was sent to find them. Finally, Victor decided he had no other choice but to try to make his way back somehow for help. He would come back for Ackles. Maybe if there were only a lone enemy patrol he would lead him away from his friend. It was not what

he wanted, leaving Ackles, but he couldn't think of what else to do. He set his too quiet friend down and made his way slowly into the jungle. He didn't know where he was or where he was going, but soon he came to a small stream. He was doubled over in exhaustion and fear, hands on his knees. He closed his eyes. Diamonds and stars and snaking blood vessels swam behind his eyelids. His pulse thumped in his ears. And then something was moving in the underbrush. He looked up and saw a figure from behind, a little man in black pajamas. Victor raised his rifle and ordered the man to stop. Without turning, the little man spoke. He couldn't understand the words, but Victor knew the man was begging for his life. Victor aimed, but before he could pull the trigger, a single gunshot echoed through the forest. Victor watched the little man drop to his knees and then fall on his back. His face was gone.

Down the embankment came an American soldier. Victor's heart swelled. He knew he was going to survive. They would get Ackles, and they would rejoin the unit. He waved and shouted, and the soldier waved back.

And then the trees beyond the opposite bank erupted with the flash and crackle of gunfire. A rocket whistled down and the soldier was vaporized. Victor ran toward the river as the jungle behind him exploded. He turned at the sound of gunfire in the trees above him. He knew it was the lieutenant and the rest of the company. The little man had led them into a trap. He dove into the green, murky water. He swam and waded, dropping everything—rifle, ammunition, pack—that would weigh him down. He followed the river until the firing from the banks grew distant, and then he dragged himself up into the woods and began clawing at the red earth. He hollowed a depression large enough to lie in. He curled up in the hole and folded his arms over his head.

And then he heard the frap-frap of the gunships passing overhead. They hovered above the river and sent down a rain of bullets. He understood this. It was standard procedure. The Viet Cong ambushed from the shadows, and the Americans responded by burning the forest. The planes and napalm weren't far behind. He got up and ran back toward the distant sound of small arms fire. He scrambled through the brush, guided only by the half-formed idea of escaping. But there was no escape. The planes were approaching. He ran on toward the sound of fighting. And then he dropped. The pain seared deep into his thigh. A dark bloom of blood spread across his leg. He could go no farther. He curled on the ground as the forest exploded around him. The stink of gasoline filled his lungs. The air itself seemed to be consumed in the conflagration. He couldn't move. Ackles must be dead now. The whole unit was probably gone. No one could have survived such violence. The man in the black pajamas may or may not have been a spy. But he was dead, too. So was the girl the little man went to war to save. Victor had gone to Vietnam to save a girl. She was still alive, so maybe things had worked out as they were meant to. At least she was safe. She carried his child. They would survive without him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the balled-up letter. Lies. All lies. Sofia hadn't written the letter. She wouldn't abandon him. He stuffed the paper into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. If he died it would be with the bitterness of Nouno Papademopoulos' words on his tongue. If he didn't die it would nourish him, a taste of misery to inoculate him against whatever happiness he might be tempted to think was possible.

Twelve

Pray to Go

He travels a borderland, not fully alive but not quite dead. He's traversed this frontier for some indeterminate time, passing only for brief moments into pain-racked consciousness. At other times he's back in Kalymnos where he stands on the docks and dreams of America while he watches the sponge boats leave the harbor until they diminish and then disappear altogether over the horizon. He dives naked into the blue Aegean, down to where the rocks and ridges are as material in his dreams as were the rooms of the little white house he shared with his grandfather. He stays down, dares the greedy point of need until his lungs burn, and only then does he rocket up to split the surface and to drink the sweet air of his youth. Sometimes he's kneeling next to Ackles' motionless body, begging his friend to speak. Other times he's back in the little upstairs room at Mrs. Demetriou's house on Hope Avenue. He kneels in the twisted sheets above Sofia, brown and lithe and smooth against the tangle of white. He leans forward and kisses her, and he falls, diving naked into her darkness where there are no rocks or ridges, nothing to cling to in the deep, dark currents.

But now, the lost girlfriend of the dead Vietnamese prisoner hovers over him, dressed in white and holding a metal basin. She leans forward, and Victor sees that the basin is filled with blood. He understands. The girlfriend of the man in black pajamas hasn't come with an offering. It's his blood that fills the container. He tries to cry out, but something inside his throat catches his voice. Nor can he move away from the starched angel. His hips are pinioned to the bed where he lies. It doesn't hurt. Fear alone makes him want to stop her. He looks up into the young woman's serene face, her smile beguiles

him like none other he's ever seen. A chill spreads up from his feet, like peace, he thinks. Death at these hands won't be a bad thing. It will be rather a deliverance. He gives up the struggle, resigned to whatever retribution the Vietnamese spirit has in mind for him.

Then the angel speaks. "Private, are you with us? What's your name?"

And now he feels her hand on his leg. She's real, as is this moment of confused awakening, Yet compared to the dream of Kalymnos, the Aegean, his grandfather, and Sofia, this one, the real world, seems the more illusory.

"Your name? Do you know who you are? Private Kanakis." Her hand gently rocks his shoulder.

Victor shakes his head and wills himself back into the dream because he does know who he is, and he does know also that he's back from the frontier.

The Filipina nurses' aid swabbed his burned skin with the red disinfectant whose distinctive odor Victor would in time always associate with endured agony. His narcotic semi-dream slowly faded back into the sepia of memory, and through the morphine haze arose fresher recollections of being loaded onto a plane. He didn't know how long ago this had happened. The nurse leaned close enough that he could smell the faint fishiness of her breath. He was in an army hospital in the Philippines, she said, and he felt himself at that moment slip forward into the future.

His memory of his brief periods of consciousness were a blur of doctors and nurses and pain so intense it seemed as if the left side of his body had been stripped of its skin. He had no sense of the time that had passed. He could have been in the jungle yesterday.

Later would come the details. He'd be told about the medevac helicopter and the flight to the hospital in Qui Nhon where he underwent the first surgery on his shattered right hip. And later the flight to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. His lower leg had been burned, and the burn wounds were salved in silver sulfadiazine and swathed in fresh gauze twice a day. Doctors had operated on his shattered right hip again to wire it back together and then had encased his pelvis in a plaster cast with a hole that allowed access for him to piss and shit. All this had been done to him while he was still in the boundary between consciousness and oblivion, before he gradually regained his senses and was reborn into the cold sterility of the hospital and the hot burden of his pain.

But this was how his recovery began—when he awoke to find that a woman whose face in the context of the world he'd left behind would have marked her for death was nursing him back to a place among the living. The morning when the Vietnamese jungle exploded was the end of one life. This day of awakening was the start of a new one. In the next months, as he underwent a series of operations followed by slow recoveries and tedious rehabilitation, he would often think back on the moment he returned to the living and regret that it had been only a dream and that the angel had not really come and exacted a more swift reckoning.

A few days later, the nurse came to his bedside. "Good news," she said. "The doctor says you're stable enough to be transferred."

Another march, Victor thought, the army way, movement without apparent purpose.

"Lucky you," the nurse said. She squeezed his hand. "You're going home."

“Where?” Victor said.

It turned out to be Texas, at least for a while. The Brooke Army Hospital is what the army called the place where it sent burned soldiers. The burned soldiers, those able to speak, called the place the Broken Army Hospital. It didn't take long in the midst of disfigurement and mutilation to understand why. Victor was taken to a ward in which a dozen beds were arranged around a central nurses station. In the bed next to him, a young man sat naked, propped against white pillows. The skin on his chest was a delicate pink and shone like rubbed candle wax. Victor was startled, when he finally got around to looking at the man's face, which was turned away, to realize how much his profile resembled Ackles'. But then the young man turned and Victor saw that the other half of his face was gone and in its place was a scarred approximation, as if a supremely untalented sculptor or perhaps a moderately talented six year old had been summoned to hurriedly recast the missing pieces.

“Pretty, huh?” the man said to Victor, who felt himself blush out of embarrassment for gawking, but also out of shame because he was unable not to.

“You remind me of someone.” Victor said, but it came out sounding exactly like the feeble excuse it was.

“It's all right,” the man said. “You can't help it. I did the same thing at first. Everybody does.” He moved hardly at all. Each blink or smile was a dramatic performance. Talk seemed to require great concentration. He winced as he shifted his weight on the bed. “You just can't believe what this shit will do to the human body. To fire, we're nothing but fuel.”

Victor allowed himself to look closer. The burn scars wrapped around the man's flank and arm from his neck to his groin like a gruesome sash and on up across the side of his face.

"I was burning shit," the man said. His voice was as delicate as his skin, almost feminine.

"I know what you mean," Victor said, recognizing GI talk, in which the crudest of expressions were euphemisms for things inexpressible in conventional terms.

"No, I mean really. I was actually burning shit," the man said.

Victor looked away. "I wasn't—"

"That's what you were wondering, wasn't it, how it happened?" He spread his good arm as if he were opening an imaginary cape. His mouth was a twisted grimace. "It's okay," he said. "Curiosity." Victor realized the man was smiling. "Like I said, I was burning shit. You know, the latrine detail? You must've done it."

Victor nodded. It was an initiation ritual, duty he, like everyone, was assigned his first few days after his arrival in Vietnam. He'd hauled the steel drums out from under the latrine and poured on gasoline and burned the collected sewage, a combustion of unforgettable stench.

"I was waiting for deployment," the burned soldier said. "They told me I was on shit detail. So I did my duty. I pour the gas in the can and then go to light it and, boom, my sleeve's on fire, and pretty soon my whole shirt's burning. I'm standing there. Don't feel a thing." The soldier paused, and inhaled a deep fluttering breath as if talking had depleted him. "It was like I was looking down on the whole scene, thinking, poor motherfucker. First day in the war and he's going to be killed by a bucket of shit. I

should've never had a shirt on in the first place, but I was new. I thought it was like a regulation or something. Stupid. Next thing, somebody tackles me and rolls me around to put out the fire. And then I'm loaded up to the hospital."

The soldier's smile was gone. Now what twisted his face wasn't exactly anger, more like you might look when you discover someone's picked your pocket. He seemed on the verge of tears. Victor thought again of Ackles. He wanted to tell the burned man that he hadn't missed anything in the villages and jungle worth experiencing. He'd been spared the trouble of making battlefield friendships—at once profound and sustaining, but also clearly destined to be finite because they were so uniquely specific to a time and place. He hadn't had to see his best friend disappear in a cloud of smoke. But Victor knew that the burned man wouldn't be comforted by any of that, any more than he would be if Victor pointed out how lucky he was to be alive. This Victor knew from experience. Pain isn't relative. Each wound hurts exactly as much as it hurts. And just because it isn't fatal doesn't make it hurt one bit less.

"That's some burning shit," Victor said, smiling.

And the burned soldier smiled back feebly. "Roger that," he said. With his good hand he pinched the bridge of his nose and sniffled. "It hurts if I cry," he explained. "But my tear ducts or whatever are all fucked up. I can't control it no more." He blinked hard several times "What about you?"

Victor imagined weeping waterfowl, but mystified, he couldn't connect tear ducts to army slang.

Victor shrugged. He couldn't remember the last time he'd cried. Maybe his ducts had been damaged.

“What happened?” the burned soldier said. “Why are you here?”

“I was with a prisoner. Trying to get back to my unit. The jungle exploded.”

The burned man’s expression, at least what was left of it, didn’t change. “So how bad?” he said.

Victor shrugged. “I broke my pelvis and my leg was burned. I don’t know how bad.”

“You haven’t looked?”

“Not close because of the cast.”

“No rush, I guess.” The burned man closed his eyes.

There wasn’t much left to say, Victor supposed, and he turned away. He was almost asleep when he heard the burned man’s thin voice. At first, he thought he was dreaming.

“Anybody tell you how lucky you are?” the man said.

Victor looked over. The man opened his eyes. “If they haven’t, they will,” he said. “Everyone sooner or later. We must be the luckiest bastards around.”

Victor slept then, and when he awoke the man who looked like Ackles was gone. In his place was another patient whose head was a huge white hornets’ nest of bandages. From beneath the gauze came an occasional low moan. Victor never knew what came of the victim of burning shit. He never asked. It wasn’t a place for such questions.

The nurse who tended to his daily bandaging was a short, round woman with a confection of cotton-candy blonde hair. “I can’t help but notice, hon, that you never look when I change your bandages,” she said. And she began to gently remove the gauze.

The cast around his hips made it difficult for Victor to sit up, impossible for him to bend over far enough to examine his leg closely. Naturally, he was curious about his burns, and it took some personal discipline to keep him from examining the wound, even to the extent possible. But if he were to look, he'd have to acknowledge a new set of facts about himself. The pain he couldn't ignore, and it left him no choice but to presume he was hurt badly. But as long as he didn't see the damage with his own eyes, he could hold on to the idea that he remained the same person he'd always been. In the face of hard facts to the contrary he'd be forced to reconfigure himself. Once he looked, pretense would be impossible. Victor could see enough to know that it was bad, but he'd told himself it was better not to look too closely. He'd seen injuries, of course. In the burn ward, but also in battle. Some apparently minor wounds made men scream in agony. But at other times, bodies were rent and bleeding in horrible contortion and the injured man would stare blankly, appearing oblivious to the damage done to him.

“You don't get much explanation from the doctors around here,” the hive-haired nurse said, looking up from her work. “They're much too busy or can't be bothered, some of them. I think that's wrong, don't you? So sometimes I take it on myself. It's not regulation, or anything like that. But it's your body, after all.”

She wore spidery false lashes and green eye shadow that she probably thought augmented her pale blue eyes, but instead made her seem bruised. The effect wasn't glamorous—the presumed intention—but an imitation of glamour, and it would have been almost comical if it didn't also sadden Victor that the woman believed she needed such an elaborate mask to hold on to something she once was, or something she wished she'd been or maybe something she could still become. Victor thought she'd be almost

pretty without the makeup, certainly improved. Behind the lashes and the garish lids her eyes had a cool radiance, like the sheen of a wrasse swimming just beneath the surface and glimpsed from above. She had removed the last winds of bandage, exposing Victor's raw skin to the air, which sent a sensation up his limb as if the swarm in the nurse's beehive had escaped and attacked his foot.

“So how about it, hon, want to see?” the nurse said.

He searched her pale eyes and her soft round face, but he saw no sign disgust or horror. Maybe she was so used to disfigurement she no longer recoiled at the grotesque, or maybe the honey-talking nurse had offered Victor a chance to see for himself because the burns weren't as bad as they felt. After all, she worked every day with burned soldiers, many, Victor knew, worse than he, and if she thought it was a good idea for him to know the extent of his injuries, maybe it was all right.

Victor nodded, hesitant but also hopeful. The nurse went back to the desk that the staff shared in the middle of the ward and returned with a small metallic case that she flipped open. One half contained face powder, the other a small, round mirror. It struck Victor as odd that she would use what was clearly her private possession to show him his burned leg. But he also realized, for the first time, that there were no mirrors anywhere in the ward. He almost changed his mind and turned away as the nurse held the tiny mirror up for him to see his foot. What was reflected in the absurdly small powder case made him wish that he had.

His foot was a purple welt of lumpy flesh. A swath of webbed tissue ran up the side of his leg and across his knee. It was impossible in the tiny mirror to take in the full extent of the damage, but it was enough. The nurse snapped the compact case shut.

“There, it’s not so bad, is it, hon?” the nurse said. “Compared to most, you’re a real lucky fellow.”

Victor closed his eyes. But to an equally appalling sight. The laughing face of the Nouno Papademopoulos flashed across the backs of his eyelids.

The nurse finished rewrapping his leg and smiled as she turned and headed off to attend to her duties.

He slept only in brief fitful intervals that night. Each time he drifted off he plunged back down into a chaotic dream in which Vietnam, Sofia, and his seared leg all played a part. And when finally activity on the ward picked up and signaled the start of a new day, Victor lay all but motionless in his bed. He felt powerless to do much of anything, even sleep. Thus began a long, dark period during which he rarely spoke, ate little, and slept no more than fifteen or twenty minutes at a time.

Several days later—though in Victor’s state of mind, it could have been weeks—someone finally noticed the funk that Victor had fallen into. The blonde nurse who had taken it upon herself to use her mirror to show Victor how lucky he was again intervened. “We’re all just a little bit concerned, is all,” she said when Victor didn’t respond to her inquiries. “The night shift girls tell me you haven’t been sleeping, so I asked the doc to write you up some sleeping pills. She handed him a paper cup with two blue tablets. “You take these and get some good rest, and you’ll feel a whole lot better. Promise.”

He was reluctant to swallow the pills, afraid of what ghosts might come rushing up from the depths of the unguarded recesses of his sleeping brain. But the tedium of consciousness made him tired to his bones, so in spite of his fears, he took the medicine. He awoke hours later. He had slept deeply, untroubled by dreams. And for a while, his

days amounted to waiting for his pills and then the welcome relief of plummeting into nothingness.

During the next few months in Texas, Victor underwent three skin grafts and two more dermabrasions, in which the doctor used what amounted to a diamond-studded sander to break down the thick scar tissue that grew where the napalm had seared away the flesh. Victor swung constantly between the raw anguish of having his skin flayed and the slow misery of shrinking, flaking, drying flesh.

One day, a lieutenant colonel appeared in the ward, and with his sudden presence, the nurses busied themselves with their patients. The colonel approached the nearest nurse and spoke to her briefly. The nurse, appearing relieved, pointed toward Victor. The colonel marched briskly to his bed.

“Private Cyrus Kanakis?” the colonel said. His sharp uniform and brisk military manner seemed almost quaint to Victor, as if the man were an actor portraying a colonel. He was real enough, but still he seemed an anachronism; he may as well have been dressed in a Victorian top hat and tails.

Victor looked up, and in the first time in months felt a smile grow across his face. He may even have been grinning.

Emotionless, the colonel drew up even more martially erect and began to recite. “Private Kanakis, it is my privilege to honor you for distinguishing yourself through your service to your country while engaged in an action against the forces of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. I thank you on behalf of the president of the United States and its grateful citizens.”

He handed Victor a velveteen box then stepped back and offered a crisp salute.

Victor raised his hand, more a wave than a salute, and the colonel turned smartly on his heel and marched away, leaving Victor holding the box with the medal. Finally, someone had recognized him. But for what? All he'd given up was his name, no real sacrifice. Honor should be reserved for heroes, men like Ackles. And no speech or medal, no matter how glorious or gleaming, could compensate such men.

Movement on the ward had stopped. The nurses and doctors stood aside while the colonel performed his duty. They kept their distance after he left, leaving Victor to wonder whether he'd dreamed the entire episode. But he could see the hospital staff had seen everything. Finally the blonde nurse came over, and Victor, unsure of what to do with the medal, held onto it. The nurse reached down and asked to look, and Victor let her.

"I didn't ask for this," Victor said.

"You should be proud," she said.

"But I didn't do anything—"

"It's their way of thanking you. It's probably hard to see that right now, but maybe someday you will. We're glad you're back and safe." She seemed to sniff back tears. "You're lucky. We're very proud of you."

She handed the medal back to Victor, but he motioned toward the nightstand, and she slipped the box into the drawer.

"I have to go," he whispered.

"It won't be long," the nurse said. "You'll be waltzing out of here."

"No," Victor said. He motioned toward his groin. "I need to use the bedpan, I think."

“Oh,” the nurse said. She chuckled as she he reached up and pulled the curtain around the bed and then found a bedpan and pulled back the sheets. She positioned the pan between the Victor’s plastered legs. Victor reached down and directed his penis, as the nurse waited.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a long, dry interval. “I felt like I had to.”

“It’s okay,” the nurse said. “Here, let me.” She smiled down at him and then reached discreetly under the sheet and gave Victor’s penis several quick tugs. And just as Victor felt himself start to get hard, the flood released. He was grateful for the relief, but also saddened at the ebbing of his erection.

“Feel better?” the nurse said, as she removed the bedpan.

“Maybe they should give you a medal,” Victor said.

The joke was lame, but the nurse smiled anyway.

At first, the doctors had focused on his burns, but as his leg healed into more or less a recognizable form, attention shifted to Victor’s fractured pelvis. He was transferred from the burn ward to a unit with soldiers representing a cross-section of the war’s casualties: missing appendages, blinded eyes, shattered nerves. The skin graft operations had required him to remain in bed for such long stretches that his shattered hip had been slow to mend. The wound had damaged the blood vessels in his hip that supplied blood flow to his bones. Deprived of necessary healing nutrients and proper physical therapy, Victor’s pelvis had knitted at a glacial pace.

His body cast was removed, but his burns were still heavily bandaged. The doctors were careful to warn him he might not walk again, but after a month of

exhausting physical therapy, he could get around with a cane. His life now revolved around the daily physical therapy treatments for his burn scars and his inflexible hip. The sessions were excruciating, but at least they presented the possibility of progress. He could tell himself that he was working toward something. The rest of the time he lay in his bed and stared out the window at a view of a parking lot, or he sat in a wheelchair in the day room watching TV.

On patrol in Vietnam, he could fall into a deep sleep as soon as he stopped for rest. Nothing bothered him. He once slept sitting with his back against the bank of a drainage ditch in rank water up to his waist with nearby artillery thumping away. But here in the hospital, when he closed his eyes the sound outside of a passing car tormented him. Tossing in his bed, he could hear a Beatles song playing on a radio three floors above him. From down the hall came the drip-drop of a leaky bathroom faucet. A cat padded by on the windowsill below him. Across the street, a couple argued about money. Someone turned on an electric fan in the room above him. His universe was defined by the walls of the hospital, and those walls were closing in a little more each day. Whatever healing he had left to do could be accomplished on the outside. A lack of hygiene was a small price for freedom. He called to a passing nurse, who told him she'd be with him shortly. Thirty minutes later she returned in a huff. "What is it?"

"I have to go," Victor said.

The nurse pulled the curtain and reached for the bedpan.

"No," Victor said. "I have to get out of here."

The nurse rolled her eyes. "We've gone through this," she said. "You'll be ready for discharge in no time. I spoke to the doctor yesterday, and he said soon."

“How long? Days, weeks, years?”

“Longer than a day, but less than a year, how’s that?” The nurse reached to pat Victor’s shoulder.

“I’m not a child,” Victor said, swiping her hand away.

The nurse dropped the bedpan and drew back. “You’re lucky, mister—”

“Oh, yes, so lucky.” He picked up the bedpan and flung it across the ward.

“You keep that up and the only place you’ll be going is the stockade,” the nurse said. She turned and ripped open the curtain and called for the doctor.

Victor laughed scornfully. “That would be worse?”

In a few minutes, the nurse returned and jabbed a hypodermic into Victor’s arm. “It’s for your own good,” she said. “Maybe when you wake up you’ll start to do something about that attitude.”

The next day, an army chaplain stopped at his bedside. Victor suspected the nurse had sent him, perhaps as punishment for his rudeness.

“I’m fine,” Victor answered when the chaplain inquired. “Good as new.” He flexed his biceps.

The chaplain smiled. “I was thinking more about your state of mind than your body.”

“Not my soul?” Victor said.

“If that’s what’s bothering you.”

“It would feel better if I was out of here.”

The chaplain put a hand on Victor’s shoulder. “Where are you from?”

Victor didn't hesitate. "Florida."

"I've been there, but I didn't hear accents like yours. Where's that from?"

"Before Florida I was Greek."

"Been there too," the chaplain said. "Lovely. You have family there?"

"In Greece, no. No more."

"In Florida then?"

"No more there also."

The chaplain looked around the ward. There was hardness in his face, a look similar to the one that Victor had seen on hundreds of faces of men in uniform. But while the soldiers' flatness was a shield of indifference, the chaplain's was more like a mirror. It reminded Victor for a moment of the Greek Orthodox icons with their eternal primitive austerity. "Well, son," the chaplain said, bowing his head, "I'll pray for your recovery."

"Sir," Victor said, "could you pray for me to get out of here?"

The chaplain smiled and put his hand on Victor's shoulder. "Father, bless this soldier. Watch over him. Give him the strength to recover from his wounds. Guide him so that he can return soon to your service. Amen."

The chaplain turned to leave.

"That's all?" Victor said. "A prayer to go back?"

"What else would like me to do, son?"

"Help me get out of here."

"Private, I'm an army chaplain. I can pray with you. I can pray for you. You can come to services on Sunday. But I can't heal you. That's up to the doctors."

"Greek priests wear robes and white beards. They burn incense and ring bells."

“You’d like a little more flair in your prayer, is that it?”

“I’d like more than a grocery list. Does the army have a Greek priest? Are there any Greeks in Texas? I need to get back to my people.”

The chaplain smiled. “I think maybe you’re just homesick.”

“I’m telling you I’m not sick.”

“I only meant you missed your home.”

“What makes me sick is this.” Victor threw up his hands.

“I wish I could help you, son,” the chaplain said.

“Then help,” Victor said.

“I’m afraid it’s all I have.” He pulled a chair up next to Victor’s bed. “One day soon you’ll leave here. You’ll go back to Florida or wherever. And nobody’s going to be shooting at you or ordering you around, but you’re still going to face disappointments and loss. Everyone does.” The chaplain’s tone had gone soft and chummy. “Sometimes it seems as if the whole damned thing is just a matter of time and chance. But I have to believe God’s more reasonable than that.”

Victor pointed to his scarred leg. “You think God did this to me for a reason?”

“I think he has a plan for you, yes. But it’s not possible for us to know.” The chaplain pressed his hands together between his thighs. “All you can do, I believe, is understand that you always have a choice, and it’s never too late to make it.”

“Then my choice is to leave.”

The chaplain smiled and rose from the chair, the weariness returned to his face. “You’ve made that crystal clear, son. Have patience. All things will come in the fullness of time. Good luck.” And he walked away.

Victor tried to sleep, only to wind himself up in his sheets. He finally tossed off the sheets, found his cane, and made his way slowly down the hall to the day room where he clicked on the TV. He didn't believe he'd really watch the movie, but he wanted the distraction. He thought of Sofia and Tarpon Springs, and it made him angry all over again when he considered that he wasted as much time dwelling on the past as he did anticipating the future. And still, he hadn't found another way. The same four or five ideas kept bumping around in his head. At best, he could ignore them, but that didn't mean they went away.

On the television, a tepid love scene played out between a young man and woman, both with tiny waists and piles of dark curls, followed by a fight between the young lover boy and two scruffy bad guys on a boat. The actors were familiar, but it was impossible. It couldn't be the same movie. He looked closer and saw that the bad guys were stealing sponges from the lover boy's boat. Victor closed his eyes and shook his head. It seemed like ages ago in Tarpon Springs when he'd last seen the movie about Greek sponge divers in Florida. The Tarpon Theater played *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef*, starring Robert Wagner and Terry Moore, several times a year. Some of the local divers had been hired as extras in the film, and they loved to sit in the dark theater and shout out when they appeared in brilliant Technicolor forty feet high on the screen. Now Victor saw those faces again as he watched on the hospital's recently donated color TV, an extraordinary exception to Veterans Administration austerity. Fate had reached out once again to mock him.

Victor watched as the young Greek, played improbably by Wagner, overcame the bad guys and in the end won the American girl. When the final scene came and Wagner

defeated the bad guys and Moore kissed him and everyone swelled full of happily-ever-after, Victor got up painfully to snap the TV off. He stood staring at the image of the lovers, feeling a new, colder wave of anger build inside him. He resented the cruelty of coincidence, that an obscure, old make-believe story could turn up just at this moment and this place. He also resented the falseness of the story he'd just witnessed, a feeling he'd never had sitting in the dark theater in Tarpon Springs. Back then, amid the old Greeks, the film had inspired a kind of communal swelling of the chest. The moviemakers had recognized the Greeks' specialness. They were singled out and portrayed as modern-day cowboys. Their uniqueness was affirmed by the thoroughly American process in which movies make spectacle commonplace and the commonplace into spectacle. They were flesh-and-blood heroes immortalized in flat, undying images on the silver screen.

But now, Victor saw it all—the movie, the phony pride, the unearned glory—empty promises of something enhanced for your pleasure, new and improved, the high life, number one. Better than plain old life with its simple food and drink and sex. It was the same kind of thing the army sold scared young draftees. Honor, duty, courage. As much a fiction as Robert Wagner as a Greek. It was the kind of thing a nurse in a burn unit swallowed when she decided to wear false eyelashes and thought it was a good idea to hold a mirror up to a soldier's scorched flesh—for reasons so abstract and hollow that they could justify anything. Honor, courage, duty. Bullshit. It was the exactly the thing he'd swallowed back in Tarpon Springs. It was why, after all, that he'd allowed himself to become ensnared in things he'd no business getting tangled up in. It hurt him deeply to think how he'd allowed himself to be so misused.

But deeper down, beneath his loathing for the falseness of the world, there was something more. And he knew it clearly, even though he didn't. It was the girl on TV, the actress. Her delicate face was ringed by cinnamon-colored hair and she was physically as different from Sofia as marble is from clay, but it didn't matter. Nor did it matter at all that the movie was about sponge diving and Tarpon Springs. It could have been any woman anywhere. It was, in fact, every woman. When he looked at any female, he saw Sofia. But it didn't matter even that the object of his need was Sofia. It didn't matter even if he was Victor Lucas. The two of them were as immaterial to the process of desire as a soldier is to the whole big enterprise of war. In a way, they didn't exist at all. They were merely fuel for an inextinguishable fire. The same two words had been gouging out the long, cratered path of human endeavor—I want.

And it would keep on being this way. Sofia was always with him. Despite everything, he loved her. Or maybe it wasn't exactly love. But to give up on her would strip away the last thread to his past. And so he clung to his desire for her to keep from spilling into a void; he would be nothing without her. Only his love for her contained him. It made him possible.

If the chaplain was right, if fate could be shaped, if he could exist separate from his desire, it would be up to Victor alone to do something about it. But not now. He'd have to wait. As long as he stayed in this hospital he was powerless to do anything except remember.

He leaned against his cane, raised his bandaged foot, and smashed the glass screen, sending the television and him crashing against the gray linoleum. He reached out for his cane, which had skidded a few feet away from him.

He felt someone grab him from behind. He turned, rolled halfway over, and swung the cane blindly. And then his face was pressed hard against the cold, gray floor, and his hands were pinned behind him.

Victor cried out in pain, pleaded to be let loose.

“It’s all right, now,” the man in white said. “Everything’s going to be fine. Just calm down, and we’ll take you back to your bed.”

Victor stopped resisting. He knew the night orderly. Smoke billowed from the empty skull of the busted television.

“You need some rest,” the orderly said. “Can you get up? Here, let me.” He lifted Victor in his arms and carried him back to his room. He felt a cold jab into his arm. He didn’t resist. He wondered what Ackles would tell him to do if he were alive and here now. He let himself slip under.

Thirteen

Like Swallowing Guilt

The psychologist, Dr. Sidney Kirchheimer, had an office deep in a distant third-floor corridor of the hospital. Victor was walking well enough to make the trip under his own power, if not his own volition. He had been ordered to report to the shrink, and so he went, with trepidation, but also a notion, supported only by hope, that somehow the doctor might provide the key that would unlock the door barring exit from the hospital.

He wore a baggy gray sweatshirt, which for some reason had the Greek letters $Z\Psi$ on the front, and khaki pants that were two inches too short. He had found them in the closet of the hospital ward where someone, apparently a former patient, had left them. He wore the clothes every day, and his particular scent had long since overpowered the clothes smell of musty abandon. No one had told him not to wear the clothes. In fact, no one seemed to notice. The act of getting up and getting dressed in such familiar clothes instead of the paper-thin hospital gown gave him the rare feeling that he was in control of at least some small aspect of his life.

He found the office and opened the door into a small, airless room. Dr. Sidney sat behind a metal desk in his cramped office, eating an egg salad sandwich that he set down when Victor arrived. He stood, wiped his hand on the leg of his wrinkled trousers, and shook Victor's hand.

"Sorry," Victor said. "They told me to come at three."

"No problem," the doctor said. "I got a little behind today so I was grabbing lunch at my desk. Your name is . . ." He opened a file and examined papers on his desk. "Cyrus Kanakis."

Victor slumped into the sagging plaid upholstery. “It’s a mistake.”

Dr. Sidney looked up and arched his eyebrows.

“It’s a mistake for me to be here,” Victor said.

The doctor made a note on his yellow pad. “Okay,” he said, the last part of the word almost a song. “Good. Let’s just get acquainted. Are you Zeta Psi?”

Victor considered what this could mean.

“I’m not crazy,” Victor said.

“Right. We’re just talking. I’m just noticing your shirt. Zeta Psi. It’s a college fraternity. I was Sigma Chi, myself, so I was commenting on that.”

“Congratulations,” Victor said.

The doctor made another note. “Okay.” The sing-song again. “You were saying something about a mistake. I’m wondering what you meant by that.”

Victor felt the sweat roll down his neck. He remembered his interview with the fat captain in Louisiana. He had promised himself he’d never let anyone make a fool of him like that again. “What I said. A mistake for me to be here.”

“Why do you think you’re here today?”

“I know why I’m *here*. I broke a television, and they made me come.”

“It’s important to understand that this isn’t a punishment,” the doctor said, baring small, yellow teeth in an apparent smile. “But *I’m* still not understanding what you think is a mistake.”

Where did they find this guy? What kind of a doctor was he? A knot tightened in Victor’s stomach. He looked toward the door.

“What is it? Please share with me what you’re feeling,” the doctor said.

“You were never in the army, were you?”

“I was a CO.”

“An officer?”

“Conscientious objector. I was drafted, but I didn’t believe in war. So instead of making me a soldier, the army sent me here. This is my service.”

“You’re a lucky man,” Victor said. “No one in war believes in it.”

The doctor frowned.

“You’re lucky you got to choose.” Victor smiled.

“It’s not important,” the doctor said. “Lets get back to what you were saying. You were telling me about a mistake. Is it something you did?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know, or you’re not wanting to say?” Doctor Sidney glanced longingly at his half-eaten sandwich.

“I just want to get out of here. I don’t want no more trouble.”

“Why do you expect there’d be trouble?”

“Trouble is all it’s ever been. From the start.”

“Let me ask you this, have you ever acted on this, tried to do anything about this, ah, problem? Have you talked to anyone?”

“That’s when there’s trouble,” Victor said.

The doctor glanced down at the file on his desk. “Look, Private Kanakis, Cyrus, this issue, whatever it is, is obviously is important to you. But I’m sensing you’re reluctant to talk about it. Please understand that whatever you say to me is confidential. Do you know what that means?”

Victor shrugged.

“It means that if you tell me something—anything—I won’t repeat it. Not to the army or anyone else. Not even a judge can force a therapist to testify about what a patient tells him.”

“You’re making a promise to keep a secret?”

“It’s the law, Cyrus.”

“That’s the mistake,” Victor said. “I’m not Cyrus Kanakis. The army thinks I am, but I’m not.”

“Why do they think so?”

Victor squirmed on the sagging couch. “Because that’s who I said I was.

“Why would you do that?”

“I had to.”

“And why did you have to?”

Apparently, this head-shrinking business boiled down to that one question—why? If that’s what psychology was, then any curious three-year-old could practice it. But Victor had gone this far, and he decided to continue. He shifted forward on the couch. “I thought I was in love. I went so my girlfriend would stay out of trouble and maybe so I wouldn’t get sent back to Greece.”

“Why would your going into the army pretending to be someone you’re not keep her out of trouble?” Doctor Sidney said.

It seemed like a such a long time ago, Victor thought, another life. “She got in trouble. *We* got in trouble. Her father. He was shot, and he died. An accident, but maybe the police wouldn’t think so. We needed help. We needed protection. So I went to my

boss, the big man in town, and he promised to take care of her, Sofia, if I said I'm his nephew Cyrus and go to the army."

"You just showed up and said you were another man and they believed you?"

"I had his ID. Everybody said we could be brothers."

"And this Cyrus, he went on with his business like nothing happened?"

Victor shrugged. "Maybe *now* you think I'm crazy," he said.

"No, but can you understand how extraordinary this all seems?" The doctor began writing on his notebook.

"Forget it," Victor said. "I made it all up to see if you'd believe me. It's okay. I'm sorry. I'm who you say I am, Cyrus Kanakis."

"Relax," The doctor said. "I'm not here to judge you." He made another note.

"I made it all up," Victor said again.

"Did you succeed? Did you keep her out of trouble?"

"I don't know," Victor said. "It doesn't matter."

"When did you last hear from her?"

"I don't remember," Victor said.

"You talked your way into going to Vietnam to protect a girl, and now you don't remember the last time you heard from her? Do you find that unusual?"

"It's just a story," Victor said. "Except for the girl."

The doctor checked his notes. "Sofia?"

"I got a letter."

"And why was this important? A Dear John?"

Victor suspected a trick. "I told you my name is Cyrus."

The doctor laughed, but then stifled it. “I mean it was a letter from Sofia. Dear John is just an old expression for when a woman—”

“It was from my boss. He said she didn’t want nothing to do with me.”

“And when was all this? Was it before or after you were wounded?”

“Just before we went out on patrol,” Victor said. “I had the letter with me that day.”

“What else do you remember about that day?”

“There was a prisoner. He was supposed to be showing us where the VC was. But he escaped and then Ackles—”

Doctor Sidney made another note on his pad. “Ackles?”

“My friend,” Victor said. “Sergeant Luther Ackles. He was wounded. Bad. He stepped on a land mine. And then the prisoner and me, we tried to get him back. But we didn’t make it. The prisoner went ahead to scout, and then they saw him and killed him.”

“Ackles?” the doctor said.

“The Americans didn’t kill Ackles. They killed the prisoner. An American shot him. That’s the last thing I remember.”

“What *did* happen to Ackles? Did you find out?”

Victor shrugged. “Dead, I guess.”

“What’s the next you remember after that day?”

“Hospitals, operations, doctors, nurses. This.”

The doctor consulted his notes again. “Let’s talk a little about the television. Do you remember that?”

“I didn’t mean. . .”

The doctor put his hand on his forehead and closed his eyes. "It's all right," he said. "You're not in any trouble. It's a just a concern. The staff says you're not sleeping."

"I'm fine," Victor said.

"But do you have trouble sleeping?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you know where you are always?"

Victor raised his cane. "This helps me remember."

The doctor smiled. "So why did you break the television?"

"I saw an old movie, about sponge divers from Tarpon Springs. It reminded me of someone."

"Who?"

"The girl I told you about, Sofia."

"Did you want to hurt her?"

"It wasn't her. It was a television."

"But you said it reminded you."

Victor edged up on the sofa. He pressed his palm against his forehead, trying to keep the frustration from weltering up and seizing him.

"It's all right," the doctor said. "I didn't mean to upset you. We can talk about something else."

"I'm not upset," Victor said. But he knew even a VA psychologist could see that he was lying.

They talked for an hour, about Victor's family, his voyage to America, curses, his relationship with Sofia, his time in Vietnam. Victor began to relax. He was determined to

show the doctor how reasonable he could be. Finally Doctor Sidney looked at his watch and stroked his beard. “We’re just about done today, but I’d like to see you again.”

“Do you think I’m crazy?” Victor said.

“That’s not really a word that we use.”

“But do I seem sick, you know, in my head?”

The doctor put his hands together and leaned forward with his elbows on the desk. “People who really are sick that way don’t wonder if they are. But I’ve seen a lot of guys who are confused. It’s complicated coming back from a war like that. It’s understandable that what you’ve been through is going to carry some, well, consequences. It’s not just the physical wounds, which are bad, of course. But they’re something we can see and treat. There are other kinds of wounds, ones we can’t see so well. Our minds sometimes invent ways to help us cope with painful, traumatic experiences. You understand? The experience of war is about as traumatic as it gets. So it only stands to reason for you to be confused.”

“But do you think maybe I can leave here soon?”

Doctor Sidney stood up and brushed crumbs from his lap. “That’s not entirely up to me. It wouldn’t be fair for me to give you false hope. A couple of things are of concern. Your insomnia, for example. The problem with controlling your temper. There are medications that can help you sleep, and maybe the business with the TV was an isolated thing. Probably from being cooped up in the hospital so long.”

Victor nodded.

Maybe the best thing I could do is just get you out of here so you can get on to whatever you’re going to do with the rest of your life.”

Victor had been wrong to be wary of the doctor in his cramped office and his rumpled clothes. Now he saw that there was something comforting about the doctor's frumpiness. He had expected a military man, another cipher. But Dr. Sidney was about as far from a typical army bureaucrat as he could be, and that was a good thing. For the first time in a long time, Victor sensed in Dr. Sidney Kircheimer someone worthy of his trust, something like an ally.

"Thanks, doctor," Victor said. "I was thinking I'm going to be here forever."

"Understand, I'm not saying you *are* going to be released."

"But you said it's the best thing."

"I'm saying it's not that easy. There's this business with your identity."

"That was nothing," Victor said, waving his arm as if to shoo a fly. "A joke." He laughed, trying to show just how funny it all was. "They army thinks I'm Cyrus Kanakis, so that's who I am. No problemo."

The doctor looked hard at him. "You can't just take it back," he said. "If you really did pretend to be Cyrus Kanakis, then that's a problem. This isn't the dark ages. Someone can't just *hire* another person to serve for them. On the other hand, if you're actually Cyrus Kanakis, and you're saying you're someone else, well, there must be a reason for that, too."

"It's nothing," Victor said. "A mistake. Like you said, I was confused, but I'm better now. Fine. I know you're a doctor and I'm in a hospital. I know today is Monday and that Mr. Nixon is president. I'm—Cyrus Kanakis from Tarpon Springs. So you can let me go back home now."

"I sympathize. I really do, but—"

“All this time I’ve dreamed about nothing else. Of the river and sponge boats. Of food. You ever had *keftéthes*, doctor? *kouípes*, *baklavá*? My uncle, he’s the big man in town. His restaurant is the best. It’s all Greeks there. Like me.” He pointed the Greek letters on his chest. “Like us, eh?”

The doctor laughed, again baring his small teeth. “That kind of thing kind of terrifies me,” he said.

“A shirt?”

“Foods I can’t pronounce. I have a weak stomach. Egg salad’s my staff of life. I think it comes from my grandmother. She was from Russia, and she cooked these dishes. Beets and sour cream and . . . I can’t begin to tell you. Just unimaginable things. When I was a kid she made me sit at the table until I’d eaten every bit of what she put on my plate. All the time I sat there, she’d go on and on about the Jews in the camps, so every spoonful was like swallowing the guilt for all those dead European Jews. After a while, I almost felt envious of them. And then that made me even guiltier.”

The doctor laughed; the story was supposed to be funny, but Victor didn’t get the joke. “See, you have a family,” he said, pressing on. “So you know what I’m saying. So please, just sign the papers. Whatever you have to do. You’re a smart man, wise, like Socrates.”

The doctor laughed again. “No one ever confused me with a philosopher,” he said. “Besides, didn’t they make Socrates drink poison?”

“Maybe they had the wrong man,” Victor said.

The doctor put his hand on Victor’s shoulder. “I really do want to help,” he said. “For a man to have gone through what you have, well, I guess it would be crazy *not* to be

confused. But it's not so simple. Try to be patient. Come back and see me in a few days. We'll talk."

Victor was certain that Dr. Sidney was quietly appraising him. The doctor was a tailor sizing him for a new suit of clothes. Victor couldn't be sure if he had in mind a straight jacket or a pair of wings. He hoped the latter. "Please, doctor," he said. "Who I am, who I'm not, it's not important. I don't matter enough to bother you."

"Not true," the doctor said. "You mattered enough for the army to send you off to fight for your country. You mattered enough for them to take care of you when you were wounded, for them to send you here." The doctor gripped his shoulders, looked him in the eye, and leaned so close Victor could smell the egg salad. "You matter to me."

"That's kind of you to say," Victor said, slipping from the doctor's grasp. He closed the door behind him and headed back to his hospital bed. It had been a mistake to reveal too much. He'd probably only managed to delay his release. He'd used the wrong key. He hoped, for his own sake, that the doctor was as ineffectual as he'd first seemed. Victor hoped that the doctor had already moved on to whatever was next on his schedule. He hoped that already the Cyrus/Victor business was simply some notes on a page in a notebook. He hoped didn't he really matter, that what really mattered to Dr. Sidney was getting back to his half-eaten sandwich.

Fourteen

Some Choices Never Are

Doctor Sidney lifted a cardboard box from behind his desk and slid it over to Victor. “I was going through some things at home,” he said, “and rather than give these to Goodwill, I thought maybe you could use them. I hope you won’t be offended, but I thought maybe you could use a few new things. Well, some different things, at least.”

Victor opened the box and picked up a folded shirt—short sleeves, white cotton with small red and blue stripes. He held it up. It was almost identical to the one the doctor was wearing. He looked further down in the box and found a half-dozen more shirts of the same basic cut and pattern and beneath those several pair of pants, the black, brown, and blue equivalents of those that the doctor regularly spilled crumbs on.

He’d look like a salesman in these clothes. “Very nice,” Victor said. “Thank you.”

“You know, Albert Einstein bought all his shirts and pants in the same style and color. He didn’t want to waste time or thought on matching clothes. Of course, my wife says that’s where the similarities with Einstein and me end.” At first he thought the doctor had swallowed something the wrong way, but then he realized the doctor was laughing. He saw his yellow teeth. Victor laughed too, but it was less at the doctor’s joke than the image he conjured of Mrs. Sidney Kircheimer.

After three visits, Victor had developed if not a close relationship with Dr. Sidney, at least an ease with the man. He looked forward to the sessions as breaks in the monotony of the hospital, but also for the chance to talk with Dr. Sidney, whose attention, though at times fleeting, was, Victor was convinced, nonetheless sincere. No

one would describe Dr. Sidney as demonstrative, but Victor had begun to read the doctor's subtle moods and deviations from what seemed at first a slightly distracted bookishness. Today, the doctor seemed almost ebullient. He was clearly eager to see Victor.

After the usual inquiries about how Victor was feeling, Doctor Sidney got quickly down to what obviously had been on his mind for some time. "I have some news," the doctor said.

"No questions?" Victor said.

"Something important," the doctor said. He held up a card on which was a handwritten string of numerals. "This is a phone number in Tarpon Springs, Florida," the doctor said, a little triumphantly. "It belongs to Cyrus Kanakis."

"You don't need a phone when I'm right here," Victor said. But when the doctor didn't laugh, Victor sensed trouble.

"I called information," the doctor said.

"Let me see." Victor took the card. "Oh, yes," he said. "I remember now. This is my old number."

Dr. Sidney peered over his wire glasses. "I don't think so," he said. Like an actor in a television courtroom drama, Dr. Sidney explained how simple it had been to check. He'd called long-distance information and asked for Cyrus Kanakis, but there was no number. So he requested the number to the Tarpon Springs Public Library, where he asked the librarian to check the current city directory for the name. Still nothing. But Dr. Sidney was persistent. He called the Pinellas County clerk's office and sweet talked a clerk into checking if they had any record of Cyrus Kanakis. There were no birth records

or lawsuits or criminal charges. Finally, though, the clerk found something, a marriage license. A Cyrus Kanakis had married a Sofia Bazos two years ago. There was an address listed. Dr. Sidney called the library again and asked the librarian to check the city director for the address. The name listed was Junior Papademopoulos. Wife Sofia.

What struck Victor was the sound of the name that all this time lay just beneath his tongue but rarely formed on his breath. To hear it spoken by someone else, especially in this way, not in the abstract, not hypothetically, but applied to a real person located in the real world, had the converse effect on Victor. With a couple of simple telephone calls, the doctor had conjured Sofia back from the realm of memory and dreams, where Victor had been free to recreate her to suit his needs, and at the same time it sent Victor slipping and reeling away from the concrete world backward, past the jungle and Ackles and the drill sergeants and the bus rides and restaurant kitchens. Past Cyrus and Nouno and a trailer and a gunshot, back beyond Mrs. Demetriou's and men on the moon, past a parade and a young, defiant girl. Back to the bayou and a January chill and down into the green water, deeper and deeper with no bottom.

But there was a bottom, and it was this: Cyrus and Sofia.

"Who are you really, private?" the doctor said.

"My name is Victor Lucas," he said. He studied the number on the card. "Did you call?"

"That number?" the doctor said, pointing the card in Victor's hand, "No, I'll leave that up to you. But there's something else." He handed Victor a folded document. "The woman at the library knew who I was asking about. She told me, so I called the clerk's office and asked them if there was a record. They sent me that."

Child's name: George Anthony Kanakis. Date of Birth: April 1, 1971. Mother's name: Sofia Bazos Kanakis. Father's name: Cyrus Papademopolis Kanakis. Previous live births: none. Previous terminations: March 1970.

Victor dropped his head into his hands to hide his tears. His chest seemed to crack open and keep on cracking with each uncontrollable sob. The doctor came and sat beside him.

“I’m sorry, Victor. I considered not telling you any of this. But I knew almost from the moment you first walked in here you weren’t delusional. Confused, yes, but we’re all confused these days. I wouldn’t have shown you this if I didn’t think you were up to it.”

Victor looked again at the birth certificate. He pointed to the section that indicated previous pregnancies. “This means . . .” He looked at Dr. Sidney, who nodded.

“Either miscarriage or . . .” he held his palms up.

Victor dried his eyes with the back of his hand. “When I got the letter from Nouno, I told myself to forget. I was through with all the past,” he said, struggling to compose himself. “But I never really believed it. The letter was another of Nouno’s tricks. I’d come back and find Sofia and then we’d be finished with the past. This is what I *really* believed in. Not marching and booby traps and guns and bombs. This is *what* I was marching for.” He looked up at the doctor.

“May I ask you something?” Dr. Sidney said. “Sofia was pregnant? So you agreed to go into the army? Is that why?”

It was, Victor knew, the essential question, not only for Dr. Sidney Kircheimer, but for him as well. It was the head of the nail that would bore deeper and deeper until he

found an answer that made sense of all that he'd sacrificed. It had seemed simple back in Nouno Papdemopoulos' office, a deal, yes or no. But he understood now that the choice was never that black and white. Such choices never are. A man's destiny was always in the balance. He understood something else now, too. The big questions that men and women ponder about truth and death and honor and courage did not lead to big answers. They did not yield the meaning of life. It was that little question—why?—that lies beneath all understanding, gnawing and grinding and peeling back what we tell ourselves we believe to be true.

Fifteen

Still That Number

He could say he'd had no choice. Boxed in, outmaneuvered. It was luck, and his was all bad. Not only was the girl he loved in danger, she was also bearing his child. If he had stayed, it was as good as losing both of them. If he agreed to go away, he'd have a chance to return, but only if he survived a war. It was the kind of choice only a man who is cursed must make.

But this wasn't true. He had chosen not only out of fear or self-sacrifice. He'd felt that in a way he'd been called to do something extraordinary and by responding he could become himself extraordinary. This notion of personal glory endured, despite the overwhelming evidence of his experience that suggested quite the contrary, that he was, after all, just another banged-up soldier with a medal in a drawer honoring the fact that he was wounded, which proved only that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He wasn't even a particularly good soldier. Not that that mattered either. Better soldiers than he—Ackles, the Vietnamese prisoner, to name just two—were dead, and it won them no more glory than his wounds had earned him. And yet the notion endured. He still believed he would win out in the end. He'd never been sure how, but he'd always known that somehow his redemption would involve Sofia. It wasn't for Sofia's sake alone that he'd agreed to Nouno's deal. Saving her was the vehicle of his own salvation. When he received the letter and everything seemed to change, he'd had to adjust his way of thinking about her. And now with the evidence Dr. Sidney presented to him, his thoughts turned to revenge against Nouno and Cyrus. He became convinced that they were behind Sofia's rejection and probably had calculated just such a thing from the very start.

But how could he fit this latest information into his glorious self-vision? Sofia was Cyrus' wife. She was now Nouno's niece. Family. She would not be his vehicle after all. He had been used and damaged and tossed aside. There was no more to it than that.

None of which answered Dr. Sidney's question: Why?

"I wanted something better," Victor said.

And then he told Dr. Sidney his story, all of it, from beginning to end.

The psychologist listened, interrupting only to ask for minor points of clarification. Otherwise, he stroked his beard or adjusted his glasses. Victor stuck to the facts but left nothing out. His first meeting with Sofia, her brother's death, his work for Nouno both at the restaurant and his late-night deliveries, Cyrus, the night at the trailer when Bob Bazos died, Nouno's deal. His answer.

When it was finished, both he and Dr. Sidney sat for a long time in silence. Finally, Victor stood. He had been sitting for so long that his hip ached.

"Don't go," the doctor said, looking up.

"I need to stretch."

"I'm sorry, Victor," the doctor said.

"You didn't do anything, doc. You're a good listener."

But the doctor seemed at the moment not to hear him. "I'm sorry you were put through this," he said. "I'm sorry there's so little I can do for you or for anyone else who walks through those doors after what they've been through." His normal reserve was crumbling. There was anger in his voice. "This stupid, fucking war. Now they say it's over. They're pulling out the ground troops. So all those lives, all those injuries, for what?" He stood and began pacing in the tiny office.

“I was stupid,” Victor said.

“No, you were exploited, used. Like I was. Like we all were.” He sat back behind his desk, but it was different now. He had stripped off his doctor’s mask. There was nothing of the dispassionate, distracted psychologist about him. “The big difference between us, though, Victor, is that you were courageous. You were faced with an impossibly difficult decision and you didn’t back down. I wound up here.” He slapped his hands flat against the metal desk.

“But you’re a doctor,” Victor said. “It’s your job.”

“My punishment, you mean. I told you I was a conscientious objector. I proved to the army that I was morally opposed to war of any kind. Which is true. But I knew what I was doing taking this job, working for the army, handing out band-aids when guys are bleeding to death from the way the war has cut into them. I had a choice. I could’ve gone to Canada, or could’ve gone to Vietnam. I didn’t do either. I went to work for the enemy. And I regret it every day.” The way he talked, it was as if Victor were no longer in the room. “I’m sorry,” the doctor said finally. “I’m being an ass. It’s just day after day of this . . . I’m not being very helpful.”

“If you really want to help me, doc, help me get out of here.”

“I will. I promise.” He took off his glasses and chewed at the earpiece. “But there’s something I want you to do first.”

“Still you think I’m crazy?”

“It’s not that. You’re perfectly sane, Victor. I can’t explain what I have in mind just now. It’s just an idea, really. I’ll let you know soon.” He was quiet, but clearly not finished.

“Something else?” Victor said.

“There’s still that number.”

Victor took the card from his pocket and looked at it again.

“I can step out if you want. You can use my phone. It’d be more private than a pay phone.”

Victor flicked the card against his fingertips.

“I’m not advising,” the doctor said. “Just offering. It’s up to you.” He stood and walked to the door. “Either way, just close the door behind you.”

Victor handed the birth certificate to Dr. Sidney.

“Keep it,” the doctor said. And he left.

Victor examined the document again. And then he carefully tore a strip of the paper and put it against his tongue where it tasted as salty as an ocean of regret.

Sixteen

Long Distance

“Hello.”

He didn’t need to ask, but he did anyway just to hear himself say it again:

“Sofia?”

“Who is this?”

He heard a tiny note of fear. “It’s me, Sofia.”

“Cyrus? What now? No, let me guess. You need money. Well, screw you. I’m hanging up.”

“It’s me, Victor Lucas.”

The sibilance of long-distance space. And then her breath came more rapidly. “Is this a joke? Because it’s not funny. You don’t call for days, and then this. I don’t have time for this nonsense—“

“It’s me, Victor.”

The earpiece rattled and clicked. She was still on the line, but it was a long time before she said, “No. Cyrus, you jack ass.”

“Yes, it’s Victor. I can prove it. I know things. I know why your brother went out on the boat with Kostos.”

“I swear to god, Cyrus, you’re going too far.” Now anger rose in her voice, and it pained him.

“The first time I kissed you, you slapped me.”

“No, it can’t be.”

“I’m in Texas in a hospital. I was injured—“

“What’s happening?”

“You’re married?”

“I’m . . . Oh my god.” She sobbed. He imagined her face. “They said you were killed. I thought . . . You understand, don’t you? I didn’t know . . .”

“And so you and Cyrus—“

“You were dead. I was pregnant. I was alone. If I’d known. . .” A sharp breath. “I can’t talk. I’m sorry. Someone’s here. I can’t—“

“Do you love him?”

“I can’t. . .” Silence. “It was a mistake.” And then she was gone again.

Seventeen

Wrapped in the Package of His Enemy

He'd almost decided not to come. And now he wished that he hadn't. But after talking to Sofia, all he could think of was getting back to her. He would have done almost anything to accomplish it. It was Dr. Sidney's idea. A day trip, an excursion to see the sights. Victor had never heard of the Alamo, and he wasn't particularly curious to learn about it, no more so after Dr. Sidney explained how the small band of Texans was obliterated in defense of the former Spanish mission and inspired a revolution. As a Greek growing up in the shadows of ruins of ancient memorials to the glory of war, Victor had a hard time getting excitement about a shrine to what to him sounded like a foolish battle fought over things that stopped mattering a long time ago.

Still, it was a chance to get out of the hospital, breathe fresh air, show the medical staff that he could function on his own, and demonstrate that he was indeed ready to be released. And Dr. Sidney could make it happen. He would tell those in charge what good therapy it would be, both physically and psychologically. Victor quickly agreed to the idea.

However, he started to suspect Dr. Sidney wasn't thinking only of his patient's interests when the psychologist called him to his office. The trip was all set, he said, but before he could get final approval, he wanted Victor to agree to "just talk with someone."

Who, when, where, Victor asked.

"During your visit to the Alamo," the doctor said. "A friend of mine from college. Well more like a friend of friend. I mentioned your story to him."

"What story?"

“Your going to Vietnam, posing as someone else.”

“I thought what I told you was secret.”

“This person isn’t from the army. He’s not a cop,” the doctor said, suddenly uncharacteristically animated.

“Why would I talk to a cop?”

“He’s not a cop. He can help you.”

“Can he help me get out?”

“He’s working *against* the war, Victor.”

“But it’s over. I’m finished with it.”

“He thinks, we both think, that people should hear your story to show the world how corrupt this whole system is.”

“He’ll tell the world about how stupid Victor Lucas was tricked into being a soldier? That will help your friend to fight against the war and the army”

“He’ll help you right the wrong that was done to you so you get what you deserve. You know, justice, the truth.”

“And when the army finds out the truth, that they were tricked, and the cops find out about everything, they’ll give me justice? They’ll say, ‘Oh, sorry for the trouble, Victor’? Why would I do this? Would you?”

The doctor looked away. “No, I wouldn’t. But you’re not me. I’m taking some personal risk by getting involved in this, but I understand there’s much more at stake for you.” Then all of a sudden the doctor seemed to reconsider. “Maybe you’re right, you aren’t ready for this. I should probably just forget the whole thing. I’ll tell the medical people maybe in a couple more months.”

It sounded very much to Victor that he was being offered a deal. Again a deal. He had a choice to make. “All right,” he said. “I’ll talk to your friend.”

“That’s all I’m asking, Victor. Just talk.”

Victor wondered what Ackles would do.

It was a Tuesday, and the Alamo was deserted. Victor stood across the small lawn and cobbled walkways that fronted the building. It wasn’t much of a monument, just a rectangular stone structure bordered by a swath of green grass and adorned by a façade topped with what looked like an architectural sombrero. A fat guard stood at the entrance, looking bored and displaying interest in the few tourists who trickled in and out only when one of them was a young female. As Victor watched, a thin young man with a mane of curly hair walked up to the guard and spoke briefly, gesturing to the corners of the building.

Dr. Sidney hadn’t given Victor the name or description of the friend he was supposed to meet nor a place where he should wait, so he wandered down a shady path that led to the building’s entrance. He wasn’t sure whether he should go inside the building. If the inside was as bare and unimpressive as the exterior, he had little reason to enter. But as he stood and pondered the situation, there was a tap on his shoulder, and he turned to confront a razorish man with a wild mop of brown curls, the same man he’d seen earlier talking to the guard.

“Spare some change?” the man said.

If it was an introduction, it was an odd one. But Victor supposed it might be some kind of test. The doctor had been cagey about the entire meeting. Victor reached into his

pants pockets and pulled out a couple of coins he'd need for the bus back to the hospital. He held them out, and the wooly man frowned, but he took them. "Thanks, man," he said. He turned to leave.

At the entrance of the Alamo, the guard hitched up his pants under his paunch and hooked his thumbs behind his gaudy belt buckle, watching the two young men. "What should I tell Dr. Sidney?" Victor said.

The wooly man didn't turn around, but he did motion with a crooked finger for Victor to follow him. Victor trailed him across the lawn. He wore an army field jacket, blue jeans, and sandals. He plopped down on the grass, in the shade of an expansive live oak, setting aside a worn rucksack that also appeared to be army-issue. Victor sat down next to him.

"Kelly," the man said, offering his hand to Victor. "At least you can call me that. I'm glad you came. Our friend the shrink told us about you, and I have to say, man, I just about freaked. The idea that the army took you in the place of someone else, Jesus, it just blows my mind. It's just the kind of story that we have to get out there."

"We?"

"The movement. The underground. We're an army. Well, a shadow army. The government's got guns and money and suits. We've got the truth. And like they say, the truth shall set you free."

"I don't want another army," Victor said. "I'm trying to get out of the one I'm in."

Kelly smiled, exposing a set of perfectly ordered white teeth that would have made Dr. Sidney envious. "You wouldn't have to do anything, exactly," he said. "We'd write the article and send it out. You'd just sign it."

“Article?”

“Your story. We’ll write up what happened to you and send it to some newspaper reporters who’re down with the cause. Then maybe they’d get in contact with you and verify it all.”

“I thought I wouldn’t have to do anything.”

“Just talk, man. Like we are now.”

It confirmed Victor’s suspicion that Dr. Sidney’s interest in him hadn’t been entirely professional. The doctor wasn’t merely a passive objector to the war, after all, but had taken up arms—however puny—against it. And what a soldier he was, waging his battles anonymously from the safety of his dumpy office in the army hospital while happily collecting his V.A. paycheck.

“Look at it this way,” Kelly said. “You wouldn’t only be exposing the army, you’d be blowing the whistle on the assholes that did this to you.”

Here, then, was the trade-off. In return for his story, Kelly was offering retribution, a chance to settle scores. Victor knew that taking on the U.S. Army was insane, suicidal even. And he had no reason to trust the doctor or this wooly-headed stranger. They certainly didn’t care about him. They obviously had their own scores to settle. If it were simply a matter of offering himself up as a kind of trophy, a severed head on the pike of the government’s corruption, Victor wanted no part of Kelly’s plan. But the idea of showing the world the truth about Nouno and Cyrus struck Victor as an opportunity he should at least consider.

Kelly pushed back the sleeve of his jacket to check his wristwatch, a simple silver case with a black face and white numerals, 1 through 12 in an outer ring, 13 through 24

on a smaller inner circle. It had a standard army-green mesh strap, the kind Victor had seen worn by almost every soldier in Vietnam. His own version of the watch on Kelly's wrist was lost, either in the explosion in the jungle or sometime between then and when he awoke in the hospital. He hadn't missed it until just now, seeing another one on the unlikely arm of a man who, along with his backpack and jungle jacket, indeed appeared to be a kind of anti-soldier wrapped in the package of his enemy.

“If I did this, what you're asking, the army wouldn't just say, ‘Sorry, we made a mistake.’ ”

“There is that,” Kelly said.

“There'd be a price to pay.”

“I know all about the government. They call *me* a fugitive—I prefer political refugee—but either way, I'm underground, like deep, deep. It's a trip, no doubt about it. On the road, constantly looking over my shoulder, prepared just in case. I'm like one of those people you read about with six or seven personalities living inside of them. I've got names, social security numbers, man, *job* histories, contacts. Sometimes when it gets too deep and I start asking myself who am I, I have to just turn it off. Just shut it all down or otherwise I'd go ape-shit bat-fucking nuts. You know what I'm saying, Victor?”

What Victor understood was wooly man's actor-like ability to shift effortlessly from one emotion to the next, now wary, now animated.

The fat guard posted at the museum entrance stared at the two of them across the lawn as if he were one of the original defenders of the mission and the two of them were Santa Ana's horde come to lay siege.

The wooly man waved. “Fat pig. If he only knew who he was looking at.”

“Why do you do it?” Victor said. “Why do you run?”

He squirmed forward on the grass. “The movement,” he said, almost wistfully. “I’m an agent of change. I’m working on a different level of consciousness. And besides, I don’t exactly have a choice.”

“You could go back to wherever you came from.”

Kelly’s eyes narrowed. “Nah,” he said. “I’m on the list, man. My picture’s hanging in the post office. My father was a surgeon in Milwaukee for thirty years. He was the chief of medicine at his hospital, president of the local AMA, all that shit. Then when it was in the newspapers that his son was an anti-war criminal, he gets shit-canned. Now he’s got FBI agents watching his house, checking his phone records.”

“What did you do?”

“Jesus Christ,” Kelly said, running his hand almost violently through his coiled hair and glancing over one shoulder and then the next like a movie spy. “I helped blow up a building where the army was cooking up new ways to exterminate people. I got together the material, fertilizer and jet fuel.”

Victor stared now, trying to picture the person sitting across from him fashioning an explosive device capable of destroying a building. But he couldn’t imagine it. Such a task surely required a steadier hand, steelier nerves, a job for Ackles, maybe, or the Vietnamese prisoner. Not this man, who seemed to be made not of skin and muscle and bone, but of wire and cables and plastic and powered by some kind of whirling magneto. Even his mass of hair seemed electrified.

“Blowing up a building technically is a crime. But I answer to a higher law, like Martin Luther King and Ghandi. And look where that got them. I just took it to the next

logical level. What the government understands is violence. That explosion was a political statement, a moral expression. Think about it, man. What's more criminal, blowing up an army laboratory where they're building bigger and better guns to kill Vietnamese babies with, or a soldier using those guns to kill babies?"

"I didn't kill babies," Victor said.

"I'm not talking about you personally, man. I'm talking about the whole military-industrial complex. The blood's on their hands, Johnson and Nixon and the real war criminals pulling their strings. Soldiers like you, man, are just cogs in the machine."

"So you use bombs to stop bombs?"

"It's a war, baby. It's a revolution, Victor, make no mistake about that. It's the end game, truth versus the pigs."

"And if you're caught?"

Kelly shrugged. "Fifteen years maybe, if I have a smart lawyer and a dumb jury. Worst case, life."

"But there were others. You said you weren't alone."

"Doesn't much matter." He shrugged again. "People died."

It was one thing to destroy property, quite another humans, even in a revolution. Victor had had his fill of killing. "This is a mistake," he said. "You think the war is wrong. You want peace." He raised the first two fingers on each hand. "I don't know anything about your revolution. But I know more about bombs and killing than I want to know."

"You think I *like* the way it turned out?" Kelly said. "The last thing I wanted to do was hurt anyone. Stop government-sponsored violence by killing people? Where's the

logic in that. But we're talking war here, not logic. You understand that, right? In any war, just or not, there're casualties."

He sounded to Victor a lot like the army he knew. He rubbed his scarred leg. "I don't want to be a casualty, not again. For no army."

"I hear you. Sometimes I think, what the fuck, I'm already a prisoner, always looking over my shoulder. Maybe I should just give it all up. At least if I went to jail I'd have somebody bringing me three meals a day. But then I think, if I don't do this, who will? If I can do something and one less soldier is hurt, one less Vietnamese is killed, isn't my duty to do it?"

Duty. The word grated at Victor.

"Let me ask you something, Victor. Why do you think you're still in the hospital?"

"They say I'm not healed yet."

"And you believe Uncle Sam thinks that much of you? How many guys more fucked up than you get shipped out of that place?"

"What are you saying?"

"They're on to you, Victor. As long as they got you locked up they can keep their eye on you. You can't embarrass them. They know they fucked up."

"The army? How do they know?"

Kelly picked at a blade of grass. "Dr. Sidney," he said.

"But he's with you."

"It wasn't his fault. At least it wasn't intentional. But he's clumsy. When he started asking for files, making phone calls, well, the government's got big ears and long

arms. They watch, you know, especially Jewish psychologists who happen to be conscientious objectors.”

“I didn’t ask for anything, not from him or nobody. I just want this to be over.”

“I’m not telling you this to persuade you to do anything,” Kelly said. “But you should know what you’re up against. You can’t count on the doctor to help you. It could be that the only place you’ll be going after the hospital is to jail. But if your story gets out, you’d be protected. Look at My Lai. That changed the way people think. A lot of good middle Americans saw the pictures of those dead kids and old women and suddenly realized that what was happening was just obscenely wrong. The same thing would happen if people find out the army is allowing people with money or influence to send someone to war in their place. You’d be doing some good, Victor. And you’d be protecting yourself.”

Victor tried to imagine his face in the newspaper or on television. He’d seen the soldiers from what was called the massacre at My Lai on TV, their faces seeming on the verge of disintegrating from bewilderment and fear when the cameras trained on them. He’d seen civilians interviewed express their disgust for the affair and the war in general, heard the protesters chanting slogans about killing babies, seen the army officers and politicians blame the “atrocities” on a few rogue soldiers. But Victor also knew that in their place, he might well have done the same as the accused soldiers. After a while, killing faded into abstraction; marching and firing a weapon and burning villages were tasks that could be focused on, the concrete work of soldiers. Though he’d never served with the soldiers who’d been at My Lai, he felt as if he knew them, shared their obvious mystification at being called a murderer for doing what was done in a war. Reality was

always about context. And what was real and what was not in a Vietnamese jungle was unimaginable to someone in a comfortable living room in America. If those same Americans read about an immigrant Greek who went to fight for an American, would they feel the kind of outrage that Kelly predicted?

“What would I have to do?” Victor said.

Kelly smiled. “There’s a group of guys, Vietnam vets who’re now working against the war. I’ll tell you where to get in touch with them.”

“I thought you were going to—“

“I can’t be part of this. Not directly. You can’t mention me. Not even to Doctor Sidney. Tell him I didn’t show up.”

“What about the movement? The shadow army?”

“If I’m associated with these guys, it’ll only make it harder for them. It’s better this way.” Kelly’s eyes darted toward the Alamo entrance, and Victor looked up just in time to see the guard turn and nod, apparently to someone at the far end of the building. But when Victor turned to see whom the guard was communicating to, he caught the back of a figure ducking around the corner.

“Did you see that?” Victor asked Kelly. He wouldn’t have been surprised if the electrically-charged fugitive had already fled.

But Kelly seemed unperturbed. For the moment, he seemed almost serene. “See what?” he said.

“I think someone’s watching.”

“Roger that,” Kelly said.

“What did you say?”

“Just an expression. From the movies. You’re right, though, we probably should get going.”

And all at once, Victor knew that he’d never return to the hospital. Nor would he enlist his services with Kelly’s army. The conversation with the guard, the army wristwatch, the casual way he’d accepted being spied on—perhaps Victor was being paranoid, but Kelly didn’t act like a man on the run from anything. It occurred to Victor that a man on the run didn’t sit under trees and wax polemic about the war. Maybe he was who he said he was. Maybe he wasn’t luring Victor into a trap. But Victor couldn’t afford to find out. Trusting strangers was a luxury he could no longer afford. But whom could he trust? If not Kelly, then certainly not Dr. Sidney either. His best hope now was to slip away, put some distance between him and trouble.

Kelly stood, offered his hand, and helped Victor to his feet. Victor’s hip ached from sitting, and he was eager to get moving so that his creaky joints would limber to the point that he would have some chance to elude pursuers—if it came to that.

“I need to get back to the hospital,” Victor said.

Kelly smiled and slung the backpack onto his shoulder. He reached into his pocket and handed Victor a scrap of paper. “Here’s an address and a phone number,” Kelly said. “Next Tuesday afternoon. You can reach me there.” Kelly shrugged the backpack onto his shoulder. “Victor, I can tell you’re a good guy,” he said. “You didn’t deserve what happened to you. I know I’m asking a lot. But I wouldn’t if I didn’t think it was important.”

Victor turned and walked toward the street. He looked back once. Kelly still was in no hurry. He stood watching Victor, and when they made eye contact, he flashed

Victor a peace sign. Victor hurried on, hoping his limp wasn't as obvious to anyone who might be watching him as it seemed.

At the corner was the stop where he would have to catch the bus back to the hospital. He began toward the bench where a tired looking, middle-aged black woman in a white uniform sat next to a stiff young Mexican with gleaming, oiled hair and a crisp white shirt. When the light changed, a group of pedestrians began across the street. Three more people stopped to wait. Across the street, one man remained. He wore a dark suit, tie, and sunglasses. He'd been watching the bench, but when he looked up and saw that Victor had noticed him, he stooped to tie his shoe and then crossed the street in the other direction, glancing back toward Victor and the bus stop. Once on the other side of the street, he leaned against a building and opened a newspaper that he'd had tucked under his arm.

Soon the bus appeared in the next block, and the waiting man and woman fidgeted closer to the curb. Across the street, the man in sunglasses folded his paper and made his way to the crosswalk. The bus pulled up, and the riders queued at the door. The man in sunglasses hurried across the street. Victor turned and began walking as quickly as he could in the opposite direction. When he looked back, the man in the sunglasses was at the curb, headed in his direction. The next cross street was maybe ten meters ahead, but Victor's pursuer was closing ground. Victor broke into an awkward trot, dragging his bad leg like some kind of movie monster. At the corner he turned as nimbly as he was able, and there he encountered a van with its rear doors wide open. It was some kind of commercial vehicle laden with cardboard boxes, but Victor didn't have time to consider what kind of business it might be connected to. He made his way to the rear of

the van and pulled himself inside. Just as he closed the door, the man in sunglasses rounded the corner, stopped, and scanned the empty street.

Eighteen

With Much Embarrassment I Have Returned

After lying in one position for what seemed like hours, Victor's hip was throbbing. He could manage only small turns to relieve the pressure, but the relief was only momentary. Even the slightest adjustment of his position grated his body across the small, hard objects littered on the floor of van. It was as if he were lying on a bed of ball bearings. He dared not move too much for fear his shifting would draw the attention of the van's driver.

He'd wedged himself between cardboard boxes and had covered up with a tarpaulin as soon as he'd climbed in the van. He waited, hoping that the man in sunglasses would pass on by quickly. But before he could check, a door opened, someone got inside, and the van was moving. He decided he couldn't very well alert whoever was at the wheel that there was a stowaway aboard because, for all he knew, the man who'd followed him—and perhaps Kelly, too—were waiting just outside. So he made himself as small and as quiet as he could, enduring the cramped, lumpy ride, and told himself that the van would sooner or later arrive at its next appointment, and he would slip away unnoticed.

The van did stop, and Victor listened for the driver to shut off the engine and open the door. But it must have been only for a traffic light, because in a few minutes they were moving again. As the van slowed and stopped again and again, Victor guessed they were still in the city, winding their way through traffic. And then, when he heard the whine of the tires grow louder and the sound of passing vehicles become more like rushing water, he knew they were on a highway.

Victor settled into a kind of numbed composure, despite the conditions. It helped that the driver turned out to be a good distraction. Victor hadn't seen him, of course, but as the miles rolled by, he felt a growing sense of companionship. He liked the twangy coarseness of his voice as he sang lustily along with the music from the radio. Victor had never heard the songs, but from the words that he could make out, they were almost all heartfelt complaints about women and too much liquor and too few chances. And the music tinning from the radio was fittingly full of tears and regret and propelled by a drumbeat that sounded like a passing train. Once in a while, when a more upbeat song came on, the driver sang with even more gusto and sometimes drummed along with the jangly beat against the steering wheel. But before long, the radio began to sputter with static, and the weeping music became more erratic, now loud, now faded. Victor knew this meant they were nearing the limits of the radio station's signal. San Antonio was well behind him, as were Kelly, Dr. Sidney, the hospital, and the army. He wondered how long it would be before he was missed.

By then several hours must have already passed since he'd climbed into the van. And hours before that since he'd last eaten breakfast at the hospital. His stomach knotted. The entire left side of his body ached. Up front, the driver adjusted the radio, but instead of music, he landed upon a low droning voice, a news broadcast, Victor guessed, but he couldn't hear what it was the announcer was talking about.

"Buncha bullshit." The driver's voice was no longer so congenial. "You believe that?"

The announcer continued.

"That's right, give it away. Give the whole goddamn to the commies bastards."

Victor understood that the driver was talking to the radio. He shifted his weight a few inches, but managed only to bore two more pellets into his hip. He wished the driver would change the channel, find something more soothing. Even more, he wished that he would stop. Victor became painfully aware of his full bladder. He breathed deeply, drawing in a fragrance whose presence he'd been aware of from the beginning, sweet and fruity, pleasant at first, but increasingly like the ripeness that reminded him of the jungle. The struggle to remain still and unnoticed required every bit of discipline and willpower Victor could rally. But still agony gained ground, and the smell became cloying to the point that Victor thought he might gag.

“Good old Tricky Dick,” the driver bellowed. “Screw the country and then pull out before the job’s done.”

Victor reached carefully beneath his shoulder to dislodge one of the ball bearings. It was smooth and hard. He held it to his nose, amazed to suddenly be reminded of his grandfather. Then he realized—uzo. He touched his tongue to it, and, satisfied, popped it into his mouth and bit down on the licorice gumball. The vehicle of his delivery was loaded with bubblegum. Fleeting, the sound of Ackles’ full laugh echoed in his imagination.

Up front, the driver carried on his noisy conversation with the radio news. “You cannot be serious. I don’t believe—“ But the rest of the sentence was lost to the blast of a truck’s air horn. The van jerked viciously, spilling boxes down on Victor. One of them came crashing down on his leg, and Victor cried out in pain. He felt the van jerk one way and then the other and then slow and finally stop. Victor’s leg throbbed. A box had fallen on his pelvis, its weight pressing against his full bladder. But he remained still.

“Who’s there?” the driver called.

There was a terrific rustle of papers, the sound of something heavy scraping the floorboards, and then the door opened. Victor began to squirm under the weight of the boxes, desperate to extricate himself before the driver opened the rear doors and had him at his mercy. But it was no use. He was trapped by bubblegum. And then the rear doors opened.

“I have a gun,” the driver said. “A big one. I’ll blow you clean through to the road bed. Don’t try me.”

For a fleeting instant, Victor wished the driver would go ahead and shoot and end his misery.

“I don’t want no trouble,” the driver said.

“I can’t move,” Victor said. But it came out a muffled groan.

“Come on out of there. Real slow.”

Victor tried to push the boxes off of him, but he was twisted in the tarpaulin. “I need help,” he said.

He felt the van dip and heard the driver’s feet against the cardboard. As each box was lifted off him, Victor felt that much closer to weightlessness, as if at last he would be able to simply float up and fly away. But when the last box was removed, and Victor began to pull off the tarpaulin and sit up, he was once again pinned to the floor, this time by the driver’s foot.

“Not so fast,” the driver said. “What the devil are you doing back here?”

“I’ll tell you,” Victor said. “But please, first I have to go. You can shoot me, but I have to urinate.”

“Okay, hold your water. I don’t want you peeing in the merchandise.” He lifted his foot and reached down and grabbed Victor’s hand and helped him unwedge himself from the stacks of cardboard. “Man’s gotta go,” he said.

The only evidence that Victor was up and standing on his own two legs was that when he looked down he saw his two feet on the ground. He couldn’t feel a thing below his knees. It was as if he were indeed floating. He had to deliberately pick one foot up and then the other to move to the side of the van away from the road where he unzipped and relieved himself. It was only then that he turned and looked over his shoulder at the driver, who remained at the rear of the van.

“Don’t try nothing,” the driver said. He held a tire iron, the only weapon in evidence. Victor knew that there was no use in trying to flee with numb legs. The driver was not a young man. Silver strands were conspicuous in the elaborate sweep of his oiled pompadour, and the stubble on his chin was more white than black. He wore a sleeveless white T-shirt that rode up over the small pot of his belly. His blue jeans were rolled into wide cuffs above pointy boots. He was hardly imposing, but with one leg scarred and withered and the other dead asleep, Victor would be no match for him.

Finally, Victor finished and zipped up.

“Jeez, you weren’t lying,” the driver said. “Now get those hands up where I can see them.”

Victor raised his hands and turned. “No trouble,” he said.

“You’re not with the company, are you?” the driver said. “The bubblegum outfit. The Luna Vending Company of Piscataway, New Jersey.” He pointed to a box in the van. “They’ve been watching me.”

Victor shook his head.

“Yeah, well, I still want to know why the blazes you was in the back of my truck.”

“I needed a ride,” Victor said. “To get out of San Antonio.”

“They’re buses, you know. Or your thumb. You could’ve asked for a ride.”

“I was in a hurry.”

The driver cocked his head and bit his bottom lip studying Victor. “Well, I guess I’ve been in a hurry to leave places nicer than San Antone before. Come on over here. And put your hands down before some cop comes by and thinks I’m sticking you up.”

“I was waiting for you to stop so I could get out,” Victor said. “I only needed a short ride.”

“Then you picked the wrong trolley, son. Cause in the bubblegum business one thing’s for sure, you have got to hustle. I got one of the biggest territories in the company. You a Mexican?”

Victor shook his head.

“In trouble with the law?”

“Just a stowaway,” Victor said, smiling.

“I suppose if you meant trouble there’d already been some,” the driver said.

“My name’s Victor.”

“Where you headed, Victor?”

“Sofia,” he said, and then realized that, though it wasn’t strictly accurate geographically, it was as honest as he could be.

“Never heard of it. In Texas?”

“No, Florida.”

“Hmmm,” the driver said, rubbing his stubbled chin. “If you promise not to fart, whistle, or snore too loud, I guess you can ride up front with me. Less you prefer the back with the gum boxes.”

“You’re going to Florida?”

“You never know,” the driver said, walking around to the driver’s side door and climbing in. “I just know there’s a lot of gum machines between here and there. You coming?”

Victor opened the passenger door, but before he could get in, the driver had to move a canvas bag, which he dropped heavily on the floor, spilling dozens of coins. Most were pennies, but here and there a few silver pieces were scattered.

“Bubblegum business,” the driver said, slipping on a pair of mirrored sunglasses and starting the engine. “Strictly nickel and dime.” And then he threw the van into drive and jerked onto the highway even before Victor had closed the door.

In the next hour, as they sped eastward through the low, vacant landscape of South Central Texas, Victor became familiar, almost exhaustively so, with the vital details of the driver’s biography. His name was Edwin Jenks. He told Victor to call him Win. He was originally from a meager little coal-mining town in Southern Illinois, but he was known throughout the region because of his achievements as a baseball player. Everyone in the area who followed the sport—and that was almost everyone—either knew him or his reputation, and they all were sure that he was destined to go on the further glory in the professional game. In a perfect world, he would go on to play for the St. Louis Cardinals in the hardnosed tradition of Medwick, Dean, and Hornsby. But the

world being imperfect, it was not to be. An injury to his throwing arm abruptly ended his career as an athlete, and less than a year later he was in Europe, a private in the U.S. Army headed to war.

“I was in France when the shooting stopped,” Win said. “Nineteen years old in the middle of the biggest celebration you ever did see. I never fired my weapon at anyone, not once, but I was a hero. It was a couple of weeks before everyone kind of sobered up and took a good long look around. That was a real eye-opener. Everything in ruins. That was my education. What I learned is that however much you want to believe that if you live a certain way and try to do right, in the end it don’t matter a whole heck of a lot. The people didn’t choose that war. It chose them. The fight was between governments, same as always. You look at Korea today, and it’s exactly the same as it was before all those people died. Vietnam—same story. I don’t know about your politics, but me, personally, I can’t think of anything stupider. All the time and money and death and destruction, and now, phttt, it’s over. And for what? You’re lucky you didn’t have to go through that, Victor.”

“Not so lucky, maybe,” Victor said.

Win turned and stared.

“I was there.”

“In Vietnam?”

“I was wounded. I was in the hospital. That’s why I was in San Antonio.”

“But you’re not even an American.”

Victor smiled.

“What I mean is, you don’t *sound* American. No offense, I just assumed.”

“I was born in Greece,” Victor said. “I lived in Florida when I went into the Army.”

“I guess that explains,” Win said. And he seemed truly satisfied with the response, even though Victor had been careful to pare down the details.

“Anyway, you understand what I’m saying, then,” Win said. “I’m not one of those peace and love hippies, far from it. But there’s too much to live for and too little time as it is.”

“It’s a good philosophy, I think,” Victor said.

At their next stop, Win had Victor carry only an empty canvas money bag and cleaning supplies, even though Victor assured him several times that he was capable of doing his share of the work.

“I didn’t offer you a ride so I’d have a do-boy,” Win said. “I like the company.”

Victor didn’t feel it was necessary to bring up the fact that Win hadn’t really offered the ride—not at first, anyway. But Victor did feel an obligation to repay his host’s kindness. He felt even more indebted when they stopped at a diner a short time later. Victor had to explain that he couldn’t afford lunch. He had only a few coins in his pocket.

“It’s on me,” Win said. “You earned it.”

Back on the road, Win tuned the radio to a news broadcast, and in minutes Victor was dozing. He awoke with a snort to Win’s thundering laughter.

“Did you hear that?” Win said. “On the radio just now.”

The announcer was talking about school children and buses.

“It’s over now,” Win said. “But they were saying the last Jap still fighting World War II just surrendered. It’s true. Been in a cave since nineteen and forty-four. Twenty-

eight years, nothing but nuts and berries. Wore fig leaves over his privates, beard down to here.” He paused. “Kinda biblical, if you think about it?” Then he resumed, “When they found him they asked him how come he was hiding for all that time. Didn’t he know the war was over? He said yes, but he was afraid the locals would of killed him for what the Japs did to the island. Don’t that beat all? They took him back to Japan, and he was a hero. Tickertape parades, and everything. People couldn’t get enough of this guy. But old Shoichi Yokoi—that’s his name—didn’t want no part of that jazz. The heck of it is, instead of being pee-owed nobody told him about the war being over and all, you know what he does?”

Victor shook his head.

“He apologizes. Can you believe it? It is with much embarrassment that I have returned alive, he says. His words exactly. A thing like that sticks with you. It is with much embarrassment that I have returned alive. Because most people’d say much joy or much relief. But he says much embarrassment. Because he was alive.”

For some reason, Victor thought of Ackles. He didn’t tell Win, but he was pretty certain he knew exactly what the last Japanese soldier must have meant.

They drove east on U.S. 90, the two-lane route that connected the far-flung central Texas towns to the world beyond the rolling hills of mesquite and bur oak. Their next stop was in Carlsburg. Win found the H-E-B grocery and pulled up to the entrance. “In and out,” Win said. “Won’t take a minute, especially with you helping.” He grabbed a ring of keys and a leather-bound notebook and went around to open the rear doors. Victor followed. “If you grab those two boxes, I’ll get the variety mix.” With a grunt, Win hoisted the carton and went wobbling into the store.

Victor lifted the first box just fine. It was transporting it that proved to be a problem. He could manage only a kind of hop-and-shuffle gait with his bad leg, a slow painful trip from the van to the front of the grocery store, where Win was already emptying the machines' coin boxes.

"You'll never make it in the bubblegum business at that pace," Win said without looking up from his work.

Victor set the carton down and made his way back to the van for the second box, which was even heavier than the first. This time, Win met him at the door.

"I'm sorry, Victor," he said, taking the box. "I get so distracted sometimes. I forgot all about your leg. I wouldn't of made you carry those if I'd remembered."

"It's fine," Victor said. "I want to help."

Win showed Victor how to fill the machines, and they finished quickly. Victor gathered the canvas bag full of coins, the empty cartons and paper towels and spray cleaner while Win met with the store manager.

On the road again, Win apologized repeatedly. "You told me you was injured. I can't believe what a dunderhead I am sometimes. I'm always acting like I've got other cats to whip. That's what Noelle used to say. She was always telling me to pay attention, but my mind just wanders. Truth is it's rare when I'm not thinking of her."

"It's all right," Victor said.

"Nah, it's not right, dang it."

"I'm fine," Victor said. And to change the subject he asked, "Who's Noelle?"

"Love of my life," Win said, grinning. "Little girl I met in France. She was a DP, displaced person. Whole family was gone. I took one look and I was head over heels. I

know some people don't believe in love at first sight. But I got that old arrow right between the eyes, if you know what I mean."

Victor said that he did.

"Now nothing improper happened. In fact, it was about as innocent as a tea party. We didn't even speak the same language. I brought her little gifts, canned fruit and coffee and whatever I could lay my hands on. But you know what she liked best?"

He turned and grinned, and Win's delight in recalling the happy events of a quarter of a century earlier was obvious.

"What tickled Noelle more'n anything was chewing gum," Win said. "I think that may have sealed the deal. I guess maybe it was just meant to be for me to become a bubblegum man."

"You're lucky you know," Victor said.

"I guess there's worse fates," Win said. He stomped the accelerator, and the van roared down the blacktop. "Worst thing is, every day I'm on the road is one more day I'm away from her."

They were nearing Houston. The sun was low in the sky, and the stores would be closing soon. The next morning Win and Victor would be waiting when the first of a dozen or so supermarkets and shopping centers where Luna vending had machines reopened in the city. But first there would be one more stop, the Czech Grocery in Flatonia, Win announced, the last of the day.

Everything was going fine. Victor and Win developed a kind of routine. While Win emptied the coin boxes, Victor cleaned the machines and then removed the lids to

the glass bowls so that Win could refill them with the appropriate gumballs or plastic trinkets. As usual, the task attracted a couple of kids, who stood their distance, spellbound by the rare chance to see the insides of things—where the money went, where the gum came from. Soon there were a half-dozen young faces following the movements. And Win, as usual, stopped what he was doing, grabbed a handful of gumballs and toy prizes and handed them out to the kids, who took them shyly and then went rushing off to tell their parents about their stroke of good fortune.

All that was left was to gather their things and check with the store manager, which is what Win was preparing to do when a man came huffing toward the front of the store. The man clutched the hand of a sobbing child, whom he was practically dragging down the central aisle. They were followed by a woman whose long face and darting eyes seemed to offer a silent apology to her fellow shoppers for this disturbance of the mercantile peace. As they approached Win and Victor, the man turned loose of the boy, who made straight for the woman, wrapping his arms around her legs and burying his face in her crotch. The man took a quick look back, shook his head in disgust, but proceeded on to his purpose.

“You the ones responsible for these goody machines?” the man said. He was a foot taller than Win and had assumed a kind of sideways stance, like a boxer, with his feet spread wide and his back shoulder higher than the front. “I’m looking for whoever’s in charge of these here.”

“How can I help you?” Win said.

“You can help me by refunding me the two dollars my son lost in your cheating machines.”

“Sure,” Win said. And he reached into the coin bag and fished out eight quarters.

“Here you go. Sorry about that.”

The man took the coins but stood his ground. “I don’t know what kinda scam y’all are running here. But, buddy, let me tell you, it ain’t right.”

Win forced a smile. “They empty out, and it’s hard to tell sometimes. Specially for a little one.”

“You trying to blame this on me and my child?” the man said, leaning closer.

Victor wondered if that meant the father was with the child while he pumped two dollars worth of nickels into a machine without getting anything in return.

“Cause my child ain’t to blame for this situation,” the tall man said. “It’s your damn machines. Probably set ‘em so’s they take every other nickel.”

“I said I was sorry for your trouble, sir.”

“Well sorry don’t git it, now does it, *sir*? I got a little boy who’s tore up about losing his money.”

“I gave you your two dollars, no questions asked,” Win said. “What more do you want?” He reached into a carton of cherry gumballs and held out a handful. “Here.”

The man’s face was as red as the gumballs. He glared down at Win, and then slapped the gum out of his hand, sending the candy clackity-clacking across the tile. “What’s that supposed to mean? No questions asked? You saying that I lied about two measly bucks and some lousy bubblegum? Who do you think you’re dealing with. I’m talking about the principle involved with this deal.”

Win’s jaw tightened and Victor watched for any further indication that his patience with the idiot had run out. He resolved to step between the two if his friend

decided to retaliate. But though Win's jaw tightened, he kept his cool. "There's no need to yell," he said. "I don't know what else I can do for you. I don't know what principle you're talking about. I don't know what your problem is. Maybe you're just having a bad day."

"My day was just fine till I met you. *You* are my problem." He took another step, and Victor moved closer to Win. Victor could see that the shouting had drawn the attention of the clerks in the front of the store. One of them had left her cash register and hurried toward the back of the building.

"What's this?" the man said. "You two threatening me?"

"You're doing all the yelling," Win said.

Just then a pudgy balding man in a short-sleeved white shirt and striped necktie bustled toward the front of the store. He was breathing hard by the time he reached them. "I'm the manager here," he said. "What seems to be the problem?"

"I'm just trying to get a refund off these machines," the tall man said. "But so far all I'm getting is attitude."

"Give the man his refund," the manager told Win.

"I already did." Win said. "I offered to give him gum, too. But he turned it down."

The manager frowned as he took in the gumballs strewn dangerously across his floor.

"I *told* him I was sorry," Win said. "And I wasn't rude."

"This is his fault," Victor said, pointing an accusing finger.

The cowboy stared at Victor's raised hand and then, like a snake, lunged and bit Victor's outstretched digit. Victor jerked back his hand, but the cowboy had clamped

down hard. Instinctively, Victor balled the fist of his free hand, swung, and caught the man flush on the ear. The cowboy leaped back with a yelp, clutching the side of his head, while hopping on one foot.

The manager held up his hands. "Whoa," he said. He looked at Victor, then at Win and finally at the tall man. He took hold of the man's arm as if to support him.

Victor turned to Win. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Serves him right," Win said. "Your finger okay?"

Though marked by the cowboy's teeth, the skin wasn't broken.

"I'm pressing charges," the cowboy said, still cupping his ear. "You seen it. That's assault, right there."

"Let's see that ear," the manager said.

The cowboy gingerly removed his hand. "It bleeding?" he said.

"Just a little sore," the manager said. "I don't see how calling the law in on this is going to make it better."

"I could have internal damage," the cowboy said. "There's fragile little bones in there, the hammer and cycle and whatever. It's ringing something awful."

"Just means it's working," the manager said. "I tell you what, last thing I want is a dissatisfied customer. I'm going to tell the checkout girls to take twenty percent off your purchases today. Our way of apologizing for the trouble. How's that sound?"

"That'll be fine," the man said, still glowering at Victor. "I don't appreciate being treated like a fool, is all. C'mon, Penny," he told his wife, who'd been standing by with the boy still curled around her leg.

"You," the manager said to Win, "come with me."

“Take the stuff to the van,” Win told Victor. “I’ll be right out.” And then he followed the manager to the back of the store.

The way Win recounted it, the meeting with the store manager was a Texas ambush. He tried to explain that the tall man had been bent on trouble and that nothing would have changed how it played out. He reminded him that the cowboy started the whole thing by biting Victor’s finger. But the store manager was in no mood for explanations. One thing quickly led to another, Win said, and soon they going at it toe-to-toe. The manager said the first ounce of energy he spent on goddamn gumball machines was one too many. Win didn’t have enough sense to handle a task simple enough for a blind nigger—his exact words, Win said. He was tempted to call up the Luna Vending company up in Piscataway, New Jersey, and fill them in on just what brand of imbecile they had representing their company.

“I admit, I didn’t handle it so good,” Win said.

After the meeting, they had retreated to the Flatonía Motor Lodge in a room cloaked by the fragrant mantle of bygone Texan sojourners, a perfect room to lose sleep in. Win sat on the edge of one of the twin beds across from Victor on the other. He’d stopped on the way to the motel for a bottle of whiskey, which he drank from a paper cup he’d found by the bathroom sink. As he recalled the exchange, all the heat of the moment was reenacted on his face. But now as the liquor took effect, he seemed spent. His face was drawn, and his skin had gone ashen. Every two or three seconds, he stole a glance at the telephone on the nightstand in between the two narrow beds, as if by watching he could somehow anticipate its ringing. Or perhaps prevent it.

“What did you do?” Victor said.

“I told him, fine, while you’re on the phone with Luna, tell them when I leave this one-horse town I’m taking my machines with me and never coming back.”

“So?” Victor said.

“I should’ve known better,” Win said. “I should’ve seen it coming.”

He still had a job, but not much of one. He was being reassigned to the Brownsville route, which meant he’d either have to move to that dusty outpost or be on the road another two or three days a week. Either way, his commission would amount at best to a third of what he made now, and a lot of that would be eaten up at the gas pumps and motor lodges.

Win slumped back on the bed, studying the last of the whiskey in the soggy paper cup, as if somehow it held the solution to his bramble of trouble.

“It’s my fault,” Victor said.

Win looked up.

“If I didn’t . . .”

“This ain’t exactly the first time I’ve been in hot water with the company,” Win said. “Besides, that guy was bound and determined. Nothing you nor I nor anyone said would’ve changed that. No, you were only defending yourself.”

Perhaps this was so, Victor thought. True, he hadn’t really *done* anything to pique the cowboy’s loutishness. But his presence alone made him feel responsible. When he jumped in the van, he’d altered the bubblegum man’s course, maybe by only a fraction of a degree, but enough so that he’d wound up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Victor couldn’t say exactly how his interference had led Win astray, no more than he could say

where he'd be this very moment had he not one day more than three years earlier chanced into meeting a young girl with a pretty smile. But as surely as that event had rippled into the tidal wave that had washed Victor all the way to point his finger at a idiot Texan, so his insinuation into Win's life had set off a chain of events that would lead to who knew where.

"You've been kind to me, but I've just been trouble," Victor said. "You told me all about yourself, but I haven't told you everything."

"That's just cause I babble so much you couldn't get two cents in." The bubblegum man offered the paper cup, but Victor shook his head.

"I haven't been truthful," Victor said.

"What, you're some kind a outlaw? One of them crazed Vietnam vets I heard about on the radio? I don't buy it." Win swallowed the rest of what was in the cup.

"You're right. I don't know a thing about you. Just what you told. You were a soldier, you got hurt, and now you're trying to get home." He crushed the paper into a ball and tossed toward a trashcan in the bathroom. When it fell several feet short, he shrugged, and picked up the bottle and tipped back a long drink. "Truth's a tricky business," he said. He looked down at the greasy carpet. "I got a phone call I'm dreading. What'll I tell her?"

"Your wife, Noelle?"

The bubblegum man smiled, but he didn't look up. "My wife's name's not Noelle. The way I told it isn't a hundred percent factual. There *was* a girl in France that I gave a stick of gum to. She *did* smile back, and then she was gone. End of story. I never said word one to her. She was just one little lost soul in amongst thousands. But I

couldn't stop seeing how she lit up for a second. It was just a stick of gum, but it sure felt like something more. I started to wonder why. Why that face, that smile? I began to turn it over and over in my mind. I gave her name. I filled in the details. I told myself that when I give her that chewing gum, it was the moment when she started to believe in the future. That smile was what grace looks like. And it was just a short hop from grace to love." His face had gone red, either from the whiskey or embarrassment, probably both.

"I never told anyone that before. Not even my wife, and we've been together for twenty-five years. Now, you didn't cause none of this, Victor. It's all because I'm an old fool. Too busy with a make-believe world inside my head to mind my real business. Even a nickel-and-dime business. My trouble is that the past, even the made-up past, has always been more interesting than the future."

Watching this simple, benevolent man coming apart, Victor felt something inside him break too. It was as if there were an arctic ocean beneath his skin and bones, and a great chunk of the glacial ice that formed him was calving off and sliding away into the frigid depths. And he knew it was true, no matter how much he'd tried to hold on to the conviction that it was just superstitious old-crone nonsense; he *was* cursed. Every time a person cared about him they ended up sorry they did. If Victor Lucas was your friend, you were doomed. He reached for the bottle and took a long drink.

"What will you do?" Victor said, feeling the whiskey spread deep down inside him.

Win nestled back in the pillow and closed his eyes. "Go home, I suppose. Get things straight with the missus. Figure out if I want to go back on the road or find something more settled. Though what that would be, I don't know. Kind of late in the

game to be starting over.” He opened his eyes. “What did you do? Before the army, I mean.”

“I was a pearl diver,” Victor said.

Win smiled dubiously.

“It just means I was a dishwasher,” Victor said.

“I guess there’s always that,” Win said. “But there must be more than that down there for you to come so far for. Family? A girl?”

Victor shook his head.

“Whatever it is, I hope it’s worth it.”

Win declined when Victor offered him the bottle, and Victor drank down the last of the liquor. “That’s why I’m going back. To find out,” he said.

Victor got up to use the toilet, and when he came out, Win was sitting again on the side of the bed looking at the telephone. Victor knew that he was trying to work up the nerve to call his wife, probably rehearsing what he would say to her. He also knew that it was a conversation that would go easier if he weren’t in the room. “I’m going for a walk,” he said. But Win said nothing, just sat and stared at the phone.

Outside, he stood for a while by the door. The Flatonía Motor Lodge parking lot was empty except for a couple of pickup trucks and station wagons. There were no lights on in any of the other rooms; the occupants of the vehicles were all apparently tucked in early ahead of another day on the road. The breeze carried a livestock smell. From far off came the insistent rhythms of a freight train. And then from inside the room, came a more irresolute cadence, the give and take of a man trying to explain his shortcomings. Victor didn’t want to stay and listen.

He walked on to the end of the building, where there was a tiny swimming pool surrounded by a chain-link fence. A sign near the gate listed numbered rules for use of the facility. Swimmers had to wear bathing caps. They had to shower before entering the water. They had to refrain from running. And they were cautioned that no lifeguard was on duty. “Swim at your own risk.” Victor went through the gate and sat on one of the plastic chairs beside the risky, dark water, which lapped against a drain, a sound like beating oars. He looked up at a blanket of stars and he thought of the village by the river in Vietnam, and that reminded him of Ackles. But when he tried to picture his friend’s face or recall the timber of his voice, nothing came to mind. Ackles was a rough idea. All that he retained that was concrete was information—a childhood in Louisiana, a young wife. His friend’s plans to go to school and improve himself. He had lost this friend, and now he was losing even the memory of him. It was unsettling. So as a test, he tried to recall Sofia’s face, and though he was able to fix her more tangibly than Ackles, it was still only her smile that he was truly able to conjure.

He got up, fought a quease of panic, and headed back to the room. He wanted to ask Win about how to keep people and events from turning into apparitions, about how to make peace with the ghosts in your head without driving them away. But the light was out when got to the door. He slipped inside. Win’s breathing was slow and steady. If he was troubled, it didn’t seem to affect his sleep. Victor lay on the opposite bed.

It was just as well that Win was asleep. What could the bubblegum man possibly tell him about what he should do? Win had gotten so lost in the fantasy past he’d constructed in his head that he’d squandered the last twenty-five years. And now he was just a tired old man afraid to go home and face the reality of a disappointed wife.

Victor, on the other hand, had never backed down from the truth of who he was or what he'd done. On the contrary, he'd thought of little else than the events that had swept him along. But why couldn't recall the faces of Ackles and Sofia? Was it just a matter of their fading with time, or had all his fretting over the past worn away his memory, the way an old coin gets rubbed smooth. Or maybe their fading away was a sign. Let them rest in peace. Move on. But when he tried, imagining the future proved even more muddled than recalling the past.

They were headed in different directions. Win was going home, north to La Grange, and Victor was going east, first to Schulenberg, where there was a Greyhound station, and then on by bus to Florida. It was Win's idea. He'd drive him to the bus station and buy him a ticket, and there they would part ways. But first, Win treated them to breakfast at the Cattleman's Diner.

"Things always look better with a new day and a belly full of steak and eggs," Win said, as they left the diner and headed toward Schulenberg.

Victor agreed. Ever since his revelation in the dark, he'd felt something had indeed shifted. He was eager to move on. He hadn't even bothered with the pretense of refusing Win's offer to buy his bus ticket.

But when they pulled up to the bus station and Victor shook Win's hand, he was sad to say goodbye. "I want to thank you for all you've done," Victor said. "I don't really know why you did it. But I want you to know that I'm grateful."

"I told you, I like your company," Win said, reaching over and patting Victor's shoulder. "You remind me of myself all those years ago. Maybe it's just because I never had kids. I don't know. I feel like I let you down. I wish to god I had some big secret of

life to tell you. But in that case I guess you'd have consider the source then, wouldn't you?"

"I think you're a wise man," Victor said.

"Older don't always mean wiser." Win popped a gumball in his mouth. "You give me a call when you get settled. You got my number."

Victor patted the pocket of the shirt that Win had given him and reached for the door handle. He would be sad to part company, but for all Win's good intentions and generosity, Victor was eager to be on his way. But then Win reached over and put his hand on top of Victor's.

"I dreamed all last night about Shoichi Yokoi," he said.

The farewell would go on, but where was it going? Then Victor remembered. "The last Japanese soldier."

"When I woke up this morning, I felt like I knew him, like we was old, old friends. For instance, I knew that every day of those thirty years he spent in that cave must of been a new humiliation for old Shoichi. Every rabbit he killed for food must of haunted his sleep, every drop of rain he drank must of tasted bitter on his tongue. I knew why. Because it was his duty to die. It was meant to be. And every time he drew a breath it must have been a disappointment it wasn't his last." Win turned to look out the window at the traffic on the highway. " 'It is with much embarrassment that I have returned alive.' I get it now."

"You're embarrassed to go home?" Victor said.

Win turned back from the window. "I was thinking about you too, Victor. Are you ready for what's waiting for you?"

It hadn't occurred to Victor till then that some kind of judgment might be awaiting him in Tarpon Springs. Like all victims of great injustice, he'd taken his innocence for granted.

"Let me tell you this one thing before you go, Victor," Win said. "What you saw in Vietnam, what you did, no one knows but you. They're a part of your story now, but they don't have to be the last word. You go on home and make the rest up any way that suits you. It's no kind of life living in a cave for thirty years."

Victor considered the source and smiled. He nodded in the way Texans say goodbye and got out of the van. He waved and started to go inside the bus station, but Win called him back over. "Here," he said, pressing some bills into his hand. "You'll need a couple dollars. It's a long ride to Florida. Here's this too." He handed him a paper bag full of gum.

Victor thanked him again and then turned and went inside. He didn't look back, fearing that if he did, Win might come running over and ask him to come home with him, fearing even more that he might take Win up on it. And nobody needed that kind of trouble, especially not a good man like Win.

Nineteen

Too Small to Get Lost In

It was a hot day, and the bus grew more crowded with each stop. Victor was lucky he'd found a seat next to a window so that he had the meager advantage of the sultry Texas breeze on his face. Still, by the time the Greyhound reached Beaumont early in the afternoon, the ripe combination of diesel exhaust and human effluence was stifling.

At Beaumont, a black woman with massive hips and breasts got on and sat down in the seat next to Victor, primly holding with both hands the handle of a satchel-size purse in her ample lap. She wore a flowery cotton dress and a black velvet hat adorned with red feathers and bows. She nodded briefly at Victor and then settled in, fixing her gaze in soft-focus tranquility. Despite the heat and her massive flesh, the woman remained remarkably sweat free. Her face was smooth and shone like polished wood over her cheekbones, and her full lips bore a faint remnant of lipstick. Compared to the other bedraggled passengers, she was almost regal. They rode in silence, and Victor was happy to have her next to him, bathed in her soothing scent, a mixture of lilac and something else, a lush, almost yeasty fragrance.

When the woman clutched her purse tighter, turned, and gave Victor a quick, suspicious glance, he realized he was staring. He smiled at her in apology, but she responded only by turning and staring more determinedly ahead. Victor reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the gumballs Win had provided him for his journey, and he offered it to her as a sign of peace.

She thanked him and took the gum from his palm with two surprisingly dainty, round, delicate fingers. She placed it on her pink tongue and resumed her stately attitude.

“I like your hat,” Victor said.

She touched it with the palm of her hand. “Thank you, sir.”

“My name’s Victor.”

“Mine’s Opal,” she said, still facing forward.

“Like the jewel,” Victor said.

She smiled slowly, and then turned and nodded. The ice was broken. She seemed to relax for the first time since Beaumont.

They chatted, and soon Opal got around to explaining that she’d been visiting family in Texas and was now headed back home to Louisiana. When Victor told her where he was going, she asked if he was coming or going. He told her he was in the army and was returning home, like her.

“Well, this is a big trip for you then, isn’t it? Must of been a long time you’ve been gone.”

Victor nodded.

“I’m curious about something,” she said. “You don’t have to answer. I’d understand, but can I ask you, were you in the war?”

“For a while, but I was wounded.”

Opal scrunched up her round face. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“I’m happy not to be there anymore,” Victor said.

“You hear about every day some more ain’t coming back. Makes me sick to death.”

In the seat in front of them, a rider who had a white cowboy hat pulled low over his eyes while he propped against the window snorted and then sat up. He took a long

look at Victor and then at Opal. “Maybe if they wasn’t all doped up and shooting their officers in the back, more of ‘em would of come back,” the man said.

“Excuse me?” Opal said.

“I’m sick of all this goddamn bellyaching about how bad these so-called soldiers had it over there. It’s a war, okay. There’s a reason that for two hundred years this country’s never lost a war till now.”

“What’s that?” Victor said.

“Sacrifice,” the man said. “I forgot more about sacrifice than young people today every thought of,” the man said.

“We’re having a private conversation back here. I don’t *believe* it’s any of your business,” Opal said.

The man turned back around in his seat. “It’s a free country,” he said.

Opal gave the seatback a mighty shove.

The man turned and glared. “Nigger bitch,” he growled. And then he got up and walked forward and slipped into an open seat.

Opal straightened her hat.

“I’m sorry,” Victor said.

“Nothing I ain’t heard before,” Opal said. “Round here, white folks are always talking about the good old days. Been saying that same old thing—times are changing—long as I can remember. And all that time, thing’s ain’t changed near enough.”

“Still, I’m sorry,” Victor said.

“I learned to let that stuff slide off me a long time ago,” Opal said. “I’d be fighting the rest of my days if I didn’t.”

They'd crossed the border into Louisiana and were riding along the coastal plain through the sparse remnants of the great pinewoods that had generated the region's first boon. Oil had long since replaced lumber as fuel for the area's economic engine, and evidence of its centrality to daily life was borne on the wind. As they passed through the aptly named town of Sulphur, the air was so acrid that Victor asked Opal if she'd mind if he closed the window.

Opal laughed and told him go ahead. "Refineries," she explained. "People here say don't bother going to the gas station. Just ride around on fumes. It's like anything you grow up with. After while you don't hardly notice it."

"This is where you grew up?" Victor said.

"Up the road a ways," Opal said.

"You're getting off?"

"Not till Baton Rouge. I stay up north now in the Crossroads. Place called Coudool. Not really a town even. Not far from Fort Polk."

"I was there before the war."

"It is a small world."

"Do you know a town Fulsome?"

"You been to Fulsome, Louisiana?"

"A friend of mine was from there."

"What's his name?"

"Do you know anyone there?"

"In Fulsome? Pretty much everybody knows everybody," Opal said. "Too small a place to get lost in, for black folks, especially."

“Ackles?”

“Sounds familiar.” Opal thought for a moment then frowned. “I recall a girl by that name works in a kitchen, kind of café. Good-looking gal. That’s the only Ackles I know of.”

“She was married?”

“I believe so, but he’s done gone now. I don’t know if it’s just talk, but this girl . . .” Opal pursed her lips and shook her head.

“Is her name Janna, a young woman?”

“Sounds right, but . . .” Opal looked suspicious. “She a friend of yours?”

“I only saw her in a picture,” Victor said.

“Understand, I don’t really know the girl. Just what folks say. None of my business. Probably she’s not even the girl you’re talking.”

“What do they say?”

Opal touched her hat. “They say she’s loose.” She leaned close and lowered her voice. “They call her Jezebel. And worse.”

Victor couldn’t imagine that the young wife with the radiant wedding picture smile could have fallen so low. “This is true?” he said.

“Like I said, just hearsay. You asked, so I told.”

Opal was probably right. It probably wasn’t the same woman. It was too much of a coincidence, happening across a stranger who by chance was from the same tiny country town as the army buddy he’d lost on the other side of the globe. America was too big and complex for such a twist of fate, its citizens too caught up in the anxious race to advance in the world. Even those who fell behind and whose direction was no longer so

true and steady kept moving anyway. In a world of constant motion, the chances that the paths of two strangers on a bus would intersect so accidentally were as improbable as lightning striking the same place twice.

The trouble was, Victor wasn't an American. In Greece, especially on a tiny island such as Victor's, his meeting Opal and her leading him to Janna wouldn't seem the least bit unlikely. A Greek knew there were no coincidences.

"You could take me to this café, the place where the woman works?" Victor asked Opal.

"Why would you want to do a thing like that?" Opal said.

"You could show me?"

"Who's this woman to you? She's just some little raggedy gal. Probably not even who you thinking of. What'd you want with a gal like that?"

"I knew the man who was her husband," Victor said. "He was killed in the war. I want to tell her about him. It might help."

"Maybe she don't want your kind of help. If this *is* the girl you got in mind, seems like she's done made her mind up about how to get along."

"You said she was a—"

"I said what folks *say* she is. But folks say a lot of things. What she is or she isn't don't matter to me."

"It would if you were me. You'd want to know the truth."

Opal shook her head and smiled slowly. "I was just now picturing you in Fulsome. I don't know nothing about where you come from, but I got eyes, Victor, just like everyone's got. That redneck cowboy. You seen today how people can be. They look

at a person but they don't see no more than white or black or young or old. It ain't right. It just is. So what if a strange white boy home from the war comes sniffing around a no-account girl? If people talk about her now like she's dirt, you think you'd be helping her?"

"Her husband was a white man," Victor said.

"So maybe then you know why I'm telling you this. You understand why people talk the way they do."

"There are things I need to tell her," Victor said. "And things I need to know"

Opal considered this. "You're welcome in my home any time. But we're still a good ways to Baton Rouge. Let's see how you feel when we get there."

They were quiet then, content to bounce along together near the back of the bus as it crawled eastward along the Gulf coast. Every shudder of the wheels caused Opal's mass of flesh to ripple in response, but otherwise she remained serene, having retreated to whatever thoughts occupied her when her gaze grew distant.

Victor closed his eyes, but he couldn't sleep. He imagined the radiant innocence of Janna's face in the photo that Ackles kept in his backpack. She was older now, of course, no longer a teenage bride. But Victor couldn't help imagining her so. Perhaps this innocent glow was the quality that attracted attention to her. Maybe that's what men saw when they looked into that face. She was young still, but clearly a woman, old enough herself to know how to read a face.

He saw it all then. The narrow diner. Janna wearing a stained apron, pouring coffee, plating up the greasy eggs and bacon, serving them to the men who leer when she turns her back, stare when she walks away, elbow each other in the ribs.

The bus groaned on toward Baton Rouge. He could get off, go with Opal up to the Crossroads, and he would find her, explain things to her.

She doesn't say much to them; even a simple question—what'll you have?—provokes toothy, lewd smiles. She's learned to ignore it. Still they hang around or they return when her shift is close to done, sit in their cars and wait. And sometimes, if they're clean and they're decent and she's had more than she can stand of the grease and dirty plates and leers and gossip, then sometimes she gets in.

They think they're taking something from her, but it's exactly the other way around. In truth, she chooses them. She's lost so much, and she's just looking for a way to get something back. What little comfort her suitors have to offer is no substitute for what might have been. But it's not nothing. Victor understands the fine distinction.

Anyway, it will all change when he arrives. For he believes in second chances. He'll explain to her about Ackles.

And he understood that this is how his curse would end. He'll close the circle. They'll heal one another. He hadn't until now seen that he'd been headed all along, perhaps forever, to this girl. Opal would take him to her. But then what?

"I've decided," Victor said. He clapped his hands in celebration.

Opal turned slowly, arched a finely etched eyebrow. "The girl?"

What had he decided? "I want to give her—something. I want to . . ."

Opal laughed and patted his knee. "The trouble with you young folks is you put all your damn cards on the table. *We* all learned *early* growing up here that you got to hold something back. No one's all one piece, always the one thing. Everyone's a lot of pieces. You act a certain way around your own people, another around strangers. There's

nothing wrong with that, just how it is. You got to see where the lines are. Learn to watch your step.”

Victor thought of Ackles. “It’s not possible,” he said, “always to be careful.”

Opal smiled. “You’re talking about pride now. And you know what the Bible says pride is. I say it’s nothing but another picture we keep in our heads of the person we’d like to be. That’s what I been talking about. There’s lots of pictures of who we are. You have to know which one to give out, like you switch the channels on the TV.”

Victor knew that Opal meant well. She was just warning him, and probably there was truth to what she said. But she didn’t understand. Something far greater than pride compelled him toward the Crossroads and Janna. He couldn’t get the wedding picture of Janna and Ackles out of his head. And now he had a new picture, one that he had made up, yes, but no less true because it came from his imagination. Ackles was his *therápon*, his double. He had died in Victor’s place. If it weren’t for Victor, Ackles would be back home now with Janna. Now he was the *therápon*. He was in Ackles’ place. He was the double. He had to go to the Crossroads to find Janna. Because he owed it to Ackles. But also because he could help make her whole again, and she could do the same for him.

“My friend Ackles wouldn’t have agreed with you,” Victor said. “Luther was a good man, but he wasn’t always careful.”

“But if it’s who we’re talking about, he was young. And white.” She shook her head. “Maybe it was different over there. I’m just trying to tell you how it is here,” Opal said.

Victor leaned back and watched the Gulf coast pass by outside the bus window. “I have to go to find her,” he said. “I’ll tell her. It was my fault.”

“Your fault what?” Opal said.

“About Ackles. Why he died.”

“That’s what this is all about?”

“I went ahead. If it wasn’t for me . . .”

“There, now,” Opal said. She put her hand softly on his shoulder.

He turned and looked into her soft, round face. “He stepped on a booby trap. He was trying to save me. But I left him. I didn’t want to, but I did. His wife, Janna, she should know.”

Opal’s brown eyes remained steady, certain. “What difference does it make, the hows and whys and wherefores? He’s gone. You’re here. And that’s that. Only thing’s for sure is terrible things going to keep on happening. Forget sometimes is the best thing you can do.”

Opal was being kind, and maybe she was right. But she didn’t understand. No one did. Victor couldn’t forget. He alone survived to remember. He owed that much to his friend. He’d left him in the jungle. He couldn’t leave his memory there too. He couldn’t make Opal see this. Somehow he’d have to do better with Janna. He’d have to find the words so that she could see that Ackles was not like most men. Ackles wasn’t a hero exactly. Not the way people think of soldiers and heroes, her young husband had the character for the role. The only reason he’d not lived out his destiny was the result of Victor having communicated his weakness onto her him, like some contagion. And how thus infected, Ackles’ sensitivity for danger was dulled. Ackles lost his foot and ultimately his life through no fault of his own, but all because of Victor’s shortcomings. It *was* the curse. The flaw was Victor’s, but it was fatal to Ackles. He knew exactly what

it felt like to be the last Japanese soldier. He too was ashamed to return alive. He stared into Opal's steady brown eyes, but he couldn't begin to know how to explain. "I tried," he said. "I brought him back. He might have made it, but the jungle exploded." But then he couldn't look at her. He'd run out of explanation. There was no more he could do but push his face into Opal's shoulder and feel himself dissolve.

She hugged him tight. "You don't owe no one any explanation," she whispered. "You did what you could, yes?"

"He was going to come back and take care of her."

"Don't matter," she said. She patted his back gently. But then Victor felt Opal's shoulder tense up. "What're you looking at?" Opal said.

Victor sat up and saw the redneck craned around in his seat. The cowboy looked disgusted. Victor sat up, made sure the redneck still stared back, and planted a big kiss on Opal's round cheek. He felt her face tighten to a grin. Up front the cowboy shook his head, pulled down his Stetson, and turned away.

"What about Florida?" Opal said when they arrived in Baton Rouge and Victor told her, no, he hadn't changed his mind. He still was set on going with her to see the Crossroads. "What about home?" Opal said.

"I need . . ." Victor tried to decide what exactly he needed, what was so important to delay his going back to Sofia. "I want to set things straight first," he said.

Opal laughed at this. "If you're a romantic, I'm not sure Fulsome's the right place for you. But I suppose you better come on then and see yourself. I got to go make a phone call see if my sister left yet. That girl'll be late for her funeral." Victor watched her

glide away toward a pair of phone booths across the lobby of the bus station. He wasn't alone. As Opal passed a bank of benches, the man she'd called a redneck pulled down his big cowboy hat and twisted around to watch her go by. He turned and looked back toward Victor then gathered up the cheap suitcase at his feet and hurried off purposefully toward a bank of vending machines, where a cop sat thickly reading a newspaper.

The policeman lowered the paper as the cowboy approached, but he remained seated as the man spoke. The cowboy jawed away, and when he raised his arm and motioned in Victor's direction, the cop stood and looked over. Victor stood too, knowing that it made him look guilty but no less able to suppress the urge to flee. He started toward the telephones across the lobby and tried hard not to limp and thus draw further suspicious attention.

Opal was still on the phone, but she stopped in mid-sentence when Victor approached. "I changed my mind," he said. "I can't do it. To you. Not now. You've been good company. Thank you."

Opal raised her elegant eyebrow. "What is this? A minute ago you're fixing to turn yourself inside out. Now it's sayonara?"

"I don't want to be trouble to you."

The cop was headed his way. Opal looked and saw him. "Well, okay then," she said, her eyes still on the cop. "If you ever get up to the Crossroads . . ."

Victor smiled and turned toward a door marked Exit at the side of the station. But before he could reach it he was stopped short by a drawled summons. He didn't have to turn around to know the cop was standing there. The voice of authority was all too familiar.

The next day Victor was called before a judge. And then he almost missed out when the jailor mangled the pronunciation of Cyrus Kanakis almost beyond recognition. Victor didn't know what awaited him in court, but he was happy for anything that would change his current state of limbo in the parish jail. His main worry—that he'd made a mistake giving the police the name Cyrus Kanakis—was allayed when he saw that no MPs were waiting for him in the courtroom.

The cop at the bus station had arrested him for vagrancy. Victor had tried to explain that he was on his way home to Florida. He'd shown him his ticket. He didn't have any identification, money, or luggage, he explained, because his suitcase had been stolen. The cop, however, raised a thick eyebrow and led Victor to a patrol car. On the way to the station, the cop made it clear that Victor's crime, while perhaps not a by-the-books violation of law, was all the more serious, seeing as how he'd crossed the rigid lines of tradition that bound the relations of white and black more rigidly than any statute on the books. "Maybe wherever the hell you come from, people can't tell a difference between white and colored," the cop said.

"We were just talking," Victor said. "Is this against the law—"

"Shut it," the cop said. "Around here a white boy's got no business with a nigger woman. End of story."

When he was led into a crowded courtroom with a dozen other prisoners and seated in the benches usually reserved for jurors, the cop was already there waiting. The officer glanced over periodically as three or four of the prisoners were called in front of the judge's raised bench. Then a bailiff called out Cyrus Kanakis, and Victor took his turn before the judge. The cop came forward as well and stood behind him.

“Mr. Kanakis is charged with vagrancy,” the judge said. “You the arresting officer?”

“Yes, your honor.” The cop stiffened to attention. “The defendant here was at the Greyhound station. He couldn’t produce any kind of ID.”

“That so, Mr. Kanakis?”

Victor nodded.

“You have to speak, son,” the judge said. “What were you doing at the bus station?”

“I was on my way to Florida, your honor, sir. I was waiting for the next bus. I had a ticket.”

The judge looked down at the cop. “That doesn’t sound like vagrancy. Sounds like a man waiting for a bus. Seems like a bus station’s the place to do it.”

“The defendant didn’t have a suitcase, your honor,” the cop said. “And he was causing a disturbance.”

Victor turned quickly toward the cop. “I was just—“

“One minute now,” the judge said. “I run the show here. What sort of disturbance was Mr. Kanakis causing?”

“Some of the other passengers on the bus noticed he was acting suspicious,” the cop said. “They got a bad feeling about him. I felt like it was my responsibility to check him out. After questioning him, I felt like the best thing to do was to bring him in. I thought it was the prudent thing to do.”

“Prudent, huh?” the judge said. “Mr. Kanakis, why don’t you have a suitcase or a wallet?”

“They were stolen from me,” Victor said. “I was asleep, and when I woke up everything was gone.”

“That’s unfortunate, isn’t it?” the judge said. “Why were you going to Florida?”

“I was in Texas working with a friend. I was on my way home,” Victor said.

“You have family in Florida?” the judge said.

“I have. . .” Victor tried to calculate how much he could reveal without getting himself into deeper trouble. “My wife.”

“You don’t seem so sure,” the judge said.

“It’s been a while since the last time I saw her. I was going back. To fix things.”

“She expecting you?” the judge said. “The reason I ask is you don’t seem to have the funds necessary to continue your journey. I’m wondering if your wife would be willing to pitch in for a bus ticket?”

“Yes, your honor, I think she would,” Victor said.

“How about that, officer? If Mr. Kanakis here can arrange to have his wife buy him a bus ticket so that he can continue on from here, do you think you could see him safely off at the station?”

The cop’s jaw muscles tightened and his back straightened.

The judge smiled. “I don’t see how anyone is served by Mr. Kanakis spending more time in our custody when all he wants is to be on his way, unless you think he poses some further risk?”

“No, your honor,” the cop said.

“I think it would be in your personal interest, officer, to see that Mr. Kanakis makes his way on to that bus. Otherwise, one could make a reasonable case that you

yourself might be expected to provide Mr. Kanakis with a ticket, seeing as how it was you who interrupted his travels. I trust, officer, it won't come to that."

"No, your honor," the cop said.

"All right then, how about this. We do away with the disturbing the peace and vagrancy charges, make it loitering, and, if Mr. Kanakis agrees to plead guilty, I'll sentence him to time served. You understand, son?"

Victor nodded.

"So to the charge of loitering, how do you plead? Now you say guilty."

"Guilty," Victor said.

"Good. Safe trip, Mr. Kanakis," the judge said, waving his hand toward the door dismissing them. "Officer."

The cop turned without responding and made his way to the swinging doors at the rear of the courtroom where he paused and turned back toward Victor. Victor looked up at the judge, who nodded, and Victor turned to follow the policeman.

Back at the station, the cop led Victor to a large windowless office with rows of metal desks. Nearby a couple of uniformed officers were occupied with paperwork. The cop sat at an empty desk and motioned for Victor to take the chair next to it. He tossed his peaked policeman's cap on the desk and picked up the telephone receiver. "Well," he said, waiting. "You got a number?"

The cop had been merely surly as he escorted Victor back to the police station, but when Victor told him that he didn't know Sofia's phone number, he positively seethed.

“You can’t remember your own goddamn telephone?” the cop said.

“I’ve been away a long time,” Victor explained. “I had the number on a card. But I had to empty my pockets.”

A police officer at the desk behind the cop looked up and chuckled. But when the cop spun around in his chair, the other officer quickly turned back to the papers spread in front of him. The cop slammed down the phone, got up, and stomped away. Victor smiled self-consciously when the second officer looked over at him.

Ten minutes later the cop returned with a manila envelope, which he tossed on the desk in front of Victor. “Your *valuables*,” the cop said.

Victor opened the envelope and spilled the contents onto the desk. In the process a couple of bubblegum balls went bouncing to the floor, and again the second cop snorted to stifle his laughter. This time, Victor’s cop pretended not to notice. “Christ sakes. Can we just get on with this?” he said.

Victor handed him the card with Sofia’s number and the cop quickly dialed.

“Mrs. Kanakis—

“This is Officer Willets with the Baton Rouge Police Department—“

“Baton Rouge—”

“That’s right, Louisiana. I’m calling because I have a gentleman here who says he’s your husband—“

“Cyrus, yes. Anyway, he’s gotten himself, well, sort of stranded here—“

“No, Ma’am, not at this time. He’s been released—“

“No, Ma’am, actually he said he was on his way home—“

“To Florida, that’s right. From, I believe, Texas—“

“I’m not aware of that, Ma’am. He said he was working for a friend there—“

“Well, Ma’am, you’ll have to take that up with your husband. Right now the issue is a bus ticket. He doesn’t have enough for the fare—“

The cop glanced at the bills that Victor had emptied on the desk along with the rest of his belongings. “Only a few dollars it appears. Anyway, the thing is at the moment, he needs for you to go to the bus station there and buy him a ticket that he can pick up here—“

“I don’t know, Ma’am, no. I’d have to ask.” The cop turned to Victor. “She wants to know if you were in San Antonio.”

Victor smiled and nodded.

“San Antonio, yes, Ma’am. But as I say, you all can get into the details when he gets back. Right now, we need that ticket—“

“That’s right, you just go to the station and tell them you want a one-way ticket from Baton Rouge in your husband’s name—“

“Thank you, Mrs. Kanakis. You’ll do that right away?—“

“I will, Ma’am, I’ll tell him.” The cop hung up the phone. “She says to tell you that your doctor called and was worried about you.”

The cop at the desk behind him couldn’t contain himself this time. He howled with laughter. Victor’s cop slowly shook his head and muttered. “Goddamn message boy.”

Twenty

Who Will You Ask For?

After twenty-two hours on the road, the Greyhound finally crossed the causeway from Tampa and headed up U.S. 19 toward Tarpon Springs. Victor had slept little on the way from Louisiana, and he could smell the sourness drift up from his armpits. The last time he'd checked a mirror, his hair, though still army-regulation length and thus remarkable compared to most every other male, sprang out in odd, irregular licks. He'd wetted and smoothed it down, but that was hours before, and so now he could only rake his fingers over his head and hope for the best. He ran an index finger across his wooly teeth, and breathed against his palm. He reminded himself to remember to keep some distance and avoid speaking directly in anyone's direction. Finally, the bus slowed and made the turn onto Tarpon Avenue, down the long hill and then up again toward the town. It turned at Pinellas Avenue and drove past St. Nicholas, the Tarpon Hotel, and the Courthouse. Little had changed. Yet it seemed in some fundamentally altered in some indeterminable way, as if the buildings were merely facades, a facsimile of Tarpon Springs, and behind them people he didn't know did things he couldn't imagine. Finally, the bus pulled into the station across Lemon Street from the courthouse, and Victor stood along with the other passengers and shuffled his way up the aisle to the front.

He was back again where he'd started, but whether that was home, he couldn't know. He had considered a number of possibilities about what he would do once he arrived, but now, just a few yards from setting foot back on familiar, if not sure terrain, he had little idea, really, what he'd do first and none at all about what came after that. And then before he even climbed off the bus he saw Sofia waiting across the street. She

hadn't seen him yet. At least it didn't appear she'd spotted him amid the departing passengers, and he was glad to hang back for a moment so he could take her in. He hoped she'd do something, make a gesture or movement that might be a clue about why she'd come, what she expected to find. He prepared himself as best he could for when she looked over and saw for the first time what had become of him.

He was a different man now, but *she* had changed, too. Victor had anticipated, vaguely, that she'd not be the same. But in Sofia's case the change was for the good. Instead of the tall girl with an almost boyish figure he'd encountered that day more than three years earlier at the Epiphany celebration, he saw now a woman—rounder in the belly, hips, and breasts.

When she spotted him, for a moment nothing more than recognition registered on her face. And then he saw that despite the fullness of her body, her face seemed gaunter, drained of vitality. Victor felt as if his heart had stopped. Then she smiled, so briefly that someone else watching her might have missed it, and in that second, she seemed her girlish self again. Victor felt himself break into an uncontrollable goofy, lopsided grin as he walked across the street where she waited. He tried hard not to limp.

"You don't look so dangerous," she said. She wore a half-smile that Victor couldn't interpret.

"It was a long trip," Victor said. "But here I am." He began to reach out for her, but dropped his hand when she stiffened and leaned away.

"I'm happy to see you," she said. "Really. I'm happy you're safe. But you never know who could be watching. You know how people are here."

Victor took a step back. "You really think I'm dangerous?"

She brightened. “I was told you might be.”

“Thank you for rescuing me, anyway,” Victor said. “I didn’t think—“

“We can’t stand out here in the middle of town,” Sofia said. “I can’t . . .” She looked around, running her hand through her hair. “It’s not a good idea for you or me to be seen here.”

“Don’t be afraid of me,” Victor said.

“*You* don’t scare me,” she said. “We’ll talk. But not here. See the yellow Volkswagen? It’s mine. There’s an envelope in the glove compartment. Cash. Out on nineteen there’s a motel. You probably passed it on the way in. You know where I’m talking about?”

Victor nodded.

“Check in, but don’t use your name. Tell them Smith or Jones, whatever. Make up something. Get cleaned up. Get something to eat if you’re hungry. Take a nap. Whatever. Just don’t go too far.”

“I’ll see you?” Victor said.

“This evening. I’ll call first.”

It was hard to tell how much planning had gone into these details. Some, obviously; she clearly had thought ahead about the money. What struck Victor most was Sofia’s cool efficiency. It was as if she, and not he, had just returned from military life. When she finished her instructions, she looked him up and down, an inspection.

“No suitcase? Nothing?” she said.

“I need some new clothes,” Victor said. He held out his arms, ashamed to have to ask.

“I see. There’s a shopping center not far from the motel. There’s enough money in the envelope for you to buy a few things. Just don’t go crazy. And don’t go anywhere in town. You think you got all that?”

Victor saw now that more than Sofia’s body had changed. Here she was, she who’d defied the entire town during her brother’s funeral march. Despite the uncountable times the world had done her wrong—most of which stemmed from the misfortune of being the daughter of Bob Bazos—Sofia hadn’t been overwhelmed by anger or self-pity or helplessness. Despite her history, she managed to wrap herself in a stubborn optimism. She seemed aglow with self-confidence. It was one of things Victor loved most about her. But she seemed now more cautious. The sheen of hopefulness seemed worn away.

“I don’t want to be trouble,” Victor said. “I can take care of myself.”

Sofia bit her bottom lip, blinked hard, and then seemed to soften. “I’m sorry,” she said. “But look, I didn’t have to send you that bus ticket. And nothing says I have to give you my car and money. I’m trusting you, okay, so for now please just trust me until I can work some things out, okay?”

“What things?”

She shook her head. “Trust me,” she said again, and she began to walk away.

“Who will you ask for?” Victor called after her.

Sofia stopped and turned.

“When you call at the hotel. Ask for Ackles,” Victor said. “Luther Ackles.”

In the four years since Victor had last bought clothes, everything seemed to have grown brighter, wider, and slicker. Looking through the racks of plaid bellbottoms and

puffy sleeved shirts, Victor thought of Dr. Sidney's interchangeable wardrobe of gray and brown, and faced with the gaudy apparel available at the Kmart he'd found, he suddenly had a new appreciation for the doctor's interchangeable wardrobe. He chose the least objectionable pair of pants and plainest shirt he could find, picked up a plastic bag of full of underwear, another of socks, a belt, and a pair of soft-soled leather shoes and headed toward the cash registers at the front of the store to pay with the cash that Sofia had left for him in the Volkswagen.

He crossed through the automotive department and turned the corner in sporting goods, where he was confronted with a glass case full of handguns. On the wall behind the counter was a rack of rifles. Victor stopped for a closer look. He had never been in a store like this one, where, it seemed, anything you might imagine wanting to own was instantly available along with hundreds of things you'd never think of buying. Here in this corner under the glass counter, for instance, were handguns for every conceivable customer—long-barreled cowboy revolvers, short-nosed private-eye automatics, each available in gleaming silver and sinister black with hand carved grips and sturdy head-busting butts. Victor had known soldiers who developed deep attachments to all manner of exotic weaponry available in Vietnam, though he had never considered his rifle—or any other piece of military hardware he'd had occasion to use—as anything other than a dangerous tool. But now, in this context, amid the bland, ordered, standardized merchandise, the guns gleaming in the back-lighted display case seemed to whisper something familiar and soothing to him. He wanted very much to hold one in the palm of his hand, feel its surprising mass.

“Nice, huh?”

Victor looked up at a young salesclerk behind the counter. Rosettes of acne bloomed across his cheekbones. His Kmart badge identified him as Chip.

“We sell a lot of ‘em,” Chip said. “You know what they say, God created man, but Colt made ‘em equal. Can I help you with something in particular?”

“Just looking,” Victor said.

Chip reached for a ring of keys attached to a retractable wire device clipped to his belt. He found the key to the gun case, unlocked it, and then let the key ring snap back in place. He slid open the rear panel, took out one of the guns, and held it out to Victor.

“That’s the Colt Diamondback. Twenty-two caliber, six-inch barrel, blue finish. That’s considered a premium American revolver. Most popular model we carry.”

Victor held the gun in his fist. He applied just enough pressure to engage the trigger. “How much?” he said.

“That’ll run you forty-eight ninety-nine,” Chip said.

Victor put the gun down on the glass, and Chip smiled at him. “I know what you’re thinking,” Chip said. “You know a thing or two about guns, am I right?”

Victor shrugged.

“Military, correct? Nam?”

Victor nodded.

“I can always tell. I was there in sixty-eight. I don’t go around advertising the fact because most people look at you like you’re some kind of freak or something. But if you been there you know how it is. At least that’s how I see it. Anyway, I don’t blame you about the Colt. It’s a damn peashooter. We got a forty-five down here. . .”

“You can just pay for these and walk out with them?” Victor said.

“There’s a waiting period,” Chip said. “You got to fill out some paperwork and then there’s a background check, make sure your not crazy or a felon. It’s nothing. Waste of time, if you ask me. I mean, if you wanted to hurt somebody bad enough you wouldn’t need no gun, now would you? So you want to see the forty-five?”

“Maybe later,” Victor said, walking away. He wondered what there was about him that marked him so clearly as a soldier, how Chip, who didn’t seem particularly insightful—nor appear himself a soldier—could peg him so readily. He wondered, too, what else about him was so obvious. Did he also appear crazy or a criminal, the kind of person the government would be on the lookout for? He remembered that Sofia had passed the cryptic message to him—through the much-aggrieved Officer Willets of the Baton Rouge Police Department—that his doctor had asked about him. It could only have been Dr. Sidney. Victor reminded himself to ask Sofia about it. The psychologist must have warned Sofia that Victor was dangerous. Or was that a judgment Sofia had made on her own?

All during his journey from Texas, Victor had grown increasingly nostalgic for the kind of familiar food available in Tarpon Springs like nowhere else he knew of outside of Greece itself. He’d pictured himself sitting down at Nouno’s and stuffing himself with lamb and feta and cucumber and spinach in all their savory combinations. He fantasized about coffee and baklava and sweet red wine and anise-rich ouzo. Those memory-soaked flavors, so close, called out to him even more urgently now. He could simply drive back to the river, maybe walk into the kitchen at Nouno’s where the crusty chef, if he was still there—and where else would he have gone?—might crab at him but

wouldn't begrudge him a sliver of lamb, a slice of pastry, a grape leaf or two. For that matter, there was no reason he couldn't walk in the front door, sit at the bar, order from the menu. It was a free country. He could swagger into the office, plop down in front of the big wooden desk, look Nouno straight in the eye. "I'm back," he'd say. "You couldn't get rid of me so easy." But he knew he wouldn't. He resisted the temptation of Greek food, and instead found a Winn-Dixie where he bought a loaf of white bread and package of bologna along with a huge bag of potato chips, a six-pack of Schlitz beer, a razor, comb, toothpaste, and a toothbrush.

Back at the motel, he unloaded his bounty on the bed and was struck by how within a couple of hours of his unofficial return to civilian life, he'd already begun amassing personal property. He was setting down roots, or such roots as could be set down by a man checked into a cheap motel under a false name and whose personal fortune consisted of a few basic toiletries, a couple of pairs of socks and underpants, and a change of clothes. Still, after a long shower, he sat down with a sandwich, a beer, and chips, clicked on the television, and felt as if maybe, after all, that he'd taken the first small steps toward what just might turn out to be something pretty wonderful. But then after he'd finished two sandwiches, most of the chips, and he was working on his third beer, it also occurred to him that he'd spent so much effort traveling the long road back that he hadn't considered what exactly should be done once he arrived.

He sat at the foot of the bed where he could reach the television and turned the knob back and forth among the three available channels, each of which broadcast a soap opera. All of the people on the programs and commercials looked remarkably the same. Even the actors portraying the elderly smiled gleaming straight-toothed smiles that

conveyed their unfailing kindness and wisdom, or conversely, in the case of the bad guys, their dark sinister good looks. It was a world where limps, scars, or bruises had no place and where what problems arose resolved in singular strokes of luck or coincidence. Such sturdy, healthy characters were guaranteed success. On television, character was simply a matter of good bones, smooth skin, and white teeth.

Maybe this was the secret. How far you got in life was simply a matter of looking the part. Victor checked his reflection in the mirror. Could this be? Then where did it leave him? He'd proved something in the war. He'd survived, and that demonstrated a kind of strength—or at least a kind of luck, which in war was probably the same thing. Soldiers knew this, even if the people they returned home to didn't. The last Japanese soldier chose thirty years in a cave over death, convinced that he was a failure, but alive nonetheless. But Victor had only to look in the mirror for proof that the war had changed him.

When he thought about what was next, how he should proceed. How did his altered appearance—and the character that it revealed—figure in? He'd always taken for granted that Cyrus and Nouno had to be held accountable for what they had done to him and that when he returned it would be easy, given their corrupt nature, to find a way to shine a light on their dark ways and thus reclaim his own good name. Once that was done, Sofia would see the truth of things and he'd have her back too. But after Sofia's inscrutable brush-off a few hours before, things were not nearly as straightforward as he'd imagined.

He clicked off the TV and lay back on the bed, studying a stain on the ceiling as if it held a sign, some clue about his future. The telephone jangled him to alertness.

“You asleep?” Sofia said after Victor mumbled his hello.

“I was dreaming the telephone woke me up.”

She chuckled. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll see you in an hour or so.”

He got up and gathered the empty beer cans and bread wrappers and the rest of the trash and stuffed it all into a tiny trashcan. Apparently, the motel figured its guests didn’t have much to discard. For a while, he sat naked on the edge of the bed, waiting, and then decided to take another shower. He brushed his teeth and combed his hair, and then sat on the bed again. He decided to have another beer and then another, and then he went back into the bathroom and brushed his teeth twice. Finally, he got up and got dressed in his new underwear, socks, shirt, and pants. When he looked again at the mirror, he was pleased with the sharp creases that announced the garments’ newness.

He sat on the end of the bed and flicked the television back on. He lay back, but then sat up again so he wouldn’t wrinkle his new clothes. He shut the TV off, stood and considered going outside for some air but decided against it in case Sofia came knocking on his door and he wouldn’t be there to answer. So he sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to cross his legs and dull the crease in his new pants and also careful to keep his feet flat on the floor so as also to preserve his shiny, uncreased new shoes. He waited.

When the knock came he nearly tripped when he jumped up and reached the door in three strides, but then he hesitated and tried to remember any of the thousands times he’d imagined an appropriately brilliant thing to say when this moment came. Now that the opportunity was at hand, all wit abandoned him. So he opened the door and stood holding it moronically until Sofia finally spoke.

“So,” she said, “can I come in?”

The embarrassment rose hot in his neck and face, and he motioned for her to enter.

“You got some new things,” Sofia said.

“I didn’t spend much,” Victor said, going to the dresser to return to Sofia what was left of the cash.

“Could of fooled me,” she said.

Victor looked down. “It’s too much?”

“You look fine,” she said. “I’m just saying you look . . . nice.” But the way she smiled made Victor think he’d made a mistake at the department store. “I’m teasing,” she said.

“It was the first thing I found,” Victor said.

“Did you get anything to drink?”

Victor went to the ice bucket where he’d stashed the beer and offered the one remaining to Sofia.

“Ah, no thanks,” she said.

“I can go get something else.”

“I’m fine.” She looked around the room, which didn’t take long. She leaned awkwardly against the dresser and then stood and brushed her skirt. She wore the same clothes that she had on when she’d met Victor at the bus station—a sleeveless white shirt and a plain blue skirt that didn’t quite reach the middle of her thighs. Not knowing what else to do, Victor stood too, near the door with the bed between them.

Victor had tossed a few coins on the motel room dresser, and now Sofia began to push them around, arranging them into patterns.

“You must think I’m a monster,” she said finally. She didn’t look at him.

Victor wanted to comfort her, to reassure her that he thought nothing of the kind. But he stopped when she looked up at him. “No,” he said. “I’ve seen monsters. You’re not close.”

She laughed and shook her head and finally faced him. What Victor wanted to say was that she was beautiful. The way she looked at him now lacked any of the earlier hard assessment. She was lovely. It was hard to conceive, let alone remember, how just a few short days ago he’d been on a bus deciding to delay this moment in order to find a woman he’d never met so that he could explain things he didn’t really understand. He knew now this woman here now in the motel room was all he would ever want.

“After you called the first time,” she said. “I didn’t want to believe it was you. It was like the ground was crumbling under me. I wanted to run away. But that’s not possible. I couldn’t. So I told myself it was some kind of mistake. I imagined the whole thing. After a few days, I kind of convinced myself. But then I was looking for something, and I came across a box I put your letters in. And I started reading them over, damn it. And I got that same feeling of slipping away.”

“You were surprised to know I was alive,” Victor said, sitting down on the bed. “You said you thought I was dead.”

“You’ll hate me when I tell you this. If you don’t already. But I was angry that you just didn’t stay dead. Because after the call, I knew sooner or later you’d come back here. And I couldn’t keep you away even if I wanted to.”

He reached for her, but she edged away. “Let me explain,” she said, frowning. “I’ve been trying really, really hard to build something, you know? And then all of a

sudden . . . this. I thought I'd put all of that behind me. I was starting to have some success. And then you called. And that doctor called. Then the cop from Baton Rouge. I couldn't just go on ignoring it. I couldn't pretend you didn't exist." She sat down on the opposite side of the bed with her back to him.

"I got the letter from Nouno. He said you didn't want nothing to do with me," Victor said.

She dropped her head into her hands. "Nouno." After a while she sat up. "I thought a million times about what a heartless bitch you must have thought I was." She turned to him. "But I swear to you, Victor, I didn't have anything to do with that letter. It was all Nouno. He said you were dead. Everything had changed. Some things you just can't undo." She got up and popped the top of the beer and took a long drink. Then she went to the window and pulled back the curtains just enough to peer out. She took another long drink, set down the can, and then sat primly on the edge of the bed beside him. "I was so fucked up. I didn't know what I was doing half the time. Nouno and Cyrus had to take care of me. If it wasn't for them . . ."

"So you married him?"

She turned suddenly, and the color drained from her face. She swallowed hard and raised her hands and covered her mouth. When she looked up her eyes were dry. "He asked, and I said yes," she said. Her voice was hardly more than a whisper. "You don't know how messed up I was. I was drowning. What Cyrus was offering seemed like a life line."

"The baby?"

Sofia closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. "His name is Georgie."

“His father?”

She creased her brow. “Georgie was my brother. You know that.”

“I ask who is the father.”

She didn’t hesitate. “You..”

“But the birth certificate,” Victor said. “I saw—”

She was unfazed. “Nouno’s idea. He wanted the baby to be part of his family. So he fixed it with the right people. The way he does. But I swear, Victor, he’s yours. That’s why I knew when you called I didn’t have a choice about whether to try to keep you away. I’m happy you came back,” she said, touching his hand. “I can’t tell you how happy I am.”

Victor could see in her eyes it was the truth. “It’s all right,” he said.

She was quiet for a moment, and Victor realized she was examining him again.

“My leg,” Victor said.

She looked up.

“You’re curious,” he said. “You were wondering about where I was hurt. My hip was busted and my leg . . .”

“Was it bad?”

Victor didn’t know how to respond.

“Stupid me,” she said. “You were in the hospital. Of course it was bad. But it got you out of the fighting. That’s something.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“The doctor that called said you left without permission.”

“Did he also tell you that I’m dangerous?”

“He just said you *might* be. He said you were confused. Would you be in trouble if the army finds you?”

“You could always turn me in if you’re afraid.” He gripped her hand, and she didn’t pull it away.

“I’m just wondering what you think you’re coming back to.”

He ran his fingertips softly across her hair and down her neck. She didn’t try to stop him. “I lost . . .” But he couldn’t say all that he’d lost. “Maybe I need to know if anything’s left.” He leaned close to kiss her.

She lowered her chin. “I can’t,” she said. “It’s not like before. I’m not saying it’s right. But I told you I can’t go back and pretend those things didn’t happen. I have to be realistic. I have responsibilities. I’m not like you. I have things to lose.”

Victor leaned away. “I’m nothing?”

She closed her eyes and rolled onto the bed. She lay on her back with her arms at her sides, staring at the ceiling. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have sent you that bus ticket. I thought it was the right thing. But I should’ve let you stay in jail, for your own good.” She propped herself up on an elbow. “But if I didn’t help you, you would’ve hated me. And I couldn’t stand that. Anybody else I wouldn’t care. But not you.”

“You just don’t want anyone to see me.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Yes, you have a son. *My* son. And a husband. I should remember this.”

Her jaw tightened and she looked away, as if to forestall her reaction. Then she looked back, but still she didn’t speak.

“What?” Victor said.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what you went through. I can’t imagine. But please.” She swiped tears from her eye, streaking her mascara. “I don’t want your pity, but please understand it hasn’t been easy for me, either.”

“The difference is, like you said, I don’t have nothing to lose.”

“Can’t you see I’m trying to protect you, Victor? Right now just you and me and Cyrus and Nouno know about . . . what happened. But secrets don’t keep so good here, you know? I don’t want the past to come back and haunt us. What do think would happen if Nouno found out you’re back?”

“It’s too late to worry about thing like that. I’m tired of always being so careful. I don’t care about the past. I only think about what’s next, where I’m going.”

“You won’t go far if Nouno has anything to do with it. Look around. You’re right back where you started,” Sofia said, not so kindly, Victor thought.

“It’ll be different now,” Victor said.

Sofia smiled. “Maybe. Things do change. Thank god they do. People here would starve to death if they were still scraping by on sponges. Things come and go. A building gets torn down. A new one gets built in its place.”

“And it makes a new shadow, maybe, but it doesn’t change the sun. The river carries away new trash, but it still flows the same direction as always. I saw a lot of people come and go, but you were always inside me. That didn’t change. It only got bigger and bigger.”

She reached for his hand and gently pulled him down beside her. She kissed his cheek, and he in turn kissed her lips. Then he lay back. “It’s okay?” he said.

She nodded.

He kissed her again, harder and deeper, and she returned the kiss. He reached down to unbuttoned her blouse, and she slid it off and then unsnapped her bra and took that off too. He kissed her neck and her shoulders and her breasts and breathed in again and again the still-familiar scent. She undid his shirt and ran her hand through the hair on his chest. But when she reached his belt buckle he sat up.

“This is really what you want?” she said.

He wanted nothing more in the world; he hesitated only because of his leg. When Sofia saw his scars she’d see for certain how much things had changed. He remembered the burning shit man in the hospital. You can’t help but look, he’d said.

“What happens next?” he said.

“That’ll probably take care of itself,” she said. Her voice was soft and dark.

He reached down and slid his hand up her skirt, and her breath became ragged. He pulled her underpants down around her knees and ran his hand up her thigh and then through the tangle of hair. She didn’t resist. She felt smooth and dark, and as he slipped a finger inside her she closed her eyes and moaned softly. She pressed her leg against him. “Oh,” she said. “Oh.” Victor removed his hand and quickly slid off his new pants and underwear, careful to keep under the sheet.

She opened her legs for him, and he pushed to enter her, and she gasped when he did. As they began to move together, the pain in Victor’s leg and hip only heightened his sensations. Sofia turned her head and closed her eyes. Her face went red and her breath came quick. And then she opened her eyes, still looking at the wall, and for a moment it was only Victor moving. It was as if she’d excused herself from the proceedings. When she looked up at him, the passion had drained from her face.

Victor looked over in the direction she'd been facing and saw there in the mirror on the wall the reflection of his ruined leg uncovered now and all the more grotesque next to Sofia's smooth dark skin.

"I'm sorry," he said, rolling away from her.

She lay on her back, still, and stared at the ceiling.

"Now you know," Victor said.

"It's all right," she said, climbing on top of him.

But Victor knew it wasn't.

They lay on the motel bed and watched the stripe of light between the draperies fade from gold to blue. Finally, Sofia spoke. "You understand, don't you, I'm really glad you're back. The truth is I've been thinking about you almost nonstop ever since that phone call." Victor had surprised himself by drifting off into thoughts of Janna. How if Ackles had lived, the reunion between the two would have been so much simpler than this clandestine reunion between him and Sofia. He forced his thoughts back to Sofia's words.

"What did you think of?"

She snuggled close to him. "This, for one," she said, and she squeezed his penis.

"And so now?"

"Can't I just enjoy the moment?"

"But what comes next? Do I stay in this room and wait for you to come and go?"

Sofia sat up. "You've been back for, what, twelve hours? We made love, and it was good. It was wonderful. But we can't get ahead of ourselves." She got up, turned on

the lights, and began searching the room for her clothes. “Maybe it was a mistake, my coming here,” she said as she pulled on her underwear.

Victor sat up in bed. “Do you remember when I talked to you on the phone from the hospital? I asked you if you loved Cyrus.”

Sofia snapped her bra beneath her breasts, twisted it around, slipped her arms through the straps to pull it into place. “Honestly, I don’t remember,” she said. “That call, out of the blue, kind of caught me off guard.”

“When I asked, you said it was a mistake. I’ve been trying to think what you meant. Was the mistake Cyrus, or was it me?”

Sofia pulled on her skirt and then her blouse. She turned her back to Victor and looked in the mirror to arrange her hair.

“A lot happened while you were away,” she said. “I have a son, for one thing.”

“I know,” Victor said.

Her eyes brimmed with tears. “When I thought you died, I didn’t want to go on. I couldn’t. Not the same way.” She picked up the car keys and examined them. “I had to choose. Try to make something of the mess I was or finish things once and for all.”

“So you chose Cyrus.”

She slammed the keys down on the desktop. “No,” she said, her voice sharp and hard as broken glass. “I tried to kill myself. Maybe the mistake was that I didn’t do it right. Cyrus, that mistake, came later.” She collapsed into a ball and sobbed.

Victor crawled over and draped himself on top of her. He apologized over and over.

“It was a mistake to let you go,” she said.

Twenty-One

Old Ground Recovered

There were moments over the course of the hours they made love that Victor felt himself float up out of his physical body and hover at some distance near the ceiling where he observed the goings-on like some credulous ghost. A part of him remained detached even in the swelter of their hungry passion. Years of longing and denial released deep down inside where he'd buried the past and surged up in immense and uncontrollable waves that threatened to overwhelm him. And even in these moments, the other ghost self, hovered and observed. He saw that he and Sofia were explorers returning to recover a territory they both thought they'd left behind forever. The rediscovery of the other's secrets—the private folds and obscure down—was sweeter even than Victor remembered. But alongside the joy ran an equally strong sense of loss. Not because he worried that this might be the last time he'd access these secrets. He'd learned from experience that he could live without her, no matter how much he didn't want to.

After they'd exhausted one another, they rested and talked. What was it like, the war, she asked. He told her about Ackles and the marches, about the villages, the prisoner, and the exploding jungle. She said, what did it feel like to be on fire? He said he couldn't remember, but he told her about the hospitals and the surgeries. Could she touch it? He let her run her fingers along the scars. She showed him the small, jagged line etched across her belly. Where they'd opened her to take the baby, she explained. Do you want to feel it? He traced the knotted pink ribbon with his index finger. Go again, she asked.

He awoke in the dark, tortured for a long moment when he found it impossible to place himself in time or space. Flummoxed by possibilities, his mind couldn't process quickly enough all the places where he wasn't—the hospital, the jungle, Greece? Only when the bathroom door opened and light spilled into the motel room did he remember where he was. Sofia was in her bra and underpants. She had a towel wrapped around her head. "Get dressed," she said. "Come on. There's something I want to show you."

It was four a.m., and the docks along Dodecanese Boulevard were deserted. Sofia turned at the street where Nouno's Restaurant was and pulled the VW into the alley in the rear of the old Sponge Exchange building. She stopped and smiled broadly. "What do you think?"

Victor shrugged. What was there to think of a dark alley?

"It's mine, Victor." She got out of the car and almost skipped around to Victor's side. "Come on."

Victor got out and followed her to a scarred metal door secured with a rusting hasp and padlock. Where there was once a lockset was now an empty hole indented around the edges where someone had forced it open. On the other side of the alley a vacant lot sprouted a ragged overgrowth of weeds. A scabrous old tomcat slinked around the corner, pressed against the wall as he passed and eyed the intruders warily.

"Very nice," Victor said. "But what did you want to show me?"

Sofia put her hands on her hips, and even in the moonlight, the feigned exasperation on her face was evident. "Smart ass," she said. She searched the key ring in her hand and turned to the metal door. "There's a flashlight in glove box," she said. The door creaked as she muscled it opened.

Sofia took the flashlight from Victor and swept the beam across the broad, empty space.

“This is what you want to show me?” Victor said. “This is yours?”

“It will be.”

“Why?”

She dropped her arm to her side so that the beam made a little puddle of light at her feet. He could almost feel her glare.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“I’ve got big plans for this place,” Sofia said. She again aimed the flashlight toward the far reaches of the building.

Victor felt something crawling on his back and almost tripped when he twisted his arm around to brush whatever it was away. Sofia shined the light on him. “A bug or something,” Victor said. He turned so Sofia could see his back.

She laughed. “You must’ve gotten it,” she said.

“It’s a bug house,” Victor said. “Can we go?”

Sofia led the way. Outside, she leaned against the Volkswagen and looked up at the top of the building.

“It’s very . . . big,” Victor said. He didn’t want to offend Sofia again by telling her the truth, that all he saw was a dilapidated warehouse that had long ago ceased to serve the purpose for which it was built. Like everyone in town, he knew that once most of the world’s supply of sponges had passed through the structure, from boat captains on one end to wholesalers on the other. But the building had been shut tight for as long as Victor had known. It had been a good decade since anything was exchanged within these walls.

“You don’t think much of my building?” Sofia said.

Victor scratched an itch on the back of his neck.

Sofia chuckled. “That’s all right,” she said. “Me either. It’s not the building I’m interested in. I’m going to tear it down and build a plaza, a little marketplace, like a village in Greece. But first I have to convince the old farts around here who get all misty-eyed about the good old days that there’s no sense in hanging on to a sponge exchange where nobody exchanges anything. Everybody’d be a lot better off with a comfortable, modern retail village, a place people would actually come and exchange money.”

“Here? A village? People will live here?”

“It’ll still be called the Sponge Exchange, but there’ll be shops and ice cream parlors and souvenir stands.”

“How can you afford it?”

“The money officially is Nouno’s. But I call the shots now.”

“And Nouno permits it?”

“It’s different now,” she said. “He had a stroke two years ago, and I started paying the bills. Eventually, I sort of took over.”

“And Cyrus? He allows it?”

The corner of her mouth curled. “Cyrus is the *reason* I’m looking after Nouno’s money. When it comes to money, Nouno knows he can count on his nephew to do exactly the wrong thing.”

“So Nouno gives it all to you?”

“He doesn’t *give* me zilch. I earn it. I’ve shown him I know what I’m doing. That’s why he turned his business over to me. These days he just signs the checks.”

“The restaurant, his . . . other business? He don’t—“

“It took him a long time to get better after the stroke. I had to hire a nurse, for when I wasn’t around.”

“You took care of him?”

“I moved into his house on the Bayou. He’s better now, but he kind of got use to me looking after things for him. He likes being around Georgie. And he knows he can count on me. But still he keeps an eye on things. You know Nouno, he doesn’t miss much.”

“What about me,” Victor said. “What about us?”

“Us?” She wrinkled her forehead. “That he doesn’t know. As a matter of fact, there is no us, Victor. For now, you can’t be—”

“I didn’t come back to hide from Nouno.”

“Jesus, I know. I know. But just for now, please, you have to stay out of sight.”

She whipped her head toward the side street, and at the same time, Victor heard the car approaching along the river on Dodecanese Boulevard. Sofia stiffened and relaxed only once the car passed by the Sponge Exchange and disappeared down the docks.

“Can I see him?” Victor said.

“You’re not listening, Victor. If Nouno finds out you’re back here. . .” She shook her head. “It’s for your own good. Don’t you see? If *anyone* recognizes you, Nouno’s bound to hear about it. Or Cyrus. Jesus, if Cyrus knew—”

“I meant can I see the boy,” Victor said. “My son.”

“You mean now? It’s the middle of the night,” she said.

“I won’t bother him,” Victor said. “I want to see his face.”

“No way. Not now. In a couple of days, maybe. We’ll figure some way.”

This time, Victor turned first when he heard the car. It approached from the direction the car had disappeared. Whether it was the same one circling back or a second one was impossible to say. But as it got nearer, Victor could see it was a cop. The cruiser slowed as it approached the Sponge Exchange. It paused and then turned down the side street toward the entrance to the alley. The light on the roof flicked on, turning the night crimson.

“Get in the car,” Sofia said. “Stay down.”

Scrambling onto the cramped floorboard of the tiny car, Victor got his leg twisted into an awkward angle. He struggled to ignore the pain. He bit his lip and concentrated on the voices outside. But Sofia and the cop were too far away—a good thing, Victor figured. If the cop came close, he’d see Victor. There was no hiding in a Volkswagen. The wait seemed endless, but finally came the distant sound of Sofia’s laughter, and then a car door closing. Victor remained crouched until he heard the cop back out of the alley and then drive away. He sat up only when Sofia opened the driver’s door and plopped inside.

“Fuck,” she said. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” She slumped back against the car seat and looked up at the headliner.

“He saw?” Victor said.

“Not you,” Sofia said. “But I went to high school with that guy. He’s still a jerk. The bad news is I told Nouno I was going out of town and I’d be back tomorrow. My old cop pal’s probably already planning how he’ll find Nouno tomorrow so he can tell him all about how he happened to run into me in a dark alley in the middle of the night.”

Victor stretched his sore leg as best he could and tried to rub the feeling back.

“We should go get Georgie and leave this place,” he said. “Tonight. Why not?. We could go to Louisiana. I know people there.”

Sofia slowly rolled her head around and raised her eyebrows. “I’m trying hard to remember why I thought it was a good idea for you to come back here,” she said. “And you’re not making it any easier.” She started the car and ground the gears finding reverse. She stretched her arm over the top of the passenger seat and looked over her shoulder to back out of the alley. “The only place we’re going right now is back to the motel,” she said. On the side street, she stopped at the intersection and looked up at the hulking building. “I shouldn’t have brought you here tonight,” she said. “But I thought if you saw it maybe you’d understand. You’d see what I see. This is my future, Victor. I know that like I know my own name. I can’t walk away from it.” She turned onto Dodecanese and pushed the little car hard toward town. “I’m not going to Louisiana or anyplace else with you. What I want is right here, and I want to share it with you if you want. But if you decide you do, you’re going to have to do what I say, at least for now, which means you’re going to have to stay out of sight. You don’t understand how much is at stake.”

“Your ice cream shops and souvenir stores.”

She jerked around so suddenly Victor thought for sure she’d run the car off the road. He reached over for the steering wheel, but Sofia had the VW, if not her anger, under control. “If it was only a couple of shops, you think I’d give a shit?” she said. “I’m talking about a hell of a lot more than ice cream.”

Sofia’s anger shown red hot even in the green glow of the dashboard lights. Back not even a day, Victor didn’t want to argue. He knew that he couldn’t convince Sofia to

pick up and leave with him. He wasn't even sure he was ready for that. Scores remained to be settled, somehow. He also knew that Sofia's caution wasn't for money's sake alone because he knew how seductive Nouno's world could be. He once had also been convinced that through Nouno lay power and glory. The old man allowed you just enough access to make it seem within reach, enough responsibility to make you think that if you were in charge things would be decent and respectable.

"It's not about money," Sofia said.

"I know," Victor said.

"I could've robbed Nouno blind if I wanted to. I could've skipped on him in a second. Don't think I didn't consider it. But I stayed. You know why?"

"Georgie?"

"Partly, sure. I want him to have it better than I did growing up. But every time I thought about leaving, I thought about Nouno and Cyrus."

"They'd come after you."

"That's not what stopped me, though. I couldn't get out of my head that day when you and I met, the Epiphany."

Victor laughed, remembering how he jumped in the freezing green water to help Georgie, to impress Sofia.

"Georgie was bummed out about that stupid cross for weeks. He thought if it he'd gotten it, things would've been different. Maybe he was right. But instead, Cyrus got the prize, and Georgie went out on the sponge boat. And then my old man. You get backed into a corner trying to protect me and end up in fucking war. Meanwhile, Cyrus goes on living the charmed life. Jesus, you'd think he was born with that gold cross up his ass."

“He didn’t have to,” Victor said. “He was Nouno’s nephew.”

“Same difference. But you get it? You see why I can’t leave? I’m not going to let Nouno and Cyrus off the hook so easy this time. For once, they’re going to see they can’t always use people up and throw them away.”

He’d heard this from Sofia before. Back in the upstairs bedroom of Mrs. Demetriou’s house on Hope Street. She’d taken the drugs. To teach Nouno a lesson, she’d said. And then one thing led to another. And another. And now here they were again. Victor looked out at the sleeping houses, imagining their drowsing inhabitants dreaming of rocky Greek islands. Of walking on the bottom of the sea. Of small pleasures and great fears. Directly or not, almost all of their lives were shaped to some degree by Nouno Papademopoulis. Love him or hate him, they all owed him something. He was not alone.

“How will you show them?” Victor said.

“By not getting used up,” she said. “By not letting them throw me away. That’s why we can’t let them know you’re back. I need you, Victor. They need for you stay gone.”

They road on in silence along streets that were deserted an hour before dawn. At the motel, Sofia pulled the Volkswagen into an empty spot next to Victor’s door. “You’re coming in?” he said. Victor reached for the door handle, but Sofia put her hand on his shoulder.

“You understand,” she said, “this isn’t how I want things. I’d change it if I could. But then, I guess we’d both change a lot of things if we could.”

Victor nodded. He understood she wanted him to decide without asking for a decision. But there was nothing to decide. He would do whatever she said. He had no

home, no job, nothing of his own. And it didn't matter. He was back. Sofia was his. When he would see her and for how long was entirely up to her. It didn't matter. He'd risked his life for her. He'd sacrificed a big chunk of his flesh. A week, a month, a year more, how could it matter? Sofia was his. "I'll see you tomorrow?" he said.

Sofia shrugged. "Hopefully. We'll see. I've got to deal with this business with the cop."

"What you'll say to Nouno?"

"Maybe I'll tell him the truth. I was meeting a mysterious man on the edge of town." She leaned over and kissed him. "I'll call," she said.

Victor watched her drive away. Then he went inside and sat on the bed, trying to summon once again the strength to be patient.

Twenty-Two

The Big House

.From the outside, the house on Spring Bayou loomed as large and vaguely threatening as Victor remembered, but inside things had changed remarkably. Gone was much of the dark bourgeois pretentiousness of the turn-of-the century carved wood and filigreed plaster. The rooms were softened and warmed with autumnal golds, greens, and oranges and made inviting with tranquil plaids.

“Take your shoes off,” Sofia whispered. “New carpet.” Victor obliged and followed her upstairs. Sofia turned and beamed. “Wall-to-wall shag,” she said. “You ever felt anything so plush?” She stopped at a closed door at the head of the stairs. “I have to let the nurse know we’re here,” she said, “I don’t want her to wake up and think something’s happening to the baby.” She opened the door a crack and Victor heard bedsprings creak from inside the room. “It’s just me,” Sofia said. “I’m home. I didn’t want you to be startled.” From inside there was low muttering. “It’s okay. Go back to sleep,” Sofia said.

They’d been to a Cuban restaurant in the Ybor City section of Tampa with not a Greek in sight, no one to hide from, nothing to fear. They’d ordered dinner, talked, and drank. A normal, happy young couple. For weeks they’d been met fleetingly in a series of motel rooms that had grown numbingly indistinct. They’d had time to do much more than make love before Sofia had to hurry off. It occurred to Victor that their hasty liaisons were the romantic equivalent of his days in the jungle, the dreadful cycle—long stretches of anxious, idle anticipation, punctuated by furious engagement, followed by nagging self-reproach. How had things arrived at such a state? For how long could he remain in

this purgatory? Day by day, leading up to her arrival, expectations swelled his imagination until Sofia burned in his thoughts like the sun. But with each leaving he became more painfully aware of a growing distance between them.

At Sofia's urging, Victor had let his hair and beard grow, and sometimes he'd catch a glimpse of his reflection in the hotel room mirror, startled by the feeling that he was also becoming a stranger to himself. There was little chance that anyone else would recognize him. Still when he went out he was constantly looking over his shoulder, always edging away from groups of more than two or three strangers, forever reconnoitering. The jungle lurked deep inside. He couldn't run, and he couldn't hide, so he tried as best he could to make his way in the shadows.

Once, he'd sneaked to the edge of the leafy back yard behind Nuono's house on the Bayou. He stood in the luxuriant riot of philodendron and bougainvillea and watched from several hundred feet away as the little boy played on a blanket in the sun. Victor watched until his leg ached from squatting in the shrubs at the perimeter of the expansive lawn. After a while the woman who watched the baby took him back inside, and Victor slinked away, all the more frustrated for getting so close and having accomplished so little for the risk he'd taken..

But then after weeks of what seemed like living in the dark, Sofia had told him they were going to finally have a night out, just the two of them. Nouno was out of town visiting relatives. The nurse was home with the baby. She had the entire night. They'd do as they pleased. And they did, shedding their constraints for a few hours, during which they pretended there were no constraints, no cheap hotel room assignments. They were young and entitled to be free.

Afterward, in the car, Victor brought up the idea of going back together to the house on the Bayou. He expected she'd say no, but he was prepared to insist, to reclaim a little measure of the dignity that had been chipped away since he'd arrived back in Tarpon Springs. She surprised him. She didn't hesitate. And so they went back to Nouno's.

After Sofia had reassured the nurse, she closed the door and motioned for Victor to follow her down the hall to the room next to the nurse's. She flicked the light switch to turn off the hall light before she slowly opened the door. In the dim glow of a nightlight Victor could just make out the little boy lying on his side in his crib. Sofia smiled and nodded, and Victor moved closer. The baby had kicked his blankets off in his sleep, and Victor mimicked pulling a sheet up to his chin by way of asking permission to cover him back up. Sofia smiled again and nodded.

The delicate feet and fingers curled into tiny fists. His cheeks were fat and round. Looking down at the sleeping child, Victor felt at peace and an instinctive protectiveness. But what else does one feel in the presence of a sleeping child? He was disappointed. He'd expected more, some deep sense of pride or purpose. He'd expected, he realized, for the baby's existence to make meaning of his own. But it didn't. He didn't know what exactly being a father should feel like, but he was almost certain that it should be more than this. He wondered what could be wrong with him. And then he felt Sofia gently take hold of his arm and lead him away.

"He's beautiful," Victor said when Sofia closed the door behind them. "He looks like you."

"I never thought so," she said. "I always thought he looked like his father."

“Can I ask you something?” Victor said.

Sofia waited.

“Do you have anything to eat?”

The dawn was soft and pink and Sofia sat next to Victor on the lanai. A soft, cool breeze rippled the blue water of the swimming pool. But Victor wasn't soothed. He'd slept fitfully in Sofia's bed, and he felt as if his nerves were exposed electrical wires. Finally, unable to sleep herself because of Victor's tossing and turning, Sofia said they might as well go downstairs. She poured them drinks and they sat outside on the patio next to the pool .

“You're not worried?” Victor said.

Sofia turned up her palms, a question.

“Me being here.”

“Just Georgie, the nurse, are here. The nurse only speaks Spanish. And Georgie ain't talking.”

“But someone could come.”

“Cyrus?” Sofia waved her hand limply. “Don't worry about him.” She sipped at her coffee. “He won't be back. I just sent him money. Enough so even he won't piss it away so soon.”

“Where is he?”

Sofia shrugged. “Vegas, Reno. Somewhere there's gambling. I couldn't give two hoots.” She twirled a lock of hair in her fingers. “I'd rather not talk about my husband,” she said. “I've been thinking about the future. How'd you like a job?”

“I don’t know ice cream or souvenirs.”

“How about sponge diving?”

“I don’t know—“

“It’s not like you think. It’ll be safe.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“I know. I meant it’ll be simple. We’ll plant the sponges. You’ll know where to find them. You’ll just go out a few miles, get in a diving suit, grab the sponges, and bring them back onto the boat.”

“How do you plant sponges?”

“I mean we’ll put them in the water. Physically place them so you can just bring them up.”

“How do you make money diving for sponges you already put in the ocean?”

“It’s not *about* the sponges. It’s a show. For tourists. We’ll charge people to see a real Greek sponge diver in action. You..”

Victor wondered if she was teasing him, but Sofia rarely joked when it came to business. “This isn’t sponge diving.”

“This is what I’m saying. You know and I know it’s not real, but people from Iowa wouldn’t know a live sponge if it was growing in their bathtub. You’d be surprised what people will pay good money for. This’d be something for you to do, a way to make some money. A lot maybe.”

“If someone from Greece was on that boat, they would see it’s a fake.”

The argument failed to change Sofia’s obvious excitement. “Think of like the movies. People know a movie isn’t real, but they watch anyway. Look all those people

who drive for three days from Iowa or Michigan or wherever to Orlando. You're telling me those people think Mickey is a real mouse. They know it's all made up. But they've come all that way, they expect at least an interesting story. So that's what we'll give them. They'll pay good money to be entertained. And they won't give a shit worrying if it's real. They pay so they don't have to think."

"So you want a Mickey Mouse sponge diver," Victor said. He took a drink "And you thought I'd be the right man for the job?"

She laughed. "As I recall, you've always had a talent for make-believe. The first time we met, you told me you were a secret agent."

"Maybe I was," Victor said. "Maybe I still am."

"Then I guess you don't need a job."

Sofia had obviously given the matter some thought. Maybe she'd been mulling it over for some time: The problem with Victor. He knew she couldn't afford to keep on paying for him to stay in motels. Even if she could hide the money she'd spent on food and lodging, the risk grew daily that someone would see him and put two and two together, and run to Nouno. So apparently she'd come up with a way for him to be useful. She was a very practical woman. She'd clearly learned a thing or two from Nouno in that regard. She wasn't being charitable. That wasn't in her nature. She wasn't selfish, exactly, but she didn't deny herself what she wanted. Not in bed, or in business. If she offered him a job, she'd expect work in return. Sofia didn't *give* anything away. She'd shown signs recently of impatience with supporting him. Twice now, he'd had to ask her for cash for food, and each time she'd seemed barely able to hide her displeasure. Now, despite the offhand way she described the sponge diving job, Victor sensed she was

delivering an ultimatum, take it or leave. Perhaps the whole dinner and visit to the house on the bayou had been intended as the proper prelude for this moment.

“I’m not a diver,” Victor said.

Sofia smiled slyly. “I watched you swim underwater across that bayou out there. Remember. You’ve been diving since before you could walk. Your grandfather was a diver. Your father was—“

“My father died. He was a statue.”

“Made of pearl?” Sofia said. She poured more coffee. “I know about Australia. Nouno told me.”

“That’s just a story,” Victor said. “Make-believe, like you say. So don’t have to think too much.”

“May be. But I know your grandfather paid Nouno to take you in. I’ve seen the letters.”

“You can read Greek?”

“I had someone translate. Someone who also knew the story.”

“Kostos?”

Sofia smiled. “He’s seen the pearl, Victor.”

“Where? Nouno has it?”

“Kostos isn’t the only one who’s seen it.”

“So why don’t you take it, sell it. You do all Nouno’s business.”

“He’d have my neck. I don’t take chances like that. That’s my husband’s territory.”

“So why talk about it? It’s Nouno’s.”

“Nouno’s not going to be around forever. He’s a sick old man, and when he goes he won’t be taking the pearl or anything else with him. If he keeled over today, it’d all go to Cyrus.”

“Nouno’s legacy?”

“His will, right, I’ve seen the papers. Half of it would be mine. In theory. That’s what the law says. But Nouno wouldn’t be cold before Cyrus packed up that money and hopped a plane to Monte Carlo or Rio or anyplace he could continue his lifelong pursuit of pissing away every goddamn thing in his reach.”

“Nouno doesn’t see this?”

“He’s waiting for him to grow up, I guess,” she said. “Something. I sometimes think that the reason he wants me around is save his nephew. Nothing else has. He don’t care so much about Cyrus’ gambling or women. But he wants him to at least act like a good Greek father and husband, you know play the part. Cyrus keeps threatening divorce, but for Nouno’s that’s the last straw, even Cyrus knows that. Nouno looks the other way when it comes to a lot of things. But family is sacred.”

From inside, the sounds of kitchen cabinets being opened, pots and pans rattling, and water running made Victor sit up. Sofia, though, remained serene.

She raised her chin. “The nurse,” she said.

“You don’t worry she’ll tell Nouno?”

“That a man was here? She won’t. And if she did, like I say, Nouno looks the other way about a lot of things. The nurse doesn’t know you.”

“You’ve had other men here?”

Sofia laced her fingers around the back of her head. “I don’t make a habit of it.”

The nurse finished in the kitchen, and called to the baby as she headed upstairs. Sofia looked over at Victor and smiled. “This is nice, isn’t it?” she said. “This house. The pool. This life.” She dipped her toes into the blue water. “When I was a kid, I looked at these places along here and couldn’t imagine what people did inside them. I thought they must be like fairy tale prince and princesses to deserve to live in a place like this.”

“And now you’re Cinderlla.”

She cocked her head and frowned. “It’s no fairy tale, Victor. This can be mine. It can be ours. You and me and Georgie. We can grow old here together. Just us.”

“I thought there was no us.”

“If anyone has a right to it, it’s you.”

“You mean the pearl? That’s just a story.”

“I’m just saying that Nouno owes you. Your grandfather sent him money. Did you ever see any of that?”

“It couldn’t have that much. Nouno didn’t need me to make him a big man.”

Victor stood and the aluminum chair scraped the tiled lanai.

“What about what you did for me? What about the war?”

“That’s over,” Victor said.

“What about your leg?” she said. Her voice was becoming ragged. “What about me?” She stood and stepped toward him.

“Maybe I *should* talk to Nouno,” Victor said. And he turned to go back inside.

“I’ll tell him I’m back. I come for all that he owes me.”

“What good will it do?” Sofia said. “Trust me. I know how to handle this.”

“I’m tired of trusting. Maybe all I want is him to know he didn’t beat me.”

There was hint of panic in the way Sofia stared at him, as if she were searching for something to convince Victor of the folly of facing down Nouno. And for a moment, Victor allowed to play out the fantasy of walking into Nouno's office and confronting him. It was like in the movies, he thought. Good guy, bad guy. Picturing the scene, he felt a sense of achievement not only for mustering his courage, but also because the idea seemed to chip away a little of Sofia's assuredness.

"What's your plan," Victor said. "wait for Nouno to die? How long? Months, years? I will be a make-believe sponge diver? I'd rather wash dishes. And then when the old man goes, what then? Cyrus? He'll just hand over everything to you and me? 'Here, Victor, here's a big house for you to grow old in.' Or maybe we'll wait for him to die, too."

Sofia's eyes glowed, but her gaze was direct and level. "I watch people," she said softly. "It's a talent of mine. I know what they want, sometimes even when they don't know. I can see their weaknesses, what they'll give up so they get whatever is they think they want. I know Cyrus. Sooner or later, probably sooner, he's going to fuck up so big that even being Nouno's family won't matter."

"And if he don't?"

"I also know Nouno. He doesn't like surprises. That's why I don't push him. If you do, it won't be good, Victor. It won't be me who suffers. It'll be you. I promise you it won't be long. But if don't wait, if you go ahead and push Nouno, I can't guarantee you anything except trouble."

Victor considered this. The more he thought of being some tourist's version of a sponge diver the more he loathed the idea. He'd not come back to be a clown. He wanted

to reclaim his dignity, not sacrifice what little scrap of it that remained. He thought of Janna, his friend's young wife, and what had come of her dignity. He remembered Ackles, and imagined how he would have proceeded if he were in Victor's shoes. But he wasn't Ackles. Even Ackles wasn't Ackles anymore. Victor couldn't rely on a dead man to tell him what to do. It was his call.

Just then, the nurse appeared in the doorway. She told Sofia that Georgie wanted to see her. Sofia said that she'd be up in a minute. She waited for the nurse to leave, and then she turned to Victor. "I have to get dressed. I have things to do. You can stay here if you want. Nouno will back around noon. Or I'll take you back to the motel. You decide."

Victor reached to stroke her long dark hair. He ran his hand down her shoulder. "I need to know more about this job," he said. "Like how much I get paid. How many days off?"

Sofia smiled. "We'll stop on the way to the motel for breakfast," she said. "We'll hammer the details."

Twenty-Three

Spongers

Every morning just as the sun rose Victor and Andreas Kostos loaded a mesh bag full of sheepswool sponges aboard a small, fast boat and set off down the Anclote into the Gulf of Mexico. Every trip, Kostos, the old sponge captain, spoke the same lines, as if reciting from a script.

As they loaded the sponges, Kostos would say, “You finally working for me now, eh, kid? You thought you run away. But I found you and hauled you in because I’m an old fisherman.”

And then out on the water, the morning chill biting at their faces, he’d curse and yell over the roar of the outboard, “It’s fool’s work to put sponges *back* in the sea.”

Victor let him rant. It’s not as if anything he said or did could have stopped Kostos. Besides, Victor agreed with the old man. Their work—if you could call it work—*was* crazy. Every morning they steered the boat toward the lighthouse on Anclote Island, some three miles west of the mainland. At a spot about a half-mile from the island marked by an inconspicuous buoy, they tied their load of sponges to a line attached to a sunken trashcan filled with cement and sent them down to the bottom. Then they returned to Tarpon Springs to prepare the sponge boat, the *Leftheriá*, for its daily cargo. Not sponges, not anymore. Now the catch was tourists.

Sofia had come up with a way for Victor to hide in plain sight. After her brother Sofia’s brother died on the *Leftheriá*, Victor had promised her that one day he would buy Kostos’ old sponge boat and blow it up. She had laughed at the suggestion, and Victor

thought she was charmed by his gallantry. He hadn't seen then what he knew now: the idea of destroying something that could prove useful was absurd to Sofia. You had to admire her ingenuity, as well as how she never let sentiment get in the way of opportunity. She recalled what Nouno once told her, that after her brother's death, old Kostos had come to Nouno complaining that he couldn't find anyone willing to work with him on the *Leftheriá*. Nouno kept loaning Kostos what little the old sponger needed to get by on, and it soon became clear that the old man could never repay his growing debt.

So Nouno agreed to take ownership of the boat and allowed Kostos to go on living on board. In return, Kostos began a second career, as a dishwasher at Nouno's restaurant.

Meanwhile, Kostos held fast to the idea that one day he'd return to the sea, and he kept the *Leftheriá* in shape in case the possibility presented itself. When Sofia laid out her plan to turn the *Leftheriá* into a tour boat and suggested that Victor could stay onboard with Kostos, the old man was thrilled. The crew that Kostos had originally envisioned all those years earlier was at long last united. And the *Leftheriá*, like its captain, found a second career, in show business.

At first, Victor still harbored pangs of guilt about the entire venture. Claiming what they were doing was sponge diving was insulting, if not to the tourists who'd pay three dollars apiece to go out with them, certainly to Kostos and all the other sponge divers who'd sailed out of Tarpon Springs all those years. Secretly, though, Victor also worried about what kind of fool he'd appear if nobody actually showed up and paid the three bucks, a prospect that seemed at the time entirely possible.

“Don’t worry,” Sofia said. “I’m the one on the line here.”

She made a recording of the speech she wanted Kostos to learn and she showed him how to use the cassette tape machine so that he could listen over and over until he was able to repeat every word. It was all about the “mystery of the deep” and “danger lurking down below in the murky depths.”

“Pah,” Kostos said the first time he played the tape. “What a load of crappola.” Sofia wasn’t around, of course. And despite his failure to appreciate the poetry of the speil, he dutifully rewound the tape and listened again and again, and the next time Sofia came around he recited it back to her. She only had to interrupt him to correct three or four lines.

The first few times they took tourists out to the lighthouse, Kostos recited the speech almost flawlessly, if somewhat woodenly, but with practice he grew more comfortable, and his performance became more relaxed. Sometimes he forgot whole sections of the prepared remarks and simply improvised.

The tourists loved the crusty, old sponger, and they flocked to the *Leftheriá*, which was renamed the *Kalymnos*. It was bad luck to rename a boat, but even Kostos didn’t object too much when Sofia ordered the change. The old captain was in no position to complain; the boat no longer was his, and he owed his livelihood to the young woman who now called the shots in place of Nouno. Besides, Kostos said, what could be a problem? You’d have to be some kind of numbskull to get into serious trouble going back and forth to the lighthouse. A man could swim home so close to shore if he had to.

But the setup wasn’t quite foolproof. Victor, for instance, still had to don the diving suit and helmet every day and go down and haul up the sponges they planted every

morning. But the old man's point was basically true. Pretend sponge fishing for tourists presented nowhere near the risks of actual diving. And anyone could see that pretend sponge fishing was what they were doing. No honest-to-god working sponge captain would have time to waste on hauling around tourists. Logic alone would suggest that if finding sponges were just a matter sailing a few miles off shore, jumping in, and coming up with a boatload of cured sponges then there should be dozens of boats plucking up such easy pickings, or back at the docks unloading them. Had the tourists given it some thought back in the sponge docks, the absence of any olfactory evidence of things brought up from the bottom of the sea would have been suspicious. But about the only fish anyone was likely to smell along the Sponge Docks now would come from the grill at Nouno's Restaurant, which is where the sponge boat excursionists were herded to after building a hearty appetite on the open sea. As long as no one questioned things too deeply, everyone benefited. So far, no one was complaining.

It was the height of the tourist season, and the boat was packed. Victor sat in his bunk mouthing the words tinning out of the loudspeaker nailed to the mast above him. He knew what was coming. He'd heard it so many times before Kostos' voice seemed almost like idle thoughts from inside his own head, as if he were not hearing, but just thinking the words. He knew what was coming.

Sitting below waiting for Kostos' to begin describing the fearless sponge divers of old—Victor's cue to begin to make his way up on deck, reminded him of the hours he'd spent waiting in Vietnam to head out on patrol or to enter a suspected hostile village, the feeling that it was all happening to someone else, and that he was watching it all unfold.

He remembered when he'd complained to Ackles that he'd come to Vietnam in place of Cyrus, his friend reminded him that no one *wanted* to be there; they were all in someone else's place. It was less dangerous to pretend to be a sponge diver than a soldier, but waiting to come up on deck in the diving suit churned up the old, familiar feelings of taunting fate by meddling in affairs he had no business in. For solace, he turned his thoughts to Ackles young wife and pictured her and him together, not always innocently. In those waiting long hours below decks, he fantasized unashamedly about Janna. It was only later was that he felt guilty about being disloyal to Sofia.

He was brought suddenly back to the present when he heard Kostos describing how a diver had jumped ship when he'd found a priceless pearl only to be cursed the rest of his days by the treasure. It was an odd story, Victor thought, for tourists curious about sponge diving. But Kostos told the tale with great, hammy fervor, filling in details when someone asked for clarification. He'd been surprised when the old man first told the story, but not the next day when he repeated the cursed pearl story, nor when, as the weeks went by, Kostos had invented a travelogue for the tourists that bore scant traces of either Sofia's original speech or verifiable fact. The tourists ate it up. Victor knew that Kostos had found his calling.

"Here we are," Kostos said through the loudspeaker. "The secret spot. The great reef where only the world's finest sponges are."

Victor's signal. He stood and hoisted the brass diving helmet in place and then clumped up the three stairs from the cabin onto the deck. The entrance never failed to induce a little wave of awe from the tourists on board. The clan of Bermuda shorts and T-shirt clad parents parted for the almost otherworldly figure making its way among them.

Little children clung tightly to the adults' bare legs. It would have been easier to carry the helmet and have Kostos lift it over his head and secure it to the suit collar just before he attached the air hose and Victor jumped over the side, but Sofia insisted. It made a better show for Victor to emerge from the cabin with the helmet already in place. More mystery, she said. It also assured Victor remained unrecognized.

“Here he is, ladies and gents, boys and girls. All the way from the Greek island of Kalymnos. The fearless sponge diver.”

Victor clomped his way to the rail near the pump and waited for Kostos to come down from the fly bridge and help him connect the air hose.

But the old man was still not out of the cabin when Victor felt hands on his collar.

“Let me get that for you, Victor.”

He had to turn his whole body to see who had called him by name. Through the glass portal of the helmet smiled a gaunt looking man. Victor could see him only from the chest up, but that was enough to make him take a step back from his bony grasp. Still, the thin man managed to keep both hands firmly on the dive suit. And when Victor tried to get loose, the man caught his arm in his fist.

“Relax,” the man said. And he did appear surprisingly relaxed, casual almost, despite Victor's straining to pull free from his grasp. “I'm here to give you a message. From a friend. He says to tell you he knows you're back. He says he'll be watching.”

Kostos clambered onto the deck. “What's this?” he said.

“Just giving the fearless diver here a helping hand,” the man said. “You better go on now. You want to give the people what they paid for.” He turned to Victor and offered him a two-fingered salute.

Back at the docks, as Kostos herded the tourists off toward Nouno's Restaurant, Victor stood in the cabin watching the messenger. The man leaned against the rail, his pale, thin forearms crossed atop the gunwale. He waited for the others to go ahead and then made his way toward the gangplank. He stopped just before he reached the side and turned toward the cabin and smiled a gap-toothed grin that made Victor flinch. "Happy sailing, Cap'n," he said to Kostos. He made his way up onto the dock and walked away in an awkward, bouncing gait that suggested he'd be more comfortable perhaps on all fours.

"What the hell was that?" Kostos said.

Victor came up from the cabin. He shrugged.

"Looks like something if you caught it, you'd throw back."

Victor hurried past the old man toward the dock.

"Where you going?" Kostos said.

"Out," Victor said. He didn't look back. He hurried up the street, head down but not worried now about being recognized. It was too late to worry. He had to find Sofia and tell her about the thug and his message. No use hiding now. He'd already been found out.

Twenty-Four

Confession

Victor raised his hand to shield his eyes from the blinding light. From beyond the glare a harsh voice ordered him to freeze. As his eyes adjusted, he could make out the police uniform.

He'd been to the shop on Dodeconese that Sofia was getting ready to open, but it was locked, and she was nowhere in sight. He slipped into the restaurant, made a quick tour of the bar and the dining room while he pretended to search for the restroom. But no Sofia. Finally, in desperation, he walked to the big house on the bayou. He peered into the garage, and saw the yellow Volkswagen. He agonized over whether to knock on the door. For all he knew Nouno would be waiting for him. Finally, he decided to risk it. Better to know that Sofia was safe than shrink from Nouno. The nurse answered. She was holding Georgie.

"Sofia?" Victor said.

"No," the nurse said. "*No en el país.*"

So he went around back and waited for some sign of her returning. He didn't hear anyone approaching.

"Come with me," the cop said.

Victor was summoned from the holding cell and followed a uniformed cop to a glass door on which was painted the words Detective Bureau. He was told to have a seat, someone would be there to see him. He wondered if the military police would finally catch up with him. He'd pleaded with the jail guard to speak to someone about a murder.

The truth, he'd decided, may not set him free, but he hoped it might keep him—and Sofia alive.

Fifteen minutes later a short, thin man in a white shirt appeared from a second glass door at the rear of the room. He introduced himself as Detective Bouchier. “The deputy that brought you in said you want to talk about a homicide,” he said.

“I want to report a crime,” Victor said. “I want to confess.”

“To a homicide?”

Victor hesitated.

“Murder,” the detective explained. “You’re here to confess you killed someone?”

“Yes,” Victor said, “and no.”

The detective pursed his meaty lips. “You’re confused,” he said.

“This is the police?”

“It ain’t St. Nicholas. We don’t have priests here. Just us civil servants.”

“Forgive me,” Victor said.

The cop’s narrow eyes went slittier. “You some kind of smart guy?”

“I don’t want to confess my sins,” Victor said. “I want to confess to a crime.”

The detective laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. The wooden office chair creaked in complaint to his shifting bulk. “Go ahead,” the cop said. “Shoot.”

“A man was killed in Tarpon Springs, and I was part of it,” Victor said.

“Who was killed?”

“His name was Bazos.”

“And when did it happen?”

“Three years ago. Maybe four.”

The detective looked up.

“And how did you kill Mr. Bazos?”

“I didn’t kill him.”

The detective was stone faced.

“But I was there,” Victor explained.

“So you’re confessing to being an accessory to this said murder?”

“It was an accident.”

“Then there’s no crime to confess to.”

“The crime happened later.”

“Slow down,” the detective said. He took a notebook from his pocket. “What’s your name, son?”

“Victor Lucas.”

“Says here you’re some kind of peeping tom. Where’d you get that limp?”

“Vietnam, sir,” Victor said. “That’s what I want to tell you about.”

The detective looked up. He had an almost amused expression, as if he were pleased they were finally getting to the bottom of things.

“I lied to the army about who I was. I told them I was Cyrus Kanakis.”

“You lied? To get into the army?”

“I did it so that the real Cyrus Kanakis wouldn’t have to go to the war.”

“Your name is Victor?” the detective said. “Do you have any identification?”

Victor shook his head.

“What’s all this about the army have to do with the killing? What’s the connection?”

“The reason I agreed to go in Cyrus’ place was because my girlfriend got into a fight with her father, Bazos, and he was killed. We were afraid the cops, er, police, would blame her. So Cyrus and his uncle took care of things, but first I had to agree to go to the army for him.”

“How did this Cyrus and his uncle take care of things?”

“I didn’t ask,” Victor said.

“They disposed of the body somehow so nobody could find him?”

Victor nodded.

“What’d you say the man’s name was, your girlfriend’s father?”

“Bob Bazos.”

“And this all happened four years ago.”

“Nineteen Sixty-Nine. November, maybe December.”

“And your girlfriend, what’s her name?”

“Sofia.”

“Sofia Bazos.”

Victor felt the blood rise in his face. “She’s Sofia Kanakis now.”

“As in Cyrus Kanakis? The man you went to the army for.” The detective smiled.

“Have you been drinking tonight, Victor? Or taking any drugs?”

Again Victor shook his head.

“And the uncle’s name?”

“Nouno Papademopoulos,” Victor said.

The detective screwed his lips around on his face. “Wait here,” he said. He got up and walked outside and spoke to the woman sitting at the desk by the glass door. Victor

saw the detective write on a pad and then say something, and then the woman nodded, took the paper on which the detective had written and hurried off.

As the detective walked back across the office, he flipped through his notebook. “I’m trying to get this all straight,” he said as he sat back down at the desk. “Your girlfriend accidentally kills her father. You and her get scared and ask Cyrus and his uncle to help you get rid of the body. They agree, but first they make you promise to go to Vietnam for Cyrus, which you do. Accurate so far?”

Victor nodded.

“So you go off, do your hitch, and come back?”

“I was in the hospital for a while. Then I came back.”

“And *when* you come back, you find your girlfriend Sofia is now with Cyrus. That’s what you’re telling me?” The detective propped his elbow on the desk and rested his chin in his palm. He looked up at Victor over the rims of his glasses.

“She thought I was dead,” Victor said. “Cyrus and Nouno lied to her. They made her think I was killed.”

The detective stared hard at Victor. “Son,” he said. “You understand this isn’t a game. These are serious allegations. If it turns out that your lying about this, especially to settle some kind of beef you have with your girlfriend . . .”

“I’m not lying,” Victor shouted.

“All right,” the detective said. “All right.” His tone was like a man soothing a nervous animal. “I’d understand, Victor, if your girl dumped you while you were off in the war and you came back and felt like shit. That’s a shitty thing to do to someone. But I’m reminding you that falsely accusing someone of murder and extortion and tampering

with evidence and probably a half-dozen other crimes in the process is definitely not the answer to that kind of a problem. Just the opposite. You'll find yourself up the creek without a paddle."

Both Victor and the detective turned when the woman out front tapped on the glass. She held up a file, and the detective smiled at her and went to get it. They spoke briefly, and the detective opened the file and began to read what was inside before he returned. He sat across from Victor and continued to read. He flipped through a dozen pages before he stopped and looked up.

"Robert Bazos," he said. "Medical examiner's report. Date of death November seventeenth, nineteen sixty-nine. Cause of death, gunshot. Manner of death, suicide." He flipped through several more pages. "Bazos shot himself, Victor. Left a note and everything."

"But I was there," Victor said. "Sofia was there. Ask her."

"I plan to, Victor. But I want you to do me a favor. While I'm doing some more checking into this. I want you to think hard about your story. If you tell me, 'Detective Bouchier, I was confused and I may have been mistaken about some of the things I told you,' I'll say, 'Victor, we all make mistakes from time to time. No harm, no foul.' I want you to really think it over, son. You get my drift? Good. You can wait right in here."

He led him to a room with a mirror along one wall and long table with three metal chairs. There he sat and waited.

After what seemed like hours, the detective swung the door open, and outside, behind him, stood Nouno Papademopoulos.

The detective looked back at Nouno, and he nodded. "That's him," Nouno said.

"I'll be just outside," the detective said, and he closed the door behind him.

Victor stood.

"That's a two-way mirror," Nouno said. "In case you were worried." He stood with his back to the glass and in front of Victor. "The cop's behind there watching. Whatever I say, just listen and nod." He motioned for Victor to sit in one of the metal chairs, and he sat down next to him. He was thinner than Victor remembered. And he moved in a shuffle. The left side of his face drooped, or rather seemed to lag behind the right side. In fact, the whole left side of his body seemed a reluctant collaborator with the animated right side. He sat heavily in a folding metal chair, rubbed his chin with his right hand, and in a louder voice said, "Cyrus, do you know who I am?"

Victor sat back in the chair.

"I'm your uncle Nouno." He spoke as if to someone who spoke little English and was hard of hearing.

Victor looked up, saw the old man bob his head slyly and roll his right eye toward the mirror. Victor nodded.

"And you know you're Cyrus, and you're back from the army, right. The detective said you told him another name. Do you remember? They called me. Some crazy thing about a murder. You know that's not true."

Victor looked up at the glass, but saw only his own reflection. Nouno reached across the table and put his right hand on Victor's shoulder.

"It's okay. I explained everything to the detective. We'll go home. I'll take care of you. Everything's going to be all right." He turned and nodded toward the glass then

looked hard at Victor. A moment later the door opened, and the detective stood and smiled.

“All right now?” the detective said. “Everything straightened out?”

“My nephew was just a little confused,” Nouno said.

“Happens all the time,” the detective said.

The old man sat in the front seat next to the thin man from the boat. Neither said anything on the way back to the house on the bayou. At every stop sign and every turn, Victor thought about opening the door and jumping out. But each time, he remembered the nurse’s face when she answered the door. Was it panic or fear he saw there? Was Sofia inside? Was she there now? She would be furious with him for allowing himself to be discovered. But what had he done except do as she asked?

Back at the big house, the man from the boat got out and hurried around the car to help Nouno. But the old man waved him away. When Victor tried to open his door, he found it was locked. The thin man grinned down at him from the outside and opened the door. He jerked his head toward the entrance of the house, and Victor went on ahead.

Inside, Nouno was at the liquor cabinet. “Can I get you something, ouzo, whiskey?” he said.

Victor shook his head, and Nouno filled a tiny glass of ouzo. “Just a thimble these days,” he said. “You shouldn’t let yourself get so old.”

The driver had slipped out of sight, but he wasn’t far away. His presence remained in the air, like the taint of smoldering electrical wires. Nouno told Victor to sit and then slowly sank down into a plaid couch.

“So,” he said. “It’s been a long time.” His speech was slow and just slightly slurred, more of a lisp, the way a man talks when he’s had too many ouzos.

Victor nodded.

“You got a job and a place to live. You’re doing all right.” He took a dainty sip of his drink. “So why do you want to tell the cops some crazy story about something that’s done and over with?”

“The truth,” Victor said.

Nouno raised his right brow. “The truth? Like how you’ve pretended to be a sponge diver? Or how you ran away from the army? Maybe the truth you told was about sneaking around with my nephew’s wife?”

At the sound of movement behind him, Victor turned, expecting to see the gaunt driver, but there was no sign of him.

“All you have to worry about for now is me,” Nouno said.

“I told them about Cyrus, about how I took his place.”

“Did you mention that it was your decision?”

Victor shrugged. “I’d still have the scars. What does Cyrus have?”

“Me, for one thing.”

“Then I’m lucky I’m not Cyrus.”

Nouno chuckled. “I know who the hell you are, goddamn it.” he roared. “What do you want?”

“Tell me about the pearl,” Victor said.

“What pearl?”

“From Greece. Or Australia.”

His dry laugh came from the back of his throat. "That was a long time ago. Like the stories of the gods. You believe in those?"

"Some."

"You'd believe that a man found a great pearl and paid for it with his life?"

"I've heard the story."

"But do you believe?"

"Did my grandfather pay you to look out for me? Yes or no."

"I'm tired of this shit."

"Did he?"

"Who do you think you are, asking these question?"

"Yes or no?"

"Who are you?"

"A ghost."

The old man laughed and reached for a handkerchief to wipe a string of errant spittle from his chin. "Ghost, that's good. So you wouldn't stay dead, huh, dishwasher. Good for you."

"We have business to settle."

The old man raised an eyebrow.

Victor pressed on. "We had a deal. I did my part."

"So that's it? That's what you come back for? You want money?" Nouno said.

"I don't need your money."

"What then? You come back to kill me? Make you feel better if I'm in the ground? Go ahead."

Victor put his foot up on the couch cushion and pushed his pant leg up to reveal his burn scars. "I want you to see what your deal cost me," he said. "I want you to repay me for this."

The old man squinted. The corner of his lips curled, the alive side of his face almost glowed. "That's it?" he said. "How's this? I'll trade you, right now. This old man's body for your twisted leg. That's my offer."

"Fuck you," Victor said.

"Yes, fuck me. Fuck it all. Are we even?"

Victor straightened his pant leg and stood. "Where's Sofia?" he said.

"Ah, so maybe now we talk about what you really want."

"If you hurt her . . ."

"What would you do about it? Not a damn thing.. You already went to the cops with your crazy story, and that got you what? Right back here. If you go back now they'd throw away the key. You're nobody. Victor Lucas doesn't exist. Not to the cops, not to the army. Nobody. So what are you going to do?"

Nothing. It was true. He didn't exist. There was nothing he could do, not for Sofia, and not for himself. It was all up to Nouno. It had always been up to him.

"Go ahead," Victor said. "Kill me. Call your, whatever that is in the kitchen and have him do it."

"Why bother?" the old man said. The right corner of his mouth rose slyly. "Better to let you live, suffer." He sipped from his tiny glass. "You come for the truth. Here it is. Sofia will never leave what she has now and run off with you. She never had any intention. Maybe she had a reason or two to keep you around. Plans for you. Maybe

you'd get fed up and come over and slit my old throat. Maybe it was my nephew. I'm guessing. Sofia's a smart girl. She had her reasons. But you only mattered as long as you stayed hid. So now, you don't matter. Go on, busboy," he flicked his good hand at him. "Goon back to your boat and your little sponge diver games. When you get tired, you'll move on, another crazy Vietnam vet. Go."

"Not without my son." Victor said.

Nouno shook his head slowly. "Ask Sofia," he said, "about what's yours."

The skeletal driver appeared from the kitchen and leaned in the doorway. Victor stood and looked upstairs. There was light, no sound of anyone else at home. Outside, he paused in front of the house. And then he headed down toward the docks.

Twenty-Five

Deeper.

Sofia turned and snapped. “What were thinking? What if the cops had believed you? What would’ve happened to us?”

“I wanted them to. I want all of this to be over.”

“All of what to be over?”

“I need answers,” Victor said.

“So went to the cops? Jesus. You know Cyrus is behind this. Nouno didn’t give a shit.. He probably you knew you were back before I did.” She pounded the steering wheel with the base of her palm. “I can’t deal with this right now. I’ve got a million things to do. This place will be crawling with tourists this weekend for Epiphany. I have to get the store opened. Goddamn Cyrus. He always did have the worst timing.”

She’d been waiting for him at the boat. She knew there was trouble when Kostos told her about the strange man. She and Victor had driven around for hours while Sofia debriefed him about the conversation with Nouno. Did Nouno say anything about Cyrus? Did he threaten him?

“It’ll be okay,” she said. But she was reassuring herself as much as Victor.
“We’re fine. We just have to think this through.”

They drove north on U.S. 19 toward Tarpon Springs. Sofia gunned the engine, and the VW seemed to scream in pain. Several times she whipped around slow-moving cars, once barely avoiding an oncoming pickup. She was in a hurry to get back to work. The gift shop she was opening next door to the restaurant was opening the next day, and she hadn’t finished preparations.

Victor was quiet. He decided it was safer to wait until they arrived—assuming they would in spite of Sofia’s maniacal driving—before he continued the conversation.

At the shop, Sofia went straight to work, shuffling cardboard cartons and forgetting, apparently, for the moment, the problem with Nouno.

“Have you been honest with me?” Victor said.

“Victor—”

“Nouno said you never really wanted me around. You’d be through with me now that—”

“We talked about this, Victor. I explained—”

“The truth, Sofia.”

She turned and glared. “What do you want to hear, Victor? I was using you for some big master plan? The truth is you’re not all *that* useful to me.”

“So Nouno was right. I should go?”

“Calm down. Nobody’s going anywhere, okay? I *want* you here. It has nothing to do with how useful you are.”

“But why? Is it for Georgie? Nouno said—”

“What about Georgie? You want me to Georgie is not your son? If I told you he’s Cyrus’, would you walk away?”

“Tell me the truth.”

“I’m telling you. You can believe me or Nouno. But maybe you should consider the source.”

“I’m trying,” Victor said.

Sofia glared again. “This is not how I wanted things,” she said.

“Then get a divorce.”

“I wanted to,” she said. “Nouno wouldn’t have liked it, but so what? He couldn’t really stop me. I went to a lawyer. Wait a year, he says. If Cyrus is still gone, you can claim abandonment. So now it looks like he’s back. I heard he came by the restaurant.”

“So now what’s stopping you?”

“He’ll want the business, everything. But that’s not the reason. He threatened to say that I’m embezzling Nouno’s money. He’s got no proof. But in court that doesn’t always matter. He also said if I try to stop him he’ll take Georgie from me. I could lose my son. Is that a chance you’d take?” Her usual confidence was shaken. She rubbed her eyes her knuckles. “You wouldn’t, Victor, and I don’t intend to.” She grabbed a box cutter and slashed open a carton.

“You could take Georgie and we could—”

“No way in hell I’m going let him ruin everything I’ve worked so hard for.”

“The three of us could start over somewhere else,” Victor said.

She stopped unloading the box, looked up, and seemed to see Victor for the first time. “If it was that easy,” she said, “if it was just about the money, I’d say, let’s go, as far as we can. Cyrus doesn’t care about me or Georgie. But you know as well as I do, Victor, that if I took Georgie away, it’d be worse in the eyes of the old ladies around here than if they caught Cyrus with his hand in the collection plate at St. Nicholas. Nouno cares about things like that. He’s not about to let anything like that happen.” She plunged the knife into another carton and ripped open the top.

Victor grabbed a stack of boxes and carried them over to Sofia. “You can’t leave, but you can’t stay here with Cyrus. What then?”

“Maybe there’s another way,” she said. “We could make him an offer he can’t refuse.” She smiled and seemed pleased with herself, as if in this phrase was the answer to all of their problems. “Like the Godfather?” she said when Victor didn’t immediately respond.

“Who?”

“The movie? You know, the horse in the bed? Sleeping with the fishes? The gun in the toilet?”

“I thought you meant Nouno,” Victor said.

“He wishes, the old fart.” Sofia laughed. “But look, listen. We could do this, for real. We explain it all to Cyrus, and hopefully he sees the logic in it. But since we’re talking about Cyrus here, probably he won’t. So then, plan B.” She walked behind the counter and reached down for a brown paper bag. She held it open so Victor could see the gun inside.

“Kill him?” Victor said.

“Persuade him,” Sofia said. “We’ll give him a choice. He’ll get the picture.”

“What do you want him to do?”

She wrapped the bag around the gun and stashed back under the counter. “Simple. Leave and never come back.”

“But he wouldn’t just walk away. You said—”

“He would if there was a payoff for him. We’ll convince him to fake his death and collect on the insurance. We’ll make it look like he drowned. He’ll be sorry he didn’t think of it on his own. And,” she put her hand on Victor’s, “the military won’t be looking for Cyrus Kanakis anymore either. You can be whoever you want.”

Surely it was all just talk, more of Sofia's working through the possibilities. Victor decided to indulge the fantasy. "What about the police," he said. "Won't they wonder why there's no body?"

"It's a big ocean. Currents. Tides. Sharks."

"What if later Cyrus goes to the police?"

"And says what? He faked his own death?"

"Says you forced him to."

Sofia batted her eyes. "Why ever would they believe such a thing?"

"Because of the money, the insurance."

She smiled slowly. "That's just it. There isn't any insurance. We'll *tell* Cyrus there is and we'll even give him what we say is his share. But if he ever gets stupid enough to go to the cops, they won't find any insurance policy. What crime have I committed? What motive is there? He's the one who disappeared."

"But if there isn't any insurance money, why bother with all this?"

"Price of freedom. I never want him to lay another finger on me or on Georgie. I want him out of my business and out of my life. I want him gone for good. And if he thinks he's pulling a fast one, it's all the more reason for him to do it."

There was a familiar glow about her. And Victor realized that the look on her face as she talked about the business of getting rid of Cyrus was the same as she looked when they made love. He believed her when she said that she wasn't plotting for the sake of money. She didn't lust for money. It wasn't about that. It was about being formidable, respected, which is another way of saying being loved, but on your own terms. And what other way is there to be loved?

So it was simple, one plus one equals two, like when they made love. What did he have to lose? They could entice Cyrus to go along. But if it came down to it, Victor would have no trouble shooting him. In the end, it wasn't really all that complicated. He loved her. He trusted her. But more than that, he desperately wanted to believe it was possible, finally, to start over.

"Do you believe in second chances?" he said.

"Sure," she said. "It happens all the time." She shoved a cardboard box aside and leaned over to read the label. "In the movies."

"What *do* you believe in?"

"Okay," she said. She pushed a loose strand of hair from her eyes. "What I believe in. I believe in work. I believe in keeping what I've worked for. I believe in taking care of myself. How's that? Maybe not in that order."

"You didn't say love. You don't think it's possible?"

"Do I believe it's possible?" She stood and stretched. "Maybe. But you asked what I believe in. I think a lot of things are possible. Maybe there's a god that watches down and pulls our strings. But that doesn't mean I believe. If I was a carpenter I'd believe in trees. If I was drowning I'd believe in water. I'm just me, so I believe in work."

"But water and the trees don't care if it's you or someone else."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You need someone else to love you."

She bent over another carton and slit it open. She removed an armload of navy wool hats with narrow peaked brims. "You want me to tell you I love you? Is that it? If I promise I'll always be true, you'll do what I want? You'll help me with Cyrus?"

“I’m not making a deal,” Victor said. “I’ve always loved you.”

“God Victor, what is it about you that makes me talk so much when I’m around you? Why do I always feel like I have to explain myself to you? No one else makes me feel that way.” She tossed him one of the caps. “On the house. Now you’re a real Greek fisherman.” She turned back to the boxes, while Victor examined the hat and saw that instead of wool the cap was made of some kind of felted paper. Its brim was cardboard painted a shiny black.

“Thank you,” Victor said. He turned the cap in his hands.

Sofia stood again and pushed her hair back from her forehead. “Victor, what you asked me earlier? I believe in something else. People like us don’t get second chances.”

“What kind of people are we?”

“The kind who spend their lives trying to catch up from the minute they slap you on the butt. If we’re lucky, you and me, we get maybe one chance to make good. Or to fail. Well, here’s our one chance, and I’m not ready to give it up.”

“There’s always another way.”

She laughed. “You mean like there’s some big payoff up around the bend? Cyrus sure thinks so.” She flattened the box that contained the fishermen’s caps and walked over to where other cartons were stacked shoulder high. When she reached for a box on top of the stack, she could barely budge it. “Give me a hand?” she said.

With some effort, Victor slid the carton toward him and caught it, almost buckling under its weight.

“Funny, I didn’t realize till just now that you and Cyrus were more alike than any of us wanted to admit. Except Nouno. He saw it all right from the start.”

“We’re not the same,” Victor said, dropping the box at Sofia’s feet. “Which leg did he give up for you?”

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings,” she said, although her face didn’t particularly register sorrow. “But I’ve learned that the future doesn’t come with a guarantee. You can’t just go pluck hundred dollar bills from the trees.” She looked up. “Or giant pearls from the ocean.”

Victor said nothing.

“Look around, Victor. This is it.”

He saw the rack of cheap fishermen caps, bins of miniature plastic diving helmets, stacks of toy diving boats, and fishbowls full of rubber octopuses.

“This is nothing. It’s all fake,” Victor said. “This is what you want?”

“It’s just the start of what I want.” The anger swelled in her voice. “And I’ll get it. Because I understand when you get backed into a corner, the only way out is straight ahead.”

She finished unpacking the boxes and she and Victor took the flattened cardboard out through the back door. Victor waited while Sofia locked up.

“When?” he asked her.

She turned and wrinkled her forehead and then understood. “Soon,” she said. “Before he goes to the cops or his lawyer.”

“All right,” Victor said.

“You’ll do it, then?”

Victor nodded, and Sofia smiled back at him then reached up and hugged him. “It’s for the best. I promise.” She kissed him on the cheek.

It was after midnight by the time they left the store. They left through the back door, and Sofia began to get in the VW when Victor stopped her. “Tell me,” he said. “Did you ever care about him?”

“Cyrus?” Sofia said. “Maybe. I guess he was kind of interesting, in a way, at first, back when he was becoming whatever the hell he’s turned out to be. At least he had to struggle. He had, you know, a goal.” She laughed. “I guess, too, that he’d probably be interesting again if he’d try to stop being what he is. Made up his mind to struggle against it. But if you’re asking if I care about him now, no, all I am now is tired of him. He wins just enough to convince himself he’s figured out how to beat the system. But like clockwork, every month he’s on the phone asking for more, and if I tell him no, he shows up here, like now. So far he’s managed to stay just far enough on the good side of his uncle so Nouno doesn’t forget he’s family.”

And then Victor realized what had really been the source of his hesitation about Sofia’s plan.

“What happens if Nouno finds out about you getting rid of Cyrus?” Victor said.

“I’ll tell him I made him a deal,” Sofia said. “He understands deals. Where do you think I got the idea in the first place?”

“And that’s the end of it? We just go on. Happily ever after?”

Sofia frowned. “Exact;u,” she said. “We’ll be happy. What’s wrong with that? Isn’t that’s why you came back here? That’s all either of us ever hoped for.”

“I don’t think it was ever for me, to be happy. I used to think so. Now I wonder.”

She stretched up and kissed him. “My Greek,” she said. “Always tragic. Always chased by fate. This time next week, we’ll be over this. And then we’ll start new. You’ll

get your second chance. Just you and me and Georgie. And in six months, a year, whenever Nouno's gone, all of this will be ours."

Twenty-Six

Down

Cyrus' arm was in a sling, and he clung to the ropes with his good hand, tying the bow line as Kostos edged the sponge boat alongside the dock. Victor watched from the dock. Cyrus had grown thicker and softer around the waist. His hair reached several inches past his collar, his sideburns were thick and wide.

Victor waited for the tourists to climb off the boat before he came out onto the deck. Cyrus was there tying off the last spring line. "What, no hello, how are you? Nothing?" Cyrus said, still not looking up from where he knelt, knotting the line to a cleat. "How's tricks, Victor?"

Meanwhile, Kostos was climbing down from the bridge. "What do you want?" he said to Cyrus. "Why are you here?"

"Relax," Cyrus said. "Just checking on my investment."

"Yours?" Kostos said, his voice rising. "This boat . . . You can't . . ." The old man was practically sputtering.

Cyrus laughed and turned to Victor. "So you're back, Victor? But no busboy. Things are looking up for you. At least that's what I hear."

Victor didn't know what to do. All this time, he'd nurtured a vision of this moment, a movie that played over and over in his head. The details changed. Sometimes the scene ended in Technicolored violence; sometimes Victor walked away in superior indifference. But always the basic story was the same. Good—meaning Victor—triumphed over evil—the always bowed, and sometimes bloodied, Cyrus. But in the here and now of it, with the hot sun pouring down over Cyrus' broad shoulders and his failure

to play the part of the villain—or even to betray some wariness of Victor standing over him—Victor would have to do some hasty revisions.

“What do you want?” Victor said.

“To ask you the same question,” Cyrus said, squinting up at him.

And Victor finally looked again into the face of his personal daemon only to see what he knew but had chosen to forget, that the face of his nemesis was very much like his own. “I came back. . .” Victor managed, but explanation escaped him. Why?

Cyrus stood, smiling as if he were waiting for the punch line of a joke. And perhaps that was the case. Maybe just being back here made Victor a punch line, his merely standing here the denouement of an intricate practical joke that had been in the works for the last three years.

“Well?” Cyrus said.

“I’m here for what’s mine,” Victor said, which was, he realized even as he was blurting it out, as accurate a statement of his purpose that he could construct, but also, judging from Cyrus’ cartoonish response, just the delicious comic pay-off that Cyrus expected. He actually slapped his knee and rubbed his eye with his free hand. Victor watched it all in silence.

“Oh Jesus, sweet Jesus,” Cyrus said between peals of laughter. “I came for what’s mine.” He looked around, possibly for a handy set of ribs to elbow. But now they were alone on the dock. “It’s good to see some things never change. Same old Victor numbnuts. He wants what’s his, he says.” And he roared again. “So you’ve come for what’s yours, have you?” he said. “That shouldn’t be too hard, should it? If something’s yours, nothing’s stopping you from claiming it, I suppose.”

“You know what I’m talking about,” Victor said.

Cyrus swung himself around, his disposition now abruptly darkened. “No,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about. Unless maybe you think that I have something that belongs to you.”

“Everything I had is yours.”

“What would that be exactly? Your gold Cadillac? Your diamond mine? When did you ever have anything of your own, Victor?”

“Sofia,” Victor said.

“My wife?” Cyrus took a step closer.

“I came back for her,” Victor said, standing his ground.

“You think she’s yours? Go ahead. You want my blessing?” He made the sign of the cross in the air.

Kostos shuffled across the deck and shouted at Cyrus. “Get off my boat.”

Cyrus ignored him. “Course, you might want to check with her,” he said. “She’s the boss, after all. Or she was. That’s all changed. For instance, this boat here? Mine. You boys work for me now.”

“Go to hell,” Kostos said. “I don’t work for no *yeeftos*.”

“Some respect,” Cyrus said.

“I came back also for the boy,” Victor said. “He’s mine.”

Cyrus jerked his head around. “Yours?” he said. A sleek speed boat growling down the river left a wake that caused the heavy sponge boat to bob against its mooring. Cyrus grabbed a taut rope with his good hand to keep his balance. All the time he kept his level gaze on Victor while a tight little grin lifted the corners of his mouth. “You might

want to check with Sofia if he's yours," Cyrus said, his voice as taut as the rope he clung to. "You and her, you can go to hell together for all I care. But you so much as breathe on my son and you're dead." Too quickly for Victor to stop him, Cyrus had his hand around his throat. "Maybe I should take you out right now and drop you in the middle of the Gulf. Who'd miss you?" He released him. "You don't even exist."

Victor doubled over and gasped for breath.

"Go on now, Victor," Cyrus said. "Before you really start to annoy me."

Victor opened his eyes and saw the boat hook lying on the deck at his feet. He reached down, and in one motion picked up the hook and swung it as hard as he could. The shaft caught the side of Cyrus' head, sending him sprawling across the deck, where he lay crumpled and bleeding from his ear.

The old man came over and kneeled next to Cyrus.

"He's breathing," Kostos said. "But he's not going to be too happy when he wakes up. You go now. Go somewhere where they don't find you a while. I'll take care of this."

"I'm not hiding anymore," Victor said. He grabbed a length of rope and began wrapping it around Cyrus' wrists and then his ankles.

"This is not right," Kostos said. "He's an asshole, yes. But he's Nouno's nephew."

"Maybe you're the one who should go somewhere," Victor said.

Kostos looked around and then nodded. "I'll go," he said. He started off the boat. "It's my fault," he said when he reached the dock. "I should've never took this boat out again."

Victor lashed the rope tight around Cyrus' ankles. "There are no curses, Kostos," he said. "Only second chances."

"Good luck," the old man said. And he turned away down the docks.

* * *

"We have to take him to the lighthouse," Sofia said. "It's the only way."

"But you said—"

"Things have changed."

He'd dragged Cyrus into the cabin and then called her from the pay phone at the marina. He explained how Cyrus had shown up at the dock. Wait there, she'd said. She had to make some calls and then she'd be right over.

When she showed up thirty minutes later, she climbed on board holding the gun. "I've had enough killing," Victor said. "You said we'd persuade him. Make him a deal."

When she saw Cyrus lying on the bunk, legs and arms bound and his mouth taped, but now conscious, she put the gun back in the satchel slung over her shoulder. "For once in your life, for god's sake, stop for a minute and use your head. Listen to me."

She pulled him out onto the deck. They would take Cyrus to the lighthouse, she explained, where someone was waiting. The satchel was full of cash, which they'd hand over along with Cyrus. They'd take the boat that he and Kostos used to plant the sponges. It would be a long time before anyone missed Cyrus, Sofia said. And with him gone, Victor could finally be a free man. The one he was before would be gone. "Everybody wins," she said.

And he saw that here finally was the reason he'd come back. It wasn't fate. Things happened—or didn't happen—not in spite of him, but because he played a part.

He could walk away, of course, and leave it up to Sofia what to do, to him as well as Cyrus. But he wouldn't. Maybe there was someone waiting at the lighthouse, maybe not. It didn't matter. He was determined that no one was going to die. It was his last chance to make things good, to make sure that he was present and on guard so that he could control events and keep them from spinning even further into disaster. It was still possible to avoid disaster.

Victor went back into the cabin, and Sofia followed him. "What are doing?" she said.

"He should get to choose," Victor said.

"Victor, no. We have to take him."

Victor reached down and pulled the tape from Cyrus' mouth. He would have his chance. It was more than he deserved, more than Cyrus would have offered if the situation were reversed. That was the point.

"Tell him," Victor said to Sofia.

She shook her head.

"There's cash in that bag," Victor said. "It's yours. All you have to do is leave here and not come back."

"Sure," Cyrus said. "Just untie me, and I'll be on my way."

Victor looked at Sofia. "You're crazy," she said. "Come on, let's go."

"You have a choice," Victor said to Cyrus. "You can leave and pretend to be dead, . . ."

"Or what?" Cyrus said.

"Or be dead," Victor said.

Cyrus looked up at Sofia and smiled. “Fuck you,” he said. “Victor, my boy, you’re about to find out what kind of girl you risked your neck for.”

“Enough,” Sofia said. “Tape him up. He’s a lying sack of shit. Whatever he gets he has coming.”

“Go ahead,” Cyrus said. “We’ll see what you’re made of.”

“A gambler to the end, huh, Cyrus,” Sofia said.

Victor and Sofia sat facing one another in the small wooden boat. In the space between them lay Cyrus, his hands and feet bound. He hadn’t resisted when they dragged him onto the boat. Victor had tucked the gun tucked into the waistband of his pants. It wasn’t until they rounded the last bend in the river before it emptied into the gulf that Cyrus began to stir. By then a light rain that had begun to fall shortly after they left the marina had turned into a steady downpour. Water collected in the bottom of the boat, and Victor, sitting at the stern tilling the outboard engine, motioned for Sofia to check on Cyrus. When she shrugged, Victor throttled down the engine to check himself.

The tape over his mouth had come loose. “You better be damned sure you know what you’re doing, Greek,” Cyrus said when Victor leaned close and pulled back the tarp they had covered him with. “You better ask yourself who you can trust.”

“Shut it,” Sofia said. She dug her heel into Cyrus’ back. “Let’s go,” she told Victor.

Victor steered by habit, and soon they were within sight of the lighthouse on Anclote Key, not far from the spot where Victor and Kostos planted the sponges each day. Sofia drew her finger across her throat, and Victor cut the engine.

Sofia nudged Cyrus with her foot.

“Goddammit,” Cyrus said. “What the hell’s going on?”

Sofia reached down and threw back the tarp. Cyrus smiled up at her, bleary eyed and bedraggled “You fuck,” Sofia said. “You think you can walk in and take my child.” She nudged him in the small of his back. “Look at me.”

But he looked up at Victor, held up his head, and smiled. The rocking of the boat made his head bobble. “It’s not too late,” he said. “Be a good boy and turn this boat around and take us all back home. We’ve all had enough of this now, haven’t we?”

Victor reached for the gun and aimed it at Cyrus.

“I hope they taught you how to use that thing,” Cyrus said. “You shoot a hole in this boat, and you’ll be swimming home.”

Victor reached down and grabbed Cyrus’ bound wrists and jerked him up into a sitting position. In the process, the small boat bucked violently.

“You’re going to tip us over,” Sofia said. She clutched the rails.

Victor held the barrel of the gun to Cyrus’ temple. “No danger now of putting a hole in the boat,” Victor said.

“Am I supposed to be scared?” Cyrus said. “If you wanted me dead, you’d of done it already. *I* would’ve, at least.”

“You’re going to leave and you’re never coming back,” Victor said.

Cyrus laughed.

“Victor, it’s too late for that,” Sofia said.

“All right,” Cyrus said.

Victor turned to Sofia. “Tell him about the insurance. How everyone’s a winner.”

“It’s too late,” she said.

Cyrus laughed again. “What’s wrong, Greek?” he said. “The lady’s not keeping her word? What’d she tell you? She promise you money? She tell you that you’d move into my place in the bed if you help her get rid of me?”

“Shut up,” Sofia said.

“Explain it to him like you told me,” Victor said.

Sofia shook her head.

“What about the boy?” Cyrus said. “She tell you about that? How she was pregnant when you left. About the abortion that Uncle Nouno arranged. She fill you in on those details, Victor?”

“He’d say anything to save his sorry ass,” Sofia said.

“You ever stop and think why a man like Nouno’d trust a little white trash slut with his money, Victor? You ever wonder why it was she stopped writing to you?”

“He’s lying, Victor. I’d never let that disgusting old goat touch me. He’s lying about Georgie. He’s—”

“Of course the boy’s mine,” Cyrus said. “Look at his hands. Same crooked little fingers. They call that genetics.”

Victor looked over at Sofia, trying to read her expression. But she looked away. Cyrus was wriggling in the bottom of the boat frantically, trying to free his hands from the ropes. “I’ll show you.”

Victor drew back the gun and brought the butt down on Cyrus’ head. He drew back again, but he fell back against the stern when Cyrus started to rock back and forth, hard, and pitched the boat sharply. In the process Victor fumbled and dropped the gun.

“Stop. We’ll all be in the water.” Sofia clutched the side with one hand and reached for the gun with the other. “Make him stop,” she screamed. “I can’t swim.”

“You’re Greek,” Victor said.

Sofia scowled back at him. “I’m scared of the goddamn water,” she said.

It was at that moment Victor first heard the drone of the boat motor before he turned and saw to his surprise that it wasn’t the sponge boat that for some reason he expected, but a huge, sleek, blindingly white powerboat. On the deck were two beautiful women, tan and lithe. He could hear their tinkling laughter as they turned and spoke to whoever was at the helm. It was magnificent, a vessel built purely for pleasure, something from the future.

It bore down on them. There was no time to try to start the little boat’s motor. There were no oars. He could either risk that the people on board would see them in time and steer clear, or he could jump out and swim. He looked at Sofia. She was still clinging to the side of the small boat with one hand. She raised the gun in the other, pointing it at the power boat bearing down on them, as if she meant to stop it with a bullet.

Victor thought of Ackles. What would he do, Victor wondered. But it didn’t matter because Ackles was gone. Then he thought of Janna in Louisiana. He liked how that rhymed.

The power boat was close enough that Victor could see the wind blow back the long blonde hair of the girl sitting above the pointed bow spearing toward him as big as a locomotive.

Georgie would be fine, Victor reasoned. Nouno would see to that. Maybe some day, he’d go out with Kostos and learn to dive. He hoped so. He was sorry he’d never get

to know the boy. It was funny how things worked out. This was how everything was always meant to be: His fate sealed so long ago and far away, a curse pulled up from the sea, a pearl of trouble set loose in the world. The power boat had been closing in on him for a long time, forever, maybe. He smiled and waited for the death motoring toward him. He thought he heard a horn blow, but it could have just been the wind.

He saw written in big black letters on the side of the boat the words: *Bottoms Up*. And then he knew. There was another way. A way to freedom. And that way was down.

He looked at Sofia, and there was terror in her eyes when she understood what he was about to do. She raised the gun, but he lunged at her, and the last thing he heard before they hit the water was the crack of a gunshot.

He drove down, carrying her deep beneath the churn of the powerboat passing above him, deeper still. After all the weeks he'd been diving in a suit, he felt almost ridiculously light. It was a struggle to go down. But he was at home in the depths, like no other place. There his ruined leg wasn't tragic. The war wasn't tragic. Those things were horrible, no doubt, but they were incurred in the service of an enterprise whose meaning was terrible.

In the war, there was never a doubt that life was unkind; the goal was simply to go on living, and it was a triumph to survive. There was something primary and bright about going on living. Sofia knew this.

The tricky part was survival. Because to survive was to return to the murkier reality of the real world, where success never comes in the form of a narrow escape, and failure rarely resolves anything. This was the real curse. Victor was not alone in this affliction. Sofia knew this too. This was their bond. Luck and coincidence were just two

sides of a wooden nickel; it didn't much matter which side turned up. Fortunes were rarely in the balance, not really.

He surfaced, gasping and sputtering. Sofia was safe in his arms. The powerboat already sliced away toward the horizon. The little wooden boat floating away in a hundred pieces. Cyrus was gone. But he and Sofia were out of immediate danger. He would swim with her to the island. Someone would come along and find them. And then Victor looked to Sofia and realized she was limp in his arms. She wasn't breathing. He pressed his mouth on hers and tried to breath for her, but she didn't respond And then he saw the trail of blood billowing from her neck like silk strands in the seawater. He held her close, and then he saw the bullet hole in her neck, a small, neat, round wound. She was gone. He kissed her. And then he let her slip away from him and watched her body sink slowly into the sea.

He was alone. And in the end, Nouno was right. He would live, and he would suffer. His future spread wide all around, a slate-gray, wet desert. Anything was possible. It was one hell of a position to be in. One tiny man in the ocean. He floated on his back.

The lighthouse was a half-mile behind him, Tarpon Springs three miles ahead, a long way, for sure, but Victor thought he could make it. He thought of Janna. If he could return to shore, he could go find her. Opal, his friend from the bus, would have spoken to Janna, and so maybe she'd be expecting him. There were things between them. But all that was too far in the future to worry about at the moment. He knew only this, he would suffer, but he would not be embarrassed to return alive. And with any luck, he just might. He kicked hard with his good leg and started to swim back to the shore.