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Double Fortune

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

DOUBLE FORTUNE

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Dan Bentley-Baker

1996

To: Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Dan B. Bentley-Baker, and entitled Double Fortune, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgement.

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

Lester A. Standiford

Charles Elkins

James W. Hall, Major Professor

Date of Defense: Nov. 5, 1996

The thesis of Dan B. Bentley-Baker is approved.

Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

Dr. Richard L. Campbell
Dean of Graduate Studies

Florida International University, 1996

This thesis is dedicated to Kandy. All other contributions
fade by comparison.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

DOUBLE FORTUNE

by

Dan Bentley-Baker

Florida International University, 1996

Miami, Florida

Professor James W. Hall, Major Professor

Double Fortune is a novel relating events taking place in Miami, Central America, and The Bahama Bank in October and November, 1983. The main character, Michael Hayden, is a free-lance music producer who has become jaded and impotent. A chance encounter on the Bay with Marisol, a Salvadoran heiress, and Hector, her brother, propels him into a complex plot to expatriate money through U.S. government channels. Willy, a brooding Cuban bodyguard hired to protect and instruct the Salvadorans, emerges as both nemesis and key to the duplicities of the scheme. The final showdown involves the four of them on the water above the Cay Sal Bank, a part of the Bahamas equidistant to their disparate worlds.

ONE

Willy Lopez checked his watch by the light of his cigar. It was nearly two in the morning. Twin reflections of flame appeared in the deep shadow beneath the prominent ridge over his eyes. Oily skin on his cheeks looked like orange peel in the glow. Willy carefully tapped his ashes over the side and spat into the dark water.

It was cloudy and the stars were blotted out. A lazy tide swelled up through the roots of nearby mangroves and ran off the exposed oyster banks in respiratory rhythm, illuminated only by a narrow band of dull light from the boat's cabin. The night fit down close around the boat and the narrow inlet it occupied.

In the cabin, tastefully done in tropical prints and bright oak joinery, the one who called himself Jose, the banker, and la rubia -- the blond -- were plainly visible screwing like two dogs in the alley after a good meal of fish heads and onions. They thought it so revolutionary -- no, that could not be the word -- they considered it so radical to fuck now, here, where Willy could see how much they didn't care.

Jose, a young man still showing the shadows of a bad case of acne on his cheeks, wore his fatigues down around his ankles and pried with the toes of his surplus jungle boots for a better purchase on the settee. It was a roughly typical end to a typical day of 'counter-revolutionary training' on the coastal margins of the Everglades. The two on the boat, except for their youth, were representative of the grand army of Cuba in exile; the Crusade for Liberation, Los gusanos, or whatever dogshit battle flag these Miami Cubanos wanted to wave. That Jose the banker and his North American lover chose this opportunity for a rendezvous meant little to Willy Lopez. It made his job more complex but not more difficult.

Willy was disciplined. Nineteen years in prisons where you didn't eat unless you stole the food from another inmate, where you didn't live unless you killed. Chinese penologists took special interest in him because they wanted to learn about such things, about his power. Then Mariel happened. Mariel was Willy's entree to all this and Mariel was his battle cry. Mariel, the Cuban port that gave its name to more than a hundred thousand who took Jimmy Carter's invitation and left the island. Willy was confident enough to sincerely believe that the whole release program and Castro's humiliation of the American president was calculated specifically to get him, Willy Lopez, to Miami and put him in place. He believed it was

so. He was a believer. He believed in Willy.

When the noise stopped behind him, Willy scanned the line where the mangroves ended and the murky sky began. No lights, none except the immense sodium glow of Miami looming in the sky twenty miles to the north. But no red and green running lights, and no halogens -- the kind police boats mounted on their bows to probe the islands and inlets for smugglers.

There was no sound; nothing above the quiet gurgling of the water and whirring insects. Alligators had been croaking and hissing in the distance all night, looking for mates in the brackish water of the estuaries. But the big lizards were now silent. Boats could be heard coming five miles away, but none was passing now. Willy heard the occasional whine of a male mosquito, the ones that don't bite, blundering close to his ear. Only they make the noise. But no low-flying planes.

Without looking, Willy pictured the banker lying back, his blond whore laid out beside him with her tits lolled to the sides, shining with sweat in the light of the battery lamp. It was time.

"Jose. Better come out here, man."

Jose refused to answer.

"Better come look at this, man."

"What? Jesus!"

Willy pulled on his cigar and made the tip glow bright. He kept his back to the door and stared out to the

east. The banker would come.

A glance back through the door confirmed it. Jose turned and kissed the woman and patted the moist tangle of brown hair between her legs as he sat up. He had already pulled up his olive drab combat pants but refused to zip up or buckle. Willy turned back to the trees as Jose came out on deck hiking up his pants with one hand.

"What the fuck you talking about, man?"

Willy raised his arm and took a step to the side, closer to the side of the boat. "Over there, next to that old wreck."

Jose strained to adjust to the dark. He saw the dim contours of a half-sunken wooden boat, a crumbling plywood derelict half buried in the mud. Jose shot a look at Willy. "Don't fuck with me, man."

Willy dropped his arm but kept staring out at the wreck. Jose walked up behind him.

"You decided what you're going to tell Calvado about that guy?" The banker was still feeling triumphant from the sex, now bold enough to challenge a man he was afraid of.

Willy turned halfway toward him. "What guy? Alvarez? He's a fucking Communist. He'd say anything to save his ass. He's a spy. Why you believe what that asslick says, eh? He calls me a spy today, tomorrow he calls you a spy. That's how they work, you should figure that out. You're

not very experienced, are you? Coño."

Jose took a step back. "Alvarez said he knew you in Cuba. Said you were on the Isle of Pines. And your name wasn't Willy Lopez. Willy Lopez died."

"Isle of Youth. That's what they call it now."

Willy untied the bandanna he wore around his neck and mopped his face with it. Jose zipped up his pants.

"Such a little kid, man," Willy said, spitting between his teeth. "So I change my name, so I don't want to use my real name. The fuck, man."

Jose watched the man who called himself Willy Lopez. "You and Alvarez are going to have to talk it out with Calvado. We don't just take new people, man. Who the fuck are you, anyway?"

Willy snorted and turned to Jose. "The new guy, eh? You Florida Cubanos pissing on the new guy. Well, you do your job, cachorro. You hear? Willy Lopez going do his job."

Willy gave him time to think about it. This ugly marielito was brought in by the boss. Willy gave him time to think.

"So what is Alvarez talking about? And what does Calvado need with you anyway?"

Willy shrugged and pulled a cloud of smoke through his cigar. He looked out to the distant channel lights of Turkey Point. "Why are we supposed to train a bunch of fucking indios, eh? Why they not training in their own

fucking country? You know the answer to that, cachorro?
Fucking 'Contras.'

Willy roughened his voice and imitated a Frito-Bandito accent. "Fucking 'contras,' man. What's so hot-shit?"

Jose laughed. Willy knew this made the pudgy banker swell with pride. Every Cuban considered himself the landlord of the Caribbean.

Willy cupped his hands in front of his groin as if cradling bowling-ball testicles. "Fucking 'Contra motherfuckers."

Jose stepped up behind him. "I want to hear his side of the story next to yours. I want Alvarez and you and me to sit down and talk. I want his story."

Willy leaned on the outrigger bracket. "His story, eh?"

"Yeah, for comparison. Calvado can sort it out."

"You want to hear his story."

"That's right."

"Then why don't you ask him. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I think that's Alvarez out there by the wreck."

Jose came up beside Willy to look. Willy was ten years older and ten pounds lighter. But the banker was puffy and had no sea legs, not even on a tidal flat. Willy leaned out and pointed to something in the water. Jose put his foot on the coaming.

"I don't see anything."

Willy doubled the ends of his bandanna around the index and middle fingers of both hands and flipped it over the banker's head. As the younger man came up, Willy planted his right knee in the hollow of the man's shoulder blades and pulled back on the bandanna.

For a full minute the two of them looked like kids playing horsie or like some avant-garde dance routine. Posed and rigid, with Willy straining back against the push of his own leg muscles, Jose trying to pull away and reach back at the same time. Legs pinned against the side of the boat, flailing his arms, craning his head back grotesquely. Jose gurgled, but not too loud. His pants fell down again. In another minute it was done. The banker's windpipe was folded shut like a broken straw, the bones in his neck splintered, his neck already swollen out to the side like a frog. Jose's legs buckled, and Willy let him down.

He pulled the bandanna free and snapped it in the air. The woman was asking questions from inside. He would do her the same way. Or he would do her in one of dozens of ways, depending on how she reacted, how she played the game. She might not come out so easy, she might lock herself in the head. But in the end, she would make three; three in the warm water for the crabs. The bodies might never be found. The wreck was their coffin. But they would be recycled --La rubia and the two men who thought they knew Willy Lopez would be lizard shit in a week.

Willy relit his cigar and enjoyed its taste. A sweet breeze was rolling onshore. Rain in another hour. He had work to do and places to go. Other blonds to take care of.

He smiled around his cigar. Jose the banker wanted to hear the story. But it would never be told, the newspapers would never reveal his story: "Willy and the Contras and Castro." Never. All these pudgy boys and bottle blonds raising money against The Man. It was Willy's movie, only for him.

They all came to Willy for his services. Because of his skills. He gave them more than they asked for.

Rain in another hour. It was good for business, it was the best he could have hoped for. He was a true believer.

TWO

Michael Hayden leaned back on a tweed couch with a naked woman crouched between his legs. Behind the woman was a small coffee table cluttered with remnants of veal scaloppini and two glasses half-full of chianti. It was his thirty-fifth birthday.

The woman brushed her hips against the table and the red wine rocked back and forth in each glass. Michael closed his eyes and opened them again, watching her, watching her face. Happy birthday, Michael. But he looked away. Looked at the yellow light outside the window and the planetary frenzy of bugs circling around it. The woman, Joyce, was good, almost expert. She moaned and caressed him, her hair brushed his thighs in the rhythm of the wine rocking in the glasses. But the happy warrior was distracted, the little general was indifferent to her devotions. That he was having less than a glorious B-day was certainly not her fault.

Guy writes a book about how down he's been and gets killed falling stone drunk off the back of a motorcycle

when he leaves the big party celebrating the new book.

Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me. Poor dumb fuck.

Things could always get worse. Always feel for the bottom.

It was her apartment and her cooking. "The way to a man's heart is through his fly," she had said, but then she covered her bets or else didn't mean it. She cooked for him, she flattered him all night with her attentions, with her looks, her eyes. All a woman has to do is let a man talk; just let him see her eyes when he talks about whatever he wants to walk about. Maybe all she has to do is stay in the same room with him. Still she cooks and listens attentively and when the music is right and the wine is almost gone she makes love.

"Wait," he said, touching her cheek. She looked up, he looked away. The wine, the cocaine, the orbiting bugs, the music. There seemed to be nothing he could say.

Joyce stood up without comment, without further eye-contact, and left the room. Michael sat forward and shook a cigarette out of a crumpled pack. It was the last one. He lit it and took a sip of wine, tasting lipstick on the rim. "Fuck."

"Don't be ironic," Joyce said from the bathroom.

"Do you want some of this cigarette?" He held it out without looking up.

She waited another minute, he took another drag and she came out of the bathroom, still naked. "I have another

pack," she said.

He watched her turn and pad into the kitchenette. She was no bimbo and no groupie. About twenty-nine, a high-school music teacher. She had a little of the saddlebags on her hips and the beginning triumphs of gravity over muscle tone in places. But she was a sultry woman; black hair, black eyes, good bones. Italian. They had circled and flirted with each other for years before he got it in him to accept her offer of dinner. She did back-up vocals for local productions Michael booked: jingles, concerts. Her invitations always seemed like a challenge. He had let her down -- the veal and all.

Joyce walked back and tossed her thick ropy hair over onto one side of her head and sat next to him. She let her thigh rest alongside his but kept her eyes on the jumbled coffee table. They passed the cigarette back and forth.

"If you started to clear off the table I was ready to hate you," Michael said. He could read it in her eyes. So what am I doing wrong? He caught himself wanting to say he was sorry.

Joyce picked up the other glass and put it to her lips. "Shari said you were still all weird over your divorce."

He pulled his shoulders back. "What?"

She laughed into the glass. "Give me a break. You guys talk about us all the time. Don't pretend to be offended."

He copped an indignant pose which she ignored. She looked at him and let the little smirk die. It wasn't what she intended him to see. They smoked. Miles Davis let a thin line of muted horn crawl out from underneath a clump of muddy reeds. Michael looked back and pulled his pants out of the tangle on the sofa.

"Don't go."

"Did I give you that?" He brushed a hand back toward the speaker on his end of the couch.

"Michael, don't go. Take it easy. Take a down."

"No, I have to." He busied himself with the belt.

"Relax."

"It's just beating a dead horse, baby. I'm sorry, I have to go."

She took a stack of plates and ashtrays into the kitchenette while he pulled on his jeans. "What have you got?" he asked.

"That album's an old friend," she said over the sound of water. "You never handled Miles in your life."

Michael nodded. Never would. He stood up and stepped into his jeans.

"Valium," she said over her shoulder. "Look in the medicine cabinet. In the bathroom. I have a script. Take a couple."

"Thanks."

A minute later, after leaving the bathroom, Michael

pulled on a jade green shirt of raw silk that draped over his shoulders and accentuated the depth of his chest as the fabric moved and folded. Joyce ambled back into the front room and buttoned his shirt, standing close the way she had when she unbuttoned it an hour before. He wedged into a pair of brown calfskin shoes and picked up his keys.

She kissed him goodnight at the door, still naked; hanging back out of the yellow light but still unconcerned for her privacy. She made it warm, made it seem like a temporary goodnight when they both knew it was signing off.

Michael sat in the car in the parking lot. Sodium vapor lights illuminated the apartment building and a string of short mahogany trees along the swale. The key was in the ignition but he had not started the engine. He sat and smoked one of her Salems. Joyce and Shari were friends; he knew that. Shari had been his first attempt at priming the pump even before the divorce was final. Shari told Joyce he was "weird" but Joyce asked him over for dinner anyway. How would that work in the guy club versus the girlfriend network? One guy tells another guy how a certain chick is frigid, how she lays on the sheets like pickled herring, but the second guy takes her out to an expensive dinner anyway and kisses her tenderly at the door after she clams up on the sofa? Probably not.

He reached for the ignition with no idea where he was going. This had happened before; he got into the car, even

showered and shaved as if he had a big date, headed out onto the expressway and watched half a dozen highway signs pass overhead before realizing his flight had no destination. He would drive for hours and come back home and then sit another quarter hour in the car out front listening to music on the radio. Car as escape; car as radio. He had been divorced for six months and his contacts with women had been disastrous; his knowledge of loneliness profound.

The crew of the USS Thresher listened for signs from the bottom but all the beeps sank into blackness, never to be heard again. "Sonar's not working, sir!"

"No, sailor. There's no problem with the machine: there is no bottom where we are."

Michael chided himself for self-pity and reached for the key again, just to turn on the radio.

"This is from your father in heaven."

He jumped at the voice, at the sight of a kid -- a boy of about ten or eleven, handing a red rose through the car window. "This is from your father in heaven."

Michael blinked at him. "Carl?"

The kid had already turned and walked away. He stopped and winked and kept walking.

Michael watched him go to another car and put a rose under the windshield wiper along with a piece of paper he took out of his shirt pocket. He was carrying a handful of

roses. He went to every car in the parking lot and repeated the process until his supply of roses was exhausted and he walked off down the sidewalk. Michael got out and picked up one of the roses and its note.

"This is from your Father in Heaven," the note read. He placed it back under the wiper blade and went to another car and read the same message on another slip of paper. Some religious thing.

The boy was gone. It was way after midnight. Michael returned to his car and got in. He held the rose in his fingers. His heavenly father was growing roses now instead of pushing up daisies. How celestial. Michael started the car and drove north, then east. Feeling with his toes for the absolute bottom.

THREE

He drove the old Triumph TR-4 down the middle lane of I-95. Traffic was thin in the graveyard of Wednesday morning. He contented himself with a smooth fifty-eight, the speed at which the automotive gnomes of Birmingham had tuned the car's dual exhausts to resonate a satisfying thrum. British engines and suspensions had long been surpassed by German and Japanese but nothing sounded as good or felt as good in the seat of the pants as a four-cylinder British iron block doing twenty-eight hundred revs in fourth gear, a precise set of conditions that resulted in fifty-eight miles per hour. It was an Anglo-Saxon thing, an Edwardian aesthetic one could depend on. It was a promise kept.

October nights most places are crisp and smoky. Here it was hot enough to keep a few short hairs stuck to the back of Michael's neck even with the top down. It was long towards morning and the windshield was bone dry and the leaves on the trees all panted for a drop of dew. Heat lightning out over the Gulfstream surged behind silhouettes of cloud banks that probably wouldn't make landfall.

It was still so hot in late October that some of the old crackers talked about hurricanes. Despite the weather satellites and TV and so forth, they all knew the feeling. They remembered the '26 storm that hit Miami and the '35 storm that wiped out Key Largo. It was hurricane weather, they said; the steamy calm before the storm. Some said it would be a good thing. They said it would cleanse the land and break the heat. Miami nights felt a lot like parking level five in fluorescent moonlight; low and clammy and hot.

The town was still paranoid after race riots two years before. Three Mile Island was still venting radioactive iodine. John Hinckley had come close to winning Jodie Foster's heart. Inflation was coming down from eighteen percent. Military advisors were landing in Honduras wearing sunglasses and leisure suits while Marines laid sandbags around the embassy in Beirut. The '66 Triumph, an antique two-seater still serving daily duty, never had an air conditioner and if it had it would be broken at this point. The cockpit heated up like a toaster inside a few blocks.

He drifted down Second Avenue in a nagging *deja vu* of another time ten years before when he was high on crystal methadrine, drifting down the same goddamn road. That was just before he met Donna, maybe that was why he met Donna. Why, when they became acquainted, he worked his way toward

marrying her. Something about this lonely road had scared him so much he fought and scrambled up away from it and jammed himself into a marriage that didn't really fit. Whatever.

But this oscillation, this pendulum swing eats up ten years at a pop. Freedom becomes excess, which becomes loathing and loneliness. Which drives him toward security and stability, which becomes suffocation which. . . Ten years a pop. Do the math, Michael, he thought, rapping his head with his knuckles. Ten years for childhood, ten years for adolescence; ten for marriage, a few more used up in between all the other blocks of time just trying to get his head clear. There he was; thirty-five. Net gain, zero. How long can this shit go on?

The city had that taut, empty look it gets in the grainy hours just before the early rush. A shopping cart lady on Biscayne Boulevard gives a finger to a white limo coming the other way. Bums peer out from under bridges. Michael wound up back at the Fifth Street docks as the sky began to lighten. He was a boat person.

The boat was his settlement. Donna was all into sailing at first but grew to hate the boat for the attention he gave to it. She got the house and sold it; moved to Chicago with her new love, an older ready-to-wear magnate with a beard. Michael lived on the boat, an O'Day thirty-seven center cockpit sloop. Penny Lane. He kept planning to change the name. The name testified to how

things changed, how one decade came in and another went out and wives changed, lives changed. It sounded so naive now.

He felt straight but still restless. City sounds were rising from Biscayne Boulevard and all the traffic inland of that. Michael untied Penny Lane and disconnected the yellow AC electric cable and walked the boat out of the slip so he wouldn't wake the neighbors. One of the professional sports fishermen hosing down the decks of his fifty-foot custom gave him the high sign. He kicked over the auxiliary diesel just to get clear of the Dodge Island bridge and into the channel away from the noise. The sun brought up a mild offshore breeze which he sliced thin off to starboard on a broad tack. Nothing serious, just enough headway to get rudder response and listen to the ripples rolling off the quarter wake. The bay looked like a cheap mirror with the sun burning out from under a low bank of clouds over the Gulfstream about ten miles east. The palms and casuarinas on Virginia Key looked purple in relief.

Losing Donna wasn't the big deal. She was a marker. They got married in 1971 with 1960s bullshit infiltrating their dreams. Donna was a radical chic socialist and Mike was too hip for words. By 1980, she was a corporate lawyer and he was up to his nostrils in the counter-culture. When she met her retail supply lover and saw clearly her true mission in life, she and Michael talked it out, drew up a timetable for dissolution of marriage, separated assets and

divided up books and record albums. But one night, about three months before she was scheduled to head out with the beard guy, Mike and Donna smoked a little doobie and began to stroke. It segued to one more of the old in-out. But he snapped out of it in mid-thrust. He looked down at her and realized she was watching him. A shudder went down his spine and disconnected all the relays. The iguana died. The chicken choked. Six months later and it was still happening. Or not happening, not happening. Half happening.

Penny Lane glided along under a blooper--a baggy chute for light airs. Seagulls shopped around in the glassy swells for breakfast. The skyline of Miami and Brickell Avenue condos a mile off the starboard side glowed bright in the early sun. Michael's eye was drawn to something in the water about fifty yards off the bow quarter. It could be a raft of sargasso weed or an old styrofoam cooler floating almost submerged; or it could be a bale of square grouper, as the locals referred to packages of marijuana thrown overboard when smugglers needed to divest themselves of contraband. But although he didn't know why he knew, Michael was certain the object rising and falling in the swells was a woman.

After the Mariel boatlift a lot of human leftovers turned up like this. He could see toes and a chin, maybe; and the unmistakable contour of breasts. He could imagine what she looked like up close. No telling how long the body

had been in the water and what had been at it all night long.

He let go the jib halyard and collapsed the blooper, stepping up around the cabin trunk to gather the sail on deck. Then he eased the main and drifted up toward the floater.

A fifty-foot sports fisherman was visible a quarter mile off to landward. A Hatteras or maybe a Trojan. It looked like a guy was fishing over the stern with a Cuban yoyo -- a hand spool line. Michael let the Penny Lane come almost to a stop while he stared at the body. He could see a halo of long hair streaming out below the surface. The eyes were closed; that was a mercy. She wore a black tanktop. As the shadow of Penny's rigging crossed the woman's face, she rolled and sank in the water. Hard sunlight flickered across her face as she raised an arm to block it out. She took a mouthful of water trying to stay afloat. For one long second she and Michael stared at each other across a distance of twenty feet; neither sure of what they were looking at.

He pulled the boat into the breeze and halted her progress. The stern swung around to the girl. "Are you all right?" he called.

She was disoriented, turning her head, blinking back the saltwater. Michael reached overboard with one hand while holding onto the backstay. He unlatched the stern

ladder and flipped it down. She grabbed it.

"The tide," she said breathlessly, holding the steel ladder and rubbing her face. She dipped her head back and smoothed the hair away from her face. She took his hand and climbed up on the bottom rung.

"I'm sorry, I thought. . ." Michael didn't want to say what he thought. He watched her balance with one hand on the rail, pulling water out of her long, tawny hair with the other. She wore a black tank suit, he saw now. She was tall and well put together.

Voices carried across the glassy water. The woman looked back, Michael looked up. Two guys in the Hatteras stood up waving and shouting. Incomprehensible but probably Spanish.

"Friends of yours?" he asked.

She turned and looked at him. He couldn't decide if she was enjoying this, if the look he saw was excitement or fear. But it wasn't about the water, or him.

"You are very kind," she said. Smooth, precise.

A roar came from the boat's big turbo diesels. One man went up to the flying bridge and the other one kept his eyes on the sailboat. The Hatt wheeled around toward the Penny Lane.

OK, so the big dogs were barking at him for sniffing up too close. He was in high-priced waters.

The blond woman took a thin gold chain from around her neck and handed it to him. Michael held the chain and its

circular medallion. He held it out in his palm. "This isn't necessary, I don't. . ."

"Please," she said. She closed his fingers.

He looked from his hand to hers and felt the warmth of the touch under the chill of water drops running from her to him. He looked up at her face but she turned without further hesitation. She pushed off the ladder and arched into the smooth water almost without disturbing its surface. He could see her clearly under the swell, streaking at the point of a trail of green foam. She came up stroking and kicking without looking back, pulling easily to meet the yacht.

Thirty yards away, the Hatteras came down off plane and wallowed around on its own wake. The woman rode over the waves. One ugly fucker with eyebrows that met across the bridge of his nose stood at the controls with a big automatic pistol held down by his leg. She pushed her hair back and yelled something up at him. Calling off her dogs.

The guy at the transom swung open the tuna door and hoisted her up over the low freeboard into the boat. The gunman clicked both engines into gear and churned up a mound of white water as the boat squatted and shot forward. He gave Michael and Penny Lane one more glare from under his overshot brows before he faced into the wind.

No harm, no foul. She was a swimmer; belonged to one of the Cubans fishing with a two-dollar rig over the side

of a million dollar boat. Probably nice people once you get to know them.

The growling turbo Detroit's kept grinding up green chunks of the bay with stainless steel cleavers, the hole it dug in the water still rocked Penny Lane on her beams. Blue exhaust boiled out of the foam to obscure the boat's exit.

Michael shipped the stern ladder and stuffed the thin Dacron foresail into the forward hatch. Back at the helm seat, as he pulled in the mainsail and caught a bit of offshore breeze, Michael Hayden felt the warmth of the sun on his face and felt Penny pull herself half a boatlength on. He rolled the helm and watched the telltale ribbon flutter on the stay, found the spot where the wind bosomed the sail and went with it.

Looking east, for one moment, he could almost see himself heading out for the Gulfstream.

FOUR

The Gulfstream went on without him. Penny Lane trailed back off her anchor line, her bows into a warm breeze from the ocean and her stern quarter looking back at downtown Miami and the mouth of the Miami River. Michael had her in the middle of the Miami Marine Stadium, a thin one-mile oval of shallow water between a spit of land on one side and the open grandstands on the other. It was a quiet spot. A crew of eight from the University of Miami rowing team found the sheltered water and measured course an ideal place to practice, and their coxswain's steady cadence echoing off the concrete stadium rang as loud as any crowing rooster.

Mike had not slept. He watched the slender boat knifing across the water from a cabin port in the galley as he made a cup of instant coffee. After he unplugged the DC chord and spilled a half inch of steaming coffee into the sink, he climbed up into the open cockpit and sat back on the cushions to watch the shell glide across the lagoon.

It was one of those moments. A little nugget washing out of a groggy sluice of shit. One of those classic

little intersections when you think you could die and not kick about it. The air, the color, the smell of the coffee. A momentary glimpse above the ooze.

The Lady of the Lake stayed with him. Something about the woman lying out in the water with her hair floating out around her head, the first rays of the sun glistening off the planes of her face. Shining. And the way she stood up on the stern ladder like it was something she did everyday -- balanced, calm. Long legs and narrow waist like a runway mannequin; but strong, Teutonic. Golden.

In the two hours since he saw her, as sleep eluded him lying on the bunk down below and while sitting back in the cockpit watching the sunlight come out in the windows of downtown, he came back to the image, replaying the two or three minutes it took to happen. He pulled the chain and medallion from his shirt pocket and turned it over again. The words, "I Am That," on one side and on the opposite, a curious design of twining snakes. Like a caduceus without the staff, only the snakes were barely coiled. Lithe and graceful, making a gentle figure 8 open at the top and with the tails wide apart. One snake was red, the other blue. It looked like enamel on gold.

His eyes hurt, they had that sandy feel of sleeplessness. It was not an unusual thing for him. Sleep was hard to come by, and he abused it with everything known

to man. Now he had another image to torment him, to come between him and his sleep. The golden smile.

Whoever she was, she had passed this talisman to him for reasons far beyond what he took it for in that instant. It was not a tip, not a token from some rich broad for making her morning adventuresome. She might be a thousand-dollar hooker, maybe somebody any European tourist would recognize, some French actrice like Catherine Deneuve's younger sister. But the look in her eyes wasn't that blow-off condescending, 'How cute, he takes me for what I am,' bullshit.

Michael reined in Penny's anchor and deiseled out of the stadium and around the shoals back to the pier. Thursday was happening for all those people on the bridges and along Biscayne Boulevard. All of them engaged in occupational therapy for their angst, getting used to the maze. Michael always treated routine like salt -- necessary in small amounts.

The music business was too schizoid for routine. Performers and session musicians had to work long into the morning and then party or go to breakfast or whatever, not seeing a bed until three or four. Wake up hard at noon. The business side was the opposite. Agents, producers, promoters and so forth ate jelly doughnuts at their desks with the phone on one shoulder, seven thirty or eight A.M. Parallel and interdependant sides of the same industry. Michael, in the middle, was odd man out.

After tying up at his usual slip, he brushed his teeth and ran the Norelco across his face. Parallel and mutually repelled. A quick look in the ol' datebook told him today's breakfast club was with Ira Chaikin, an oily man who considered himself superior to Michael in every conceivable category. They were old friends. They met at a corner diner. Ira's Rolex looked puny on his corpulent wrist. He pushed around a pile of lox, eggs and onions with his fork. The smell of scrambled fish wafted up.

Ira was the polar equivalent to coke-smoking slicks in black see-through shirts who talk about themselves too much and smile at inappropriate moments because they are in show-biz. The night shift side of the business. Night people didn't know how to approach the daylight people, and vice-versa. So they hired go-betweens.

Michael called his secretary at nine but she wasn't picking up the phone. They had been on the outs. It was getting hot, it was only beginning to get hot. The day stretched out ahead like a bad trip. He had to fight off the urge to go back to the boat and take a pill.

The thing was hallucinatory, the Biscayne Bay episode. She was the result of his decades of conflicted wishes. Tender blue-eyed girls in chifon and lace versus the hard-eyed lounge chicks and semi-pros in blacklight. Sunshine girls and the pagans. It was an essential contrast, he longed for both. Now he imagined a big blond with perfect

skin and sloe eyes rising up out of the heaving waters, protected by snarling sharks. She reached out and touched him, then returned to the elements from which she came.

Michael patted himself down for another telephone quarter and felt the medallion again in his shirt pocket. He had to get his secretary on the line, get her to touch base. But he had no quarter.

At half past eleven he walked to the public library to look up whatever there was on gracefully intertwining snakes. And he wasn't too amazed to come up with nothing except the tired old Greek stuff about Aesculapius and Hermes and the medical symbol. Was she a doctor? Was she Greek? What was 'I am That?' doing in the context of medicine? Medicine was all wrong, unless it was Navaho or Zuni or something. Some shaman ritualistic symbol.

The enigmatic design on the medallion was becoming a test of her reality. The girl was real if she could be dicovered and she could be discovered if her logo made sense.

He took a ride over to the big Episcopal church a few blocks north and west. A very imposing building. Michael always wondered why the Episcopalians in town wanted to worship in a replica of Union Station, but, hey. The priest was somewhat of a local expert on stuff, showing up on TV from time to time. Vice President George Bush stopped in for a Sunday service on the way to the Keys for a little bonefishing. This made the priest's reputation.

Medallions are religious, that was the premise for Michael's visit.

The priest was in his study, the 'sacristy,' by the sign on the door. Various robes and hats occupied nooks along one wall. Mike introduced himself and brought out the object.

"Ah," said Father John, squinting over his half-frames at Michael. He rubbed his white beard. "Interesting. 'I am That,' the mystic profession of unity. 'Tat tavam asi,' I am That which I am.' Unity."

He looked across his desk and sat back, leaving the medallion spread out on the blotter. Michael waited for the next shoe to drop. He would play Jeopardy with the guy if he really needed that kind of thing.

"Unity?" Michael repeated.

The priest knit his fingers meaningfully in front of his chest and clasped his hands tight. "Union, oneness with God. Re-ligare, religion; from the same root as our word, 'Yoke.' In a word, yoga."

"Yoga. This is about yoga."

"Yes."

Michael picked up the medallion and turned it over in his fingers. "What about this design? What is this? What do the snakes have to do with anything?"

"I'm afraid you got me there. Something Hindu, I imagine. My knowledge of snakes is limited to the Book of

Genesis."

"OK. But this is yoga."

The priest nodded. He took off his reading glasses and gave a weak smile, evidently disappointed the young man had no interest in the Garden of Eden and snakes he did know. They stood and shook hands and Mike left.

He went out with a yoga freak once. She got him into all the positions; the plow, the cobra, that kind of thing. Michael, like all men everywhere, was attracted to the science of yoga because of its erotic potential. But he found all the leotards and crotch-watching was quite sexless, as anti-erotic as nudist camps. It was body culture without the pleasure principle. Or maybe the practitioners of the yoga he'd been around were masochists and had little use for anybody else's body but their own. But, hey.

It was time to meet an old buddy at Limelight and introduce him to a new contact up at Criterion Studios. This was the essential task of Michael's trade, bringing things together. Joey had been a field photographer in Nam, Marco flew an F-100 in the Spanish Air Force. They were now in production companies in Miami. The meeting went well, they drank Marco's family rioja. Michael left.

He drove down to Coconut Grove where he remembered a large yoga studio to be. A class was going on. Radiating sleeplessness and depravity as he was, the instructor regarded his visitor a hopeless case. He told Michael the

design on the medallion was symbolic of cosmic energy, of shakti. But, he hastened to add, his studio had no such medallions and didn't go in for mysticism.

"That's what this is, mysticism?"

"Yeah, tantra, that sort of thing. We practice a very simple hatha yoga here. We don't do all that stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Remember transcendental meditation? This medallion is like from that. Raja yoga; more into meditation and spiritualism than health and well-being."

Michael thanked him. He hadn't anticipated a controversy of yogas. The limber yuppie who ran the hatha yoga classes seemed to have no time for snakes either.

Near five o'clock, Michael cooled his pipes in the Blue Note, a dark recess on the edge of Overtown where his skin was still good for a few beers because he was a regular and knew where to hide. Upstairs an old Wurlitzer played Monk and Coltrane and Mingus. The blacklights behind the bar made everybody purple. He toyed with the medallion and put off calling the one person who knew about this kind of thing. But he finally did. He left a message with a guy named Kirk Mongen who ran off at the mouth about yoga and meditation with annoying regularity.

By ten o'clock that night he was out of the Blue Note ahead of the amateur drinkers and back on Penny Lane, whocked out on the bunk trying to get his shoes off without

sitting up. His eyes felt like cigarette butts. He tossed the medallion into a chart drawer.

She was probably less than a mile away. One of the condos on Brickell or Bayshore Drive. Doing the plow with whoever paid for the Hatteras. He did not want to take her home to mama. What he really wanted to do was get rid of the medallion. The token made the encounter solid, incarnate; not some anecdote he could tell over a beer. He intruded, she incumbered; it was a social trump. Like two Mandarin officials tussling over a gift, trying to save face. It was not yet in the past.

FIVE

Friday morning broke hot and hazy. On deck with aspirin and a warm Gatorade, Michael got his call-back. Kirk Mongen, a local geek in a blue and white striped shirt, sat on the finger dock five feet away, grinning like a Bible salesman.

"I've been waiting for you to wake up, man."

Mike took a sip of Gatorade. It tasted like what horse piss smells like. "Who told you where I was?"

Mongen declined his head and hunched his shoulders in a mock offering of shame. "Jackie said you might've gone to the studio on Miami Court but Wolfe said you weren't there. But he said you were on your boat -- nice boat, by the way. But I didn't know which one was yours so I asked around. . ."

"So you woke up everybody I know. You were supposed to leave a message with my secretary."

"Sorry." Mongen smiled. "I didn't mean to wake up anybody."

"Wolfe musta loved you."

"I called yesterday but there was no answer. I waited for you to wake up, though."

"It's all right, what can I do for you?"

"You called me."

"Right." It had seemed like a much better idea yesterday.

"I hear you're putting together an all-star jazz thing."

Michael took another chug of Gatorpiss. The stuff was good for hangover. "Jazz All-Stars, that's correct."

Mongen hunched up again and stuck his hands out. "So I'm an arranger, man. You got multiple acts, you need an arranger. That what you wanted to talk to me about? Let's talk. Tell me who you've got, I'll rough up some charts, you know. Let's talk."

Michael nodded. The All-Stars concert was four months away and rushing down like a freight train. Twelve acts, all egos; twelve bands and/or soloists wanting top billing. Mongo Santamaria and the Jazz All-Stars; Nat Adderley and his Jazz All-stars. And there would be jams and medleys to set up.

"I do my own arrangements."

"That's good, that's good. Take a fresh slant, that's all I'm saying. You know, get back a few steps and come up on it another way, get another opinion. Work with another ear, you know? Everything starts to sound like Count Basie, you know what I mean?"

"I got an arranger."

Mongen smiled his winning smile. "Fingerhut. I know him. You got Lee Fingerhut. He couldn't arrange a fruit

bowl."

A long, deep moan came from a departing cruise ship on the other side of Dodge Island. Michael recapped the Gatorade and put the bottle in a cup holder.

"You want to get some pancakes?"

Mongen widened his smile. "Sure."

Looked like Mongen missed a few meals, missed a few nights sleep. But never missed an opportunity.

Michael took the Triumph past the tail-end of a Cuban protest in front of a monument. About a hundred people waving signs and Cuban flags. Mongen eyeballed the TV trucks and the cops. Camera crews were having a ball. "Viva Reagan" and "Boland No!" signs waved on cue. Fill lights and reflectors everywhere.

"That's Miami Vice, man," Mongen said. He twisted and craned his head as they passed by. "They're shooting a location, man. I know some of those people -- Michael Mann, Jan Hammer. You work with those people?"

Michael pushed the roadster through second gear and eased into third as he made the right-hand jog in front of the Dupont Plaza. He was driving the arranger back to his digs in South Miami. Mongen traveled by cab since he lost his license. Yes, Michael had met Jan Hammer, the composer and performer of the "Miami Vice Theme." But after an hour-long breakfast with Mr. Mongen, Michael had learned

not to encourage the man's self-aggrandizement. Besides, the protest looked real.

The runt was preoccupied with his long hair fluttering in the wind. "I was an Irish Setter in my last life," he said, sticking his face over the door sill into the wind.

More like a Chihuahua, Michael thought. "I was this car," he said. The idea brought him around to his agenda.

"You believe in that shit? Past lives?"

Mongen pulled himself in and sank down in the seat. "Yeah. I mean, not about my being a dog, no. Souls probably don't jump from dogs to people, there's no way a dog can earn that, I mean. Maybe I'm wrong."

"But you believe in reincarnation."

"Yeah. But, ah. The teachers say all that will take care of itself; that reincarnation is automatic and we don't have to worry about the future. Rebirth is the failure of understanding, not the reward for it."

Michael reached into his shirt pocket and showed Mongen the medallion. "Ever see one of these?"

Mongen took it. "One of these, specifically? No. Where you get it?"

"What does, 'I am That' mean?"

Mongen shrugged. "It's a mantra, a principle of tantric yoga."

The yoga instructor had used that term. "Tantra, what is that?"

"Depends; magic, Tibetan. Tantra usually goes with

Shiva. Tantra is a way of meditating on Shiva."

"Where does one do that around here?"

"Try the Yellow Pages."

Mongen watched Michael's eyes, Michael kept his eyes on the road. Finally, Mike flicked a look and Mongen grinned. "The truth shall make you free, whether you want it or not. Shiva ain't for everybody."

Michael looked at him directly. "It's powerful shit, that's all," Mongen said. "Not everybody's ready to take it back from the priest class and do it for themselves. You know what I'm saying?"

"No."

Mongen laughed and rolled up into a ball in the seat. He slapped his thighs. Michael put down a powerful urge to reach over and unlatch the passenger's door and set the prick loose.

Mongen gave the medal back. "Where you get it?"

Michael held the thing with loops of chain draped through his fingers. "A hand came up out of the water," he said, lifting his hand slowly between them, "and I took it."

David Wolfe stood in a phone booth on the corner of Flagler and Third. The door was half open at his back. It was hot. The tarnished chrome finish vaguely reflected his face above an array of smudgy keys. He picked up the

receiver and dropped a coin in the slot and lowered his hand. The dial tone demanded his attention, demanded a decision. Make the call. Are you going to make the call?

This would be the last chance to bail out before it all started getting sticky again. He could hang up now and quiet the phone, turn and jam the door aside and not look back. Or push the buttons and initiate a whole sequence of events which had an end somewhere down the line, somewhere beyond his control. He had the choice. But he would push the buttons, there wasn't really much doubt about it. No real doubt, only fantasies of escape. He was vested, as they say; embedded. His life was good, too good to walk away from. He would just have to ride it out. He had done it before. Yes, and it revised everything then. Changed every cell of his life.

David Wolfe lifted the phone to his ear and pushed the seven numbers and then replaced the handset onto its hook without listening for a connection. It didn't take much of a wait. Scarcely before he could drop his hand the phone rang. He picked up the receiver and put it to his ear. Traffic passed by behind him on Third Avenue.

"Yeah," he said, like accepting the offer of a warm beer.

"Good of you to call, David."

The voice on the other end was too loud. Wolfe held the receiver back an inch or two. It was as if the other

voice was in the booth with him; as if the man was inside the phone box itself. Wolfe squinted against the glare reflecting off car windshields and sidewalks as he looked around, through the milky panes of the phonebooth to a pawn shop and a shoe store across the sidewalk, then behind him to the parked cars. Then across the street. He found what he was looking for.

Across the street, the back window of a yellow cab rolled down. The man in the back seat held a telephone receiver against the side of his face.

"You guys are always trying to go one up," Wolfe said. He could see the man's lips curl up behind the black receiver.

"Of course," the older man said, "We're the pros. Always one step ahead. Meet me at the corner, I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

The window went up. Wolfe scanned the sidewalk and replaced the phone on its cradle. He headed for the open air coffee bar on the corner and went in past the L shaped counter and found two stools near the back. The other man came in a few seconds after him and ordered two Cuban coffees, indicating his friend as he walked behind the seated customers. The man's Spanish was effortless but poorly accented. He eased onto the orange vinyl stool next to Wolfe. They shook hands rather awkwardly. Wolfe turned to the counter and smoothed his neatly trimmed black beard.

"What's up, General? Why the curb service?"

The general smiled and picked up a laminated menu.
"How 'bout a pastelito? I'm going to have a pastelito."

Wolfe let his head slump forward an inch, as if the general's glib manner was a sentence of hard labor.

"Don't be impatient, David. Call me Clarence, my name is Clarence, not 'General,' OK? Do you recommend anything? This is your turf; how's the local Danish? What's it called?"

The coffees arrived. Wolfe picked up his demitasse and touched it to his lips. "Must be a Soviet breakout in Eastern Europe, right? Start of World War Three. That's why you gave me the code, you want me to jump in tonight at midnight."

The general smiled broadly and looked at him. Wolfe was three inches shorter and twenty years younger. "No, no, my boy. Nothing like that. I know this is the call that you'd hoped would never come, I realize that. You spend years waiting for the tap on the shoulder and just when you think the fucking spooks have forgotten all about you, bingo; there it is. The phone call."

Wolfe faced him. "What's the deal? Lay it out."

The general sipped his cafe. "Not here."

"When is it?"

"Right away, a week at most. We're playing catch-up ball. Seems one of our grand schemes lost a player last night."

David Wolfe turned and spread his fingers on the counter. His hands were strong, the nails clean. "And I'm the back-up."

"That's right. Only I think your role is going to be more like assistant coach. If you think you can find it in yourself to preserve your God-given way of life, that is."

Wolfe nodded and glanced in the mirror behind the counter. "Fine. You name the time and place, but spare me the melodrama."

The general smiled again. His quick, broad grins were always little embarrassments, as if some sudden picture of folly confirmed his theory of the absurd. Wolfe did not smile at all. He watched the two men staring at him from behind a blender and assorted bottles of Malta Hatuey and Yoo-Hoo. One was tall and crewcut and smiling; one was bulky and dark and would not avert his gaze.

"How come? I mean, why dig me out of the basement, General? To what do I owe this opportunity to serve my 'way of life?'"

The general turned the pastry pedestal next to him on the counter and eyed the flaky empanadas inside. "Let's just say, for the moment, that it was a fortuitous encounter."

The man, older and taller, still athletic somewhere near sixty with a blondish salty crewcut, stood up and fished out a couple of bills for the coffee. "Yes, that's what it is: an epiphany, an opportunity that presents

itself when you least expect it. Come, I'll give you a ride uptown."

SIX

Willy Lopez dangled an elaborate set of keys, rolling them in his fingers; a tiny plastic shoe, a chrome whistle, a bright pink pacifier. The whore had presented him with all he needed, and offered him more. In the moment of her ultimate truth she had changed from fear to wanting; from eyes that darted about the deck and the mangroves for an avenue of escape, to those eyes the woman makes when she feels the swelling of the witch's twig. Down there. Or more often they pretend it, simulate it, for their own ends. She had gone from, "What do you think you're doing?" to "I think we can be good friends, Willy. Don't you feel it?"

He got her handbag and all her keys and her car. He could have had her. But why? The banker was still fresh in her. Her sweat was still laced with his stinking cologne. Instead of fucking her Willy brought her down. He had merely to grab her long blond hair and bring her close like he was going to kiss her and then pull her off balance as he snapped down to one knee. The weight of her

body did it. He had only to turn her and bring her shoulders down and, slam. Lights out surely and quickly as if he had cut her head off. Like Manolete in the corrida. A single lunge, twist and drop. Ole. The deck was fiberglass; concrete would have killed her. He knew that. Thus was his skill.

And like any artisan he savored his skill. He had delayed the coup de grace for as long as he dared, as long as prudent. Willy fought with his desires in the service of higher purposes, just like any artist. This was his strength, he knew that. It was the technique that Altamira Prison had given him. When he was a young pachuco on the streets of Havana he was all desire and no direction. By the time he was ten he was imprisoned for the next twenty years of his life. Then the Chinese technicians gave him the control he lacked and he owed them great respect. It was more than his art, it was his power. No cunt could give him that. He lacked for nothing.

The girl had served him well with the lizards, though. The lovely little rubia made a good live bait. He saw to that.

And she also provided the next part of the dance. The middle-aged Alvarez had mouthed off about knowing Willy from Altamira, saying he was a fidelista. It was just talk. Such accusations flew back and forth daily in the commando groups since the Mariel boatlift. The exile commandos had become bolder, striking at Cuban coastal

towns and highways more often, but they had become even more suspicious. Willy Lopez was a surgeon where they were only children playing doctor. He had the training they only pretended to for the sake of their blond American whores. Training enough to know he must eliminate all talk about him. The blond girl was going to help.

Willy pieced together the woman's life from the contents of her purse. He found her address and watched the apartment building for an hour. Then, in mid-morning, when neighbors were off to work, he used her keys to enter and look around. No men's apparel, only one bedroom. A message on the answering machine from her mother. Willy could live here for a week until her body turned up, if it ever did. Until the banker went missing. But that wasn't the purpose for the visit.

In a closet, on the upper shelf, he found a pink jewelry box. He took it down and opened the top. A tiny ballerina inside twisted in front of a diamond-shaped mirror. A simple melody repeated as she turned, slowing with every verse. Old photographs and handwritten letters were stacked in the jewelry case along with a handful of trinkets and odd items. A little girl's bead bracelet with NANCY spelled out; a tube of lip gloss, a yellowed newspaper clipping of a high school boy in football gear.

Willy pulled at the pink satin lining inside the top, behind the ballerina. He pulled one corner away from the

plastic shell of the box. It was ideal for his purposes. Willy took a thin deck of playing cards out of his shirt pocket, careful to hold them by their edge, and put them on the bed beside the box. He flipped the first card over and inspected the typed information glued to the reverse side. It was a list of names. He flipped over the second card. Four color pictures were pasted on the card; one of them was of baldheaded Calvado. Willy put the clipping of the football hero between the second and third cards and closed the deck. Gingerly, he inserted the cards into the space behind the jewelry box liner and pushed it back.

After it was wiped clean with a corner of the bedspread, Willy opened the box again and pulled back the lining. The ballerina struggled to resume her dance. Willy took a powder puff from the girl's dresser and dragged it across the brittle threads at the corner of the lining. Powder flecked on the cards and a few filaments of cotton were pulled out onto the edge. He pushed back the lining again; contented with his work, happy with the precision of it.

The bed was soft, the kitchen was inviting. But this was not for him to sample, no more than the woman herself. She had nothing for him. This was not for pleasure. This was a cat putting his turds in another box.

The ballerina slowed to a stop. The melody dwindled to a single last chime. Willy Lopez replaced the pink jewelry box high up on the shelf in the bedroom closet.

The deal was chart work in trade for yoga info when he originally called Kirk Mongen. If Michael had to throw some work Mongen's way in return for identifying the medallion, so be it. Mongen attached the medal with tantra and tantra with the name Shivananda. Shivananda was a guru with a converted hotel in town. But Michael was pretty ambivalent about the whole thing, and not just because of Kirk's grating personality.

Michael had to fight back his misgivings every step of the way. It sounded too much like Indiana Jones and the Temple of Snakes. He should be doing something else, working some crowd or something, pumping handshakes at Guzman Hall. Locating his goddamn secretary. After all, the girl in the water was hauntingly beautiful, but just a girl.

Despite all that, he drove up to the joint, Swami Shivananda's yoga ashram, which was an unregenerate fly-speck hotel on South Miami Beach; the Tideway, on Ocean Drive and twenty-second. South Beach had hit its bottom and was slowly rebounding, picking up an odd cache. It was once a big nursing home for Eastern Europeans who came in at Ellis Island and wanted to go out sitting on the porch watching the sun come up over the Atlantic Ocean. But property values were edging up. Mariel Cubans who found

the depressed rents and narrow streets of South Beach a lot like home were beginning to compete with gays and students and artists. Shivananda's corps of organizers had bought the Tideway cheap.

Michael parked in front of a plywood Pina Colada stand and walked around to the front of the building. The side street smelled of garbage and jasmine blossoms. A fresh breeze off the ocean carried iodine and cocoabutter. It was a three story block with concrete brows over each window and a large diamond niche above the entry. Somebody had long ago painted over the glass block in the niche and made the building look like a sleeping cyclops.

Michael resisted the urge to hang outside and smoke a cigarette so he could watch who came and went for a few minutes before going in. He felt like he should look back at whoever was on his case, to meet eyes with somebody he knew who would flip him an attitude about going into the place. He felt self-conscious, like he was crossing the hardwood floor of the gym at a seventh grade dance. He was at a disadvantage in this domain, he was disarmed. Hip had been his metier for so long. What he was doing was not hip.

A big bearded guy sat at a card table inside the glass doors. The guy looked like an interior lineman for the Calcutta Cowboys, dressed all in white with a loose turban and a cotton tunic the size of a bedsheet. The temple guard said nothing, only tracked Michael from beneath his

hooded eyes. The guy's toes stuck out under the table. Fat toes.

Michael picked up a brochure. It had the snake logo on the back, abstracted to an open-ended figure eight encircled by the words again, "I am That" and Shivananda Yoga.

When he looked up, the dark-skinned man with the beard said, "Upstairs."

Michael watched him and waited for something else. But it wasn't there. The guy was a sub-continent zombie. Michael put the brochure down and crossed the lobby to the staircase.

The hotel looked like it had been stripped and scrubbed with steel wool. Sandalwood incense replaced any trace of Geritol and urine and kreplach. One priority was evidently a new air conditioner, a new compressor, or whatever. The interior was cool and dry.

He climbed up the broad, bending staircase, no doubt once a romantic thing to do, back about 1930. The carpet had been removed and the cement scrubbed free of most of the adhesive residues. The cast aluminum hand rail along the side had been wire brushed or sanded to a dull luster. Nearing the top landing, he identified the sound of voices, lots of voices, droning out a repetitive chant. Dozens of shoes were lined up outside an open door.

About fifty people sat on the carpet facing a central

point on the long inside wall. A set of spot cans on the ceiling lit up a high-backed leather chair on a carpeted dais. The chair was empty except for a framed portrait of a swarthy old man with three white streaks on his forehead and a shitfaced grin. Glads and daisies and mums in simple vases flanked the chair. Everybody was dressed in the same sort of white costume, both men and women. The incense smelled like a burning whorehouse.

All of the people Michael could see from his vantage point at the back of the seated group were young, quite young. If she was here, he wouldn't be able to spot her in the generic get-up.

He sat down and rubbed his eyes.

It was stupid. Not so much coming to this voodoo ceremony, that was easy. He had been to dives in Harlem, donkey shows in Tijuana, cock fights in Santo Domingo. Strange, heavy shit was recorded behind these eyes. But it was stupid chasing down some European call girl like she wasn't just another bummer. Women had become a grinding frustration. And this place, these people. The incense was getting into his blood like a light hit of blotter acid and a half bottle of Mateus rose. Fucking stupid.

The chanting went on, a throaty repetition of something that had to mean a lot to the crowd but sounded like imitation Navaho. Mesmerizing, like when he was a little kid in Philadelphia sitting in church with his mother, closing his eyes while the doxology droned on

around him.

Something moved in the corner of his sight. Someone was coming in. Her hair was hidden, she looked different, but it was her, the blond. She made her way to a spot halfway up and near the wall and sank to the carpet out of sight. She was a striking woman; tall, blond, tanned. Almost regal.

What would she think when she saw him, what would he say? How stupid was it to arrange another "chance" meeting with someone he didn't really want to know? It was something leftover in his central nervous system, smoke from another fire. Something elicited somewhere else, some other time. Lights crossed by shadow, flecks of red, streaks of sun on broken water. He closed his eyes.

After what seemed like an hour the chanting stopped. Michael had unconsciously learned it and was going along with it, feeling the resonance of the voices in his chest. It felt good.

An American woman stood up in front. She lowered her eyes and exhaled, then looked up. "Let's do gita," she said. With that, they all got to their feet and started singing a hymn. Michael assumed they were as much in need of circulation in the lower extremities as he was. He tried to spot the blond.

They sang in English. It was an unfamiliar melody but unmistakably a hymn. "It is the light of God, the light of

God within us; This is liberation through the inner door."

The gita went on, changing form, changing key. Then the song came to its conclusion. ". . .Lift up our lights beside him and give him our loving thanks."

With that line, they all got down on hands and knees and bowed, touching foreheads to the coral colored carpet. Michael was left staring at the framed photo of the swarthy old man with the three white streaks and the shit-eating grin staring back at him from the throne. Left standing like a kid out on the playground. He looked sideways and saw her standing in the sea of supplicate bodies, standing twenty feet away with her hands clasped under her chin and her head down.

Then everybody stood up and the meeting began to break up. People hugged and shook hands and made small talk and drifted for the door. Michael made his way in her direction. She looked up and noticed him watching her. She was tall, even without her shoes, with straw blond hair falling out of her white turban. She recognized him and lowered her eyes. He closed the distance.

"Excuse me," he said. She looked at him. "May I ask you why you didn't bow down like the rest of them?"

"You didn't either," she said, smiling; pleased with something. "You could not bend either."

She had a European accent, something indistinct, like Swiss. She had brown eyes.

"No." Michael looked at his hands, then back at her.

"Then it is not a habit for you, you do not come here. This is not coincidence?"

He laughed because it started to sound like midnight at the disco: Do you come here often? What's your sign? "No, it's not a coincidence."

Michael glanced at the people filing out around them. "Could we go somewhere, have a cup of coffee?"

"Why?" She wasn't smiling. She stood almost at eye level with him.

"Why? Because I want to ask you a couple of questions." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the medallion. "About this."

"About that?"

Michael watched her face. She was mixing signals. "About this, about everything surrounding this. About the other day. You do recognize me -- from the water. I'd just like to talk."

She finally let him off the hook, offered him some assistance. "About fate?"

He nodded. "Sure. About fate."

SEVEN

He suggested a coffee bar a block south on Ocean Drive. She nodded and they walked. A wind whipped across the beach and rattled the palm fronds across the street. The wind was warm and moist and smelled vaguely of the foam. Filaments of dried turtle grass rolled across the pavement. It was dark out over the ocean. He took one glance around for her boat friends.

Michael opened the door to the Turk's Cap, a little Cuban coffee and sandwich bar in the corner of the Berliner Hotel, a corroding South Beach landmark. They went to a table at the end of the counter in the crook of two windows. Michael motioned for the counter man but stopped and asked her what she wanted.

"Coffee? Espresso?"

"Espresso, yes."

He held up two fingers and the counter man, who looked like a used prizefighter, nodded. The man turned to a stack of cups. Satisfied with the preliminaries, Michael knit his fingers and rested his hands on the table. He

looked at the sugar dispenser and a bottle of Tabasco sauce pushed up against the grimey window. The blond pulled her turban loose and shook out her tawny hair. The place was warm.

"So. My name is Michael."

"I am Marisol."

They shook hands across the table and smiled at the awkwardness of the situation; the table, the formality, the informality. She was trying to be stand-offish and approachable, which was a common problem for beautiful women. He was trying to be sincere and off-handed at the same time.

"Beautiful name," he said.

"Thank you. My mother says I named myself."

"How'd you do that?"

She kept her hands in her lap. "Before I was born she had a dream. In the dream she saw a little girl with blond curls standing beside the sea. The little girl pointed to the sea and pointed to the sky. It was covered with high, silvery clouds and the sun was shining out in rings. Sea and sun; mar y sol, Marisol. When I was born a few months later, she gave me the name I choose."

"Beautiful. Like the Indians. You know, Running Bear, Screaming Eagle; whatever the father sees when he comes out of the birth tent."

"Ah, indios. But better, no?"

"Exactly. Much better. You did it the way everybody

should do it. Name yourself, every child should do it that way."

"You are named after your father? Michael? It is your father's name?"

"No."

"Ah."

"I have an uncle on my mother's side, I think. Michael."

"Then it is entirely possible you did the same thing but your mother does not remember the dream."

"It's possible."

"So tell me, Michael; why didn't you bend to him?"

He took a sip of thick Cuban coffee, holding the little ceramic cup without bothering with the handle. "I don't know."

Marisol took a sip of hers, holding the cup conventionally even though her fingers were no better porportioned for the half-inch aperture of the handle. "What were you thinking about?" she asked, "during the song, the gita."

"I don't know. I was thinking about my mother in Philadelphia. When I was a kid. I haven't been to church since I was ten."

"So you were thinking about church."

"I guess I was."

"It is the same with me. I have been to Shivananda

yoga twice before tonight but it is the same with me. It is very high yoga, but."

"What kind of yoga? What do the snakes mean?"

Marisol turned the medallion on the table so the snake design was up. "One is blue; that is the breath when you take it in. The other is red, which is the breath when it is exhaled. The serpents are rising up the spine. They represent the unity of opposites -- hot, cold; physical, spiritual; man, woman."

"Like yin-yang."

"Exactly."

"So why do you say it's 'high'? Why did somebody tell me it's not for everybody?"

"Tantra is dangerous. It is very powerful. The pranayama breathing can be harmful if not done correctly."

The coffee and the atmosphere had brought out a fine sheen of perspiration on her cheeks and above her lip.

"Dangerous," he repeated, handling the word with a dubious respect. "Like you could pass out."

She put her hands back in her lap and kept her eyes down. "Yes, there's that. Tantric yoga has three forms; white, red and black. What you saw tonight is directed toward the mind, the awareness and love. Black tantra is about power. Red tantra is about sex."

He knew he had to leave that line alone. A beautiful woman puts the subject of sex on the table and trusts her companion not to run away with it. And sex wasn't all that

good a topic for him lately.

"And this guy Shivananda is the head guru of all this?"

She made eye contact again. "Yes."

"But you aren't really crazy about the idea of worshipping this particular guru." "Each time when it comes to the end, I cannot do what the others do."

Michael remembered the grinning face, the three vertical stripes. He leaned back. "I went to church when I was a kid. My mother and I went every Sunday. Morningside Baptist Church in South Philly. I used to sit next to her and drift off. I remember staring at a woman's fox stole, you know, with the glass eyes staring back at me over her shoulder. And the stained glass window of Jesus over the altar."

He let himself ramble. Nothing to lose. "I'm about as un-religious as you can get, you know what I mean? It's not my thing. But when somebody or something props up a picture of some old dude and suggests I need to get down and kiss the carpet, well, I feel like I already gave, you know? I gave at the altar."

They sat quiet a moment, contemplating faces in picture frames and in stained glass. At length, Marisol looked at him. "We are at the same place, you and I."

He thought about it, pictured the two of them standing amid the assembly of supplicate bodies. "I guess."

Then he drank down his coffee. He did not want, had not wished to precipitate anything else but this, this coffee and conversation. He could not allow it to totter off toward the same old bitterness. He did not need a woman, he needed coffee.

He asked if she would like another cup. She declined, picking up her clutch and keys. "I have answered all your questions?"

They stood up. Michael gave the prizefighter behind the counter a five. "Not really."

On the sidewalk, the wind blew loose strands of hair across her face. "Will you be back?" she asked.

"Yeah."

She pulled a strand of hair away from her eyes. Michael took the medallion out of his pocket. "I almost forgot," he said, closing the distance between them. "This is yours."

"No, it is yours." She pushed his hand gently.

The ragged branches of palms dipped and reared in the buffeting wind, crossing in front of the streetlight above her. She put her hand up beside her face to shade her eyes. Michael felt the wind flag his shirt against his back.

"You're not coming back," she said.

"No, I don't think so."

"Then our ships shall pass in the night, as they say."

"Let me call you," he said, searching for the neutral

but not indifferent signal. Trying to place the ball at her feet with absolutely no bounce. "You could tell me more about the white tantra."

She studied him a moment. "I have to go to a banquet tomorrow night," she said. "I don't want to go with my brother. Allow me to buy you the next cup of coffee."

He laughed and looked at the ocean. "Was that your brother in the boat?"

"Tomorrow night, what do you say?"

"It's a deal. A banquet."

"Black tie," she said. "It is a political thing."

Michael shoved his hands in his pockets. "Sounds fine."

"Wonderful," she said. "You have saved my life. I hate these things."

He turned with her as she took a few steps to her car, a gray sedan. She open the car door and smiled at him. "Then our two boats shall not have passed by silently in the night, eh?"

He held the door for her. "Where do I pick you up?"

"I live at Costa Bella, you know it?"

"Brickell."

"Yes."

"OK. We'll talk about fate," he said.

"Yes. Call me. Marisol Luna."

"Costa Bella."

He closed the door. She pulled her Dodge Aries out and went south on Ocean Drive. Michael tossed the medallion and caught it in his fist.

EIGHT

The wind that had kicked up dust devils and tossed the girl's hair around like blond flame was docile on the other side of the bay, just a strong flutter. But reason enough to put out two spring lines on Penny Lane.

Michael felt like a beer and buffalo wings but he grabbed a choripan instead -- a Cuban sub. He opened the white paper wrapper on the passenger seat and drove over to the studio picking off green peppers and oily coins of chorizo; little Cuban cholesterol grenades. He decided to forego the food for the beer. Live on hops and malt instead of pigmeat and olive oil. Die the American way.

The so-called studio was on N.E. Miami Court, a warehouse on a cheap street in one of the backwater zones between the tracks and the expressway. A few blocks to the west near St. Francis Xavier Academy, old timers called the corridor of 1920's era houses and gaunt public housing, "Good Bread Alley." A few more blocks north and west, near where Cassius Clay's mother once lived, the region was more accurately referred to as "Bucket of Blood." Michael

Hayden shared the building with David Wolfe, a cop who turned metal sculptor when he got chopped out of the department a few years back.

The TR-4 pulled into a walled yard next to the building. A sodium vapor light on the corner cast the place in unnatural shadows. Mike put up the top and gave the bundle of greasy paper to a gang of cats near the door. Sirens and reggae carried on an updraft across the railroad right of way; an aroma of barbecue and gardenias mingled with the odor of cat spray and marijuana smoke. The wind here was blocked by buildings. It was still hot after midnight.

"What it is, Wolfie." Mike slammed the steel door and climbed the stairs. He had to shout over music and the sound of a grinder.

The grinder stopped. Wolfe's answer bounced off the metal ceiling. "What it was."

Michael stepped up on the mezzanine and turned on a desk lamp. He walked over to a pipe railing on the other side of the room -- a platform built into the side of the warehouse overlooking a two-story space big enough to hold Penny Lane with room to walk around the sides. Wire encased industrial fixtures lit the space. He leaned over the rail.

"How can you listen to that shit?"

Wolfe looked up. He wore a leather apron over his hairy chest and a baseball cap, backwards, with a pair of

welder's goggles on his forehead. He was standing on a milk crate in front of an eight-foot metal sculpture. "The Eagles, man. You don't like The Eagles?"

Mike didn't answer. Wolfe stepped off the crate and went to a steel shelf against the wall and cranked the amplifier up with a flick of his wrist, then shot Michael a grin and a finger.

David Wolfe kept his beard trimmed in an elaborate mephisto cut; short and sculpted low on his cheeks, shaved clean up under his chin. His face was tanned and sweaty, teeth bright and regular. He was as well defined and heroically proportioned as his work. Michael often considered this a truism: a man is his work. This, of course, called into question his own definition. Marginal, transitional, mixed; neither a musician nor a businessman but a go-between for both. He rifled through a stack of mail and came down the iron spiral stairs to the concrete floor.

"Met a girl," he said. "Marisol."

"Pretty name."

Michael peeled open a cardboard package and handed the plastic case inside to Wolfe. "She named herself in a dream. Met her at a yoga thing."

Wolfe played with switches at the steel shelf. Hotel California stopped in mid whang. "Fucking Kirk Mongen was over here at four in the morning." He put the new CD in.

"You can bet he wasn't high on fucking yoga. I assume he coerced you into going?"

The more modulated sound of Steely Dan came on. Both men nodded at the fidelity of the new equipment. The comparison was uneven, however; even Wendy and the Plasmatics would sound good on laser disk. Maybe not. Michael dropped into a chrome and leather sling chair and dropped the rest of the mail onto the floor beside his leg. His accountant, another notice about the marina, several cassette mailers.

"Coerced? Not exactly. All he had to do was stay away."

"I hear that. She's a friend of his?"

"God, no. As a matter of fact, I met her before I got there. I took her for a corpse out on the bay a mile off Brickell."

"Sounds like a beautiful girl, Mikey."

"She is."

For a minute they both contemplated the sculpture. It looked finished to Michael's eye but Wolfe had been grinding and buffing on it for a week. It was a woman, that much was certain; her polished breasts and thighs, her gleaming buttocks and dark recesses stamped an image of lusty, voluptuous woman in the viewer's eyes. But the way she was built, with re-bar and cable and flex conduit welded into the core, she seemed to reveal her insides at the same time as her outside. Reflective silver skin;

corrugated, blackened guts inside. All at once. The ultimate flash, the beaver shot that turns itself inside out.

"I like her," Michael said.

Wolfe stared at his creation another few seconds and then got up. "Lois quit again."

Michael's part-time secretary. Woman: the real inhabits the ideal. Her defection explained why Mongen had to go to the dock to answer his call. "What'd she say?"

"Said she was tired of being your maid."

Michael rubbed his eyes. Lois beefed about his office, about coming to this place, about seeing her boss so little because his daily schedule overlapped hers only marginally. She complained about the dope, about Wolfe's welding fumes wafting up to her telephone and typewriter. Above all, she bitched about sorting out Michael's business affairs and his personal affairs and sorting them out from each other. He gave to her all the grotty work he wanted to dump on Donna, his ex, but which Donna kicked back in his face.

"Women are always straining and gnashing at their definitions, Wolfie. They should learn to suffer silently like we do."

Wolfe threw Michael a bottle of Polar. "Happy birthday, by the way."

Older than Jesus; out-lived Mozart. "Thanks." He got

up and took the beer to a filing cabinet and pried the cap off, catching the jet of foam in his mouth.

Under the mezzanine, Michael's part of the studio floor was given over mostly to space which could be used for whatever purpose presented itself. He kept a Yamaha DX electronic piano here, under its vinyl cover, and a pair of congas on stands. But this wasn't a music studio in any reasonable sense; no production ever went on here, no specific rehearsals. It was used for composing and making sample tapes for ads and for listening to demo tapes from musicians. Michael moved his beer from box to crate to filing cabinet looking for something.

This was the kind of shit that drove Donna nuts and drove his secretaries away. Especially since the divorce, everything he had was either in a box, in a closet, misfiled in a filing cabinet or gone for good. He pulled out a heavy cardboard box and opened it. Records; LPs, mostly his father's classical stuff. Phillippe Entrement, Glenn Gould, Jose Iturbe, Claudio Arau. Another box; open-reel tapes. This crap should go. A box of books; yes.

He pulled out handfuls of paperbacks and textbooks and scanned the covers: James Baldwin, D.H. Lawrence, Sartre, which he never read; Kerouac's The Subterraneans, which he did. Albert Camus, Hesse's Magister Ludi. Lots of early science fiction; No Blade of Grass, The Man Who Couldn't Sleep. How prophetic. It was a random sample of his college career.

So far the whole exercise was descriptive. Here were Carl Hayden's buried gods -- his father's molding totems; all concert pianists with great pedigree and intensity. Dead. And here also the forgotten gods of his own youth; all seekers, all rogues and shitters, all just as dead. Except for Baldwin; was James Baldwin dead? This was the junk Michael Hayden cleaved to when his father fumed about his lack of a music career. In high school, piano practice was like doing his own root canal every goddamn day. He pulled away from music outright, never even started a high school rock band, which would have infuriated his father anyway. He wanted to be a writer but never wrote anything legible.

What was he looking for? He had hoped to find some of the books he knew were somewhere that had words like siddha and tantra. He had the books, had even read them. But these words, like pranayama which meant breath or spirit in Sanskrit, these words were slippery. You could read and look it up and get it, and then go back and read it again in the next paragraph and have no fucking idea what was being said. It always made the stuff seem mystic and wise and lofty because it was just out of reach. But it always fell off like glitter on a Mardi Gras float the day after. The words didn't stick.

He dropped the books back into a carton and pulled his tux out of the closet and hung it on the door. Then he

pulled off his shirt and shucked his sneaks. It had been a long Thursday. And quite the eventful Thursday it was. From the throes of dissatisfying sex with Janice Torelli to a really engaging cup of coffee with Marisol Moon. Round X. In the case of a knockdown, go to a neutral corner.

NINE

Michael Hayden greeted Saturday long before he wanted, nailed to the sofa by a bolt of eight o'clock light. He rolled over and scanned the studio floor. Wolfe was bench-pressing a bar and two steel plates the size of boxcar wheels, sucking air and popping it out in cadence with clangs at the top and bottom of the motion.

"Thanks a lot, shithead."

The huff and clang continued. Wolfe doubled the pace for the last five reps and finally tossed the bar up onto the rack and sat up. "Good morning, darling," he said, dragging a towel over his face. "Welcome to middle age."

Michael rolled to the wall, wincing as he passed the shaft of sunlight. "Fuck you."

In the relative cool and quiet of his pillow, the night seemed almost recapturable. Until a claw lifted him by the shirt collar and beltloops and swung him to a more-or-less vertical position. "Three sets of eight reps, asshole."

"This is not funny, Wolfe. I need a cup of coffee."

"Sweat first, coffee second. Come on, I'll spot you."

Come on. Make you feel good."

Michael gave in. He managed to lift the barbell once and struggled to put it back on the rack. Wolfe changed the weights. It was true; in the end, after three quick rounds with fairly heavy weights he felt pumped and ready for the shower and whatever loomed thereafter. Wolfe filled the building with Pink Floyd and the aroma of Cuban coffee. Michael soaked his head in a steaming stream.

He had dreamt of her. Standing big and gleaming in chrome, glistening in the morning light. Wolfe never named his women. Each one was different and yet they were all different views of the same woman. In the past two years he had made five of them in the studio. Mike had watched them grow up from scraps of steel; lived with them taking shape until at some point the life came out in full bloom and he realized she was her, the same woman.

Women, real women, the fleshy kind that he or Wolfe brought around, were almost always instantly jealous of her. And none stayed as long as she. And when Michael slept on the studio sofa he was often wrecked on one thing or another, usually restless and fighting for a little oblivion. In times like that she inhabited his dreams.

Only now the woman had long, rope-colored hair. Spreading in the water, lifting in the wind, falling in strands beside her neck.

Michael called his secretary and begged her answering

machine to call him. He picked up the phone to call his accountant and dropped the handset back on the cradle before pushing the first number. He didn't know how much money he owed or how much he had. He didn't want to talk about it. Michael's phone slips were always piled up and out of control. In his business everybody called everybody else at least once a week; the little potatoes called the top bananas ten times before getting a return call. Everybody was over somebody and under somebody; everybody in the music business fed it and ate it. Mike, as usual, was in the middle.

Cuban exile leader Alfredo Calvado sat between two men who could have been his brothers, and were in some way exactly that. Across the table were two more countrymen -- all of them criollos, all masters of being Cuban. They sat at a table in a restaurant with mirrored walls and gold-painted Louis XIV sconces and crystal chandeliers; a restaurant as cacophonous visually as audibly, as much at midnight as noon. Men with size forty-eight belts and thinning hair, drinking diet Fresca with guava pasteles. Calvado lived in a stately home in Coral Gables but he never felt at ease, never enjoyed his anonymity until he came to West Flagler Street.

"Jose Romero wears his prick around his neck," the man across from Calvado said. "His wife is twelve months

pregnant."

The man, Roberto Marin, thinner and boasting a youthful head of black wavy hair above a rugged face, held a thimble-sized cup of coffee in his fingers and tossed it down. His hands were large and red. "So he thinks the vanilla pussy is sweeter."

None of them laughed. Calvado dabbed his lips with a linen napkin. "There will be an audit. Unless he shows up by five o'clock today. This is Friday. The bank will wait until five o'clock."

"No money is missing," Roberto said. "He is a fool, not a thief."

The man on Calvado's right, a former radio announcer in Havana named Godoy who looked a lot like Cesar Romero, asked the obvious. "What do we know of the girl?"

They looked at Calvado. He raised his eyebrows.

The men looked about for one of them to pursue it or dismiss it. Calvado was careful. "She shouldn't have been there, he shouldn't have been with her. It was bad. They could have run off together. She could have slit his throat. We know nothing."

"What about Willy?" Roberto said. "What does Willy Lopez say?"

"They were fighting when he picked them up," he said. "A lover's quarrel. Willy put them off at Kings Bay Marina at nine o'clock and never heard from them again. He was

disgusted, he left them. It is nasty."

"And the banker's wife?"

Calvado wagged his head. He looked at the table. "She knows about them, but she has not heard from him. I suspect he will call her today and come home with his balls in his pocket."

Godoy nodded. "Put the bollocks in the jar, put the jar on the table by the bed, and use them only to get babies. Phit!"

Godoy crossed himself in a sewing motion, sewing up the air, pursing his lips.

They laughed and grunted. Calvado's lips widened, he turned his head, laughing in his belly. He pressed against his abdomen just below his sternum. "Jose will call from a motel and ask her to bring him some clothes."

"And Alvarez?" Roberto Marin asked. "Calvado, have you spoken to Rodolfo Alvarez?"

Professor Calvado searched his coat pocket for his Roloids. He shook his head. "It is my fond hope they are all in the same bed."

By noon Michael Hayden was up to his neck in a business crisis. Shelly, his accountant, told him the business account was being attached for security default. One of his acts had allegedly trashed a hotel room and molested a waitress. Michael Hayden Inc. was running on no

capital. Between irate calls from his secretary's husband and the lawyers handling the hotel fuck up, he got a call which made the others seem relatively straight-forward. An agent for two of the lead acts in the Jazz All-Stars concert called to cancel on grounds of labor conflict.

"What do you mean?" Michael sputtered, "Sunrise is a non-union hall."

"That's the point," the agent replied evenly, "my people don't want the exposure."

"But this is a Right to Work state. This makes no sense."

"That's exactly the point. They work union states up here. AFTRA, Variety; they called me. This is a work action, Mike."

"This shit never happens. Not in open workplaces like this."

"Sorry. We were looking forward to playing down there."

Then, stumbling against the tuxedo hanging on the closet door, he fought off the tide of rejection and called the girl. The concierge took his name and after a short hold, Marisol came on the line.

"You called. I'm glad."

"So, you named yourself, 'Sea and Sun Moon,' is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"Yes." Her voice was soft, the accent complex, like

Ingrid Bergman in "Notorious."

"Mar y sol Luna. 'Luces encima del agua,' is that it?"

"You speak Spanish."

"This is Miami. You just heard half of everything I know."

"I don't believe you. Your accent is very good."

"Thank you."

"You have not called me to tell me bad news, have you? I won't hear it."

Psychic. "No. What time do we go?"

"It is at seven. But in Boca Raton."

"Boca."

"Yes. I think it will take an hour. I propose you come up to see the sundown before we take the road, no? One drink on the balcony before we go."

"Sounds inviting."

"Good. Five-thirty?"

"With bells on."

"Excuse me?"

"Five-thirty."

"Ciao."

Bada-bing. For a few seconds she is all there is. He saw how easy it was to sink into the movies: 'Marisol, the world doesn't care a hill of beans about you and me.' Bada-boom. Beats lawyers and trade unions by a mile.

He managed to leave the wreckage of his livelihood

behind as he walked out of the studio with his clothes and shoes in a garment bag. The cats would look after things. He bought a new tux shirt downtown, bought a bottle of Veuve Clicot and a bag of ice to chill it until five. The day was lighter, the air thinner. The wind had circled around off the glades and over the ocean, finally pushed through to the Bahamas ahead of a pillow of cooler, drier air. First break of the season, first day the humidity dropped below fifty percent, even though the sun warmed the air to nearly eighty degrees. Still, it felt like April in Paris for all the hothouse Miamians, be they Crackers or Latinos. All shared a relief. It contributed to the scenario.

At five o'clock Michael carried the champagne in a brown paper bag up to the porter's desk and gained entrance to the twenty-first floor. She greeted him at the washed-oak double doors with a vast plain of bone-white carpet beneath her feet and the deep blue sky above the balcony over her shoulder.

"Ah, yes. Bienvenido. Welcome to my little chateau."

She turned and stepped back, Michael walked in. She closed the door and came up to hold his arm above the elbow. "Look around, look around. Open the wine. I have made us hors d'oeuvres."

Michael watched her go into the kitchen. She deftly whisked a bottle of something out of a silver ice bucket to

make room for his. He put his offering on the counter dividing the kitchen from a dining area. She wore a shimmery gown with spaghetti straps holding up a moderately generous bodice. He twisted off the wire and worked out the cork.

"What is that, a Valentino?" he said.

She put two champagne goblets on the counter. "How astute. It's Gianni Versace, the only one I have."

He decanted the wine and she put the bottle in the ice bucket, then came around the counter with a tray of stuffed mushrooms. "Let's go outside. The air is fantastic."

She came alongside him and somehow managed to give the impression it was him taking her to the balcony for the 'fantastic' air. He saw she was in stocking feet and wondered if he was supposed to remove his own shoes. But then they were on the stucco balcony, holding champagne glasses up to each other with Fisher Island and the Gulfstream under their arms.

"To fate," she said.

He smiled, they sipped. "This is where we met," she said.

"Pardon?"

She pointed with her glass. "Right out there."

Michael found the spot, actually beyond the Intracoastal markers. "Do you always swim out there?"

"Sometimes. I think the tide was going out."

He looked around. Over the wrought iron railing he

spotted the white Hatteras tied up in the little marina at the edge of the plaza below.

"Try one of these," she said, lifting the tray of mushroom caps from the table.

Mike munched, she handed him a pink napkin. "What is that, truffles?" He sipped some wine.

"You like it? And garlic, of course. God in heaven if you don't like garlic, we should have never met."

He loved garlic just fine, but. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" he said.

She put her fingers up to his lips. "No, no. Only if it is about garlic or champagne or, or Shivananda. Don't ask me about anything."

She turned to face the sky and the bay. A water taxi cut through the shadows cast on the water by the high-rises, sunlight flashing on its wake. "We have only an hour," she said. "In an hour you may not want to ask me any questions, or you may have all your questions answered."

She turned to him with her champagne glass in front of her lips. "Right now I am a princess who lives in the water and you are the pirate who brought me out on land with his touch. We must not waste this moment."

There was little doubt she meant it. Not the details but the request. It was easy to accept. With the sun behind the building the air grew cool and she held her arms

close to her breast. The water taxi, with its scalloped yellow canopy, fared its way upside down in her champagne.

"I was wondering," he said, "if we shouldn't take your car."

TEN

She said yes, no problem, and gave him a brief tour of the apartment. Which suggested more questions about who and what she was. When they stepped in off the balcony he was staggered a bit by the view from the raised portico looking in. The apartment opened itself from that vantage, allowing sight lines left and right as well as back to the foyer and the kitchen with its little bar. Spongy white carpet went off on the right to a sitting room done up like a harem with giant pillows and wicker settees and Chinese screens. To the left was a raised hardwood platform with pickled oak dining table, chairs and sideboard.

All the rooms looked out onto the sky and overlooked the bay through walls of glass; all the surfaces were crowded with tropical plants -- no cut flowers, she pointed out -- but "heliconias, birds of paradise, bromeliads," and waxy red and yellow flowers he had never heard of, all carefully arranged to look haphazard. There was a broad-leaved palm tree in the living room big enough to sling a hammock on.

She let out bits, saying things like, "In El Salvador," and "My family in Salvador," which answered his question, at least in part. Down in the parking lot, she

changed her mind when she saw his Triumph and insisted they ride in it. It was consistent with her fantasy, apparently. Tooling up the Interstate in their tux and designer clothes like a couple of swells, Marisol loosened her hair and played in the wind as if they were running up to the 7-Eleven for a TV Guide. She was letting herself out like her hair; at will, not on demand.

"My father sent me to school in Europe when I was twelve," she said, leaning against the door. "I thought he was trying to get rid of me. But I began to love it. The mountains, the seashore, the snow. The school I attended had no buildings, no classrooms. We were twenty girls traveling all around Europe, attending classes at the Prado in Madrid, The Lycee in Avignon. I had a dormitory in Florence and bicycled across the Dolomites to Parma. We used to practice verbs as we pedaled. Can you imagine it? Twenty teenaged girls in little Madeline smocks rolling down the hills, chanting verbs?"

"I'm beginning to get a picture," he said. "Feet off the pedals, rolling along; pluperfect, future perfect."

She treated his picture like a memory, as if they had been there together, which is what he was imagining. She reached over and put her hand over the back of his seat, like a friend, looking over the door sill into the wind.

When they turned off the highway west on Glades Road she handed him the invitations. When he found the entrance

road and rolled through the hedges down a long path to the country club, she raked her hair with her fingers and wound it around onto her head and fixed it into a loose bun. In the dull blue light of dusk and a red glow from the dashboard, Marisol looked like a Gibson Girl or some apparition from another age.

The weather had dipped below seventy after sundown and the tall, open entrance to Coquina Knolls Country Club was alive with fox and minks slung casually over powdered shoulders and beaded gowns. Marisol used an off-white knotted shawl for the same purpose -- to ward off the chill and set her apart.

And that it did. Maybe not the shawl but her height and bearing, maybe even the quirky roadster she arrived in. Certainly the fact that she and Michael were younger by decades than anyone but the valets. It seemed Marisol made a habit of being different, her rebellious inclination had become apparent by the time Michael took her hand and they stepped up the two plush burgandy steps to the courtyard entrance. She had the bearing of a woman who was familiar with the limelight, of being watched during every moment. And she played with it by defying expectations.

The stage was lush. Opulent. Waterfalls, plantation shutters, royal palms like stone columns, hanging lanterns in bronze and crystal; handsome attendants in red foxhunt costumes standing about like living lawn jockeys. Coquina Knolls had that Bar Harbor, Hamilton House, Kona Kai look:

Old money in quiet dominion.

"How should I introduce you?" Marisol asked Michael when they waited at the reception table.

"Michael Hayden."

She tried it and fought with the initial H; Michael Ai-dan, then A-Den, which was close enough. He handed over their invitations and got a table number -- two table numbers.

"I could not move my brother," she confided. "Forgive me."

Then she had to work on his name right away, meeting a clump of ladies and gentlemen who looked like extras from a night with the Reagans at home. Marisol introduced him as a musician. He smiled, took handshakes from the gentlemen and bubbly smiles from the matrons. People presented themselves to her; some she knew and some who seemed to know her, including military brass in full dress array; ribbons and buttons and bow ties. A marine colonel seemed out of place in his olive drab tunic but he was actually the guest of honor.

In a lull, standing toe to toe with martinis in hand, Marisol offered a commiseration. "Not your kind of party."

"I'm flexible," he said. They both smiled at a lady whom they had greeted earlier. He drained his gin. "But you seem right at home."

She kept her eyes on the crowd. Wall to wall frumpery

and spreading waistlines. The air was thick with floral colognes and mustache wax and a hint of mothballs.

"I have a home on the shore near Acajutla," she said, "My father built me a palace by the sea. That is my home."

Michael watched her, caught her eyes in a quick look. The debutante, the princess -- whatever she was -- had a bit of history behind her. If she wore any cosmetics they had been professionally applied to suppress her delicate coloration, and failed.

There followed a long meal of capons and veal during which she sat at a table of ten people near the head table which was on a dais. Michael sat at a similar table rather far back near the potted palms. One Betty Horn and her husband, formerly of Dallas, took it upon themselves to entertain the single guy. For most of the time he and Marisol were not in line of sight but she found a reason to excuse herself while coffee was being served. She cruised his table, gladhanding with Betty and the rest, and surrepticiously dragging her hand across Michael's shoulders in the process.

She leaned close and whispered to him. "Come, I want you to meet Hector."

Michael got up and excused himself from his table mates. Marisol led him by the open French doors along a veranda, holding his hand lightly behind her. Hector was at the head table, a man approaching forty; dark and square.

"My brother," she said, resting one hand on the man's shoulder. "May I introduce my friend, Michael," she said, looking from one to the other. He rose and shook Michael's hand vigorously but not aggressively. Marisol stood between the two men. Hector was a hand shorter than his sister.

"Michael Hayden," Mike said, sparing his date the trouble. Even without his yoyo and with his shirt on, Michael placed him as the 'stout' man on the Hatteras.

"We meet again," Hector said. His English was all but perfect. "I'm afraid I misjudged you the other morning. My sister has a way of attracting sharks."

"I blundered into your privacy, I'm sorry."

"Not at all. Marisol tells me you are a gentleman. I over-reacted badly."

Somebody was pinging on the side of a water glass near by. Two of the redcoats began setting up a projection screen directly behind the dais. "I hope you will join me for a smoke after the show," Hector said. Michael assured him he would.

Marisol put her hands on the back of the chair which carried her shawl. Hector pulled it out a few inches and she stepped toward the table.

"All your questions will be answered, I'm sure," she said, letting go of Michael's hand.

What followed was indeed revelatory. The Marine

Colonel, one Lt. Col. Oliver North, was acting like a latter-day Billy Mitchell. But instead of sounding the alarm for air power following WW I, he was motivating for a post-Viet Nam war preparedness.

"We are, whether we know it or not, at war," North said from the podium, "and our enemies never sleep."

The body of his talk was an audio-visual presentation of Cuban-backed rebel warfare in Central America. The problem was, of course, that congress refused to admit the problem. It was a Democratic Congress versus a Republican executive.

Michael was bored at first. Until North got rolling in his earnest, midwestern style. And then the pieces began to fall together vis a vis Marisol and her brother and their country. El Salvador figured to be the next Nicaragua, North said. He had a timetable for the Communist control of the whole isthmus and the months were ticking off. Salvador was vulnerable and even more strategically placed than Cuba. The smell of blood was in the wind.

ELEVEN

After the presentation, Michael stood on the veranda with Betty and her husband, just trying to stay loose. Coffee and chocolate mousse had been finished, cognac and cigars were circulated while the guests mingled in the dining room and on the verandas overlooking the links.

A Cuban exile who was introduced with the head table, Alfredo Calvado, and his wife Nery stood with them. Michael recognized the man by his well-tanned bald head, the same bald head he had seen at the protest on Biscayne Boulevard the day before. Betty's husband, Bob Horn, introduced the squat, dapper Calvado as a professor of political science at the University of Miami. The group was discussing Colonel North and his slide show. Betty Horn was evidently quite taken.

"That young man has a sterling future," she said, touching Nery's wrist. Nery nodded.

Betty's husband, Bob, a tall man whose white hair and ruddy jowls gave him a rugged, regimental look belying his long career in toy manufacturing, rocked on his heels and grunted an amendment. "Golden, Betty. Golden future. We may have just had dinner with the president. After Reagan, Bush; after Bush, your 'sterling young man.' Col. North should be quite ready."

Hector and Marisol ambled up to the group and introduced themselves. Betty gave Michael a wink when Marisol was introduced to him. Betty was slick. A tall, slim man and his wife, whom Michael recognized from the head table also, joined the clutch. Hector introduced him.

"Brig. Gen. Clarence Alban Shipley, United States Air Force, retired."

The man bowed. "I prefer 'Mr.' if you don't mind," Shipley said. "When I shed my uniform in 1979 it was not my intention to maintain the bull's eye over my heart."

Only Shipley smiled. His nodding salutations showed a crescent-shaped scar above his right ear, an ominous gesture of what he said. He took a leather cigar case out of his breast pocket. "Ladies, may I take the men out on the tee for a little smoke?" He peeked deliberately at each wife. They acceded. The brigadier squeezed his wife's hand. Marisol remained tall and recondite. Mrs. Horn took her hand.

"Go on, Mr. Shipley, retired," Betty said, sashaying herself across the circle with Marisol in tow. "We want to discuss the Colonel's political assets on our own."

Shipley grinned broadly. Marisol looked back and gave a weak smile, then leaned down to charm back at Dallas Betty. The men strolled out to the elevated first tee. Hector filled Michael in as they lagged behind.

"Shipley is attached to the NSC. He also flew over

Viet Nam, but he won't tell you about that either. Sharp as a knife."

When the five men assembled on the first tee, Shipley concentrated on lighting his cigar, rolling it in his fingers and pulling the flame into the tobacco at each turn. Michael preferred his Salems. Shipley blew a plume of blue smoke into the air. "It is a beautiful night, gentlemen," he said, flicking his eyes up momentarily. The late moon was painting silver cameos behind a string of clouds.

"First time this season," Bob Horn said, puffing his corona to life. "Been so goddamn hot."

"You've been living in South Florida a long time, Mr. Horn," Shipley said. He worked a fleck of tobacco off his lips. "It's forty-five and rainy in Washington -- thirty-five by this time of night. This is a dream."

"Right you are, right you are. Bob; call me Bob."

Shipley gestured a kind of salute with his cigar. "You folks got it easy. You follow football, Bob? I'm used to Chesapeake football weather. All those Redskins games in RFK stadium down by the water."

Bob Horn wagged his head and shrugged. "I'm just glad to get a break in the heat," he said.

"Well, you've earned your right to be comfortable. Tell me, sir, what's your take on all this?" Shipley drew his cigar in a circle to encompass the grounds and the circle of men and the cluster of ideas. "What does all

this mean?"

Bob Horn looked back at the country club's dormers and broad eaves in the moonlight, at the regularly spaced coach lanterns along the balustrade and the Jamaica palms moving in a high breeze across the red tiled roof.

"I believe in preparedness, General," Horn said. "I've seen the results of isolationism and military budget cuts between wars. I was at Pearl. Quartermaster Corps, Seventh Fleet. This place reminds me of Schoffield Barracks."

Horn scanned the shifting clouds. Shipley acknowledged his authority with a nod. Bob Horn turned his back on the lanterns and palms. "Colonel North is right. That business about the rocket launcher in there, about the Chinese war materiel traced from North Korea to Cuba to Nicaragua. That crap is pretty obvious, don't you think? I see we've got a major, major situation on our hands."

"Between the wars?" Michael said, a bit too derisive. "You see this as one war after the other?"

"War is a fact, sir. Communism is in our hemisphere," Horn said. "We can't wait for war to come to us."

Michael had heard this before. "Shit, call me a peace-nik."

"That's the problem, isn't it," Gen. Shipley said, mediating with a casual detachment. "The U.S. disarmed after World War One and got caught flatfooted at Pearl

Harbor. Now we get Jimmy Peanut taking war preparedness down to nothing after Viet Nam and the Russians kick-start every rebellion, student strike and worker's revolt around the globe. We sit around whining about lost battles and the bad guys plan the next victory."

"We don't have Jimmy Peanut to kick around anymore," Michael said.

"You're goddamn right," Shipley said. "Say a prayer when you say that."

Michael could not argue the obvious. He mainly resented being glommed up with a bunch of Lawrence Welk fans while the night faded away.

"Ronald Reagan is the American Horatio at the Bridge," Shipley said, looking from one man to another. "On the other side of that bridge is the Russian horde. Brezhnev; Andropov, Aleksei Kosygin. You forget about KAL Flight 747? You forget Afghanistan? Angola, Ethiopia, Syria? There's a pattern to all this, gentlemen. Communist hegemony --the constant expansion of World Communism encircling the Free World. This ain't some goddamn polysci class here, guys; this is reality. And it's happening right under our noses."

"He's an actor," Michael snorted, "If Reagan's all we got, heaven help us."

Shipley flashed his grin. Two years in office, Reagan was still paying for Bedtime For Bonzo. "He may be reading the cue cards," Shipley said, tapping his ash to the zoysia

turf, "but he's got good writers. I tell you this, the lines have never been so well drawn: capitalists versus socialists, Americans versus One-Worlders, democrats -- small D -- versus autocrats."

"Congress versus the White House." Michael said.

Shipley reached across and tagged Michael's shoulder. "Exactly. The House of Representatives versus the Executive branch. Who's got the power, who's going to lead the country. These are real issues. Time of war, gentlemen, you want strong leadership."

Michael rested back on his heels. He looked back at the clubhouse. A baritone and a twelve-piece orchestra were working through the Jerome Kern songbook on their way to Victor Herbert. All else fails, this market sector was a goldmine for Geritol cotillions. Minus the Bad-Commie slide show.

"Well," Michael said, stroking his chin, "you know what they say, 'If Fidel Castrol didn't exist, we'd have to invent him.'"

Gen. Shipley let out a chestful of air. Michael appreciated the group squirm. The general seemed to appraise his remark.

"The truth is, Mr. Hayden, the leaders of the two largest, most powerful countries in the world, Kennedy and Kruschev, came about an eyelash short of atomic warfare over Cuba. Now they're both gone while Castro's still on

the throne. Meanwhile, he gets to empty out his prisons and asylums while we pay for it. I believe an independent observer would have to conclude Castro invented Carter, not the other way around."

Michael shook his head in playful despair. "Castro calls the shots. The old fart gets what he wants."

Gen. Shipley shifted his weight and made a point. "Not entirely, son. It is a confrontation of will. One that transcends US presidential politics."

Shipley seemed pleased with his claim. Bob Horn called it as he saw it. "The power of a dictator versus democratically elected leaders. In maintaining a kind of momentum."

"That may be true," Shipley said. "But the will of the United States is more -- shall we say -- continuous than the pendulum swing of presidential politics. Things do go forward, things do get done."

He edged closer to the group. "Can I trust you guys a little here? Can I trust you with a little Q-T?"

Horn and Calvado assured him. Michael watched curiously. Shipley tapped an ash. "Ever hear of Grenada?"

"Granada," Calvado corrected.

"No, Grenada, with a hard 'a' in the middle. It's an island in the West Indies."

"Barbados, the Grenadines," Hector said. "Trinidad."

"Precisely. Grenada. There's a demagogue named Maurice Bishop there who's managed to get control of the

island. He's a professed Marxist-Leninist and he lives to drink Fidel Castro's bath water."

"So what is the secret?" Calvado asked.

"He's building a military airstrip on the island. Long enough to land the Tu-95 Bear bomber and the Tu-22M Backfire B, the Soviet version of our B-1. Maurice Bishop is setting up Grenada as the next Cuba in the Caribbean and there's nothing down there to stop him. The Treasury Department has been tracking millions of dollars in counterfeit U.S. currency coming out of the Lesser Antillies and they think that's where it's coming from. It's classic, gentlemen, classic."

"What are we going to do about it?" demanded Bob Horn. "Sit around? We know all this and we just sit back and wait?"

Clarence Shipley was silent. The other men stared at him. Shipley kept his eyes on Horn and slowly moved his head side to side. From a distance one would have thought the man was emphatically declining a bon-bon or perhaps comically refuting a charge of looking at pretty girls. Michael, Calvado and Horn watched the tall man in his fifties with the crewcut and the curious scar above his right ear and attached his unspoken denial to the question asked. Hector blew smoke up into the air and rocked back on his heels.

"Stay tuned, gentlemen," Gen. Shipley said at last.

"Watch the home team run a strong-side sweep." He stepped back and flipped his half-smoked cigar into a clump of palmettoes off the back of the tee.

"We should go waltz our wives before they start looking at the bus boys," Shipley said. He took two steps toward the gravel path leading up to the veranda.

"But this ain't about that, is it." Bob Horn said, halting Shipley on the grass. "This is about Nicaragua."

Shipley turned back, the three others closed the gap. "And El Salvador and Honduras," Gen. Shipley affirmed. "What if Mexico went Communist? Jesus Christ, then the Democrats would wake the fuck up. The liberal-socialists would still sing songs about brotherhood and blame the 'fat cats' for all the starving peons pounding on the backdoor to California and Texas and Arizona. But the Congress would wake up by then, yeah. Then we'd be faced with fighting a nation of forty million Communists instead of three. And we'd have a two-thousand mile border to defend instead of the Gulf of Mexico between us and them. But, no. This banquet tonight isn't about Grenada, no." The group walked on. Hector pulled up to re-light his cigar and Michael stayed with him. Hector turned his back to the breeze to nurse his Macanudo.

Michael took the moment to watch the man. He was almost Arabian in his confidence; the way he moved his trunk and kept his hips beneath his shoulders. For Michael, men under six feet tall had always proven

difficult eventually. They were reactive, defensive, territorial, with the degree of difficulty increasing with every inch below five-nine. Hector was just under that. But Hector seemed to have his own scale.

"I'm in the country only a few days, Michael. Is the Hialeah Range still open?"

Range, range -- quick: driving range? Cattle range? There was only one Hialeah range.

"Hialeah Range and Gun Shop, yes indeed. I guess. I think it's specifically mentioned in the fourth amendment."

Hector flicked his eyes at Michael and then pulled on his cigar. "I would be appreciative if you could direct me. Perhaps accompany me in a little shooting. Tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Be a first for me, but, sure."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. I got dragged out duck hunting when I was a kid, but I bet you're not talking about shotguns."

"Well then, you must allow me to introduce you to the art. No one shoots as well as us Latinos."

Michael bumped Hector with his elbow. "Oh, now. 'Remember the Alamo.'"

"I do remember the Alamo," Hector said. "You lost. We gave you Texas on a platter, it was a political victory."

TWELVE

It had been a most unusual first date. But then, Michael wasn't entirely unused to big bands and cumberbund conversations. He had booked enough mega bar mitzvahs in his career. There isn't a mariachi band or beebop combo in America that doesn't know hava nagilah. This gig was the Boca Raton equivalent, the Republican equivalent. Only this time he was attending with the guests of honor instead of getting high with the band.

Marisol looked wilted and asked if he minded taking her home. She led him in a round of good-nights and then they ducked out. She became almost somber.

Michael took the TR4 down the gravel path away from the clubhouse, leaving the warm lamps and harmonious music like a solitary craft departing land at night for the open sea. The woman beside him was quiet. She had folded herself into the passenger seat and rested her head against the seat and her arm on the door, her hair lifting and swirling in the cockpit as if in a tidal surge against the reef. The tall, gracious young Salvadoran diplomat had

gone but the wistful princess had not reappeared.

Michael sorted through a dozen probes, a dozen inquiries, but let her alone. On the turnpike she gathered and twisted her hair just enough to keep it in the car. She shifted to rest the other way, to the inside toward him. Still silent, both of them listening to the car's thrumming song. She put her arm behind him on the seat and rested her head close to his shoulder.

He had read about banquets like the one they had just left. Seen the group shots on society pages: paunchy old men and their wives, fresh Bermuda tans; smiling like deacons and docents in the First Church of the Sheltered Tax. Delirious to eat chicken for a good cause. And there they had been, the two of them. Two kids among the grown-ups. Now he knew why she needed an escort, an ally. Hector -- well, he was her brother. He knew her when. She counted on Michael buying the princess bit just long enough to get her through the evening, a defense against the stuffy and the ordinary. She was a princess, it seemed -- sort of. And the ordinary was wrapped up in threatening details.

The slide show had been political. The Marine colonel, who described himself as an Eagle Scout and professional soldier, was carrying the ball for Ronald Reagan in the big Commie Bowl in Central America. He had traced a Red Chinese rocket launcher, an RPG, by its serial

numbers and lot numbers. Very effective. Korea to Cuba, Cuba to Nicaragua, Nicaragua to El Salvador. Smoking gun stuff. But in all the photographs of the region there were those short, swarthy men in oversized fatigues; hauling M-16 rifles along dusty roads, putting their feet on the wreckage of Russian trucks. Indian, oily, dark. And the women in combat boots and headkerchiefs resting bundles of firewood on their hips. All of them staring into the camera like fish. It was impossible to see Marisol anywhere near that land. It was not possible to see this woman in that landscape.

She had said he would have all his questions answered, but if he had any questions they had nothing to do with any of that. And he had no desire to hold her to account for it.

Rolling down off the I-95 exchange downtown and over the Miami River at Brickell Avenue, Michael's sense of landscape heightened, the ironies peaked. Under the tamarinds and poincianas heading south, watching the bold massifs of condos loom behind the greenery like an escarpment, it was obvious the landscape of rich Miami suited her well. The playful architecture -- condos like deco ships, like Leggo blocks; cut-outs with palm trees and a red spiral staircase between the tenth and sixteenth floors. Crazy, crazy rich. And behind it all the moon traveling with them, all the way from Boca Raton. Yes, she belonged here. But he wasn't at all sure he did.

He pulled into a guest spot near the front door of Costa Bella and shut off the engine. Marisol stirred but did not look ready to climb up out of her slumber.

"I don't want it to end," she said sleepily, pulling her hair back. She sat upright and pulled the shawl close around her neck.

He heard the dangling conversation there: End the evening, End the ride, End the relationship. There was some choice at hand, some alternative. He had usually picked the wrong end.

"I think I understand," he said, "about your, your situation. You're hemmed in by things, big things. Tonight was a momentary escape."

She stared out at the trees along the water. Michael pulled his tie loose and twisted open his collar. "I have only one remaining question," he said.

She looked at him. "What is it?"

"Why me?"

It may have seemed simple to her, it may have seemed naive, or obvious. "Come up for a cognac. I will answer that question."

Michael turned back to the steering wheel. "I've got to get this tux back before midnight," he said. Then he couldn't help laughing at himself.

A furrow appeared between her brows and went away like

she was unsure of the translation. Her lips did a Mona Lisa number. "I wouldn't want, una calabaza. . . I wouldn't want you to become the calabaza."

"The calabash?"

"You know." She used her hands to describe a large ball.

"A pumpkin."

"Yes, that."

More princess stuff. They went up. An occasion for the apartment to play center stage.

Marisol disappeared into her suite and left him to explore on his own. They abandoned their shoes in the tiled foyer like entering the yoga hall, something subliminal the creamy white carpet proposed. But Marisol gave him all the maneuvering room he wanted, allowing the apartment, which seemed to take up a quarter of the twenty-first floor, to represent her. A few minutes later she met him on the balcony with the brandy. She had changed into a sleeveless V-neck version of the caftan she wore at yoga. They took a sip.

"Let me show you something," she said, leading him in through a sliding glass door to her bedroom. "This is my little altar."

Mike joined her on the carpet in front of a red lacquer chest. Marisol lit a candle in its glass container and pulled her cupped hands across the flame to her face.

This high up the room was still and silent despite the open doors to the balcony.

"You see my sacramentos, no?"

He scanned the two-foot surface, draped with an embroidered cloth, with its icons and votives. Jesus, Buddha, and a photograph of a distinguished gent. He pointed to the photo. "That must be your father."

"Yes." She was surprised.

"You mentioned him at the banquet, 'Palace by the sea.'" I thought I heard the sound of the long-departed. And if you and Hector are really brother and sister there is certain to be another gene pool somewhere in here."

"What does that mean?"

He gestured to the picture. "This man looks like you; the eyes, the jawline. Hector looks like Fernando Lamas or somebody."

She focused on the image of her father. "Hans Dietrich von Marburg. He left Germany after the war and settled in El Salvador when he met my mother. I am Marisol Maria de Marburg y Luna. My father left the body seven years ago."

Michael looked from Jesus to the candle to Hans Dietrich and the Buddha.

"When I gave you that chain I had no expectations," she said, "none conscious. When I saw you in the yoga I realized what I had done and I questioned my motives. But

when you came over to me, what did you do?"

"I don't understand, what did I do?"

"When you came to me, did you ask me about the chain? Or try to give it to me? No, you asked me why I did not bend down to him, to Shivananda. You see? Then I knew the meeting in the water and the chain was less than the reason why we met. You asked me about what I was asking myself. Our meeting was beyond coincidence, beyond our calculations."

"I see."

"You do. You must see this."

Then it occurred to them separately to take a sip of cognac and they became aware of it, like a toast, and looked at each other. Marisol smiled her giaconda smile and tapped her glass against his.

They were kneeling on the carpet in front of the red lacquer box, the shrine she had set up. The cognac made itself known all the way from teeth to chest and belly, like they had sucked down the candle and held it in. Michael thought he could feel her warmth coming across the few inches that divided them, but he told himself it was impossible, that it was the spirits or the candle. He became acutely aware of her skin. The warm burnished tan on her shoulders and the way it gave way to a more translucent, northern skin between her breasts. That she was tropical and Germanic, sweet and dry like the wine.

He could not say he had no calculations, but if he was

trying to slow down, trying to forestall another test of his sexuality, this was dangerous.

"To fate," he said, wondering if he believed it.

They raised their glasses again and sipped. And then he had to kiss her before the fluid was gone off her lips. She leaned into his touch and put her arms around his shoulders. Michael was good enough to find a place for his brandy snifter on the box but she dropped hers onto the carpet behind him. He heard the dull ring of it from far away. The rustle of fabric and breath close by in that intoxicating way that confuses one source for another. The way her lips felt like his and her tongue was in his mouth and not the other way around, and her breath came and went into his lungs. He pressed his hand against her back and her breasts were his, against his chest, hard like the ache in his belly.

In the embrace she christened him, calling his name her way. "Miko, Miko, yes. You must feel it, you must." And when he opened his eyes he saw the little blond girl pointing to the ocean. He pushed his open mouth down along her neck and moved his hands against the cotton fabric covering her back and hip. Brought his hands to her arms and eased back.

He waited for her eyes to lock on his. "I want to see you tomorrow," he said.

"Yes."

"You understand?"

"Yes. I do. It is the way, it is the way I want it too."

"Yes."

"Tomorrow is Sunday, Miko. We will go to mass together. The little church right here on fourteenth."

"Fine."

"You can come for juice and croissant and we can walk there. This is good, no?"

"We spilled your cognac."

"I know, it's terrible."

THIRTEEN

Roberto Marin craned his head and stared up at the building. Lights were on high up, maybe a third of the apartments were lit, at least in one room or another. But which was Hector's? Which light was the one from Hector Luna's condominium? It was not easy to count floors from the outside, in the dark. His eyes were no longer sharp as they once were. He could not rely on them.

Roberto lowered his head and rubbed his face, pinching the bridge of his nose. The hard steel in the small of his back weighed him down. The offshore breeze carried the smell of tobacco.

"What are you doing here?"

Roberto turned around. A man was close up to him. He had approached as silently as a cat. "Dios mío, my ears are no good, señor I did not hear you."

He shaded his eyes from the streetlight. "Is that you?"

Willy drew in on his cigar. "What are you looking for?" he said.

Roberto moved sideways between two cars in order to

bring the available light onto Willy's face. Willy turned with him. "This is Sr. Luna's place, no? This is the condo of the Senorita Marisol."

"He is not here. It is late," Willy said.

"I know. I have not come to see them, either of them. I knew you would be here."

"Me."

"Yes. I know. I want to speak with you."

Willy took some time to smoke and examine the man before him. He was old, he was frail, his breathing was audible between phrases when he spoke. But he was not afraid. "Why do you want to speak with me?"

"Ah, we have much in common, Senor Lopez. Like you, I have come to America in search of freedom. Like you also, I have enjoyed the hospitality of the Hotel Altamira."

The old man thrust his hand forward with fingers spread, turning it in the faint light to show the X-mark in the web of his thumb. Willy pulled a cloud of smoke through his cigar. The old man's hand shook visibly.

"So?"

"So. I also, like you, know Rodolfo Alvarez. You remember him, yes?"

Willy looked past the man and narrowed his eyes against the light. He turned and stepped into the shadow of a palm tree. "No. He is always talking about the prison. I don't remember him. I think he is a fool, I

think he was a maricon, just one of those filthy huecos I paid to wash my latrine. If he was at Altamira he was one of those. Why would I remember his name? Tell me, what brand of coffee can did you piss into at night? Bustelo? Pilon?"

Roberto Marin laughed. He waved his forefinger back and forth and walked closer. "No, no, señor. It is not so easy. I was there in 1962, I know how it goes. Communist agents are given the names of men who die in prison, then they are released or allowed to escape. I know of this."

"What are you talking about?"

"Who are you? You can tell me, señor. You were not political, were you. This is why you are ashamed. You were one of the sick, isn't that so?"

"I am Willy Lopez, I can prove it."

"How? The same way you proved it to Calvado? I'm not as gullible as him."

"I can show you. Look, I have papers. Right here."

Willy reached for the door of the car nearest to them. Roberto Marin rocked back on his left foot and put his hand behind his back. The big Browning Hi-Power fit perfectly into his hand and slid smoothly out of the waistband as he turned.

But for every fraction of a second it took to do these things, Willy Lopez took a fraction less. In opposition to Roberto's swinging arm motion as he brought the pistol around his body and up to firing position, Willy pulled the

car door open and back. The door slammed hard against Roberto's hand and knee.

It made a loud cracking noise against the gun, the bright light of pain from his knee rose up to Roberto's eyes with such force he assumed the gun had gone off. In the heartbeat it took to focus on his target once again, Roberto felt the broad metallic impact on his face and shoulder and realized he was falling. He heard the gun clatter to the pavement, felt the brittle tiles of broken teeth in his mouth.

Sitting on the hard asphalt between two cars, Roberto searched the light and broken shadows of moving palm fronds against the cloud-lit sky. The man who called himself Willy Lopez looked down at him, then the door came again. And again, now only a distant sound.

They said goodnight, holding hands lightly, kissing gently at the apartment door. She was demure. After all the role-playing, Marisol Maria de Marburg y Luna relaxed into a quiet, rather angelic repose. Michael felt good. He could have ended the contact right there and chalked it up as one of the better ones. But that was sick. If he took little baby steps to bed with her it was going to be very, very good. He wanted that, the pressure in his groin testified to that.

It was cool outside. The parking lot was dark. As he opened his car door Michael heard a sizzle and looked up to see the silhouette of a man leaning on the car across from his. The sizzle was the man's cigar flaring bright in the middle of his face. Michael held the door open and stared. The man did not move.

"Wha's up?" Michael said, wanting to get in but not ready to take his eyes off the guy until he gave some sort of mitigating gesture. He had been there and Michael never saw him until he wanted to be seen.

The cigar came down. The man turned his head and blew a plume of blue smoke into the air, giving his profile to the light from behind. His jaw was strong, his head looked small. A simian skull.

"Cuidado, amigo," the man said, looking back and replacing his cigar. "Un hombre pueda ser perdido aquí."

Right. A man could get lost. Michael thanked him for the advice and got in his car. He had seen this before in Miami; the security irregulars. Restaurant owners hired people to watch cars, supermarkets sometimes had locals on the tab to do this sort of thing. Sometimes you tipped them. Michael drove away.

In the eighth grade, on a cool autumn day like this one he had gotten to second base with Myra Polaski sitting in her brother's '57 Chevy out front of her house after school. She had given him tongue, and tit through her Maidenform. He had walked home on a trail of moving

sidewalk and asphalt still tasting her lipstick and feeling the impression of her points on the palms of his hands. That was the day he found out about wet spots.

It was never a matter of conquest with him; always dissolving, always melting and flowing into another human being, female-type. Oceanic.

Michael drove back to Penny Lane and put his jacket on the V-berth and poured himself two fingers of Remy Martin and stretched out on his bunk. He smoked a Salem and rolled the strong wine around on his teeth and squeezed his lips together, letting the stuff down his throat.

FOURTEEN

He didn't want a woman, that's what he told himself. Just conversation and coffee. Closure on the medallion thing. And the whole banquet scene -- just an expediency, a favor. Oh, what delusion, what bullshit are ye capable of. With the rise of the sun and a new day, Michael could only wonder at his willingness to pursue it all again.

It was a developing trend between them: Marisol opens the door and he must qualify for entry, he must telephone the concierge or the church for room number or schedules. He was the knight, she the maiden, and it made all the sense in the world to him. He bought it and accepted the role.

Finding out the Carmelite Catholic church on Fourteenth and Brickell held mass at eight, nine, ten and eleven o'clock on Sunday morning gave him a key to her schedule. He would find her at home between those hours, presumably waiting for him. The concierge, a woman with an older Ursula Andress voice, seemed to know him now, with his second call. She said, yes, Dona Luna is on the terrace by the pool. And the rather corpulent doorman in his Franz Lehár uniform and red-rimmed eyes accepted

Michael's name without checking his clipboard and yes, directed him through the lobby to the terrace by the pool. It was bright and cool in the shade, warm in the sun. Marisol wore a flower print dress and big sunglasses. She saw him and stood up.

"God, Miko, it's so good." She brushed her cheek against his in the European fashion, and turned herself and him with a wave of her arm. "Isn't it fantastic! Dios mio."

A big Bertram plowed south down the waterway, crossing in front of an even bigger Trumpy going the other way, both boats gleaming arctic white in the sun. Queen palms scissored their fronds at the end of the raised terrace beyond the pool. Marisol sat back down, only letting go his hand to begin unwrapping the gingham napkin in a wicker basket.

"The bread is still warm," she said, pushing the basket forward. "Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Would you like a mimosa?" She indicated her glass, a champagne flute with a frothy residue. "I'll have another."

Michael looked up and found the boy standing at the door. Michael took her glass and held up two fingers. The boy nodded and turned away. Marisol plucked a black olive from a dish.

"I have been thinking," she said. "I have been very

bad to you, I know."

The bar boy stepped out onto the terrace again carrying a tray with two tall flutes and a split of Moet. Michael and Marisol sat back and watched him place the glasses in front of them, pour a few ounces of champagne into two inches of orange juice in each, carefully topping the foam without overfilling. And finally withdrawing with tray and bottle. Marisol tore a croissant and put one half on Michael's dish. He noticed her nails were natural.

"I have asked you to ignore the political things," she said, dabbing raspberry compote on her bread, "and think only about the spiritual. But then I get you into that, that, thing last night."

"It wasn't so bad."

"Miko, in Salvador I was a prominent person, no? You can imagine, you see me. But my father never instructed me to be low like the Salvadorian women, you know. He was proud of me, and yet embarrassed by me. I was too big to hide, you know?"

"And blond."

"Absolutely. Then I came back from the United States and from Europe with big ideas. I was stunned by my country. The poverty, the ignorance. I saw girls whom I had played tennis with as a child turned into duenas -- como se dice? -- old ladies. Matrons, yes. At the age of twenty-one. I saw little girls having babies. Babies,

babies. Too many babies. Salvador is the smallest Central American country but it has the largest population. It is poor."

Michael sipped his mimosa and nibbled his croissant, trying to keep the morning sun out of his eyes. He could see her compensating for the princess fantasy as if her father's voice had chided her in her dreams. Her country was in the midst of a civil war; it was bound to divide its people down the middle.

"I got into trouble with the Catholic church," she said. "I went on television with the UNICEF people. The Planned Parenthood movement in Central America. It is there. I handed out condoms in San Miguel and in San Salvador. In the Zona Rosa where the prostitutes walk up and down like women in a supermarket."

"And your father was furious."

"Yes. I was so young. And the archbishop of San Salvador came to him."

"Is that why you came to Miami?"

"No. I have been traveling all over since then, not just Miami. I am the one without a home, no? The woman without a country."

Michael shifted his weight and turned his chair. He downed the chewy dregs of his drink. "I know people who owned property in Cuba before Castro," he said, "who came over when their sugar mills and tobacco farms were nationalized. They had money but no home."

"It is like that, yes."

"But it's not too late in El Salvador, you can go back there if you wish, right?"

"It is war, Miko. It isn't safe."

"So you're a Gucci bag refugee, then."

He knew he had sounded cruel, seeming to dismiss her life as history, as class warfare. She seemed to rest behind her sunglasses. The waiter came out and topped off their drinks, pouring OJ and Moet in two streams like cafe au lait. Marisol remained still. When the boy left, Michael leaned closer.

"If you're expecting me to get up and walk away now you're wrong. OK? If you tried to warn me with all that political bullshit, OK, I'm warned. But I don't particularly buy the little princess routine any better than the Salvadorian social worker. Or any worse. OK?"

She nodded.

"I like the one in between. The one who is both. Look, I've been playing the float all my life: Classical and jazz, art and money, uptown and sleazeball. It's embarrassing; making 'artistic commercials.' My life is an oxymoron."

She fought a grin. "You are a Libra, no?"

Michael squinted against the sunlight. "My birthday was Friday."

"The day we met."

He nodded. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all. Next mass is in twenty minutes. Do you want to come?"

"Sure."

"It won't take us five minutes to get there."

"Great. Do you suppose I can get a cup of coffee?"

The mass was totally in Spanish, there was no homily - - no sermon. Just the rite, translated easily from Latin to Spanish, sounding more like the old church than modern English versions. Michael came in feeling self-conscious for various reasons, not the least of which being he wasn't Catholic. He was a Presbyterian on paper but no more a Christian than a Hindu. And he felt conspicuous in this population because they were all Hispanic, all Latin-American.

In this surrealistic neighborhood, the Carmelite church attracted a lot of Central Americans -- Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, Hondurans -- presumably because the order was big down there. Some of them lived in the Brickell condos, most worked in them.

And again, walking in and sitting beside Marisol made him feel an embarrassment of pride. Michael knew how her father must have felt. She was a big, bright bouquet at his side -- easily the most beautiful woman he had ever escorted anywhere.

When they were outside on the steps and Marisol had removed her thin scarf, Michael looked back at the carved

limestone facade. A small rosette window over the door looked very much like an eye. It bore a family resemblance to the Tideway Hotel.

"It's no different, is it," he said, stepping down beside her. "This and the yoga."

"No. They make it different." She took his hand. "The bishops would condemn us for tantric yoga, I'm positive of that. They have their theology. We have ours, yes?"

She had put on her sunglasses but took them off to look at him. They stood on the sidewalk beside a huge sago palm with resurrection ferns sprouting from leaf scars going up the trunk. The street was unusually quiet, it was Sunday morning. Sometimes on early Sunday mornings the neighborhoods of Miami can be empty and quiet and sunny for a few minutes at a time.

They were distracted by a flight of parakeets squawking across the tree tops, flashing blue and green, flying fast. It could have been another time, another place.

"If you are not busy I invite you to visit my aunts; tia Pilar and tia Inez. I have told them about you."

"I told Hector I'd go shooting with him."

"Well, that's good. The tias another time. You and Hector get along, then?"

"Sure. I mean, he doesn't know me from boo but he

seems to consider you a good judge of character."

"I am. Usually."

"I thought it would be a good day to go sailing," he said. They crossed the grassy median and started up the whitewashed steps to the Costa Bella terrace.

"I see. Then am I invited to go sailing with you?"

"Certainly. Tia Whoever and tia The Other One, too. And Hector. We'll have a picnic."

But there was never any doubt about his invitation. Marisol took the opportunity before they came up to the top of the stairs to kiss him. She took a half step down and turned into his arms and planted her lips on his mouth. They made contact all along their bodies for the first time -- every frontal surface pressed together; lips, loins, legs, everything. He tasted her and smelled the sun rising up off her body for a handful of seconds until she broke away and bounced up the remaining six or eight steps to the terrace.

Hector was at the table they had occupied before. He sat with one ankle crossed over his knee, dressed in slacks and a tennis cardigan and Panama hat. His aviator Polaroids reflected the glare. No one else was on the terrace. He stood.

"Buenos, Michael, Mari."

Brother and sister did the two-handed air kiss. He showed them their chairs. They all sat down.

"I am going to visit tias," Marisol said. "You boys are going to shoot?"

Hector looked at Michael. Michael nodded.

"Very good," Marisol confirmed. "And later, perhaps a sail? Michael has invited us for a sail."

"Oh, thank you, no," Hector said, "not for me. I'm one of those who gets sick unless traveling at a speed independent of the water. Do you know what I mean?"

"Fast," Michael said.

Hector loved the answer. He smiled grandly and nodded, made a gesture with his hand like slow-motion karate. Shark fin cutting the water. After a few more pleasantries and fruit juices, Marisol excused herself and stood up. The men stood with her.

"I'm going up to refresh, then go to Coral Gables. Michael, see me up the elevator. We have plans to make."

Hector watched them go, standing like a king in vacation clothes. Michael and Marisol walked hand in hand into the lanai and past the concierge's office to the lobby. In the elevator she took off her sunglasses.

"Just what is a free-lance music producer, Miko?"

He leaned against the rosewood panels. "Jingles and ditties, mostly. I'm known for my strings," he said. "People will come to me with a commercial and I'll add a five-piece string track to give it a texture they're looking for. And opera snippets. People love opera for up

to twenty seconds at a time. I can lay in a bar of Puccini or Mascagni without spoiling the whole ad. See what I mean?"

"What kind of car do you like, Miko; Mercedes or BMW?"

He assumed the extinct Triumph was out of consideration. "BMW, I think. I think the Beemer is tighter on the road."

"And what kind of whiskey?" The elevator stopped at the top floor and she led him out.

"Is this a survey?" He gazed wistfully at the ceiling and drew his hand across the air. "Walks in the rain, The Old Man and the Sea, breakfast in bed and honesty. And Ballantine twelve year old Scotch. Turn-offs: polyester, apartheid and anything plaid."

She denied him her grin, though it was there. He had gotten into wondering how much she picked up on and decided his sarcasm was tolerated at any rate.

At her door, she inserted the key and turned to him, pulling him closer. "What do I do? Where do I meet you?"

"On the terrace. Bring a bathing suit."

"Of course. Now, Miko, give me a small kiss like we are lovers for many years."

He watched her look down, she played with the front of his shirt. When she looked up he pressed forward and touched his lips to hers. It was anything but small and simple. There was all the expectation and restraint between them. All the push and pull.

And when she turned and went inside and shut the door and he walked back to the elevator, Michael knew he was playing at this restraint and elegance. What she saw as gallantry was in fact fear; a six-month legacy of sexual ineptitude.

Michael and Hector crossed the bridge over the rail yards separating Hialeah from Miami. Though the cities were co-terminous like so many others engulfed and suburbanized in the sprawl, Hialeah was different and apart; the second largest city in Dade County, second only to Miami. Hector seemed to remember his way to the gun shop well enough. He drove a Mercedes Benz. They rented ear-protectors, shooting glasses and pistols. A matched pair of 9mm SIG-Sauer automatics. In the windowless range, Cordite and cigar smoke turned the air blue under the halogen lights and the staccato noise of various guns rang and thudded against the tin roof. Each caliber with its distinctive trace -- the peck of .25s, the pop of .38s, smacking 9s and booming .44 mags. Although bullseye targets were available, all the shooters at this range chose to shoot man silhouettes. Michael was interested to find a shot in the balls was worth the same points as a shot in the shoulder.

"You shoot well," Hector said when they reloaded their first clips. They shot from adjacent booths near the side

wall. Michael dried the palms of his hands on the carpeted shelf inside his booth while Hector flipped the switch to bring his target flying back on its wire pulley. It was peppered with pencil holes.

It was a surreal situation, a case of jacked-up schoolyard play. Weird.

"Got his ass," Michael said.

"Aim for the center of mass. Forget head shots and such. Most men will fall with any hit to the body."

"Makes sense. We take it out farther now? Fifty feet?"

"No. Any man more than thirty feet away is not your enemy. Unless he has a long gun, in which case you haven't got a good chance. Hide and wait for your opportunity. Handguns are for close-in battle. Most gunfights are done within ten feet. Face to face."

Michael examined the paper silhouette and wondered how he would react to a man shooting at him from ten feet away. Hector reversed the switch and sent the target back out to thirty feet.

"You hit him nine times out of fourteen shots. Only one is necessary. Now do it without aiming. Shoot from mid-chest level. Load and put the pistol on the table. Then when you are ready, pick it up and shoot five rounds as fast as you can. Make sure you count your rounds. Know how many shots you have left."

"Do we have anything in a size 9 cyanide? I like a

cyanide dum-dum for close-in work."

Hector went back to his booth without comment. This was beginning to feel less like gun play than something else. So many people coming to a closed space to practice killing. Not a sport. More like a rehearsal.

He performed the reflex shooting, as Hector called it. They did it again and again, shooting well over a hundred rounds each, sometimes fourteen shots as fast as they could pull the trigger and replacing the clip with another one already loaded to fire a total of twenty-eight shots in under twelve seconds. When they came back out to the store counter to turn in the equipment, Michael ran his fingers through his hair and shook out his hands.

"This is goodamn warfare," he said.

Hector smiled broadly. "An accurate assessment."

The manager handled the two weapons deftly, breaking them down to the slides and springs and running an oily rag over the parts, swabbing the bores.

Hector went to the water cooler. "Thirsty?"

Michael walked over and accepted a paper cone of cold water. They drank.

"Do me a favor, Michael."

"Sure."

"Let me buy you that pistol, eh?"

"Oh, no. That's. . .no. No way."

"I would appreciate it. You have no handgun?"

"No, I don't."

"Well now you do."

"I can't, man."

"And do me another favor, OK?"

Michael stopped disassembling. Hector turned his shoulder and led him to the window. "Buy them both for me."

Hector took out his handkerchief and wiped his face and replaced it into his back pocket. He had left his tennis sweater and hat in the car. He looked Napoleonic. "You understand what I am asking?"

"Citizenship hassles? Gun laws?"

"Yes. I can't buy these weapons without a great deal of paperwork. In three days, you can sell me one of them for a dollar with absolutely no problems. It would be a considerable favor to me."

Hector read the last hesitation on Michael's face. "I will reimburse you in the car. You have a credit card?"

He nodded. Sure he had a credit card. It was a future he didn't have. Shit. But the legal hassles with Billy Zemek's wild tirades were solvable. One had to believe.

"I'm getting the better end of this deal, Hector."

Hector slapped him on the back. "I'll feel better with you armed, Michael. Do you understand me?"

Michael nodded. But he didn't. Not really. But it was all right.

FIFTEEN

By afternoon it was hot again with a little moisture blowing back off the ocean. But the summer was indelibly broken and the fat white clouds only made the sky more blue. Hector dropped him at the marina and Michael got Penny Lane ready for a cruise. A matter of emptying ashtrays, stuffing clothes into lockers and laying in two bags of ice.

By three o'clock the day was virtually indistinguishable from any day in June except for half the humidity. It felt Mediterranean, it felt like a postcard. There was a warm wind from the east southeast bringing a powdery aroma from the Bahamas -- enough of it to heel the boat and make a hissing wake. Marisol didn't lock her ankles and hide behind a big hat. She wasn't the kind. Didn't lay out on the foredeck like a hood ornament. She wanted to take the wheel and crank the winches. She didn't ask where to head the boat like most day trippers; she felt the wheel and watched the luff of the mainsail and found the groove.

"You've done this before," he said, watching her face

watching the sail.

"Poco poco. I have always wanted to do this like this."

She wore the same black tank suit. Conservative, refined, skin-tight -- stretched over a world class body. He played Vivaldi in the cabin for background music and pointed her south for the Featherbeds and Elliot Key. They anchored in Sands Cut and snorkeled on a stern line, pulled out on the incoming tide like flags in a ripping breeze. Jacks and barracuda held station below, pointing into the current like they were. The water was as sharp and clear as a Bombay martini.

At sundown, Marisol made a pitcher of caipirinhas with a dozen limes, sugar, white rum and Cachaca. Brazilian lime-ade. They took turns showering and changing into loose cotton; white drawstring pants and a light shirt for him, a crinkly skirt and top for her. He put on Ivan Lins and Luis Bonfá to complement the punch. She broke out a vegetarian basket which the concierge had put together for them. A half dozen sailboats anchored with them on the bay side of Elliot Key but they all spread out from each other. A couple of boats had barbecues on the stern railing. It was customary to salute the setting sun with flare guns. The wind dropped and it got chilly.

Marisol pushed in close. The sunset faded behind Turkey Point and left a pervasive mauve, a sky the color of

old rose with stars winking through high up. An Air Force jet coasted in over their heads for touchdown at Homestead Airforce base, its lights blinking in a lazy rhythm.

Michael thought several times she was about to say something, about to comment on the sunset or the day. Then he realized they hadn't said twenty words all day, since they set out. The boat seemed to evoke the mood. Like the day they met. "The tide," she said then. It was all said in a touch, a look. It was in the situation. What could either of them possibly say to modify or characterize this.

If she was going through similar deliberations they both arrived at the same conclusion. It was there when they looked from the horizon and watched the reflection of sunset in each other's eyes. Marisol put her hand to his face and brought their lips together. Then he felt himself at the boundary of that tender skin, and gave into it. He pulled her back on top of his body as they sank against the cushions. Her breasts pushed on him and moved apart to hold him and caress him through the cloth. She opened her legs and clasped him as if her whole body was a mouth and she couldn't get enough of him.

Without a word they went below where it was warmer. Michael lit a candle and Marisol sat on the berth. She reached across her body and pulled her shirt off in a single motion, setting her breasts free. He knelt on the bed and pulled off his shirt. Then pants and skirt came off and she shook her hair loose and they let their bodies

play unrestricted. No cloth, no motives, no nothing. Just lips and tongues and fingers. He kissed down to her belly but she urged him up and put him in her, cradling his hips in her thighs and rocking him with her pelvis.

He ran his lips across her open mouth and pushed himself in her and felt her opening deep inside.

"Miko, Miko," she whispered. "Yes, yes. I want you to fill me. Fill me, Miko."

The boat amplified their motions, taking their desire up the scale. Ripples became waves and spread out across the bay, turning all the boats to honor them. Tears rolled from the corners of her eyes, forming currents in the saltwater. In the end it was everything he never had.

He pushed up finally on his arms, feeling conscious again. A thin film of sweat separated between them with a smack. He had his breath back.

"The motion of the serpents," she said.

He laughed. Catholic snakes are different from Hindu snakes. He eased out and rolled over. He grappled for a Salem and she held the candle for him.

"The unification of opposites?"

"Yes, Miko. Part of you is me now."

"It all seemed metaphorical back at the coffee shop."

She rested with her eyes closed.

He smoked a while. The gentle swaying of the boat tapped a halyard against the aluminum mast. A flow of cool

air diluted the head of steam they had filled the cabin with. The incense of their lovemaking drifted away on the breeze.

"I wanted you then," she said. "In that coffee bar."

He thought he could get mushy on that tack; when he first wanted her, how much he missed her, searched for her -- years before he knew she existed. Love letter shit. She pulled a towel over her legs against the chill but it was too short. He got up and found her skirt. He put on his pants and put on a John Klemmer cassette. Free Fall Lovers.

Michael grinned. Somewhere a grizzled old hag was pulling a long pin out of his effigy. The curse was off.

There was a moon and broken sky to illuminate their way home. The southeast wind turned around to south and let him put up a cruising chute for running downwind. The boat surfed along, the saxophone music surged with the breeze. Pinpoints of green and red navigational lights moved slowly against the sparkle of Miami lights. Marisol made some Nescafe and put a pinch of cinnamon in it.

Funny how getting laid changes everything. Simple as that. A girl like Marisol could turn East St. Louis into Rangiroa or Paris; she turned Miami into the Garden of Earthly Delights. By the time they drifted up against the concrete dock at Costa Bella he felt the root growing again.

They carried stuff up to her apartment and had some apple papaya juice. The goodnight kiss went directly and inexorably into lovemaking on the white linen sofa. Her dress up, knees up, her fingers kneading his naked buttocks like milking a bull. He thought of nothing, or nothing longer than it took to cross his senses; her eyes closed to slits, her mouth open and breasts bouncing against the cotton shirt, her looking down to see him entering her. The way it was always supposed to be.

"Sleep with me," she said when they were sitting back shoulder to shoulder. "Stay."

He had to tie up the boat, had to get back. He wanted to fall asleep with her but was afraid of waking up with her. She knew this, or seemed to. Do men protect something the way virgins protect their virginity? Is it some sort of hymen that grows over intimacy where there is no barrier at birth? He had to rebuild his emotions after pouring all his desire into one place all at once. He wanted to follow his flow, to reside there in her, in her garden. But he had to push back. Had to re-knit the membrane. She understood. In an hour he would want to come back.

So they said goodnight again and pulled away. It was good to want more. He went down the elevator and into the lobby feeling like What's his name in American Gigolo, betraying all his higher thoughts. It wasn't about

conquest, no. But it was about doing it. As much as anything else, it was this feeling. Funny how getting laid changes everything. How a woman wanting you changes everything. Wanting you and taking you inside her.

He called her from the lobby phone. "Can I take you to dinner tomorrow?"

She was laughing when the phone rang. Silly boy.
"Yes, yes. Tomorrow?"

"Today, later. Dinner."

"Oh, Miko, Hector and I have family plans for dinner. Join us afterward for drinks."

"Good."

"Good night, Miko. I had a wonderful day. All of it, all day."

He heard a hesitation after the "I."

"Good night Marisol of the Moon."

And it was there for him, too. They already had to fight back the L word.

"Call me. We'll meet."

"I'll call."

They broke off. He nodded to the man in uniform who opened the door for him. It was almost three in the morning and cool.

The Penny Lane rocked against a pair of plastic fenders. Michael saw her sunglasses on the cushion in the cockpit. He saw the white Hatteras tied up in the last slip. Empty, or apparently empty. Back in port where it

hadn't been when they left. Monkey Man had taken a midnight ride. The cigar man; the one with the overshot brow. Hombre perdido. He had been out there, just out of sight, watching. Maybe Hector too, but certainly the other one. The orphan with his gun.

SIXTEEN

He awoke with her in his brain. Her taste, the smell of her on his skin, the papaya juice, the salt spray. The candle he lit was puddled on the counter beside the berth, a viscous white glob dripping through the taffrail like waxy lava.

Any sexy thoughts would have to wait until his head cleared and he did something about the grunge. Last night's balmy salt air was this morning's oily film, the hot passionate skin was now just scratchy and stubbly. There was a hierarchy involved, roughly; air, then coffee, then aspirin. Maybe toast, a shower. Then love.

Christ, what a woman. Michael rolled out of the bunk and peered out through the oval port over the sink. It was overcast and sticky. He pried the melted candle off the teak and inspected the impression of the wood grain on the underside. Somehow it seemed symbolic of something. The passage of time, the flow of passion. It had been so fast, so beautiful. Things had changed. He took a swig of Scope and climbed out on deck. He wore his white drawstring pants. An older broad named Margo on the next boat gave

him a smile. He spat the green liquid overboard but she had turned around. It was Monday.

He decided to go up to the pay phone and call in but remembered he had no secretary anymore. It was ten o'clock. It was hard not to feel like a waste-oid under these circumstances. Impossible to see himself with her. She was rolling over on lightly starched sheets and thinking of him. Or she was sitting out by the pool having sapote and lime with Perrier. Michael got himself into jeans and a clean shirt and seized the day.

But the day had to wait for the car. The Triumph had let out all or most of its cooling water onto the asphalt and needed a new lower hose. This repair had been done before -- everything had been done before. This car had had every nut, bolt, wire, bearing and knob replaced, rebuilt, glued or lost. The lofty word was 'unrestored,' the practical word was 'worn-out.' He got a roll of duct tape from the boat and wound half of it around the rubber hose and carried water from a faucet in a bait can. This was not helping dispel the grunge at all, not at all. He made it to the studio.

The big doors were open in back. Wolfe was supervising a crew loading his statue on a truck. He was pissed.

"These fuckers want to hang her with a fucking rope!"

The three guys were close to shoving the big girl up

his ass sideways. The white guy kept trying to make the deal work.

"How much does it weigh?" the guy asked, wiping his face and looking at his men. It had the sound of a repeated question. False patience: And how much does it weigh, your honor.

"No fucking idea," Wolfe said. He was in full form. "But you can't put a rope around her waist and see if it breaks. Look, call Mary What's her Face and tell her to send a lift truck. You know, a, a fucking lift gate truck. On the back. A hydraulic lift."

Michael walked in and went for the coffee maker. The hauler didn't want to give up. Probably refused to lose a job, not after he put up with this much. The statue had been moved ten feet toward the big doors. The four of them took up positions and waited each other out.

Wolfe came over to the coffee maker under the mezzanine. Michael leaned against the file cabinet.

"How much does it weigh?" Michael muttered into his cup. Wolfe poured himself a mug.

"No fucking idea. What's with you?"

"I'm in love."

"Good. Bring her around."

"No way."

Wolfe drank his coffee. "You afraid I'll steal her?"

"Yeah, right. She thinks I'm Julio Iglesias, man. She thinks I have an office in CenTrust Tower. Why would I

want to bring her around here?"

"Fuck, no, keep her away from this scrap heap. Fuck. I wouldn't bring a two-dollar whore around here."

"She's a Salvadorian. Lives on Brickell. Costa Bella, ever hear of it?"

"Fuck no. She's the one you thought was a corpse? In the water?"

Michael broke up. She was indeed. He left Wolfe to have his fun with the truckers and called for a replacement hose to be delivered by the local parts store. He and the Union-Jack Import Parts and Service Co. were on a first name basis. Jack called him Mike and he called him Mr. Jack.

The coffee and a handful of Cocoa Puffs gave him the fortitude to call his lawyer about the union business. It was a big mistake.

"What are we saying, Shelly? You're telling me the collapse of Jazz All-Stars is the least of my problems? Shelly?"

Sheldon Marks, Esq., J.D., C.P.A., seemed at a loss. Michael listened and fought off the urge to toss the phone. He nodded and cursed. Wolfe took notice. Michael began repeating what he heard for Wolfe's benefit.

"My bank account is frozen?" Michael searched Wolfe's eyes for some sort of recognition. He wanted Wolfe to act knowing about it. "They can't do that, Shelly. Can they?"

Wolfe turned and walked back to his problem. Michael gently lowered the telephone onto its cradle. "I'm fucked," he said quietly. "Apparently that asshole Billy Zemek pushed a waitress down the stairs and I'm being involved in a federal conspiracy suit. It's surreal. It's too funny for words."

The other men in the room enjoyed the stark physicality of their task by comparison. Foibles of the art effete. Finally, Wolfe took off his gloves and paid attention.

"Conspiracy?"

Michael nodded. "My bank account, my boat. Shelly says it's just a technicality. But if I tried to sell anything over a hundred dollars the government would get the money. Billy Zemek was my responsibility the night he freaked out. Billy violated the woman's civil rights. Did you know Billy Zemek was a Skinhead?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't. I hate rock and roll. Jesus."

Wolfe offered some standard mitigations -- it will blow over, the bonding company is liable, Michael's not responsible for criminal acts on the part of his clients. Even if he should have known Billy Zemek was a PCP neo-Nazi nipple-piercing racist zorch pipe from East End. He didn't know. Billy had no U.S. management. It was to be a tour. Four months ago it looked like a money-maker.

Michael sat back on the couch and smoked a cigarette.

"They're talking about the Jim Morrison case, Wolfe. Remember Jim Morrison peeing on the audience in Dinner Key Auditorium? Remember that? Fucking whips it out. Cops go nuts. I bet whoever produced that particular show really bit the bag."

He hated smoking in the morning. On impulse he called Marisol. Before he could change his mind the concierge picked up. Dona Luna left a message. Would the gentleman meet her at Braman Motors anytime after ten. It was almost eleven thirty. Cabs don't pick up in this part of town.

Braman sold Cadillac, Rolls, Bentley, BMW. The showrooms downtown were like sheet metal museums. Marisol turned and waved as Michael walked in the door. The boys in the truck outside hooted and waved back at her. Michael half-turned and then disavowed any association with his ride. He and Marisol pressed cheeks and then used the opportunity to touch each other surreptitiously like lovers do, turning to look around at the imported cars on polished marble floors and berber rugs.

"I want you to help me, Miko."

"Anything."

She pointed to the 525i beside them. "Champagne," she said, then leading him to another one nearby, "or Dawn?"

He looked at the two cars, the theatrical lighting reflected off chrome and sank into the pearly finish.

"Tough choice. Life is full of tough choices, don't you

find?"

"Yes."

"Dawn or Champagne. Like morning and evening. Pity. I guess the Champagne has more complexity, more overtones. Silver over a hint of green. It's provocative."

She liked his parody. Or she bought it.

"The Champagne."

He tried to make it feel crucial. He nodded. She smiled and pressed against him again, hugging his arm. She had a way of eroticizing his arm. "I agree."

She looked over to a salesman in an Armani suit. He had been hovering. Hover distance is directly related to price. His hair gleamed like the chrome. He stepped over to them. Marisol handed him her Visa card.

"Todo esta puesto de Sr. Carreras."

The salesman gave a little bow from the waist and took the card. "Claro." He smiled and turned and showed a two-inch tail sticking out of the back of his head.

"Miko, I have to take my car back to the rental."

"Ah."

"You meet me there, OK? They are ready here, when they are ready, I mean. You can make sure of everything?"

"Sure."

She kissed him for real this time. Her lips were instantly electric and soft; spreading and motile and quick. The promise of infinite things.

"This is so exciting," she said. Her eyes were lit up

like the expensive machinery.

They stood face to face holding hands and forgot what they were doing. He knew the other car sharks were hanging on the water cooler and leaning on their green blotters and watching them. Fuck it, fuck 'em. Marisol started for the door.

"National," she said, "at Douglas and Biscayne. U.S. One, OK?"

"Gotcha."

Buying a BMW wasn't like buying a Chevrolet. He took the credit card and the receipt without looking at the numbers, signed the release himself. It was OK. The salesman started the car on the showroom floor and slid open the glass doors. They had rubber mats for the marble floor and wooden ramps to go over the sill. Probably use red velvet for the higher jobs; the Corniche, the Silver Clouds. It was OK, though. Michael got more hassles buying socks at Sears.

Driving down Biscayne fiddling with the sunroof and the radio he knew he was being seduced. He was tumescent. The car, the life, the girl. He had a woody. But she knew it. Isn't it exciting, she said. Yes, baby. Oo.

She waved from the corner and he picked her up and they tooled off again down the highways and byways.

"You bought a car on your Visa card?"

"It is unusual, yes? But there are controls on how much we can take out of the country. I have a, how do you say?"

"You have an allowance."

"That is it."

Oh baby.

She unwrapped a cassette of Brazilian jazz and slid it in. Reminiscent of the boat. She unpinned her hair and let it float up through the sunroof like Boca Raton that night. When was that?

Down through the overarching tunnels of banyan trees on

Ingram and around Cocoplum Circle; up through the Gables and over to Key Biscayne.

Michael used the car for what it was worth, jogging lanes and taking inside lines through flat turns, trying to break it loose. The Beemer sprinted like a gazelle and cornered like a mountain goat. His antique TR4 would never be the same.

But they were not alone.

Somebody in a light green Ford sedan was playing follow the leader with them on the straight-aways. Michael flicked his eyes from the road to the mirror. He stretched it out and the Ford closed back in. They were up to ninety on I-95 northbound until he pulled off and slammed the BMW into a short drift on the gravel under an overpass.

Marisol caught herself with her hands on the dash. The green Ford was nowhere around. Michael turned the stereo off.

"OK, we've got to talk about it. OK? I'm cool, I'm cool. Cool as the next guy. But you got to tell me about it. Now."

She pulled her hair back and twisted it. She looked like she wanted to laugh but couldn't.

"Tell you about what?"

"Don't. Come on." Michael fought down his anger. "The white Hatteras. The boat. It was out there last night, wasn't it. Wasn't it."

"I suppose."

"You suppose. Now this green Ford. Who's following us, Marisol? Is it Hector? Your bodyguards? You have bodyguards?"

Her brows knit, her eyes searched his. "Yes," she said simply. Like Yes, dummy. What did you think? She looked like she was going to cry, not from fear or embarrassment, for his stupidity.

Michael took a breath. "You have bodyguards." Trying to get used to what seemed obvious.

"Yes. The war, Miko. Let Hector tell you, he can tell you."

"I know, I saw the slide show."

Short, dusty pachucos carrying RPGs through the jungle. Bandannas across their faces. Was he supposed to

think about them when he drove through Miami?

"Who's the guy in the boat?" he asked, "The ugly one."

Marisol sat back and put on her sunglasses. Michael took his foot off the brake and pulled back onto a quiet road heading east. She talked to him.

"His name is Willy. He works with Hector. They are working on something. Hector will tell you."

"Willy?"

"Yes. Willy Lopez. He is Cuban, a political prisoner for many years. He has a mark on his hand."

She showed him the web of her hand between right thumb and forefinger. Michael wanted to say, Why didn't you tell me, but it was ridiculous. How does a girl tell her date about her bodyguards. She doesn't. Only a schmuck mentions it.

"Why do you have a Cuban bodyguard?"

"They work together. Hector will tell you."

He pushed the hair back off his forehead. "You should've told me, that's all." Michael looked at her.

"You know?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"I needed to know. How was I to know?"

"I should have told you at the beginning."

"Whatever."

"He's a political prisoner, he was a political prisoner in Cuba. Twenty years. He has great respect from

the other men."

"What 'other men?'"

She stumbled for the words. "Counter-revolutionary, the exilios cubanos. Miko."

Michael pictured the man on the boat holding the automatic down by his leg. He was the cigar-smoking silhouette in the parking lot. Motionless, hissing. Now the snake was in a bile green Crown Victoria. Pea green. Ugly car.

"Michael, it isn't important, is it? It doesn't matter about Willy, you know. I can have him to go. It isn't a problem."

"No. I don't, it isn't a problem. I didn't know, that's all. Shit, if he's gonna be back there, I'll know it. No biggie."

He took the car up First Ave. Traffic was light for two in the afternoon. Monday. Cripes. Marisol turned the music up enough to hear but not too much.

"I don't want to make any mistakes, Miko," she said. She held her sunglasses in her lap. "I feel like we are good."

He took her hand and brought it to his hip and held it. She leaned close. "It's not easy for me," she said.

"Me either," he said. "That's not true. It's very easy. It never was, now it is. I should have gotten that thing out of the way right away. At the coffee shop. I should have come out and asked about the guys in the white

boat. I didn't want to hear, you know, that it was your husband. Or your lover. I thought if I didn't ask about it he might go away. Then I finally did and it's over."

"Oh, God, Miko."

There was a ton of stuff in her voice, laden with all sorts of data. Relief, maybe. Like him -- glad it was out. She bent down and kissed his hand and sat up, resting her head on the seat back. Michael felt himself respond, or begin to respond. The sly dog awoke and stretched, aware his sleep was over. The mind reels, the gonads roll over. Convinced the long sleep is really over. Funny how it works.

His eyes flicked up to the mirror.

SEVENTEEN

The colossal woman was still there, standing tall where her captors had left her, her gleaming breasts and silvery thighs reflecting sunlight and tamarind leaves in the open doors. Her weight had proven to be her best defense.

Michael walked into the studio past the hulk of his car, a new radiator hose resting on its hood with an invoice under it. He looked around and let Wolfe know he had company.

"What it is?"

Marisol came in behind him. Wolfe saw her image in the polished steel. She took off her sunglasses.

"What it ever was," Wolfe said. He came out of the tank cage wheeling an empty cylinder of acetylene welding gas. Michael turned.

"She's magnificent," Marisol said, lifting her gaze upward through the curves and tangles of the big lady.

"Yes, she certainly is," Wolfe said, glancing at Michael. "Most definitely." For a second or two the men watched her scan the statue.

"I'd like you meet Marisol," Michael said. "Marisol,

Wolfe."

Wolfe approached and took her hand. "Encanto. Mikey described you so inadequately."

For a moment Michael thought there might be an actual hand-kissing. Marisol smiled and regained her hand before the swoop.

"Words fail, Mr. Wolfe. Is she for sale?" She looked up at the statue.

"Yes, as a matter of fact." He peered back at Michael. "The truck never got back here."

"I'm afraid the artist can't bear to let his creation go," Michael said. "He accepts gallery placements and then doesn't let her get on the truck. As bad as a father with a teen-aged daughter."

Wolfe had to react -- huffing and cussing the truckers, the gallery, and Michael. He continued playing the bombastic metal sculptor for Mikey's quail; being large, waving his hands. He blamed his separation dilemma on women.

"Every man I've ever met was obsessed with a woman, or several women, except the fags I know, who are obsessed with being women. Christ!"

Michael brought three Polars out of the fridge. "So we're having a drink tonight, Wolfie. Care to join us?"

Wolfe wiped his lips and leered at him. "Ho, ho, don't invite a wolf to table, my friend."

"I didn't mean it, of course. Why don't you put in

that radiator hose for us."

"Fuck you. Just kidding."

"None taken. Mail come yet?"

Michael wanted to show off his compact disc equipment and lucky enough, got a promotional CD in the mail. There were no legal-looking envelopes, for what that was worth. He got a new Hubert Laws; perfect for the occasion. Wolfe chose the moment to call the gallery again.

"Wish me a happy birthday," Marisol said above the music.

Michael couldn't be sure he heard her, then knew it fit. She read all the changes in his face and laughed.

"I told you, Miko. We are in the same place in the same time. Two Libras, eh? Do you know your chart?"

He shook his head. "I don't know anything about all that."

Wolfe began shouting elaborate profanities into the telephone. Something about camels shitting in the ocean. Part of the act.

It was decided Michael would drive her home and keep the car. He would meet her and Hector at the Grand Bay after eleven. With his newly refreshed libido, Michael could think of several ways to pass the time, but Marisol had to go to a family dinner in a couple of hours.

Shortly after three o'clock Alfredo Calvado watched

the woman gardening in her back yard. He could see in through the screen door, over the floral rattan settee and through the open patio doors to a little garden out behind the house with tomato rings and marigold borders and tall papayas. He rang the door bell again. The woman looked up and squinted through the doors but could not make him out. She wore a canvas sun hat and white gloves, the kind of gloves with green thumbs. She sat back on her heels and started pulling them off.

Calvado took the opportunity to fish out another foil packet of Pepto Bismols. He chewed two wafers and put the twisted wrapper in his coat pocket.

"Oh, Dr. Calvado," she said when she got to the door. She slipped the latch and pushed open the door for him. "I can't thank you enough for this. I know you're a busy man. Nancy always tells me about your work."

Mrs. Fisher pushed the hair back from her face with the heel of her hand as if she still wore dirty gloves. Calvado blinked to adjust to the shade. It was curious to find a Kentucky cracker still living without air conditioning in Hialeah, one who declined to burn lightbulbs and TVs in the daytime and used screen doors and cross ventilation to cool the house. It was a curious throw-back. His own mother had retained the old ways. She came to Miami and went to her reward in 1959, never believing in air conditioning.

"I don't suppose you've heard from her," he said.

Mrs. Fisher shook her head. "No, I wish." She led him into the kitchen and ran some water in the sink. "That girl, that girl. No, Dr. Calvado, I'm afraid I didn't call you over here to tell you she turned up. Please, be comfortable. Give me your jacket. Are you a beer or a lemonade?"

Calvado shrugged out of his jacket. Mrs. Fisher placed it on the back of a vinyl and chrome kitchen chair. "Nothing for me, ma'm."

"Oh, now. Don't be formal. I feel like I know you, honestly. Nancy has told me so much about your books and all the work with the university. And Jose, Lord, you should be a fly on the wall some time, Dr. Calvado. The young people talk about you like. . ."

"Jose Romero?"

"Of course. A fine young man."

Then she lost her momentum and turned her face away from him. Calvado looked away. Magnets adorned the refrigerator; a half soccer ball, a wedge of lemon meringue pie, one of those trolls with fuchsia hair.

Mrs. Fisher used a paper napkin to blow her nose. "I just can't shake the feeling those kids got themselves in bad trouble. I just know it."

She pulled open the door and took out a pair of Budweisers and used a metal fixture on the wall above the light switch to pry off the caps. She handed one bottle to

Calvado. She upended hers and used a dish towel on her eyes. Calvado took a healthy draw and dabbed the condensation from the bottle on his pants.

"I won't lie to you, Mrs. Fisher."

"Lorraine."

"Lorraine. What you say is true. I can't tell you how much I've worried about this."

Lorraine Fisher took off her hat and shook out her hair. She looked younger by a decade. "Oh, listen. I told the FBI my daughter was going out with a banker named Jose Romero. Period. Whatever else these kids are involved in is their business, you know? My husband was in Southeast Asia from '61 to '66. Laos, Cambodia, the Parrot's Beak. It was all behind-the-scenes back then. The Quiet American, the Bamboo Curtain--all that. I'm not your typical hysterical hausfrau, Dr. Calvado. I don't know nothing and I don't tell nothing."

"Alfredo."

"Excuse me?"

"Please, I mean. . ."

"But Nancy always keeps in touch with me. She would never go off for a week and leave me hanging like this. Her make-up, her car. It's been five days."

The woman's voice caught again. "I mean, she just wouldn't." She put her beer down on the counter. "That's why I wanted to ask you, Dr. Calvado, point blank. I want you to tell me yes or no."

Calvado stood on one side of the refrigerator and she stood on the other. The glare of sunlight from a windshield outside glinted into his eyes.

"You don't have to be specific," she said, holding one hand up, pushing the air toward him; gently, insistently. "Don't give me any details."

Calvado blinked and stepped to the dinette table. He put his bottle down. "What are you asking, Mrs. Fisher?"

She looked impatient for the first time. "I want to know if they're off on some 'activity' together. Jose and Nancy. Just confirm that much."

Calvado took a deep breath and tweaked his nose. "The best thing I can say is, 'sort of.' Nancy has been working with The Crusade for some months. You know all this. She stuffed envelopes, she made signs. She's been a good volunteer. We know about your husband's sacrifice in Laos, Mrs. Fisher, and we consider him and his whole family part of us. We have all lost brothers, wives, husbands, sons. In the fight against world communism."

"Lord knows."

"Yes. Well, we asked Nancy to help us with the financing part of our crusade and that's how she met Jose. But beyond that, I'm afraid I don't have any idea where she is. Or Jose."

Mrs. Fisher held herself for a moment, as if contemplating pushing harder on Calvado. "So why are the

Feds trying to say my daughter is a spy?"

"They're not."

"You could've fooled me."

Calvado wagged his head. "They always just grope around. They think Jose was into the bank, that's all. You know; Cuban banker, Cuban bank. Into the bank for a large amount of money no one had discovered missing yet. They had to try that out on you, that's all. There's no irregularity at the bank and nobody thinks anybody is a spy here. Jose's married, has a little girl five months old. That's what's going on here, I'm afraid. I came over here today expecting you were going to show me a letter or a postcard you got from Acapulco or somewhere. Really."

"No."

"She's a very attractive young woman, Mrs. Fisher."

"Lorraine."

"Lorraine. That's what's going on."

Mrs. Fisher took another pull on her beer and curled her hair behind her ear. They could have been sisters. There was that favorable comparison, even though she was looking at sixty. Still very attractive.

Alfredo Calvado took another mouthful of beer and massaged the cool droplets from the bottle into his hands.

If Lorraine Fisher knew anything about the incriminating deck of data cards her daughter had stuffed into the lining of a music box, the woman kept it close to her chest. Somehow, the prospect of Nancy Fisher running a

spy ring was becoming more and more ridiculous.

"Lorraine, I don't want to alarm you."

"Go on, Dr. Calvado, I can take it."

Calvado shook his hand, "No, not about your daughter. I mean, not directly. But in addition to her and Jose, there's another one of our volunteers missing. Rudy Alvarez, do you know him?"

"No, can't say that I do?"

"I just thought. . . And Roberto Marin. Did, do you, have you ever heard his name?"

Lorraine Fisher shook her head. She was beginning to reject the process, starting to rebel against the litany of names and faces. "Who's Roberto Marin?"

Just a corpse, Calvado thought. You'll never know him. Just somebody who tumbled out of a garbage truck this morning, Mrs. Fisher.

"Well, that's about all, I guess."

She blotted the table with her apron. "You can't tell the players without a score card, can you."

Calvado had to grin. "No, you sure can't."

Not even the sides. Or the name of the game.

Lorraine pressed her lips together and pushed up from the table. "I wish you could tell me why the government sent three different sets of investigators over here to ask me questions," she said, fanning herself with a Redbook.

"Three?"

She nodded. "Yes, three. Six men, altogether. FBI, something else and something else. Alphabet soup. My land. I will never understand how the government does things."

Easy to agree, Calvado thought. No less from the inside as out. But he could hardly consider himself an insider, not as long as people like Hector Luna and Clarence Shipley played the game.

He bid Mrs. Fisher good-day and left the neat little house marveling at the American capacity for faith in government. The country was based on a profound distrust of empowered leadership but insisted on a patronal figurehead in Washington. People wanted to be told it was all right. They didn't want to know what kind of garbage had to be taken out. Daddy will take care of it. Not all that different from Cuba, merely blest with Scottish traditions instead of Spanish.

Michael felt pretty dumb standing in front of a rack of hundreds of birthday cards, trying to find the right one. Nothing in her category. Six-foot aristocratic Latin sexpot.

The flotsam and jetsam of his business had settled into a damp heap in some federal office so his lawyer could bill hourly to stand in line looking for it. The dock situation had come to a head in the middle of all this.

The City of Miami swore it would tow all unmoved boats and charge delinquent owners for the privilege. Michael found a mooring up-river and spent two hours of his life moving her up. Sailors hate bridges. Meanwhile somebody took possession of the ten-dollar radiator hose left on the hood of his Triumph. It was a bitchy Monday all wrapped around a heavy, sweet tropical promise of rain.

But all he had in mind was something nice for his main squeeze.

Ten minutes into rush hour the skies opened up and the monsoon whipped through town ahead of another weak cold front. He had beaten it on the river by half an hour. No dodging freighters and Haitian trawlers in a blinding crosswind, thank you. His luck was changing with the weather. Wolfe was out of the studio when Michael returned. Time to cop a long shower and a short nap. And dream of flowing yellow hair.

EIGHTEEN

Sundown, after the rain. The town was getting cooler. Willy spotted the woman when she came through the door. Welcome to La Chinandega, little blondie. La Chinandega was a one-room tavern in a hard-scrabble part of the county called Sweetwater, an area now also known as Little Managua, out on Okeechobee Road where limestone quarries and hourly motels blended into Australian pine thickets and two-acre farms. Willy liked the cool and always dark concrete block building.

Nobody minded dirty fingernails and work boots in La Chinandega. Drivers from the cement plants came in here, cutters from the DOT came in to knock back a couple. Willy had the black muck of the 'Glades on his shoes and twenty-four hours of sweat in his clothes from bivouac with the Contra banditos. Special instructor Willy had been teaching the indios such things as the nasalis spear where a man's broken nose bone is driven into his brain and the ear slap that works like a concussion grenade for a second or two. And the oleander suppository. Bark scrapings from

the flowering bush make a stealthy poison dripped on toilet paper.

Dirty work. And nobody cared in La Chinandega. It was the same as hauling garbage or grinding stumps for a living. It put his occupation on an even par with respectable laborers, the men he knew. Killing, butchering, garbage handling. All straight-forward human toil. He liked that. He liked the loud music and neon signs. And he liked blonds.

She picked him out of the gloom as soon as her eyes adjusted to the red and yellow shadows behind the bar. It was early but this guy was melting the sateen velvet in her crotch where she hiked her shorts up. Just for him. His eyes came up, she smiled and walked over to where he sat.

"Buy me a drink?"

She had lipstick on her teeth. Willy looked at the rim of black around her forehead under the peroxide line. She had a scar in her upper lip. Her nipples stuck out the front of her peasant blouse like teacups.

"I don't even know you, why should I buy you a drink?"

"My name is Cheeky. Glad to meet you. If you don't buy me a drink I gotta leave."

Willy looked at the guy behind the cash register. He had too much hip for his T shirt. "So leave."

"Buy me a drink first."

"Then you'll leave."

"Buy me a drink and I don't have to leave."

Willy looked over at the fat guy. "Give me another Amstel and whatever the lady wants."

The lady was all grins now. "I'll have a Corona and lime," she said.

"Pick another one," Willy said. "Have an Amstel."

"Corona."

"Corona's a fucking Communist beer," Willy told her. The bartender watched.

"What's a Communist beer? How can a beer be Communist?" Cheeky said, still smiling.

"Corona's from Mexico. Mexico trades with Cuba."

The woman examined Willy's eyes for the giveaway, for some sign of humor or ridicule. It was apparently rare for a man to tell her what he thought beyond some exaggerated description of his desire. They were always telling women like her how she couldn't take them because she was too small, that their massive horse-like organs could be seen bulging out her belly. The men would tell her things about her body and about their detailed plans with her. But they would rarely say things like he did. Simple. About beer and Cuba.

Willy reached for his bottle and she put her hand on his. She ran her thumb across the tattoo on the web of his thumb and forefinger. It looked like an x with dots.

Willy looked at her and pulled his hand away. "I buy you Busch or Budweiser. I buy you Amstel. It's a good

beer."

The little blond looked at him without turning her face and without the fifty dollar smile. "We could get a bottle and go somewhere."

"Where? What kind of bottle?"

She let the corner of her mouth rise up, the side with the scar embedded in the lipstick. "You're making it hard for me to be nice. I want to be nice."

Willy wished she was taller. Wished she was one of the cold, proud ones. But she was young. And she was asking him to take her away. Like they all did; they all came to Willy. Sooner or later they all came to Willy.

"Tell me about your music," Marisol said. She and Michael moved easily at the edge of the hardwood dance floor. Marisol seemed gratified to find out he was a good dancer. Michael was relieved to be with her, close to her. The day had been gruesome.

The amber globes of decorative lights over the long bar reflected off the glass wall and blended into the smaller, more numerous pinpoints of sodium vapor lights in the city down below.

"Tell me about your father," she said.

"My father?"

"Yes. All I know is you are not named after him."

Michael turned with her and looked around. Hector was talking to a man at the booth. "My father was a concert

pianist. Carl Hayden, Curtis Music Conservatory. He was on tour about ten months out of every year."

"And he wanted you to become a concert pianist also?" Michael nodded. "You have no brothers? You are the only son?"

"Only child."

"There, you see?"

"See what."

"Us again. I am the only daughter of a prestigious man. The youngest, the last-born."

Marisol returned her head to his shoulder. Michael watched the bar man light a woman's cigarette. Marisol spoke close to his ear. "I am not as clear on what I am rebelling against as you are. I am a female, so that is it, I guess. I am rebelling against all that."

She looked up and smiled. "But still, what we have in common is the key. Not what we rebel against."

"What is that?" he asked. "What do we have in common?"

"It has no name."

He laughed. "Jeez, for a minute I thought you were going to hand me the great secret. 'It has no name.' I've heard that before. 'The Zen you know is not the real Zen.'"

"No, Michael. I'm not talking about that."

And then he could see he had jumped on her line rather

brutally. Oh. That. That in common: us. "I'm sorry," he said. "I suppose I was being defensive. Obtuse."

They listened to the music for awhile. Roxy Music, Brian Ferry.

Marisol eased back in his arms. "I could call it love, Michael, but it is a mistake to use such words. All I know is you and I have something together. You see it as well as I do."

He nodded, still afraid of the word.

"Michael, we have an opportunity. An opportunity to explore ourselves and to explore God. You see? Dios mío, it gives me shudders to think about it."

"I think you're probably half right."

She put her head against his shoulder. "I just don't want anything to spoil it."

People at the bar were interested in a tiny television at the end of the counter. Of course, it was his line, he was the one who always worried about spoiling it. He worried about being the thing that spoils it. He had begun to assume, in the passage of years, that the it which was spoiled was normal, the normal it. This, which he held in his arms, was the only incarnation of it he had allowed himself to consider in any way unspoiled, intact, or worthy of preservation in years.

However she took the silence between them, she held him tighter across the shoulders and seemed to rest against him as they moved in a slow, aimless circle among the other

couples.

When the music changed, Michael took her back to their table. The vanda orchid he brought her was in the center of the round table. Its tall, spare stem and vivid flowers seemed to float in the smoky air. Hector stood up as they approached the booth. Behind him the glass wall came to a corner.

"Excuse me," Marisol said, letting go Michael's hand. She moved off toward the powder room. Michael slid in the booth and jiggled the ice in his scotch.

"Hell of a thing," Hector said. He turned to look out of the darkened window.

"What's that?"

Hector turned back and lifted his chin at the bar.
"The bomb. In Lebanon."

Michael looked again at the people congregating at the end of the bar, staring or glancing as blase as they dared over at the TV. It looked like a basketball crowd, but for an out of town team.

"Two hundred and some Marines were killed in the embassy in Lebanon," Hector said. "They think it was a car bomb. A suicide bomber, while they slept."

"Two hundred?"

"At least."

They drained their drinks. Hector gestured for refills. "Hell of a thing, to die in your sleep. In

Lebanon."

Michael chewed on a piece of ice. "You seem very at home in Miami, you're pretty well connected."

Hector gave him a sideways glance. "Is that your way of asking if I'm in the mob?"

Michael almost inhaled his ice. "No. No, I mean like Professor Calvado. I see his commentaries in The Herald. That's what I mean by connected."

"He is a fine man, a doctor of law."

The music had become too loud. Michael wanted to ask what the connection was between the august Dr. Calvado and present company. It was connect-the-dot practice; the exilios cubanos and ugly Willy and this patrician Salvadoran family. Hello? But Hector obliged without being asked, or at least began flitting around the edges of it.

"Calvado is a consultant to the United States Agency for International Development. You know of it? A.I.D."

"Foreign aid."

Hector nodded. "We have a professional relationship, but I consider him a friend."

"A security agreement? He supplies the yeggs?"

"The what? Excuse me."

Michael pointed his index finger and flexed his thumb. "The roscoe, the gat-man, the heavy."

Hector eased back. "Oh. Mari told me you had some concerns about bodyguards."

Michael shook out a Salem and used a fancy Grand Bay match on it. He felt timid about this subject, as if commodities futures or deductions for art donations was being discussed and he was the punch-clock schlub who didn't have a clue. Like the veddy rich and their upstairs maids. Bodyguards were not one of Michael Hayden's regular considerations.

The music swelled and smoothed out. Donna Summer was still alive; she pleaded for unconditional love.

"In Salvador," Hector said, "the war is less a declared military conflict and more a guerrilla insurgency. The Communists consider intellectuals and bureaucrats to be the repressive bourgeoisie. Landowners are the enemy. Mari became the symbol for all that. She was so visible. She has told you?"

"Some of it, yes."

"Well, it is worse than she says, I'm sure. She minimizes her position, I'm afraid. She has placed herself on precarious ground between the Catholic church with the rebels on the one hand, and against both the rebels and the Church on the side of the working class."

Michael rubbed the smoke out of his eyes. "I'm no good at this sort of thing. It all sounds contradictory to me. If she's on the side of the little guy, why are the rebels against her?"

Hector nodded. "The Church is aligned with the

Communists, Michael, at least the local priests are. The Communist insurgency is external to Salvador. They are not rebels, no more than the Viet Cong, you know? The people are simple, hardworking people who appreciate her honest attentions. She cares for them, the people love her. But anybody that becomes prominent is a target for the Communist insurgents."

"So you have her followed by bodyguards."

"Of course."

"Even in Miami."

"Maybe especially in Miami, Michael."

"And Cuban bodyguards because they know the town."

"And know the enemy. But Michael, that's not what you saw yesterday. There was no bodyguard yesterday."

Michael had been following the ninth-grade civics with all the bourgeoisie and insurgent bullshit. Somewhere he got lost. "I thought you said she was covered in Miami."

"Usually. But not so much since you came on the scene. We keep tabs, we both make sure we know where the other one is. But I assure you there was no one following you yesterday."

"A green Ford sedan."

Hector shook his head. His eyes had narrowed down. He was intent but more managerial than concerned about what he was hearing. "Willy uses my Mercedes or else he uses his own car, a black car."

Twice now Michael had put a name to the protuberant

brow and basilisk eyes. Marisol had tagged him, now Hector. "Willy."

Hector scanned the crowd over Michael's shoulder quickly and returned his attention. "He's in the field tonight. But I want you to meet him, Michael. You two should know each other. He is an amazing man."

Michael turned and looked around but saw nobody with a mono-brow in a sharkskin suit standing around. "She said you had some business with him."

"Yes. Listen, Michael. A trusted friend is very, very difficult to find. Do you know what I mean? Willy is valuable to me. Just as you are."

"Me."

"Yes. In a way, my sister has screened you for the family. Her instincts are sharp. And you are, shall I say, extrinsic? You are not coming from anywhere close to our situation. You are so outside it is unlikely you have vested interests. You follow?"

"You mean I'm harmless."

Hector smiled. "Put it this way: If I were a music producer, would you introduce me to a singer you hadn't signed?"

"Not if he was any good."

"Exactly my point. You have no prior interests in our business."

"What business is that?"

"Coffee, of course. But in the larger sense, my family business is the perpetuation and welfare of El Salvador. I know you cannot relate to this in any direct way. Perhaps a Southerner could, if they had lived through the American Civil War. The Cubans in exile here in Miami know it better than I do. A merciful God will not teach me to that degree."

Michael looked around at the assorted Latin American clientele. "You're right, you're right," he said, "it's easy for me to ignore all that. Somehow I don't think about war when I drive up I-95. Fool that I am."

Hector leaned back against the tufted leather seat and withdrew a cigar case from inside his jacket. "Come out on the roof with me, Michael. Mari will join us later. She is giving us a chance to talk."

They slid out of the booth and went along the short end of the bar and out through the corridor that led past the restrooms. Hector knew the way. They walked across a narrow deck to the concrete parapet at the edge of the building. Hector cupped his hands and brought his cigar to life.

"You are a businessman, Michael," he said, leaning on the thick wall. "You know the ropes. What is it they say? War is the extension of politics by other means? And the Japanese credo; business is war. That's the way it is. For a little country such as mine, anyway."

"Yeah, well," Michael said, rubbing the back of his

neck. "If that's the case, I'm out of ammo."

Hector turned his back to the wall and propped an elbow on the ledge. "I think you're rolling with the punches. Michael, I want you to do me another favor."

"Sure."

He raised his cigar in protest. "Don't be so easy with that. Listen to me first. The harvest is starting in Salvador. All over the country the coffee beans are turning red. Each bean has to be picked by hand. No machine can tell the ripe ones from the green ones, and one green coffee bean in a hundred can make the product so bitter it is worthless. It takes thousands of men to carry out the harvest, and to do it before the rain gets to the crop. It is labor-intensive."

"OK; red, pick -- green don't. I got it. You want me to pick coffee."

"Not exactly. We have a deal with your government, a guaranteed loan. AID advances us the money to pay the pickers and we pay it back at one-half of one per cent interest when the harvest is sold. That's where you come in."

"How?"

"I had a banker lined up to get the check and cash it in Panama. The cogedores must be paid in cash and USAID wants the US dollars in circulation to show the economic effect of the money in the region. The Salvadoran treasury

doesn't like it but the dollar is our most reliable currency these days."

"Grey market economy, yeah. You said you 'had' a banker?"

"He ran off with a blonde. His young wife and baby are left behind. It is a scandal."

Michael walked the few feet to the edge and looked down fourteen floors to the spotlights shining up through palm trees in the driveway infield. Valets in white jackets sprinted across the blacktop.

"Are you asking me to be the banker? I don't know anything about money transfers and all that."

"You don't have to. You just have to fly to Nassau and convert a wire draft to US currency. Then you take the money to Salvador. One hundred and twenty-two thousand dollars."

Michael whistled. Hector turned to face over the wall. He stood away and inspected the tip of his cigar. "It is good you are impressed with the amount, Michael. I wouldn't want to convey that much money with anyone who thought it was just a piss in the ocean."

Michael walked across the gravel to a large vent. It was quieter a few feet away from the edge. Hector watched him. Michael picked up a pebble and tossed it into the blackness over the wall. The marina and the bay was out there, but invisible.

"How come you trust me with this much money, Hector?"

You people don't know me from Adam's house cat."

"I need an American citizen," Hector answered, "and I need someone I can trust and I need him now. The plans are set up, the harvest will not wait. You have come along and answered all my needs."

"Why me? Why not get a courier? Another banker."

Hector crossed the gravel to him. He scraped out his cigar against the side of the sheet metal air vent. "I trust you with my sister, why wouldn't I trust you with a hundred thousand dollars?"

No arguing with that. One hundred twenty-two thousand dollars. "What about customs? How do I get that kind of cash through customs?"

"You are carrying US dollars out of the Bahamas. They don't regulate that. They won't even look. And you have a voucher. Michael, this is a legitimate operation. When you land in Salvador, we will be there to expedite things. Again, nobody will look in your carry-on."

"I thought you said Panama. Why Nassau?"

"Change of plans. It's close, it's an English-speaking country. Panama was set up for Jose, that's all."

"And crooks? What if somebody thinks they should get this particular government loan?"

"You will be covered. You won't be alone. And, this is one way being an American still counts for something, my friend. My country is a war zone divided up between three

or four factions. You're just another gringo. Pardon my reference."

"Yeah, sure. No problem."

Michael wanted to believe this was all legit, and he had his answers. All the gnarly little questions were nailed down. It had to be cool, not only because it seemed up and up. But also because he could never separate Marisol from her brother. This was a kind of qualification for him. Like bringing the golden apples back to the king or some shit. The test of loyalty necessary to get the princess's hand. Why not.

Hector looked for a nod or a wink. "Then it's a deal? We'll go over the details, you have full support on this. But, what do you say? I need your help."

Hector offered his hand. Michael reached out. "A deal." They shook on it.

"How does five per cent sound? Eh?" Hector laughed and pulled Michael off balance with his handclasp. He put his left hand on Michael's neck. "I love you. You never thought of asking, did you? You didn't think I would ask you to do this for nothing, did you?"

"I don't know. It's a favor."

Hector stood back at arm's length. "Your share is five per cent, it's in the contract. I won't lie to you, my friend; there is some danger involved. You deserve your fee. Sixty-one hundred. Is that good with you?"

Michael grinned, mostly at his own appalling lack of

savvy. Yes, it was good with him.

NINETEEN

Marisol had gone on home with friends while Michael and Hector were doing business on the roof. Hector had not shown any surprise about this; he never did, about anything. But he revealed his part in the petty collusion.

"I think she has a late dinner planned," he said, looking a little conspiratorial. "She is quite taken with you, Michael."

Michael was unnerved, maybe even embarrassed. He wondered how somebody got used to these little sexual intrigues involving Sis. Hector was older than she was, and far more worldly. It was consistent enough. Only Michael felt any awkwardness.

"She has told you about her past?" Hector said. He could have read Michael's eyes. The men were alone in the booth, nursing cognacs.

"The peripatetic schooling in Europe; her charity work in El Salvador, yes."

"Yes. But not Stefano."

"No."

"He was one of those sharks I mentioned. Stefano is an Italian skier, a professional athlete. They met in St. Moritz. Naturally, I ran a check on him."

"Natch."

"You understand; credit history, criminal record, social standing. He was clean. And more than that. He was worth the equivalent of three point five million dollars in liquid assets. Such a stake virtually guarantees he is not a gigolo. They were enjoying a whirlwind relationship for five months. Mari was quite happy."

Michael was uncomfortable with the whole line of conversation. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Forgive me, Michael. It is all to your advantage. I am in the process of complimenting you. You are good for Mari, this guy was not. She became dull and materialistic, not like her. She bought him gifts and spent too many nights going to parties and nightclubs in Biarritz and Milan. Then I noticed something odd. A further check of his bank account still showed the \$3.5 million dollar balance."

Hector looked at Michael as if that figure meant something. It didn't, except that it was a staggering amount of money.

"Three point five million dollars, Michael. Why would anybody keep three million dollars in a bank for five months? You follow? And even more suspicious, how does

that amount of money stay in one place without accruing interest? That much money has to be invested and sheltered and diversified, Michael. Nobody, nobody has three million dollars in their bank account for more than a few days."

"And, what was it? Borrowed? Front money?"

"You have it. He had ties with organized crime -- he is connected. It was some sort of plan."

"What kind of plan?"

Hector flicked his wrist. "It was two years ago. It is over. Can you see how you come into this family, my friend? You are a working man, but an artist. You are solvent but have no investments. You have a sailboat. You are unconscious of money. It is refreshing."

Both men laughed.

"You ran a check on me," Michael said.

"The day we met you, the day of the water. About an hour after."

Michael nodded, accepting it as routine. Hector had seen the boat name. He made a phone call, knew who Michael Hayden was and how much he owed on his Visa Card before he even got to sleep. There was an odd liberation in knowing he had no secrets.

"I'm not sure what I thought of you," Michael said, downing the last of his cognac. "The boat is not unusual, and a Cuban with a gun -- it's almost emblematic. But a girl like Marisol comes swimming into your life only once."

Hector clapped a hand on Michael's shoulder and looked

at him sideways as if by way of appraisal, his eyes sparkling. "Good man. Now, go see whatever nightcap she has set out for you. Vegetarian -- you know her."

"No, I like veggies."

"Good, good. Don't sleep too late: Noon, airport hotel, upper level bar. Just bring your shaving kit and a change of shirts, we'll provide everything. And your passport, don't forget your passport."

"Passport." Michael pushed out of the booth. "See you there."

Willy looked around while the girl fumbled with the key. He didn't like the tall hibiscus bushes so close to the door, or the bare yellow bulb on the wall beside the door shining in his face. But traffic on the road behind them was fast; cars kept hissing by, trucks roared and kept a cloud of limestone dust permanently in the air. All of that was good.

She pushed open the door, a jalousie door window covered with thick, painted plywood. Willy waited for the lamp to come on and carried his paper bag to the dresser. The little blonde, who had introduced herself as Cheeky, locked the door and put on the chain.

"It's not much," she said.

She was right. But it wasn't much different from his own place a few miles east and south. He slept in the

service quarters on the first floor of Costa Bella when necessary but not often. This place, and his own one-room apartment, felt more like home. Willy took the two bottles from the bag and opened the rum. Ron Matusalem, made in Clewiston, by exile Cubans. He cracked open the Coke.

"How 'bout some ice?" she said, taking a tray out of a rusted freezer.

Willy took the rum by the neck and lifted it to his lips and sloshed a mouthful. The girl watched. A wide grin spread across her face.

"Ay, carajo. No fucking around."

Willy wiped his mouth and held out the bottle. She put down the ice tray and came closer, taking the bottle in both hands. She moved in close to plant herself against Willy's side, placing one leg behind and one in front of his. Willy put one arm around her waist.

"You want me to swallow the whole thing?" She toyed with the tip of the bottle against her lip.

Willy stared at her. She up-ended it and accepted an ounce of amber fluid in her mouth, bulging her cheeks. She swallowed and coughed. A dribble of rum and saliva trailed down off the bottle and ran down her chin. She wiped her mouth and licked her fingers, keeping her eyes on him.

Willy took the bottle and drank another quick gulp. "Anybody else live here?"

She shook her head. Willy looked around. She pressed her groin against his hip.

"You work with somebody, a pimp. Anybody?"

She grinned and wagged her head from side to side. Willy watched the jalousie windows behind the curtains. Headlights glowed and moved away in a regular rhythm with the noise. He put the bottle on the nightstand and pushed her onto the bed.

"Ai!" Cheeky bounced and laughed, her head already loose from the rum. She propped up on her elbows and lifted one knee.

Willy sat on the edge of the bed.

"You are my kind of man," Cheeky said, watching him. She balanced her raised leg from side to side, feeling the press of thigh against her labia beneath the cloth. Allowing, awaiting the moment when he would look over and see her vertical smile.

Willy reached into his shirt and pulled out a leather thong and the tiny sheepskin bag attached to it. He ducked and pulled the lanyard over his head. Cheeky watched intently, forgetting her seductions for the moment, as he loosened the cinch on the skin and took out a small object.

Willy turned it in his fingers and put it to his lips. He placed the tiny figure upright on the table. "Santa Barbara," he said without looking at the girl on the bed.

She watched him take a short piece of birthday candle from the bag and set it in front of the one-inch statuette.

The ritual culminated in his placing a handful of pocket change and pouring a dollop of rum at the feet of the saint. Finally, he lit the candle. Only then did Willy look over at her.

The tastefully decorated corridor was quiet, the penthouse was at the end. A warm rush of incense greeted him when he opened the door to Marisol's condo. Hector had given him the key. Michael came in and called her name and shut the door.

Candle light turned the greens and reds of her tropical foliage to shades of gray and mauve. The carpet became a patch of sand in the light. Some drifting, thready music seeped through the room, almost inaudible. Michael made his way down the hall.

He did a night dive once. Like this, floating down corridors of coral rock over luminous paths of sand. The warm sea had been as thick as the fragrant air, the walls seemed alive with shadows of waving flames. He had felt welcome there, on the night reef. He feared it before, thought the whole idea of scuba diving at night was reckless endangerment. But he drifted down into the living canyons like a seed on fertile ground. Unmindful of predation.

The boudoir consisted of shower, jacuzzi, toilet and bidet behind a wall of mirrors and closets and two basins shaped like scallop shells. He had seen the room before

and remarked on its size. Now it looked more like a grotto of dark blue tiles, with candles perched all around and flickering off the polished surfaces. Marisol stood up in the jacuzzi. She wore red. Soapy water cascaded down the thin cotton smock she wore and molded it to the contours of her body. Her hair flowed like candle wax.

"You look like Botticelli's wetdream," he said.

She pulled open the first few pearly buttons at her neck. "Would you like to do some kundalini yoga with me, Miko?"

He stepped closer. The surface of her skin and the film of soapy water on the gown glistened and moved as she breathed. "I'm not completely sure what that is," he said. "But I think I'm gonna like it."

Marisol reached out and shucked his jacket back off his shoulders onto the floor. "It is when a man and a woman awaken and move the serpent of desire. The serpent that sleeps coiled up at the base of the spine."

Michael put his hands out and pushed the wet material out along her shoulders and dragged it slowly down her upper arms until the whole weight of the red dress rested on her breasts. It looked like her nipples were supporting it all.

"Take off everything, Miko. Strip off all your clothes."

She seemed to be speaking through a slight tremble in

her breath. He felt it too, and tasted it, as if the incense had intoxicated them both. He felt a fluttery excitement in the pit of his stomach that had become familiar. He was chemically reacting to this woman. And to this heat, this liquid air. In another moment he was standing completely naked and she urged him into the high-walled tub.

She arched her back and the wet gown fell to the water. Her breasts bounced up with the release of the weight, their dark centers shining in the candlelight like eyes.

Marisol urged him down into the water with her. It was warm and smooth. She used her soaked gown to bathe him and anoint his hair and face. The water was perfumed and slick.

"The idea is to capture the serpent and tease him up and down until he is ready to strike. Then hold still and trick him into a spell."

"Ah. Sounds wonderful."

"The woman grips the lingam with her yoni and prevents the serpent from falling into his slumber. Then we breathe and move the snake's attention up through the six chakras until the kundalini power comes out. Does this sound good to you, Miko?"

"It does."

She lifted her knees out of the silky water and inched closer to him with legs wide apart. "Then we will awaken

the serpent and grasp him in loving embrace."

She rested her arms beside his neck. Michael put his hands under her arms and pressed against the sides of her glistening breasts. "I think the serpent is already awake, darling."

She moved one hand down under the water and ran her fingers along the shaft of his penis. She looked and saw the swollen head just poking up out of the water like some proud and randy behemoth spying above the waves. She smiled and leaned her face close to his. Beads of sweat had come out on her upper lip.

"This is called the Kalidasa posture, Miko. Put your hands under me."

He moved his hands down to cup the globes of her bottom. She lifted herself onto him and used one hand to position his penis at the mouth of her vagina. And then she let herself down onto him and slid him deep up inside her until he felt it touch the limits.

She rested her forehead against his a moment and breathed hard. "Now, Miko. You feel how the serpent's tongue is locked in a kiss with me? You can close your eyes and see the tip of it entering the uterus, can't you?"

He had a ringside view, yes. The one-eyed serpent pressed on.

She began a slow rocking motion that gently urged his penis up against the cervix and tweaked past it to the

fundus behind. Against the roof of her vagina.

"You feel the flick of his tongue against her throat?" she whispered, "You see when the serpent comes it will flow in a circle? Like our breath? You feel it Miko?"

He did. And he knew she would have to hold still soon or the flow would commence in another couple of flicks. His serpent was awake, wide awake. And the old devil was stiff from years of lassitude and disinterest. And he was bursting with the old good feeling. Now that he was in the family, that is. Now that he was in the fold.

"God, I love this," he said, scarcely able to form the words. He said it again, and he knew it was close. But it was OK, it was good.

Her name was Odalys but she liked to go by the name of Cheeky, which was a play on chiquitica, a nickname since childhood. It meant little cutie or tiny girl. She had always been small, except for the explosion of adolescence. The breasts that came up from bumps to melons in a single summer. The malnutrition of her youth was overcome in sexual fertility, and in America.

Now she lay spread out on a bare mattress with hands and ankles tied to the metal frame. With Perez Prado and Celia Cruz doing a scratchy mambo on the radio near the bed. With Willy's face hovering an inch from hers.

"Do you want more, chiquita? Yes? Another hundred?"

Willy snapped a crisp hundred dollar bill between

them, creased it and pulled it under her nose like offering a fine cigar.

Cheeky didn't look to see if it was really a hundred. She kept her eyes on Willy. When she nodded, he smiled.

Willy sat back. He still wore the khaki pants and caiman-skin boots he had on in the Everglades but he had removed his shirt. The room was hot and small, and he had finished most of the quart of rum. His face ran with sweat and his body shone with an oily film. He reached for his bottle and sloshed back a mouthful. Then he put the bottle in the V between the girl's legs and nestled it close to her pudendum. He picked up his cigar and drew a couple of puffs out into the humid air.

"What will you do for this hundred, Cheeky? Eh? You take me in your mouth?"

Cheeky nodded and managed to revive her smile.

"Anything, baby. You know that. I'm good for you, baby."

Willy pulled the bottle from her crotch and chugged again, this time he spat short jets of rum onto her belly and rubbed it in with his fingers. "No, I'm going to tie you up some more. Is that all right, baby? Tie you up some more?"

Cheeky looked at the nylon stocking tied around her right wrist and the silk sash from her burgundy robe knotted around her left wrist. Lengths of drapery cords held her ankles out wide, the ligatures pulling her down

against the mattress. Willy had taken care with the knots, asking her about each one and seeking permission for the next. It was not apparent what he had in mind now but she nodded and gave the man a grin. "I like it," she said. "I like the way you do me, honey."

Willy smiled -- an expression that never succeeded in softening his appearance. He reached down to his waist, unbuckled his belt and pulled it free.

"I been waiting for that," Cheeky said. "Let me see it, baby. Give it to me, honey."

Willy held his cigar in his teeth. He leaned over and slipped the wide leather belt under the girl's neck and pulled the free end loosely through the buckle. He pressed his face close to hers and blinked through the rising smoke.

"Is that OK, chiquita? I put your money on the table, OK?"

Cheeky rolled her head to see the nested bills, each folded long-wise like the men do to slip money under a dancer's G string. There were five bills. Five big ones. More than she ever got, more than any other single night. She nodded and brought up another smile, although each smile seemed to be harder to find than the last one. She swallowed and the hard belt rode up on her throat. Willy creased and smoothed another hundred dollar bill and showed it to her.

"What can I do, eh? You want more, little baby? What

I'm gonna do now to you, eh?"

"Whatever you want, baby," she said. "Fuck me. Fuck me good."

Willy smiled. He put his cigar on the edge of the nightstand and placed the new bill in the stack with the others. He loosened the belt and rubbed the red marks on the girl's neck.

"I want you to help me with something," he said. He slid the buckle down the leather strap and pulled it tight against her neck. The girl closed her eyes and coughed. Willy pulled the bottle from between her legs and drank from it. He upended it and drank it down like water and let the burning liquor rush down his throat inside and out. As the last drop disappeared he brought the bottle down hard and shattered it against the headboard.

Cheeky screamed, or tried to scream. She was startled and tried to turn away from the flying shards of glass. But the belt was too tight. Her scream was only a grunt.

Willy held the broken neck of the bottle in his hand. A rill of dark blood welled out between two fingers. His eyes were glassy from the rum, his face and body covered in sweat. Sweat dripped onto the girl's breasts and belly. He leaned closer and showed her the broken edge of the bottle.

"You know how a woman is split? You know?"

He dragged his other hand up between her legs and up

between her breasts to her lips. "You can draw a line from their ass to their pussy and all the way up to the little valley under the nose, like this. You know?"

Cheeky was no longer answering. She took her air in gulps and struggled to swallow past the leather strap.

"Like you can lay them open," Willy said. He wiped sweat from his eyes and drew a smear of blood across his nose. "Like a fish. You can slit them open like a fish. How much you want for that? You want double? Double or nothing, eh?"

Willy laughed and let the broken edge of the bottle rest against her chest in the white skin between her breasts. He stopped laughing and shook his head. He seemed tired. He looked up. The girl lifted her head off the mattress. Santa Barbara saw nothing.

Willy wiped the sweat away from his eyes. "They roll away the rock and his mother cry. She rip open her shirt and scream, 'My baby!' An' Baby Jesus he look down. He see her tits. Holy tits."

Willy laughed and spat a froth of rummy spit beside the bed. He looked at the girl as if remembering her, as if reminded she was there.

"It's going to happen now, little cheeks. I'm gonna fuck you up, just like you want. It's gonna fucking burn though, baby. You know how that is? You remember? Like the very first time? I going lay you open like a little

fish."

Willy smiled. He heard something and looked down.
The girl was urinating on the mattress.

TWENTY

Shafts of morning light shot through a few gaps in the drapes. Michael batted his eyes open. Across the crisp white topology of pillows and bedclothes another face stared back at him as if in a mirror of his dreams. The corners of her eyes crinkled.

He had stayed the night. Greeted the morning. And it was a good feeling. They caressed and rolled together. They made quick morning love with him spooned up behind her, pulling her hips back against him across the sheets. Then while she meditated he slid out of bed and went down the hall, feeling his nakedness in a strange place. Feeling odd and at home at the same time. Feeling like he could lift the toilet seat with Mr. Happy.

But he had to hustle off. The airport was at noon. Marisol had been warm and subdued, stretching and lifting her hair with both hands.

"I wish we could start again, Miko." She hugged him when he was leaving. "So uncomplicated, so impossible."

"You got to give me five minutes to recharge, darlin'."

She looked down. He was being randy, she was being romantic. Same as it ever was. He told her she wanted to be the princess of the sea again and she nodded. Sleep was still in her eyes. "Yes. It was enchanting. So beautiful. But now you go off to work, the novios is over."

The honeymoon. But he could feel it just beginning. Wolfe was unloading his pickup when Michael got to the studio. He made coffee while the sculptor wrestled with a prized '56 Cadillac bumper and supermarket baskets and bent bronze propellers he brought back from Akers' junkyard. More raw material for his women. The Colossus of Overtown was gone.

Wolfe pulled off his heavy gloves and came over for a shot of caffeine. He dropped into a leather sling chair and took the mug Michael offered.

"So," Michael said, leaning back against the counter, eyeing the scrap heap. "The new beginning."

Wolfe sucked in a few ripples of hot coffee. "I've been bitchy all week, man. It's like this every time. It's separation anxiety. The closer I come to a good one, I mean a really good one, the faster she goes. You lose your entire family, sell 'em into servitude for a fat check. It's fucking ruining me."

Michael was mulling around suggestions. Keep one, make horses or chrome eagles. Do a madonna so he could

donate her to some church and feel the good riddance.

Wolfe interrupted.

"I had visitors earlier, man. About you."

"Who, what kind of visitors?"

"Haggers and Benedict; cops I used to know. They're big time now, though. FDLE; Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Coordinating multi-jurisdictional taskforces. They had a few precious words about you."

"Me?"

Wolfe put his mug on the floor. "Seems you've been sportin' around town with fucking Evita Peron, man. You realize that? You're hot. I know you don't have any idea how hot this broad is, but she's hot. And you're hot."

Wolfe had departed from his ordinary theatrics. He seemed genuinely pissed. Michael went and started pulling shirts out of the closet, hanging them on the doorknob. "What kind of car did these guys drive?"

Wolfe twisted in his chair. "What kind of. . . I'm talking serious shit, Mikey. Did you know her brother is like, the heir apparent to the presidency of El Salvador?"

Michael stood still and then nodded. "He's a nice guy. Kinda heavy, but not too heavy for an heir apparent. I like him."

Wolfe slumped back around in the sling chair and sank down another inch. He retrieved his coffee mug and brought it to his mouth. "You've got highrise fever, friend. A delusional state marked by association with the very rich

and accompanied by wild ideas of joining the club."

Michael pulled a garment bag off the closet shelf. Hector had said pack light. "I guess I should've known this would happen. You met her, did she seem like a delusion to you?"

Wolfe didn't answer for a minute. "She's a beautiful girl, Mikey. No doubt about it."

Michael dug through a black plastic bag for clean socks. He had stripped most of his stuff from the boat because the new location had no security. "I've got a deal in Nassau, Wolfe. I'll be back in a couple of days."

Wolfe pulled himself out the chair and took his coffee to the tailgate of his pickup truck which was backed into the studio. He took a gulp of coffee and sat the mug on the truck bed. "You're working for Hector Luna? In Nassau?" He laid on heavy sarcasm, like it was unthinkable.

"I need the money. What the fuck, Wolfe, you sound like you know him. How do you know Hector Luna?"

Wolfe hunched up. "Who said I know him? I don't know him, I only know what Hagers and Benedict tell me about him. He's a heavy, like you say. The question is, how the fuck do you know him? You're getting involved, Mikey."

"No, it's not like that. Hector trusts me because I'm some sort of random factor in the scheme. They have a whole network and they lose one guy because he runs out.

Hector said it was with a babe. Maybe that's a little story, I don't know. But I'm the stranger on the train. OK? I'm the hundredth monkey. I'm so unlikely I'm safe. So what?"

Wolfe scratched his pointed beard and nodded. "Random factor," he repeated.

"I know what I'm doing, Wolfe." He waited for Wolfe to meet his eye. "I'm improvising. I'm on a riff."

"You're fucking crazy."

Michael accepted the diagnosis. He bobbed his head. "As long as we're clear about that. Will you take a message if my lawyer calls?"

Wolfe clanged his heavy metal in the truck. "Anything else?"

"What color was the car?"

"White. The car was white."

"What did these guys say? They came over here to tell you I was dating somebody important?"

"Routine, that's all. Saw your name, probably saw this place on the transcriptions. It's a diplomatic surveillance assignment, I guess. I've done it. They could get in deep trouble for coming over here. These are honest cops; I went to the academy with Hagers, I went to his wedding. They're just old buddies who wanted to clue me in."

Michael looked at the black socks in his hand. Wolfe pulled a six foot re-bar off the truck bed. The coffee cup

came with it, breaking and spilling cold coffee on the concrete.

"Life is ebbing out all over the goddamn floor," Wolfe said. "Veins and tubes and shit lying all over the place."

He stood in the middle of the pile of metal scrap and surveyed the parts. He nudged a bumper with his boot.

"Just maintain an even strain," Wolfe said. "Be frosty."

Michael parked in the short-term lot and crossed traffic on the upper ramp. He carried his garment bag over his shoulder and went into the airport hotel bar. Hector and somebody else were at a table in the back. The stranger stood up and shook his hand. Hector introduced him.

"Octavio Matamoros," Hector said. "A trusted friend and attorney."

They sat down. "Sounds contradictory, doesn't it," Matamoros said, smiling at his own expense.

"Yeah," Michael said, "like 'honest cop.'"

"I'm delighted you could help us," Matamoros said. He wore a crisp Italian suit with a silk tie. His skin was dark and burned to an angry vermillion under his eyes in the pattern flats fishermen get from reflected sunlight. He was a lawyer from the neck down. Michael was in a sports coat over a black LaCoste.

Hector gestured for the waiter. "What do you like? I, personally, cannot fly without drinking."

"I'll remember that next time you want me to go up with you," Matamoros said. Hector shrugged and grinned.

"Just coffee," Michael said.

Hector gave him a funny look, a particle of the macho sneer endemic to Latin men. Men should drink, particularly when beginning adventures. But coffee would do. "Good for business, eh? Mine and yours." He ordered himself a whiskey.

When the waiter turned away Hector put a thick white envelope on the table. "Eastern to Nassau at 12:42. After you finish at the bank, buy a ticket on Taca Airlines to San Salvador. There's eight hundred cash for expenses."

Michael took the envelope and pried it open. His coffee arrived. Matamoros brought up a manila file folder and opened it.

"I have a complete itinerary for you, here. Addresses, contacts, hotels. Telephone numbers in Nassau in case you need a local contact outside the community."

Michael looked up from the papers. "The community?"

"The banking community. The commercial channels. Everybody who does business in the Caribbean knows everybody else. The competition is harsh, but there is a kind of guild. You'll see."

The Cuban shuffled more papers. "If you will sign

this you will be an official subcontractor to the United States of America. Pan-American Initiatives, which I represent, joins with Michael Thomas Hayden, which is you, for the purpose of representing the US Agency for International Development. Which is tax money."

"Who's Pan-American Initiatives?" Michael asked.

"That's Alfredo Calvado," Hector said. "His consulting firm. They bid on AID contracts in the Latin-American Caribbean area. PAI is the intermediary for this farm loan."

Michael signed. "Busy guy."

Matamoros showed him a pale green check with receipt attached. "If you endorse this to 'deposit only' and give me the name of your bank I'll see that it clears by the time you get back. Is that the amount we agreed on?"

Michael inspected the check. Sixty-one hundred drawn on a bank in Arlington, Virginia. He tapped the pen on his knuckles.

"To tell you the truth, I'd rather not do that. I'm having trouble with my accounts. Business troubles, law suits."

He reached into his jacket and took out the check for eleven hundred dollars which Hector had given him for the pistols.

"I've been meaning to go to your bank and cash this, Hector."

Hector took a dram of his whiskey. He looked at the

lawyer. "Can you open an account in his name, Octavio?"

Matamoros nodded and took the check. He looked at the bank. "Sure." He reached into his attache on the seat beside him and brought out a short printed form. "Just give me a signed PA -- Power of Attorney. Tell you what, give me one dollar out of your pocket and I'll give you my business card."

Matamoros fished in his expensive jacket for his card. "That makes me your legal representative. Whatever you want me to do with the money, consider it done."

Michael took out his folding cash and gave Matamoros a dollar. The man treated it with the same respect as the check for sixty-one hundred. Michael leaned back and drank some of his black coffee.

"That was bothering me. I'm glad that's set up."

Matamoros took a sip of his drink. "IRS?"

Michael shrugged. "More like EEOC. One of my clients pushed a black waitress down a flight of stairs."

Matamoros was preoccupied with separating papers; putting copies in the manila folder and originals in his attache.

Hector pushed a rectangular sample case with his foot and put it next to Michael's chair. "Keep all your papers in the case with the cash. Put the papers and especially the vouchers when you get them flat on top of the money."

Michael snapped the latches and laid back the two

flaps. It didn't look big enough for a hundred and almost a quarter thousand dollars. Hector kept talking.

"Don't try to hide anything but keep the money out of sight. Don't bribe anybody but if the officials at the airport in Nassau start to dick you around, give a hundred dollars from your pocket. If they want more, call the embassy."

"They won't," Matamoros said.

Hector agreed. "Of course, keep the case with you at all times. If you go to the bathroom on the plane, take it with you. If you just pretend your balls are in that case, everything will become obvious to you."

Michael put the manila folder in the empty sample case. "Where did you say you went to school, Hector?"

Hector grinned. "Notre Dame. South Bend, Indiana. Why?"

Michael closed up the case and latched it. "No reason."

"And get a receipt for everything," Matamoros said. "Except putas."

Nyuk nyuk. Never put the girls on plastic.

Michael tried to hand Hector the keys to the BMW.

"Keep them, it will be only a couple of days. Mari can use my car." Hector pushed the keys back.

Michael admitted it to himself. He had the fever. German precision automobiles and tall blond women with breasts that stood out like Cadillac bumpers. Yes, indeed.

He had the fever. And the unhealthy inclination to see how far it all would take him.

A climbing jumbo jet roared a few hundred feet above the Interstate bridge over the Miami River, echoing between the Metro-Dade court building and several large yachts in cradles across the parking lot. High concrete overpasses and a cluster of hospital buildings closed in around sabal palms and wild bougainvillas growing in the broken shade. Alfredo Calvado left his white Buick station wagon with fake wood panels. He walked to another car, a metallic blue sedan, and got in the passenger side.

The driver was a man in his mid-forties, dressed in scrub greens and a white T shirt.

"What have you got?" Calvado asked.

The man put a stack of five by seven color photographs on the seat beside them. His hands and fingers were pale and the black hair on each knuckle made his skin look whiter. Calvado picked up the photos and turned his head.

"They're bad, Alfredo. Open the window."

Calvado kept his face to the glass and cranked it down. He spat out of the window and wiped his mouth with his right hand.

The other man delivered the particulars. "Sierra Club volunteers discovered the body yesterday in the mangroves south of Turkey Point. She came up with an old wreck they

were pulling off the shoals. You asked me to watch out for a young male but I figured you'd be interested in her. Same area, approximate time of death matches what you gave me."

"You were right, Mario. You were right to call me."

Calvado made himself look at the top picture again.

"What can you tell me about her?"

Mario Lacasa looked out over the steering wheel. "Not much. Not much there. Probably white, maybe blond. Approximately twenty to thirty years old."

Calvado shuffled the deck and looked at the next photo. It showed the remains from another angle. He took another spit.

"The evisceration is probably crocodile," Mario said.

"Crocodile? I didn't know we had crocodiles."

"We have crocodiles. Not as big as the Nile croc. North American crocodile. Likes brackish water."

"They did this?"

"Yeah, almost certainly. All the visceral organs are gone except for the trachea, bronchials and reproductive organs on the broad ligament. They go for the organ meat first. The head, of course, is gone. Could have been the cause of death. They like to grab something and twist around until something comes off. No sharks that big in that close. But then again, it could have been drowning. We'll never know. Unless toxicology comes back with something dramatic."

Calvado could examine the corpse more carefully now, though he knew the image would stay in him like a bad taste for days. Human beings are not supposed to look like this. Not even a side of beef hanging in a meat locker looked as obscene as the blackened, ragged ribcage without a head, and the rest of it. Unrecognizable flaps of skin. Fairly normal looking pants with a belt and pockets and legs. Black, like the tissues. From mud and decay. The boots were the same familiar Viet Nam era jungle boots he had bought in a job lot for seven dollars a pair.

"Can you identify her from fingerprints?"

"Not me, I'm an assistant medical examiner. You'll have to ask somebody else about that."

Calvado put the photographs on the seat between them. "This could be anybody. She could have died of an overdose or suicide. This tells me nothing. Not until I know who she is."

Mario dug into his back pocket and put a plastic bag on Calvado's lap. It was a man's school ring. Calvado picked it up and held it at eye level.

"Miami High School, 1979."

He looked closer and read the tiny letters around the imitation ruby in the center. "Varsity football '78, '79."

Mario took the bag and turned the ring inside it. He squinted at the band and held it for Calvado to see. The inscription was too small and faint for him to make out.

"'Bobby and Nancy 4-Ever,'" Mario read. "The word is spelled with the numeral four; '4-Ever.' It was in her pants pocket."

Calvado turned to spit again but changed his mind. He rummaged in his coat pocket for his pack of Pepto Bismols.

Mario gathered the photos. "This is who you were looking for?"

"No. Well, yes. I thought she was long gone. But that tells me a lot. Tells me something. I don't know."

The assistant ME returned the ring to his pocket. "There's one more thing, Alfredo. Whatever the proximal cause of death, it was homicide."

"How do you know?"

"Both hamstring tendons on the backs of her legs were cut clean. Through the pants. Looks like one swipe."

Mario made a cutting motion across the inside of his elbow. "The perpetrator didn't want her to do any swimming."

"Is that unusual? I mean, is that indicative of anything?"

Mario hunched one shoulder. "Could be the Cali-Barranquilla boys. Could be Mafia. I've never seen it. But it sure isn't no crime of passion."

Calvado took his spit. "Any reason to connect this with Roberto Marin?."

"Not that I can see."

"OK. Thanks, Mario."

"You're welcome. Any interest in prostitutes?"

Calvado had his hand on the door latch. He turned back to Mario Lacasa and wondered what impression the man had about his motives in this. What was he thinking.

"Prostitutes, Mario? Have I asked you to provide me with information about prostitutes?"

Mario shrugged. "Nevermind."

The two men shook hands and Calvado got out. He bent over to give his old friend a parting salute but he was busy starting his car and finding reverse. Calvado stood up and noticed with some concern that the Granola flakes he had for breakfast were still in his esophagus. Just behind a head of something that tasted like Chlorox.

TWENTY-ONE

Michael tucked the case up under the seat in front of him and buckled his seatbelt while everybody else bumped and stumped down the aisle of the 727. Along with tourists in gaudy resort clothes, the majority of passengers were Bahamians heading to Nassau and the 'Home' islands from there. Gingham cowboy shirts and gabardine pants, thrift shop suits and Times Square Rolexes. Their faces were broad West-African, with Yoruba cheekbones and Mandinko jaws. Complexions tended to bitter chocolate with tan lines around the neck. The women were wide, the men wiry, both with an unexpected variation in eyes; from bituminous black to a watery amber and gray. They all seemed to carry grocery bags full of stuff. The occasional businessman on board was either stale drunk or nervously watching the parade of humanity from the protective compound of business class.

One hundred eighty-five nautical miles east southeast from Miami, the flight would put him in Nassau on Friday, a good day to pass customs. The bank was open Saturday mornings. He was expected. Michael had taken a cabaret

show to Nassau a few years back, to a waterfront dive called the Purple Onion after the San Fransico beat joint. A small coterie of islanders craved cool jazz in the realm of calypso and imitation reggae, habituated clubs like Charley-Charley and the Hungry I. Burl Ives used to sit in, Michael talked cars with Commander Whitehead, the Man from Schweppes, who kept a dusty Jaguar roadster on New Providence Island.

Ten or twelve years ago, Nassau was a British ex-colony; still fuddy and Victorian. Anglican school girls in blue smocks, constables on hatboxes directing traffic on Bay Street, dark old men in white wigs in the House of Assembly. Now the young watched Miami Vice and made huge profits in the coke trade. Even the cops had guns now. And very little of the British mentality was left. It was just a cruise ship stop. That's why this was work. The honeymoon was over for now.

Marisol was guilty of transcendent passion and he was guilty of needing it. It had been impossible to communicate this to his best buddy Wolfe. Michael agreed to go along on this and whatever trip she and her heir-apparent brother engineered because it was the only game in town. She was the game, he wanted to play. He would do worse than carry money for that privilege. It made him look crazy to Wolfe, but then rank ga-ga shit-faced love always makes guys look crazy.

And anyway, the same quirk of fate that brought him sailing up to her also brought the deal. The same improbability of him being a gold-digger suggested they were not some evil coven of jewel thieves who needed a mule. Why did this act need justification? Michael Hayden was a middle man, an intermediary. So what's new? There were concert productions and recording contracts in his past that made this business look like a Nehi and a Moon Pie, keep the change. People did this shit.

The BC hadn't changed: the British Colonial Hotel was big and traditional and on the beach. It was on his itinerary, a typical upgrade for a merchant. Michael produced a cover story when another American sharing a cab to the hotel introduced himself and asked about his 'game.'

"Hayden, Michael Hayden. A & R; advance and research. I'm looking at talent in the music business. Great R&B bands in Nassau. Is Peanuts Taylor still around?"

So there it was. The good lie stands up cheek and jowl with the truth. He even bought a bunch of locally produced cassettes for his sample case. But it was next to impossible to sleep, even after too many margaritas. He was suddenly alone. It all seemed like a Friday biopsy that wouldn't come back until Monday. An audit in the morning. No matter how casual he was as Michael Hayden, A & R man, tomorrow he was going to carry weight in his sample case.

Barclay's Bank was a stand-alone on Bay Street, distinguished from all the plaques and shingles festooning office buildings all up and down the street. Banking was a cottage industry throughout the Caribbean but Barclays was a branch of one of the biggest British multinationals. All was well -- hangover notwithstanding -- the morning was sunny, the air was smooth with sea salt and steel drums from Rawson Square. Saturday was an important cruise ship day, people set out their wares at the straw market, surrey horses wore their nose bags. Unemployed men and boys loitered at every corner looking for the catch of the day. Smoking, looking.

The assistant manager who greeted Michael was a Chigro -- Chinese Bahamian. Grey eyes behind subtle epicanthic folds.

"Gustavo Choy," the man said, pumping Michael's hand. His name was as hybridized as his face. Mr. Choy wore a brown suit that brought out his pallor. "We've been looking forward to your arrival since the Telex last night."

True enough, in the six or seven-worker office with a smattering of business going on, three or four employees beside Mr. Choy seemed to be watching in turns.

Choy opened a file folder and Michael opened his case. They began the complicated exchange of documents, signing everything in a rapid, ritualistic sequence. Not only were

there forms, there were forms that certified that those forms had been shown; and then forms that he had to sign indicating that the second form had been signed. A trim young woman in a dark blue suit carried everything back and forth to the Xerox machine, including Michael's passport. Eventually, Mr. Choy asked Michael to accompany him to the counting room, a wrought iron cage-like antechamber to the vault.

The banded stacks of hundred dollar bills -- one hundred each to the bundle, ten bundles to make \$100,000 dollars; plus ten bundles of twenties for \$20,000 and another two stacks of tens to total \$122,000 -- were ticked off by band number and laid precicely on the table beside the case. It all seemed hum-drum; the money seemed far less grand.

But bulky. One hundred thousand dollars was chump change in international business terms but ninety-nine out of a hundred people on the street would kill to get it.

Outside the cage, two uniformed guards with white service belts and ornamental Berettas on lanyards waited to escort him back to his hotel. The two guys looked like shark chum for the guys outside with Uzis and straight razors. Michael had given this scenario some of that insomiacal thought the night before. He took a plastic Jose Cuervo bag out of the case and loaded the twenty-two bundles of money into it, followed by all the documentation.

"Mr. Choy, you have been most professional and I know you would never accept a gratuity, but. . ."

"Thank you, Mr. Hayden, thank you. It has been my favor."

Michael took out his cash and flicked off a hundred. "But if you could assist me further."

"Most assuredly, yes."

"OK, take this case to the airport and put it in a locker. Give the key to the TACA desk with my name. Tell them I'll call later today. Got it?"

Choy became less ebullient. "The case?"

"Right. You and the boys. Take it to the airport for me. I'll pick it up later today. OK?"

The bank clerk accepted the bill Michael pressed on him. Mr. Choy was evidently picturing himself walking out front with this obvious satchel of money. He might have been calculating how many people in the bank knew about the transfer and how many relatives and friends they each had.

Michael took off his jacket and slung the Jose Cuervo bag over his shoulder. Choy opened the cage and directed one guard out front and the other to open the back door. But it was all for show. Kiss that case adios.

So the point of attack was diverted enough. Michael had arranged for his garment bag to be taken to the airport and checked. He followed it, spending the four hours before his TACA flight to San Salvador sitting at a booth

in the coffee shop reading a Stephen King paperback.

At boarding, the desk clerk gave him an envelope with the locker key. Michael retrieved his empty flight case and put the Jose Cuervo bag in it. Mr. Choy was a real dreadnaught.

The flight south-southwest to San Salvador took four and a half hours. From the air, coasting in on final approach off the tropical Pacific, El Salvador looked like Hawaii. Volcanic peaks covered with green flock, black beaches with white surf. Closer in, the photochemical biscuit hovering over the capital looked more like LA on a smog alert day. The terrain was high, the city was spread out in a valley like Denver, and the pollution looked thick enough to land on. Then the crowding, the population density became obvious. San Salvador was swollen with shanties and lean-tos full of campesinos trying to avoid the fighting in the north. The Bahamas was sweet and clear by comparison.

A man resembling Hector introduced himself at the airport when Michael descended the stairs to the tarmac.

"Carlos Fortas de Luna y Marburg," the man said. "I am Hector's uncle. Welcome to Salvador. You had a pleasant flight?"

Carlos was graying at the temples and thicker around the jowls but otherwise Hector's clone. With him was a thin mulatto in a blue suit -- a neoamerican Joseph Goebbels. Carlos never introduced him. The man never took

his eyes off the flight case. They all went to a convoy of Jeep Commanches -- various colors, all new -- parked on the runway apron with engines running. Michael played out another part of his operatic little plan devised while tossing and turning at the British Colonial.

"May I see two forms of identification, please," he said, balking at the car door.

Carlos drew up but complied, diving into his jacket pocket for his wallet. He was heavier and taller than Hector but less menacing for all his bearishness. Carlos presented credit card after credit card, all on American banks and stores. He even had a State of Florida drivers license.

"Good," Michael said. He smiled at the uncle.
"That's done. Good."

He took the bag off his shoulder and handed it over. Carlos urged him into the car.

Despite the cool of Salvador's height, the haze baked the sunlight and radiated heat from all directions. Michael was glad to get into the air conditioning of the second Jeep. Just as glad to turn over the money. Carlos inspected the contents and pulled out the papers. He closed it without counting. When he looked up and nodded, the driver tapped the horn once and the convoy started up. Michael and Carlos's car, a metallic blue Commanche, was second in line as they crossed the service area near the

cargo hangers and drove on through a chainlink gate onto a good road.

Carlos sat back. The weasel-faced man in the blue suit turned and handed a silver hip flask over the front seat. Carlos took the container and offered the first drink to his guest.

"After you, Sr. Luna."

"Thank you. Please call me Carlos. And please accept my gratitude. You have helped my family a great deal. We are grateful."

Carlos pulled off the domed top and unscrewed the silver cap beneath. He poured a dram of cognac into the top, took a drink and passed it to Michael. "My country is at war," Carlos said as Michael took a drink. "It is the latest crisis in a history dotted with conflict. We will remember those who served us as friends in this time."

It sounded both sincere and rehearsed, like the country club rhetoric at Boca Raton. Carlos could have taken his nephew's place at the banquet in Boca Raton. He had no doubts about his place in the big picture. For Michael, resting back with the cognac warming a self-assured place behind his sternum, watching the stream of buildings and crowds of people go by, it was all moot. He was a Libra, like the lady said. Unable to find the truth between heads and tails. It was a popular rebellion fueled by eons of economic oppression. It was a Communist invasion from Nicaragua and Cuba mediated by radical

elements of the Catholic church. Both true. Only the players could espouse one over the other. Not this intermediary. I just carry the payroll, Madam.

The trip took long enough for Carlos to doze, despite the break-neck speeds over increasingly narrower and rougher roads. The convoy climbed into wooded mountains, emerging from hardwood forests into old-growth pines. The air cleared, blue lakes appeared. Finally, the jeeps circled a ridge half a mile above the banks of a huge mountain lake which Carlos, rousing himself, identified as Lago Coatepeque. The family estate was dead ahead.

It looked like a Swiss chalet or Tyrolean lodge. High angled roof with strong beams and broad eaves. A full-length porch on the lake side bathed in brilliant sunlight. The smell of horses. A ring of out-buildings; garage, stables, hothouse.

Something like what Bonanza must have looked like when Lorne Greene was in full form and Pernell Roberts still had hair.

A maid showed Michael to his room and then they had dinner--the main meal at four o'clock. Carlos introduced Michael all around. Even the caramel-colored Goebbels character nodded and made eye contact over his soup. The matriarch of the family was Dona Isabela, Carlos's older sister and Marisol's mother. She was seventy-something and distant, sitting at the head of the table with a lace shawl

similar to the one her daughter had worn in Boca.

Michael couldn't help searching the old woman's face for geneological clues about the German-Hispanic graft that initiated this family tree forty years before. Tried to imagine Dona Isabela at twenty-six; the tawny, aristocratic loins upon which Hans Dietrich von Marburg built his empire. Dona Isabela had Marisol's lips, or rather the other way around -- from mother to daughter. Marisol got Marlene Dietrich eyes and Lola Montez lips; a good distribution of traits.

Carlos presented Michael with the cassettes of Panamanian salsa bands he had left in the Jose Cuervo bag. The turtle soup was fiery, the chicken breasts in tamarind pepper sauce was piquant and memorable. Four forks, two wines. Three stars.

They spoke about the coffee harvest -- in English apparently out of consideration for their guest -- and engaged Michael in polite news and views of the world. The embassy bombing in Lebanon gave way quickly to the US invasion of Grenada which came only days after. It was all seen in the same light.

By nine it was cold enough for a sweater. They moved off the porch and closed the tall French doors. The building was lit with kerosine lanterns and candles. Carlos explained the generators made too much noise.

"We are going over to the drying flats in the morning. You may have seen them driving in -- covered with canvas.

I want you to see what your money is going for."

"Not my money, Carlos."

"Yes, your money. Until we sell the coffee on the world market, Cafe Salvador Luna is indebted to the American taxpayer for \$122,000. Do you pay IRS? You are a stockholder in my family company."

Carlos put one meaty hand on Michael's shoulder and smiled at the realization on his face. Michael liked Carlos. He was straight. And as serene in his understanding of politics and his personal role in it as some Norwegian shipyard worker or Nebraska corn farmer. It was straight, not subtle.

Michael hated to leave. But he was looking forward to tasting some of this good life at its most pink and nutrient source. She was just over there on the other side of the airplane ride holding out her arms. Now you see me, Miko. Now you are clear about the princess and the Evita Peron thing and the lusty little girl who loved to ride horses and loved her daddy. Know me, Miko. Inside and out.

TWENTY-TWO

There was a shitload of trouble off his mind. The flight back was clean and green. No mega-money, no doubts, no insomnia. He was a few thou richer and much more comfortable with the arrangement. All things were possible. Well, maybe not all things. If he and Marisol tried to get married that lake tribunal with Dona Isabela at the head would probably cut her off and cause a massive stink. Maybe not. Maybe demand a pre-nupt and make him work in the business for a few years before admitting to his legitimacy. This wasn't high-rise fever exactly, it was just a matter of following leads and doing yoga.

The third city he coasted in on this week looked pretty fucking good. A wind off the Everglades brought in cooler, clearer air and put the TACA Airlines jet out over the Gulfstream for its upwind final approach. The reefs offshore were visible in the green water, the pastel Deco district on South Beach looked like a beer commercial. It was late afternoon on Tuesday and the rush hour traffic was building up. Kids were playing in the side streets. Miami looked like San Juan after a cleansing rain.

Immigration welcomed him home. Taking his single garment bag to Customs, Michael started wondering if Wolfe had looked in on Penny Lane. A boat can sink with a week's worth of neglect. The Customs agent asked him to open the garment bag. Michael unzipped it and laid it open. The agent, a compact African-American woman with a French manicure, punched his passport number into her keyboard and stared at the CRT.

"You can zip up, Mr. Hayden. Step back behind the red line, please."

Michael looked for the red line. Two hefty uniformed Customs agents and a civil service stereotype in a shortsleeved shirt and clip-on tie came up behind him. The G-12 asked him to empty his pockets. Michael did.

"Something wrong?"

"Routine procedures, sir."

The agent watched as Michael put his coins and goods in a plastic tray. A line of other travelers was watching with mixed concern and fascination. The shirt-sleeve agent stepped so close his Aqua Velva was overpowering.

"Would you mind stepping into the next room, Mr. Hayden?"

Michael looked at him and tried to inch away without looking worried. "Something wrong? What's the deal?"

"Just routine, sir. Would you step into room six, sir? Right this way."

The guy pointed across Michael's chest to a door marked with a six. The female agent behind the counter watched him. So did the two uniformed bruisers behind him. They seemed to be waiting for an answer. As if there was any other answer possible.

"Sure."

Michael walked toward room six. The gang followed; one geek, two bulls, all but the woman.

It was a bare white room with a carpeted bench built into one wall. A TV surveillance camera glared from one corner on a wall bracket. The guards closed the door.

"I'm going to have to conduct a strip search, Mr. Hayden. If you choose to cooperate fully, it should be quick and easy. Will you cooperate, sir?"

Michael felt himself wanting to laugh and slap the nerd a high five and exit. He felt a surge of anger right next to a sinking fear. Routine, the guy said. Routine. Michael massaged his brows and looked around.

"Did I sleep through something? The plane was hijacked, that it? Landed in Russia? Cuba? Is that it?"

"Are you going to cooperate, Mr. Hayden?" the nerd repeated.

"I am cooperating, asshole. Nicaragua? That it?"

"I have to inform you it's a violation of federal law to use profanity to an agent of the government, Mr. Hayden. Did you know that?"

Michael Hayden was feeling like a bug. "I go to Nassau and then El Fucking Salvador and my own country gives me the totalitarian bullshit?"

The nerd looked past him to the uniforms. In another heartbeat they had Michael up against the wall with a forearm to his throat and two knees against his gut. One goon had an elaborate Okinawan grip on his hand that hurt like a cigarette burn. Michael struggled just to keep it fair.

The nerd-agent stood close and pressed his advantage.

"I warned you about the profanity. But I really don't want to arrest you, sir. You seem like a reasonable man. Are you? Are you a reasonable man?"

Oh, the guy missed his line, oh man. 'Is it safe, Mr. Hayden?' But Mr. Hayden could not enrich the repartee with a beefy forearm hard up against his voice box. No imagination. These certified public assholes never have any imagination.

"Are you a reasonable man, Mr. Hayden?" the nerd repeated.

Mike nodded and flicked his eyes from man to man. They all agreed he was.

For his reasonableness, all Michael got was naked in a cold room under fluorescent lights bending over with his elbows on the bench. The nerd took plenty of time with his rubber gloves and with documenting things carefully on a

clipboard. He left, then came back and asked Michael to sign the release of information form, which he did. Then one guard and the nerd left and the guard came back with a paper hospital gown. Then everybody left and Michael sat on the carpeted bench in his paper gown for an hour. His ribs quivered.

The Big Brother routine continued. Another nerd in a dark suit ushered him into another interrogation room. This room had a desk and a wall clock and a chair but remained as cold as the first. The new suit offered him a cigarette but didn't have a match. The organization was manipulating his discomfort and Michael was negotiating for his clothes. Classic George Orwell shit in the bowels of Miami International Airport.

Several steps later, Michael sat in an employee lunch room with red plastic chairs and a Coke machine and boxes of paper towels against the wall. He had been awarded his pants and shirt. No shoes or socks, no belt. His jockeys, belt, cash, keys, shoes, etc. were in a clear plastic garbage bag by his chair. Michael tried to enjoy a non-menthol cigarette.

Two new officials came in for the next shift. One had a fiberglass case and the other a black Samsonite attache. Both were military in appearance and bearing. Crew cut, posture, movement. The first guy flipped open an ID wallet.

"James Holloway, ONI. We'd like to ask you some

questions, Mr. Hayden."

It seemed to be starting all over. The rush of anger Michael fought down was as palpable as ballistic vomit. He sat back and planted his feet on the cold tile.

"I haven't done anything. This is all bullshit. I want a lawyer."

Holloway sat down opposite Michael at the lunch table. The other guy stood at ease. "You're free to leave, Mr. Hayden. You haven't been charged with anything. I regret that episode, it's not what we had in mind."

Michael looked at the other guy and looked at the door. "You kidding?"

"No, sir. ONI issued a request that you be detained for questioning, that's all. Customs and DEA did it their way. I apologize."

"What's ONI?"

"We're a branch of the pentagon, sir. This won't take long. Can we ask you a few questions?"

"Ask away."

The other guy put the fiberglass case on the table and snapped the latches. He removed the top and unfolded the front to form some sort of telephone. A goose-neck microphone stuck out toward Michael's face. Holloway opened his attache and sorted through file folders. He took out a stack of 8x10 glossies, face down.

"I'm going to show you some pictures, one at a time."

If you recognize anyone, I ask you to name him or her. If you don't recognize the person, please say so. OK?"

"What the hell is this?"

"A survey, sir. Routine."

"Yeah."

"Ready?"

Michael nodded. The other guy flicked on the machine. First picture was of Ronald Reagan. Michael nodded.

"Mandrake the Magician."

"Do you recognize this man, sir?"

Michael sat up straight. "OK, OK, sure. President Reagan. Let's get on with it."

"Very good." Holloway put the photo face down and tipped up the next one.

It was Hector. Not a yearbook photo or a surveillance shot; a slick studio portrait maybe five years old. Michael identified him.

"Hector Luna."

"Good."

Up came the next one. "Marisol Luna."

"Good."

Then some faces that didn't connect. Unknown people. And then Dick Van Dyke. Then the general at the banquet whose name Michael could not remember. And Calvado and the guest of honor, Marine Lt. Colonel Oliver North. The last photo was Captain Kangaroo.

Everybody laughed. "You government people are out to

lunch, you know that? How much is this game budgeted for, huh? This is ridiculous."

Holloway put away the photographs and scanned a sheet of paper. "Almost done, Mr. Hayden. I'm going to ask you to read a list of names and terms. Please just read them out loud. If you have any knowledge of any of the names or terms, please tell me. Just give a brief description following the word. Understand?"

Michael took the sheet of paper. He read from top to bottom. Most were the same names as the photographs. There was also a bunch of terms and titles interspersed.

"La Crusada, that's Calvado's organization. Double Fortune? I have no idea. Admiral Poindexter, I think, was FDR's Cocker Spaniel; Daniel Ortega is the Nicaraguan president -- or have I got that backwards? No, definitely: Poindexter-Dog, Ortega-Nicaragua. Yes."

"Have you heard Ortega's name discussed recently?"

"In the news, sure."

"By Dr. Calvado?"

"No, I don't think so."

Holloway took the paper back and put it in his attache. "How about 'Double Fortune.' Have you heard that term used before today?"

Michael pushed his palms into his forehead. "Can I get my socks and shoes? Jesus. My toes are cold."

Holloway closed up his attache and stood up. It was a

signal to the other one to shut down and buckle up. Michael began rooting in the plastic bag for his watch, his socks and some change for the phone.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Hayden. I personally regret any unpleasantness you may have experienced. So long."

They left. A whiff of jet fuel and asphalt indicated freedom on the other side of the door. Michael hurried with his socks and shoes and took the plastic bag in his hand and pushed open the door. It was bright sunlight outside. Apparently a staff parking lot near the end of the terminal. Dumpster, fork-lift, stack of wooden pallets. Jets roaring overhead. Michael stepped away from the building, fully expecting a pair of goons in white coveralls to come through a trap door to pull him aside for another hour of head games.

He got twenty feet away and felt twenty times better. He took the time to empty his personal items from the plastic bag and stuff it into the dumpster. He realized he had left the garment bag somewhere inside but couldn't care less about it. He had no idea where he was or where the short term lot was from here. He needed a pay phone. Turning around, he saw the two brush-cut individuals driving away in their standard-issue car.

Ford Crown Victoria. Snot green.

Mike found a pay phone just inside Customs area B,

lower level. The concierge at Costa Bella said Dona Luna was traveling. It was hard to communicate between the woman's accent and the airport noise. Michael hunched up against the phone.

"She's traveling? OK, is Hector there?"

"Sorry, sir. Whom do you wish. . ."

"Hector Luna. He's staying with her, her brother. Is he there. This is important."

"Sr. Luna is traveling also."

"No, this is Michael Hayden, OK? I work for him, I'm working for him. You know me."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Hayden. But the apartment is empty. Senor and senorita are traveling and. . ."

"Where did they go?"

"Really, sir. I do not have that information. I cannot discuss this any further. I'm sure Dona Luna will contact you. Perhaps she does not have your schedule?"

Perhaps.

The concierge left an empty black space on the line. "Are you at a number where you can be reached? Would you like to leave a message with me? Senor?"

He thought about it.

"Senor?"

"No, that's all right. I'll get back to you. Just tell, just make a note of my call. That's all."

Michael went into the baggage claim area and rode up

an escalator to the departure floor, exited the building and walked across incoming traffic to the short-term parking lot. The BMW was there. He opened it and let it air out.

Miami was getting more and more like a Latin American capital. It seemed more so after visiting a couple others in rapid succession. The old timers who couldn't get used to this fact were always grouching about it. Fifty-sixty thousand people who couldn't speak a word of English, quarter million more who couldn't read an English newspaper. Bugged the locals. Michael had never held any sympathy for those old people, those crackers. Miami was as happening as it gets. Better than two weeks in Cancun or Puerto Plata. You could drink the water. But now it seemed more menacing, more alien.

He got in the car and headed out, paying the maximum at the parking gate. He still had three hundred and change. All the paper work was in Carlos's hands in Coatepeque. It was probably quite good the customs people and the other Feds never caught a glimpse at those.

Michael drove to the studio. Time to regroup. Revise and revamp. Run this by Wolfe. What is was: Mikey runs cash for Hector (which is legit), but the Feds are watching Calvado (who is questionable). Therefore, what?

Better idea. He turned south at the interchange instead of north and headed for Brickel Avenue and the condo. He still had the key. Maybe the concierge was

drinking. Maybe she had been given orders. Maybe Hector was actually 'traveling' in federal custody. Fuck. Check the rearview mirror.

TWENTY-THREE

Alfredo Calvado exited French doors and stepped around a terra-cotta pot of caladiums. He walked across a broad green lawn; his brown suit flapped in the bay breeze, his collar open, his tie pulled down. Hector stood and welcomed him to the concrete gazebo. A servant in a white smock assisted with the wrought iron chair.

Hector clapped a hand across Calvado's back. "Welcome, welcome, my friend. This is a celebration. Take off your jacket."

Hector pulled Calvado closer and sat down. He gestured to the servant. "Tomas, a pitcher of margaritas, s'il vous plait."

Calvado fell into the padded chair but grappled for Hector's upraised hand. "No. No drink, nothing for me."

Hector Luna lowered his glass to the table. He inspected Calvado curiously. "What is the matter with you, professor? If this is your response to unqualified success, I hate to think of anything less. Why so tense?"

Calvado exhaled and sat forward. He struggled out of

his jacket. "I'm not used to this sort of thing, Hector. I have been following some very disturbing details I want to share with you. That's what brings me here, not the money."

"You don't like the money, Alfredo? You have lost your convictions along with your nerve?"

Calvado looked up pointedly but Hector kept smiling. Tomas stepped onto the flagstone behind him with a blue pitcher. The rattle of the ice startled the bald man. Hector took the pitcher and sloshed margarita cocktail into a matching blue goblet and placed it in Calvado's hands.

"We have been very resourceful, professor. Very resourceful. Not every corporation can change players and still win the game. And we won, senor. Don't harbor any doubts."

"You've been talking to the general," Calvado said. He held his glass close to his mouth but did not drink. "His football metaphor is very tiresome."

"Then what? Warfare? The international struggle? Our two countries grabbing crumbs off the American table? What?"

"Doubts, Hector. Fears."

Hector seemed to address his attention to the little man for the first time, though still with more toying curiosity than sincerity. "Yes?"

Calvado looked sideways. "Can we speak in

confidence?"

Hector looked at the servant. "Of course."

Both waited. Finally, Hector pushed back and stood up. "Walk with me, professor. Walk with me."

Calvado got up and followed Hector to the seawall of cut limestone. A squall out over the reef line was sending puffs of cool air landward against the setting sun. Calvado watched a raft of coconuts and turtle grass lapping against the barnacles at the base of the wall.

"Nancy Fisher was murdered," he said. He did not look up. "That explains one of the three people who disappeared that night."

Hector walked along the wall. "Has the banker shown up?" Hector took out a cigar and occupied himself with lighting it. "Or Rudy Alvarez?"

"No. I spoke to his wife. I spoke to Nancy's mother. If the girl was trying her hand at the game, somebody taught her how to play. Her body turned up in the water, almost completely eaten out by animals. In the shallows by Turkey Point."

Hector puffed his cigar. "Animals. In the water. What was the cause of death?"

"Unknown. But her hamstring tendons were cut with a knife."

Hector held his cigar in his mouth and looked out at the horizon. To the north, mangrove islands formed an archipelago at low tide. Populations of greater terns

roosted on the sand banks. He turned and looked back at the gazebo. The air was turning pink in the west.

"No doubt you have a suspect, professor. And I take it you don't accuse me."

"There's more. Roberto Marin was murdered. His body was found at the county landfill this morning."

"And you think there's a bounty out for Cubans. This is a violent town, Alfredo. There were seven hundred murders last year."

"Christ, Willy was with all three of them the day they disappeared. He was the last to see Nancy and Jose alive, as far as anyone knows. Don't accuse me of hysteria, my friend."

Alfredo Calvado drank. His hand shivered. He turned back to look out at the water. "I never wanted to work with that man, not at all. He is a dangerous man."

"The man is a freedom fighter, Alfredo. I have seen the scars on his belly from where they put jumper cables on his testicles. He was held in Castro's lowest dungeons for more than twenty years. This is a man who kills, yes. You would too. But he kills Communists, my friend. Willy Lopez is your Cuban version of Oliver North, eh? A freedom fighter, not a murderer. Have you asked him? Have you put this to him? He can be reached."

Hector started to cross the grass toward the house. Calvado jumped back off the seawall. "No, Hector. I don't

want to know if he did it, you understand? Christ, I don't want to know. I cannot wash my hands of this, God knows."

Calvado laced his fingers and clasped his hands in front of his face, in prayer or determined self-direction. "We must live with our sins. It's war."

"You're goddamn right, it's war, Alfredo. You introduced me to Willy Lopez, remember? He came into this operation from your end."

"He was the general's boy, you know that. He is highly revered in the Cuban community. But I don't trust him. He is a professional killer, he can take your life with a paper cut. No, I don't want you to confront him. Just don't, just don't turn your back on him. Dogs turn on their masters, Hector. Bad dogs turn worse. Don't let him get behind you."

Hector looked from Calvado to the gazebo. When he looked back at Calvado, Hector's eyes had none of the celebratory slant with which he had greeted him a quarter hour before.

"Willy was with Roberto Marin?"

Calvado blinked. "I don't know. No, I have no reason to say that."

"Well perhaps you are wrong, Alfredo."

Calvado conceded the point with a shrug.

"He's back," Hector said. "The musician is back. He landed at five-forty. But I will make adjustments. Isn't that what I said? We have made adjustments all along the

way and we'll make adjustments here. I'll tell Matamoros that I'll meet them in Bimini. I'll radio and tell him to wait in Alice Town Harbor if I don't get there first. Stall the transfer if necessary. I'll bring them in, OK? Does that satisfy your misgivings, professor?"

Alfredo Calvado squinted at the house beyond the gazebo, then back out across the bay to the growing line of dark clouds encroaching upon the softer hues of sunset.

Hector spoke softly, as if to himself. "From the beginning, it was decided. The boat comes back from Nassau with a family aboard. Man and woman plus crew and that's what we got. Don't worry. In Bimini the money gets turned over and our part is finished. That should be only a matter of hours from now, professor. It is in everybody's best interest for Willy to do what he is supposed to do -- including his."

Calvado eyed his associate and looked away. He was constantly reminded of his relationship to the plan. He was a consultant, a 'modular' player. These things were done this way, with knowledge parcelled out to individual members of the operation on a need-to-know basis. It is standard operating procedure and he was no more one of the inner circle than Willy. Concentric circles, plans within plans within plans. And very light threads of connection between rings designed to break away cleanly. This was the architecture, and he had known it from the outset.

"I have misgivings, Hector, yes," said Calvado. "I am not going anywhere. I am not being extracted. I have a business, I have a home. I am a legitimate businessman."

"Yes, of course, Alfredo. And when they come to you, you tell them that. I depend on you to do just that. Now, go. Go back to Coral Gables and wait. The musician is about to take his solo."

Michael gained entrance to Costa Bella from the staircase leading up to the patio across the street from the church. Rush hour traffic on Brickell was blocked by the building. Facing the bay and the causeways, the grandly oblivious attitude of the gilded high-rises began to set in with only ten feet of elevation to the pool deck. Michael walked across to the lanai bar and entered the corridor. He nodded to the pool boy and walked past the concierge's office door. The door was open but he did not look in. Ten steps down the carpet and he knew she was not in. He rounded the smoked glass corner to the lobby and stepped into an open elevator. It took him to the twenty-first floor. The key Hector had given him at Grand Bay opened the door to the condo. It looked the same.

The plants were plump, the bone white carpet was fluffy. The red and gold cushions in the Turkic sitting room were arranged carefully. A note on the refrigerator proclaimed something inspirational about God, in Spanish. A platitude risen to an aphorism via Latin. Si tendría

Dios en la vida no hay falta nada. Michael went down the hall.

"Marisol?" He called out just in case she was there. No answer.

The bedroom looked the same. The bed looked inviting. Strange and familiar. A two- by three-foot impression on the carpet by the wall told a tale. The red lacquer chest was gone. Her sacramentos. The Buddha, the Cristo redentor, the photograph of Herr von Marberg. All packed into the chest and gone. It was not a trip or a weekend. It was more serious than that. Regardless of whatever clothes in the closet and the BMW or anything else, if Marisol had the little altar with her, she was gone.

Michael began to feel antsy, as if the building security cops were on their way up with the airport police. The apartment was once a haven, a dream-like venue where warm fantasies evolved. Now it felt like a trap. He thought about fingerprints and went back to the kitchen and picked up a dish towel. But he thought again and decided his prints were all over the apartment and there was no need to deny that. He had a key, it was given to him. Oh, man. He was thinking like a victim. Fuck that. She was traveling, he would find her.

He examined the fridge next to the Dios aphorism. There were pizza delivery numbers and other numbers. Under a magnet was a small envelope with a pair of Dolphins

tickets. The back of the envelope was inscribed in ballpoint. "Our compliments."

Marisol didn't seem like the football type. But then she didn't take the tickets with her. Then again, Michael had to start dealing with the fact that he knew very goddamn little about her.

The pole lights and flood lights around the bases of palms in the parking lot were on when he came down. The concierge never intervened. No bodyguards, no recognition. The jet lag was on him, though. Traffic over the Miami river bridge was slow. Wolfe wasn't at the studio. The cot beckoned. Michael opened the big doors and drove the BMW in through the back and parked near the base of Wolfe's new lady love -- now only a rebar armature in a washtub of sandbags. Michael closed down and locked up. Fuck it all.

Guy has an accident on his chopper where the sissy bar goes up his ass and the doctors have to cut out six feet of his intestines. He sues the guy who hit him and collects a million bucks in damages. His lawyer takes the money and runs off with the guy's wife.

One screw never precludes another. Feel for the bottom.

The concierge called early the next morning and politely shamed him for entering the building and Dona Luna's home without permission. He had been reported by the pool boy. She assured Senor she would call him the moment Dona Luna returned from her travels or if she called

with any message for him. It occurred to Michael at that juncture that he was supposed to be offering money for these services but he decided it wouldn't help. Not with Ursala.

The call brought all the smarmy details down on his awakening consciousness like a sweaty blanket. The still-gleaming champagne-colored 525i was on the studio floor looking at him. Why did he feel like a cheerleader who fucked the star quarterback for love and got free clothes from the local K-Mart and a gift certificate to Beula's House of Hair 'n Nails on her nightstand the morning after? A little more than a week ago this boy was moaning about his lovelife and now he was all red rough and sore because the best lay he ever had was out of town. Why? Maybe it had something to do with the latex sex he got from the Customs agent and the other-worldly voir dire with the Feds who drove those bilious Ford sedans. Yeah, that was it. A screwing had taken place. And the community seemed to be telling him to enjoy the feeling and shut the fuck up.

It was time to piece a few things together. The bank his money had been deposited in declined to give out details over the phone but confirmed that Michael Hayden had an account there. They even described it as sizable. Pan American Initiatives which had hired him as courier told him Dr. Calvado was not in but would return his call as soon as possible. The lady on the reference desk at the

Miami Public Library downtown did not know who or what ONI was but promised Michael it would be in the latest Almanac under Government, federal; US agencies, offices and departments.

Michael went to Penny Lane and made sure she was still above water. The river was already etching a line of brown slime around her waterline. She ached and called out to him for a jaunt in the cleansing salty swells offshore.

"Later, baby. I promise."

He started her up and charged the port battery and cycled the bilge pumps for an hour. Hosed a black patina of jet exhaust off the topsides.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, Michael put in a call to the studio. Wolfe answered. He was strange.

"Where are you?"

"I'm on the boat. Where you been?"

"On the boat?"

"By the boat. At the dock, on a dock phone. I'm back, you know. Back in the US of A."

Wolfe let a beat go by. He was acting remote and preoccupied. "You had vistors," he said finally.

"Getting to be a habit, isn't it."

"Feds, Mikey. You had federal visitors while you were gone."

"Yes, I know. The Salvadorian brother and sister act are apparently on the road, Wolfie. Wolfie, I think I may have gotten porked but I don't know how."

Another beat. Signal he had more to say but couldn't trust the pipeline not to leak. "How about lunch. You eat yet? Want a little fish?"

Little fish. "Yes. Meet you there in thirty."

Click off. Penny Lane would get a little exercise. Not the salty washdown she had hoped for but at least a look at the river.

Michael lit a cigarette and watched the flame quiver in his fingers. Something serious was wrong. Some real noxious shit was just now approaching the fan and would very soon go violently airborne.

TWENTY-FOUR

Penny would have to wait for her exercise. Michael hung up the phone and immediately got paranoid. Taking a big, slow boat down the river for a clandestine meeting with Wolfe was counter-intuitive. He threw a few things in a sea bag and hailed a cab on North River Drive. The cabbie, a retired New York cop, did a U-turn in front of a cement truck and crossed the twenty-second avenue bridge. They went south on the other side of the river, in and around boatyards and warehouses to Michael's destination. The driver kept babbling about foreigners. Michael paid his fare and walked in the front door of the restaurant. A place called Big Fish.

Big Fish was an evolved riverside baitshop. Business people and fun types liked to eat avocado salad and fried snapper sandwiches on the unrestored dock next to diesel pumps and stacks of crab traps. The owner always wore a straw hat. Everybody knew him as Ed.

"What's good, Ed?" Michael said, looking around. If Ed saw anything worried in Michael's expression he didn't

let on. Ed was hip to the look. It was that maintaining appearances thing all the Armani cokehead businessmen were good at. When wife and job and bank account teetered on the brink of destruction, suck it up an' yuck along with the boys. Everybody looked worried. Something about the Big Fish and the river in general put it all on equal ground.

Ed pushed his glasses back up his red nose. "Conch chowder's good. Made it myself."

"Good. And a glass of Dego red. You see Wolfe?"

Ed looked between his specs and the brim of his hat. Wolfe was standing on the dock by a piling, looking up the river. Michael strolled out and pretended to push him in. Wolfe jumped back. Michael squeezed a grin.

"Well, I guess you cleared this joint good enough. No federales?"

Wolfe didn't laugh, didn't bother to play the game. They stepped in and sat down at a little cabaret table in the corner. "Where'd you tie up?"

Michael motioned with his chin. "Up river. Thought you sounded sufficiently spooked to take some precautions."

One of Ed's girls brought Michael's wine and asked Wolfe if he was ready to order. Wolfe declined. He waited until she was gone.

"You know they'll get you, don't you. You know there's no such precautions that will work. Why'd you come back?"

"Hold on, Wolfie. Who we talking about, FBI?"

"Yes, FBI. They have a subpoena for your appearance before a grand jury. They said you slipped them at the airport."

"I slipped them? That's rich."

Wolfe squinted across the table and lowered his voice. "What makes you think you can walk off with twelve million dollars and nobody's gonna ask you any questions about it? How did you get so stupid?"

"What?"

Wolfe sat back. "Fucking stupid." He looked away.

The waitress brought a bowl of cold conch chowder and a basket of Cuban galletas. Michael didn't touch his food. A lobster boat pulled up at the diesel pumps.

"They said I took twelve million dollars? Wolfe, that's bullshit. I cashed a Telex in Nassau for \$122,000 dollars and took every cent to Hector's brother in San Salvador. I spent two days at their family estate. Met the uncles, the mother, everything. When I came back through US customs yesterday they looked up my ass and played word games for half an hour. This whole thing is George goddamn Orwell, man. I know nothing about twelve million dollars."

"I believe you."

"Thank you."

"Because nobody's stupid enough to steal that kind of

money and come walking back in like nothing."

Wolfe pulled the bowl of conch chowder to his side of the table and took a spoonful. Michael sank back in his chair. He used both hands to pull his hair back and massage his temples.

"Hector fucked me over," he said. "He used me to bait and switch."

Wolfe sprinkled Tabasco sauce on the chowder and tried it again. "And who do you suppose was the cheese?"

Michael drank some wine. It was hard to contemplate. But there she was, playing on the local bigscreen of his bugged-out memory. Forty feet high, resplendent in her morning face. I'm sorry the novios is over, she says. Foreshadowing the big kicker. Catherine Deneuve in Belle du Jour. You will always remember ziss, my darling. I'm sorry. . . I'm sorry, she says.

"Wolfe," Michael said, breaking out of his slop. "What does ONI stand for? What's ONI? Something in the Pentagon."

Wolfe was asking the girl for some water. "I don't know. What is it?"

"The green cars, the car. The cops at the airport. They said they were ONI. What does that stand for?"

Wolfe took a sip of Michael's wine. Michael surveyed the half-empty bowl and the wine glass. Wolfe caught his eye. "Look," Wolfe said, wiping his mouth with a red and white checked napkin. "I'll help you anyway I can. My

advice is get out of Dodge. You need money?"

"No. I don't think so. I'll call you."

He got up. Wolfe took a gulp of water. Michael put a five on the table. "Were you followed?"

Wolfe looked around. "Are we still here? I wasn't followed. I don't know. As far as I know, you didn't kill anybody. They only want to question you. Maybe they're watching us at this very moment, maybe what I'm saying is being transcribed by some stenographer in Arlington or Sioux City tomorrow morning. Hi, dear. Maybe not. I have no idea. Generally speaking, though, the Fibbies play this game seriously. My official advice is give the money back and come clean."

Michael picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder. "OK, you're on the record. But for the record, I didn't take it. Now piss off."

"Your mother."

Michael snatched a Cuban cracker and ducked out through the back. The lobster fisherman was pushing off.

"Give me a lift?"

The fisherman motioned him aboard. Michael took a giant step and the captain nudged the throttle forward a bit. The boat parted company with Big Fish and started downstream toward the bay.

"Where you going?" Michael asked.

"Fowey Light."

"Let me off at DuPont, OK?"

The guy didn't say he would, didn't say he wouldn't. For all he cared his passenger could swim. Or work the trap lines all night. Or commission him for a trip to Cuba. It didn't matter that much to Michael either. It was all just an exercise now. An intellectual curiosity. Exactly how did Hector and Marisol turn his paltry life into so much shit for their own purposes. And who got how much money. And how long would the patsy have to lie in his bunk and ask himself if she was worth it. Standing on the gunnels of a lobster boat heading nowhere.

Greta cut evenly across the deep Tongue of the Ocean, riding high on plane with Willy up top at the controls. Marisol and Octavio Matamoros rested in the cabin. They had been living in a suite together for three days. Gambling on Paradise Island, climbing the Queen's Staircase, drinking rum punch at the Big Bamboo. Marisol had maintained her flat expression throughout the ordeal but the charade was taking its toll.

The drum of the big engines reverberated through the cabin soles and bulkheads, adding a constant throb to the canned music Matamoros kept going from a portable stereo. Marisol leafed through magazines. Despite the boat's air conditioning, the atmosphere was uncomfortable.

At first, they both played their roles with a kind of enthusiasm, a certain amount of optimism. But Octavio was affected by her looks and the looks of others as the two of

them moved about in the casinos and at the tennis courts at Lyford Cay. Marisol found it necessary to bring him up short the second night when he had had too much to drink and forgot when to stop pretending. He was not her husband, not her lover. It was not a pleasure trip.

She suggested to him the next day, at breakfast, that he had somehow misunderstood. That seeing her with the American musician had given the impression that she leant that much of herself to all her roles. He had assumed something about her and how she would become 'Mrs. Matamoros.' That was inaccurate.

Then the accumulated sunburn and hangover and Willy's constant, lurking presence had turned them into the perfect rendition of a couple at the bitter end of a long relationship. As that, as Mr. and Mrs. Octavio Matamoros of Queens, New York, failing at their last-chance to fall in love again, they succeeded. Their torpor and alienation would have convinced any customs agent.

Matamoros lifted his head to listen to something. Marisol noticed and lowered her magazine. The lawyer pushed up out of his settee. "One of the engines is out," he said, looking at the carpet at his feet to locate the sound, or the lack of sound.

The boat changed level and came down off plane and began to wallow. Then the sound of the engines cut down to nothing and the stereo was the loudest thing in the cabin.

Matamoros pushed open the door and swung out on deck.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

He held onto the stainless steel ladder and shouted up to the flybridge. In response, Willy revved the port engine twice as the Hatteras came to rest in the water.

Matamoros climbed the ladder. Willy was moving the port clutch lever forward and back. It made a click as it crossed from forward to reverse but otherwise did nothing. He looked up as Matamoros leaned over and took the lever, repeating the same futile motions.

"What happened?"

Willy began loosening a thumbscrew at the chrome-plated base. "It must be a broken link," he said. He pried up the cover and began to inspect the brass mechanism underneath, rocking the lever back and forth again.

Matamoros straightened up and looked around. He scanned the ocean. Luckily, it was calm. But they were miles from nowhere and alone with the clouds.

"Shit."

"Might be the slave piston on the transmission," Willy said. He let the cover slide back over the mechanism. "I'll have a look."

"No," Matamoros said. He turned back and put his hand on Willy's shoulder. "Fuck it. We can get there on one engine. We can hold a plane. I think."

Willy looked like he doubted some part of his boss's prognosis. The fifty-five foot boat needed both engines to

break up on top of the water and run any more than about fifteen knots.

"Ain't you gonna check the transmission?" Willy said. "You want me to do it?"

"No. I'll do it. Stay up here and move the clutch lever when I say so. OK?"

Willy nodded.

Octavio Matamoros gave one more quick glance out to sea, perhaps confirming the need to fix the clutch. The flybridge afforded a good view but it was all ocean, it was pointless. Looking for a Shell Oil sign in the middle of the Bahama Bank.

Willy put his foot in the middle of the lawyer's back and kicked him over the back of the flybridge to the deck nine feet below. Matamoros landed hard, collapsing his left arm and shoulder under his body as he tried to fend off the rolling surface. He did not move.

Willy came down the ladder. Marisol was at the door. Willy went to the fallen man and turned him onto his back.

"Do you know why dogs circle before they shit, señorita? Eh?"

Marisol held her hand up to her mouth and watched as Willy searched Matamoros' pockets. He pulled out a set of brass keys and dangled them for her to see.

"Do you know why the male animal likes to copulate fast and in an upright position? Do you? It's because of

me."

Willy laughed. Matamoros groaned and began to sputter. Willy unlatched the tuna door at the transom and dragged the man to the opening. Willy straddled him and slid the man out. Octavio Matamoros made no attempt to stop his fall, and made no attempt to swim after he splashed into the water.

Willy came back to the cabin. Marisol stepped back into the shade. He pointed to her. "Don't worry, senorita. This event does not mean anything to you. This means nothing."

He sorted through the keys and found the one that matched the padlock on the large electric cooler mounted against the cabin by the door. Cool foggy condensation billowed out as he pulled the top up quickly. Willy used one hand and then the other to rummage through packages wrapped in white paper. He propped the lid open with his head and tore into several book-sized parcels. They all contained four-pound packages of frozen shrimp.

"Wait," he said.

He dropped the lid and used a bait knife to cut open one of the packs of shrimp. Then another. He swept them aside and got out another one from deep down inside the cooler. They were all blocks of whole, frozen Venezuelan shrimp.

"Maybe I'm wrong," Willy said, looking at Marisol. He rubbed the cold out of his fingers. "I was wrong,

señorita. You know? This does mean something afterall.
This, this. Means something."

TWENTY-FIVE

Michael caught a bus going up Collins Avenue from Harley Street and the Miami Beach Marina where the lobster boat captain put him off. The library at 20th and Collins was mostly for old people looking for mysteries to get them through the night, but it had to have an almanac. It did. ONI was an abbreviation for Office of Naval Intelligence. Mystery solved. Sure.

Hector stole twelve million dollars from the Navy? Hector was doing business for the Navy? Navy payroll, Navy purchasing? He sold a ship? Calvado was the figurehead, actually. The bald professor could have a contract with the Navy and Hector was involved in a scam for kickback. No use, not enough data.

But the combination of military and Central America was fertile ground for any kind and degree of corruption.

A quick cab ride up to the Eden Rock and in through the kitchen. At four-fifteen in the afternoon, the lull was just about breaking between lunch and dinner. The sous-chef, a German kid named Hans, was a buddy. Michael owed him money.

"Got something for you, Hans."

The chef, a tall man in his late twenties, looked suspicious. "You have my money, Hayden?"

"Yes. Sort of. I got your car. What are you driving? Volkswagen? Volvo?"

"Ford Merkur. What is your game? I got no time for games."

Michael pulled the BMW keys out of his pocket and tossed them. Hans inspected the abstract propeller logo on the leather fob.

"I still owe you two bills, Hans. But I'll trade you cars for a week. No charge. Give me your keys."

"Trade?"

"Yeah. Brand new 525i; sunroof, Blaupunkt, the whole enchilada. If you like it, we'll make a deal. Settle up."

"Why?"

"It was a gift, Hans. A lady. You know. But I gotta put some distance between us now. The car's like a bad memory for me. And my new girl knows where it came from. Get it? I mean, I thought of you, you know. How much you appreciate the Bavarian craftsmanship."

Hans kept thinking, but hoisted the edge of his white smock to fish out his car keys. He held one set of keys in each hand and hefted them for comparison.

"Merkur's a fine car," Michael said.

Hans looked up and curled his lip. "Jah, fine. A

deal."

"Options after one week, Hans. Remember. OK?"

"One week. Show me the car."

Michael pulled a pen out of Hans's breast pocket and jotted the address of the North River Marina on an order book. "This is where it is, man. That's one little contribution on your part. You have to go get it."

"I send a waiter."

Michael smiled. Hans gave him the keys to the Ford. "It's in the basement," he said. "Find it yourself."

No American boy can maneuver without his wheels. The black Merkur was nimble and actually had more horses than the Beemer, even though the transmission was as crude as his old Triumph's. The big drawing card, of course, was its anonymity. It might take the ONI boys in their slime green Fords an extra day to home in on it.

Coasting over the Julia Tuttle Causeway west into a lowering sun, Michael rooted around in the sea bag on the seat next to him and pulled out a handheld VHF radio. He held the wheel with his knee and switched to channel 25. He adjusted the squelch and keyed the mike close to his mouth.

"Miami operator, Miami operator; this is Penny Lane requesting traffic, over."

Another repeat brought a response. "This is Miami marine operator seven. What is your traffic?"

Michael gave her the number of the studio and listened

while the phone rang and she asked Wolfe if he would accept the call. He did.

"OK, Wolfe. How's it hangin'?"

"Taking my advice, old buddy?"

Wolfe assumed Michael was on the boat, probably leaving Dodge over his shoulder.

"Yeah, sort of. Listen, you're an old cop. Why did the ONI guys want to ask me questions and record it? What was that about?"

"You find out who they are?"

"Yes. US Navy intelligence."

"Navy."

"Yeah, that's what I said. They asked me to identify people's photographs and asked me to read a list of names. Why?"

"Voice stress analysis. They wanted to see if you tightened up when you said certain words or names. They show you one of the president?"

"How'd you know?"

"Lie scale. There's always one response that they know for sure you know the correct answer. They use that as the baseline for comparison. It's fairly new technology. It was a portable unit?"

"Correct. Wonder what the Navy has to do with this."

"With what? I have no idea what's going on, Mikey. Have you found Hector?"

"No. I think he's long gone. So am I. Give my regards to your girlfriend."

"Yeah, Mikey. Have fun on the Riviera."

"Wolfe, I didn't take it."

"Yeah. Later."

"Penny Lane, over and out."

The marine operator came back with the time and log number. Michael took the left hand overpass and headed south for Solar Bank, N.A., on LeJeune Road and Tamiami Trail. He had about twenty minutes to get there and lubricate a few bucks out of his 'sizable' account before closing. It would be close. But then, he should get a blender out of the deal no matter what.

Solar Bank was a Cuban exile version of the Barclays Bank in Nassau, except ten times the size. Miami Cubans used government dollars after the Bay of Pigs fiasco to buy car dealerships and banks and various other bits of local infrastructure. Most Caribbean entrepreneurs were like that, turning discarded oil drums into a music industry or selling limes on the street. Whatever it takes. The people at Solar Bank acted like all twelve million dollars was sitting in Michael Hayden's checking account.

The teller, a youngster named Lazaro, after inspecting identification, came around the counter and walked him to a desk. There, he introduced Michael to another man, Bernardo Berman, who was twice Lazaro's age. Berman shook

hands and asked Michael to have a seat. He offered coffee, Michael said thanks, and then Mr. Berman diddled his desktop computer terminal and jotted down the date on his note pad.

"And then, how can I personally serve you, Mr. Hayden?"

"Well, first of all, I need an update. I've been traveling and I've posted some receivables in this account and I need a breakdown of my account."

"Certainly, sir."

A lovely dark girl in a miniskirt business suit brought two demitasses and poured steaming Cuban coffee for them. She also had a couple of icewater chasers on her tray and a big, toothy smile for Michael. Mr. Berman wrote with his perfectly sharpened pencil and rotated his note pad for Michael to see. The figure was \$129,259.09.

Michael was as cool about it as he could be.

"And that's all in an interest-bearing open account, Mr. Hayden. It's free, of course, but unprotected. As you know, FDIC guarantees accounts up to one hundred thousand. I recommend you re-deposit a portion of this today, if you wish."

"To insure it, you mean."

"Yessir. A second account, CDs, passbook accounts, yessir. It's good business."

"I agree. Could you tell me how the deposit is

listed?"

"Yessir. Seven thousand two hundred dollars in two checks dated October 26. The first, for sixty-one hundred was written on Pan-American Initiatives, Inc.; the second, for eleven hundred signed by Sr. Hector Marburg y Luna and endorsed by you. Then, of course, the deposit from Barclays Bank in Nassau, the Bahamas, in the amount of one hundred twenty-two thousand dollars."

"From who's account?"

"Yours."

"Mine."

"Yessir. At least, by your authorization. Is there any irregularity, sir?"

"No. What about the extra fifty-nine dollars and nine cents?"

"Interest. Three days at twelve percent APR, sir."

Michael sat back and picked up one of the tiny porcelain cups. "Fascinating, fascinating."

Mr. Berman picked up the other one. "Salud."

"Salud."

Michael grinned like a regular capitalist. "Where is Hector? I was expecting to meet him here."

"Today, sir?"

"Yeah, I guess today. This is the thirtieth?"

"That's correct."

Michael took a sip of cold water. "Tomorrow's Halloween. Well, I guess I missed him. He's an officer or

something, isn't he?"

"Sr. Luna?"

"Yes."

"No sir. Hector Luna has never had any official connection with Solar Bank that I know of."

"I could have sworn."

"No sir. As a matter of fact, he closed his accounts yesterday. He has no connection with the bank."

Michael sat forward. "I knew he was traveling but I thought he would stop by. Look, I'm going to do what you said. I want to diversify a little bit. Some cash, some CDs. I'll sign off on all that now. I know you're trying to close."

"No problem, sir. Just the cash. If we can get whatever cash you want to take with you today we need to do that before five o'clock. Otherwise, there's no hurry."

Michael looked at his watch. Only five minutes. He was growing tired of playing the grandee. Anybody who got off on this kind of toady treatment was a real bed-wetter. Time to take some money and run.

"How about fifty thousand cash for now," he said.

"Fifty-thousand dollars U.S. Will hundreds be fine?"

Fine enough. He shifted in his seat and rubbed his hands. There was that distinct nasty-boy satisfaction that comes with any prostitution, willing or seduced.

He spent an hour watching the studio from an alley across the street just to gauge the level of interest. Michael figured on two kinds of potential mistake: assuming too much threat and assuming too little. Since he knew he was being at least watched by two federal agencies, the FBI and the ONI, it had to be wise to err on the side of caution. It was uncertain what Hector and his side of the equation had in mind. But there was no apparent activity around the studio. It was early in the evening, people were coming home and kids were still in the street. The neighborhood was ninety per cent black. A cop or anything like a cop would stick out like a zebra.

At seven, Michael used the radiotelephone to call his number. No answer. No lights on in the studio. He took the Merkur through a little expressway gymkhana at quasi-legal speeds to winnow out any tails. Nothing obvious showed up in the mirror. At eight P.M. he parked behind the Checkmate Lounge, a little club in South Miami. Gap Mangione was rehearsing with his brother's band. Michael came in through the backdoor. Gap waved from the stand. Michael sat down in the back booth with Buddy Collins, the club owner.

"What's going on, Mike," Buddy croaked. He was as close to a black Hoagie Carmichael the world would ever see. Too skinny for a Barry White but the voice was close. Buddy gestured for a waitress.

"Knee-deep in shit, Buddy," Michael said. He asked

for a Ballantine and soda back.

"Knee-deep is easy, my man. Loan me some money, seeing how you only knee-deep. She-it."

"How much you need?"

"Ten thousand, twenty thousand. How much you got?"

"I don't like the way this conversation is going, Buddy. You won't respect me behind that, you know that."

"I'll send you flowers."

They laughed. Michael took an inch off his scotch and chased the burn with a mouthful of cold soda water. It set up a comfortable zing between hemispheres. "Buddy. You were Navy, right?"

"Twelve motherfucking years."

"I got a client with discharge trouble. I got a visit from the ONI yesterday."

Buddy wagged his head slowly and exhaled a bifurcated plume of smoke through his nose. Michael waited. Buddy looked up.

"He's not coming clean with you, man. If he's got honorable or dishonorable discharge problems with the Navy you don't see ONI. He would have the Adjutant General's office, or the Naval Investigative Service in Bethesda. ONI is national intelligence, not sailors with legal problems. He's blowing smoke up your dress."

"National Intelligence."

"That's right. International intelligence. Fucking

government's got so many levels of spooks they can't keep track of each other. Tell your man he's full of shit and make your own decisions, man. But unless he's a spy, he don't arouse no ONI."

Buddy chortled quietly in his chest. As an old scat man, he couldn't help making rhymes.

Michael spent another hour passing time with Buddy and Gap when he took a break. To walk out without that much would have been an insult. But then, he wasn't really sure where to go next. There was only one logical base to touch.

At eight fifty-five, he relocated to the intersection of Red and Bird Roads on the border between Coral Gables and South Miami. After finding a parking space in the Red Bird Shopping Plaza, he found a pay phone and called for a pizza. Then it was just more waitin' and starin'.

A faded blue van showed up at the far corner of the intersection. Michael was watching the traffic, slouching back on the seat. A barefoot pregnant woman got out of the side door with a cardboard sign and stood on the curb. The van pulled around when the light changed and let out another pregnant woman on the opposite corner closest to Michael's car. Stringy hair, cut-offs, flip-flops. Stubby, dirty fingers. And preggers to beat the band. Her sign said, "Need money to buy milk." It said the same thing on the back in Spanish.

Everybody runs their scam. Shee-it.

TWENTY-SIX

Nery Calvado checked the oven. Her roasting garlic was bubbling around the edges and browning evenly. She pulled the dish towel off her waist and put it on the counter. Her husband's favorite appetizer was nearly done.

In the next room, Alfredo Calvado stood at the open pull-down leaf of an old burly oak console bar. His father had bought it when they lived in Paris in the 1920s. The diamond-shaped beveled mirror had been re-silvered twenty years ago and the wiring for the hidden lighting fixture replaced, otherwise the rounded and burnished piece was as elegant as it ever was. Alfredo twisted off the silver top to the shaker and strained two Beefeater martinis into stemmed glasses. And as it was no doubt meant to, the mirror reflected his hands as he spooned in two olives for each of the two drinks.

It could have been Paris. Or Havana. Now it was Coral Gables. The house on Urbino Street. He wanted it to sound like 'Maison rue Balzac,' or 'El Paseo,' after their family residences of years past. But it didn't have quite the character. The bar did not exactly fit the house.

He lifted his glass and opened his mouth to call his wife, when the door bell chimed. Calvado put the martini down and went to the door. His footsteps tapped across the hardwood floor in the dining room and thudded on the old Persian rug in the front room and tapped again as he stepped up to the foyer. He could see the silhouette of a man in a baseball cap through the frosted panel in the door. Calvado hesitated, then opened the door. A thermal pizza bag was presented by a man in a Domino's cap.

"I did not order a pizza, young man," Calvado said, stepping back with one hand on the door. "Someone has made a mistake."

"You sure?" the guy said. "Take it anyway. This hat and bag cost me five hundred bucks. Shame to see it go to waste."

Calvado looked up at the man. He looked at the bag. His wife opened the kitchen door and inquired about the visitor. Calvado turned his head and raised his arm. He kept his eye on Michael.

"It's OK, Nery. A student, he won't be long."

Nery stood with one hand on the door, watching her husband and the stranger. Calvado did not turn all the way around. Nery retreated into the kitchen.

Calvado sagged on his heels and looked Michael in the eye. "What can I do for you, young man?"

Michael lowered the pizza bag to his side and took off

the cap. "Look, I'm a little paranoid standing here like this. Do you mind if we talk inside? You know I have to talk to you, don't you. You knew I would be here."

"Yes. Come in."

Michael followed Calvado into the small den off to the left. Calvado showed him a wing chair and took a seat behind his desk. They sat down.

"I'm sorry about this bullshit," Michael said, tossing the Domino's cap onto the couch. "I'm not really sure how much to hide, you know what I mean? I'm trying to assess the situation here."

Calvado opened a humidor on the desk top and Michael stiffened. They met eyes. Calvado froze and slowly lifted a cigar above the lid for his guest to see. He offered him one, which Michael declined. Calvado closed the box and sat back.

"You have seen your bank account? You have been to Solar Bank?"

"Yes. I have expensive tastes in hats."

"Yes, I see. Then my best advice is this: you have perhaps twelve hours to withdraw your money, if you haven't already done so. And to find a nice place to settle down. Preferably not too expensive. Not France, not New York. You're young, you should go to Brazil. That's what I'd do."

"Brazil."

"Yes. Your money would last you a lifetime in

Brazil."

Michael clinched his jaw and looked at the wall of books. The professor's collection was heavy on politics and history. And philosophy. Hegel, Kierkegaard, Unamuno.

"That's your professional advice."

The man did not look very comfortable. Michael had a bitter, metallic taste swelling in his mouth. A contempt for the books and the words and the smell of the cigar. In one sudden, unpremeditated motion, the pizza man crouched forward out of his leather wing chair and swept his arm across the little professor's desk. The desk lamp, with its green glass shade; the blotter, the pencil cup, pens, letter opener, paperclip holder, note pad, ashtray, humidor -- everything -- flew across the room and clattered, clanged or fluttered to the rug. The rich, burnished wood on the desk top looked newly waxed. Michael stayed in his crouch, ready to heave the desk against the opposite wall if the spirit moved him in like manner.

Calvado sat with his shoulders and arms pulled in, his legs crossed, waiting for the next move. He watched Michael Hayden carefully, holding his cigar next to his lips.

Michael breathed hard to burn off a wave of adrenalin surging through his veins. He put his hands on the desk and leaned closer to Calvado. "Now, look. I'm a reasonable man. That's been officially established. You

are a reasonable man, you have a reputation for it. So I know you can give me a fuller, more goddamn detailed professional assessment of my situation. Don't you?"

"Mr. Hayden."

"Wait, no wait." Michael dropped his head, held up his hand. "Let me." He sat back down. "You and Hector set up a deal with the Navy. Something, I don't know. But it had a twelve million dollar price tag. Where else do you get that kind of inventory lying around? What was it, a helicopter? That about pays for a King Air, right? A plane for the Salvadoran Coffee cartel, or some shit. International sting, right? Then you set me up to 'steal' the money. That money in my bank account is evidence I was in on the deal. My cut. So is the car."

"Mr. Hayden."

"So is the girl."

Calvado held out his hand. "Mr. Hayden. May I show you something? Yes?" He had his hand down by the file drawer on the side of his desk. He waited.

Michael ran his hands back through his hair. "Slowly. Go slowly."

Calvado continued to take his visitor very seriously. He pulled out the bottom drawer and took out a manila file folder. He opened it flat on the desk and turned it so Michael could read the documents.

"You are very, very close to the truth. I commend you. This is a receipt you signed for \$12.1 million

dollars issued at this date and time in Washington DC and converted to US currency in Nassau, Bahamas at this date and time. That is your signature. This is the agreement you signed here in Miami before you left, agreeing to do just that. This is the receipt for your commission. Now, please don't become violent, young man. But if you did not get a receipt when you turned over the money in El Salvador then you have some explanations to make. The money is missing. It remains to be seen if a crime has been committed."

Michael considered violence, but he had lost the fire. The Rubic's cube aspect of the deal was rising above the emotional strain. Even a rabbit in a snare can appreciate the engineering of his pain.

"I sign a bunch of papers, I carry a bag of cash. But the papers I sign and the cash I carry are not the important ones. The real money is moving somewhere else by some other means. Two lots. Double fortune."

Michael watched the man across the desk and detected just a slight but noticeable tick in the corner of one eye when he used the buzz words. Double fortune. It was a scam on the government.

"So this is a confidence game," Michael concluded. "And I'm the patsy."

Calvado re-lit his cigar. "Close. You have done well, sir. Hector said you were smarter than we gave you

credit for. But you may be surprised to know that you, Michael Hayden, are the only one to make a clear profit in this scheme. You and Willy."

"Willy?" Michael couldn't keep his voice from betraying incredulity. "What?"

Calvado pushed his chair back from the desk. "Listen, let me talk to my wife a moment, OK? Let me just console her, I'm sure she's worried. OK? Then you and I will talk. I promise I won't call the police. Do we agree?"

Michael nodded. He was still dealing with the idea of him and Willy Lopez somehow being on the same employee benefits package. Punching the same time clock.

Calvado got up and stepped through the scattered papers on the floor. "Would you like a drink, young man?"

Michael nodded.

Calvado made a new batch of martinis and they sat in the relatively spacious front room.

"I am not at liberty to tell you the whole story, Mr. Hayden. You must understand why."

"No, I don't."

"You said it was a government scam. It is. That's all I can say. The more you know, the more danger you are in. I don't know the whole story, believe me. It goes too far up the chain of command."

"I don't get it."

Calvado sipped his martini and sought a way to

explain. "Do you know Frank Sturgis? He lives near here, in Hialeah. I've known him for twenty years. Barker and Martinez. They are old acquaintances."

"Watergate burglars."

Calvado nodded. "Freedom fighters, Mr. Hayden. The definition one wears through time is less a function of the act than of the outcome. To the victors go the glory. Frank Sturgis was working for his country when he broke into the Democratic National Committee offices in Washington that night. He was not working for a big payoff. He is not rich."

Michael drank some of his martini. "I'm losing my patience again, Dr. Calvado. I bet nobody tricked Frank Sturgis into breaking into the Watergate hotel. Sturgis and Barker at least had the opportunity to say yea or nay."

"So did you, Mr. Hayden. At Grand Bay. You said yes. It doesn't make any difference why you agreed to it, only that you did. Time was short, we had to get the job done. Our original operation was halted by an unforeseen complication. We had to plug in new personnel. You came along at the right time to fit the bill."

Michael ate his olive. "And you didn't have to use patriotism on me because good old lust worked well enough. So what's the Navy angle? What's all the talk about Watergate? You give me all these oblique hints about duty and country and shit, but you set the Navy on me. Why?"

Calvado's eyes flickered, seemingly overloaded with the mixture of sensitive and irrelevant implications. "Forget the Navy. It's all wrong, you're barking up the wrong tree."

Michael wanted to. But he could not delete the sense memory of paper gowns and latex gloves and orchestrated humiliation. The numbing cold, the nakedness. "Forget it? That's more professional advice? Ignore it?"

Calvado nodded. "Personal advice, young man. Now I think you should go. I don't know what force the FBI has in Dade County but you're pushing your luck. You have your reward, now take it, and stop asking all these questions."

The warning seemed genuine. He had been in one place for more than half an hour. Even with the car switch, the professor's house was a likely target for surveillance. He had fooled no one with his pizza disguise. But it was hard to walk away. There was no coming back.

"The chain of command -- Professor, how far up do I go? Where's Col. North? Where's the general, Gen. Shipley, was it? These are the keys to this, right?"

Calvado took on a rheumy, sad expression. He shook his head side to side. "Mr. Hayden, what do you want to do? What is there to find out?"

There was a thought. You're a fish, shut up and lie there. Why ask why? "Where am I supposed to go?" he said, as much to himself as Calvado.

Calvado rubbed his eyes. He looked tired. "You are

at the tip of a peninsula at the edge of a continent. Your freedom is almost absolute. Just go."

Michael caught a glimpse of the man's wife peeking at him through the kitchen door. Her eyes showed fear, her mouth showed anger. It was an unusual thing to see, a new way for Michael Hayden to see the world regarding him. Suspicion, fear, hatred. He and Willy were the grunts in this unholy war.

It didn't feel like absolute freedom. At the bottom of a peninsula at the trailing edge of a continent. It felt more like hanging off the end of a rope.

Michael re-entered the night without his disguise but taking the props with him at Calvado's insistence. The pizza bag and hat; objects of his halting attempts at skullduggery. Michael Hayden was the perfect patsy for all his indiscriminate, go-with-the-flow approach to life, his passivity. And naked admiration of powerful women. Donna had been the inspirational 60s socialist and evolved into the ruthless 80s lawyer. Michael trailed along. Marisol was the charismatic comet, he the blurry tail. Now it seemed he would either spend time in a federal pen or expatriate himself in infamy unless he accorded Michael Hayden contrary to type.

What did he want? Name the game, define the goal. Without it, there can be no win.

Ending his ruminations, two men approached him at the

curb. A white Plymouth Fury was parked behind the black Merkur.

"Mr. Hayden, may we have a minute of your time?"

One big, athletic cop with a crewcut similar to the ONI boys, flashed his badge. The other, about the same age but trimmer, came around the other side of the cars, ahead of the Merkur. Both wore sports jackets and ties. The big guy wore black high tops.

Oh, mama. He should have expected this. This was not the FBI. This was not going to be an investigation of recent events.

Crewcut pocketed his badge, thinman came up behind on the grassy swale. Michael looked to his left, at open lawn. The white Plymouth was too close to the back of the Merkur to allow him escape that way unless he hopped the hood. It took too much time to think about.

The first hit was in the right kidney. Then another to the same spot, producing instant spasms of sparkling pain. This was followed by a thudding uppercut to the solar plexus, hard enough to leave him doubled over and paralyzed on his feet. Only the assurance of bigger things to come prompted any defensive action.

He took another impact against his crossed forearms and stayed bent over with his elbows locked tight to his sides, protecting his cramping guts. He moved back against the smaller guy. Looking down, fighting the desire to pass out, he saw a tidy black loafer with a new polish. The

little guy was a dandy. Michael stomped on the tidy little shoe like it was the cockroach from hell. Somebody groaned, and it wasn't the civilian this time.

You have here a small-scale police riot, Michael; you must anticipate, improvise, see the sequence as a whole. Influence the outcome. Sure. All his strategy got was a slight revision in the script. When the inevitable knee came up to smash his face into a bloody pulp, Michael had his head turned so he caught it on the side of his head.

Anticipate, derive the event from its stereotype. See these flatfoots as escapees from a Duane Hansen statue: Violence on the Lawn. And it worked. Instead of spitting out teeth, he was listening to sonic overload and wondering about the location of his right ear. But art moves on, Crewcut would be setting up for a re-boot. A dedicated peace officer, he lived for this.

The second knee to the head made crunching sounds all down Michael's spinal column. Negative chiropractic. Finally finding the ability to breathe after the punch to the solar plexus, Michael decided to get in the one good swing he would probably have time for. He brought his right arm up like swatting a backhand cross court and connected with the crewcut asshole dead center in the mouth. They were both surprised at the accuracy.

Littlefoot got an armlock from behind. Crewcut rubbed his lips and looked at his hand. He sneered and spat a wad

of red spit to the side. This was going to be ugly.

Crewcut laid into his vengeance, bending over his work. Left, right, left, right. Workman-like pummeling to the exposed midsection. No more style, no more zen. Textbook two-man assault.

Calvado said something from the porch. His wife even looked out around the door. Calvado walked out on the grass waving his hands. The wrecking crew looked up and took a breather. The natty cop snarled into Michael's ear. He pushed something into Michael's face. A bar of soap.

"This is your special soap, punk. Keep it with you at all times. Never let it get away from you. OK? It's a gift from me to you, OK?"

The man pushed the bar, a pink bath soap, against Michael's mouth. Crewcut reiterated the question with another shot to the gut. Michael nodded. OK, yes, I get it. The soap tasted bitter.

"Where you're going, a guy never wants to be without his personal bar of soap," the shorter one said.

They were enjoying this now, their fun heightened by the audience on the lawn. Crewcut laughed. Littlefoot released his hold and stepped back. Michael caught the soap as it dropped from his mouth. The cops were nearly giddy with their work. They reluctantly pulled themselves away and got in their car, pulling their jackets and shoulder holsters in place and joking with each other. Michael looked at Calvado. Calvado wanted to be

sympathetic but declined. He turned back and took his wife by the arm and led her inside. Michael watched the white Plymouth back up and speed away. He held onto the Merkur and lurched around to the driver's side door.

This was a funny kind of shake-down. Why didn't they take him in? Why did they sniff him and claw him up and leave him on the grass like a bloody mouse?

Cops will be cops. Kick 'em all and let the judge sort it out. It was turning out to be another bad day.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Medically, the most serious wound was a rather ugly gash on one knuckle which the ER resident at Doctor's Hospital disinfected and sewed up. Michael got a series of shots and a chemical ice pack for his cheek. He looked pretty awful, awful enough for the doc to make noise about police reports. Michael told him he fell.

It was Friday night. Emergency rooms all over the city were filling up. On to bigger things. Michael took a room across the street and popped a Percocet. Next thing he knew it was Saturday. He ordered in and watched cartoons and took the rest of his prescription. If there had been some way to crawl into a cocoon and ride out this part of the game he would have done it without a second thought. The thought, the question that kept coming up like a bad burrito was the one Calvado had placed in his mind just before Mutt and Jeff did their act. What is it you want, Mr. Hayden? What do you want to know?

Being hurt and alone and fucked over by your girlfriend tends to affect self image. Michael knew that.

Divorce, impotence and chemical stupor had taught him well. He knew all that. Yes, yes, Lord. Yes, yes. Why the same lesson? I know all about loneliness and humiliation.

Let's move on.

Maybe Donna and the divorce was mere preparation for this. This was the main event. The stakes, after all, were no longer marriage and self-respect. The ante is upped. We are now playing for life, liberty, and the pursuit of understanding. And it seemed to begin with the question: What did he, Michael Hayden, wish to happen from this point on? What was the desired outcome?

Lying on crumpled sheets with a can of diet Pepsi in one hand and the TV remote in the other, the answer came most easily in negative terms. What he didn't want to happen was federal prison for stealing twelve million dollars. Springfield, Leavenworth, that kind of prison. One day for every dollar.

Oily whiskers poked through his swollen cheeks. Purple mountains of addled skin spread majestically from bleary eye to puffy ear. On Sunday morning, when the Percocet was gone, he almost cried.

What is it you want, Mr. Hayden? What do you want to do?

To untie the knot, reverse the rope; read it back. He had his life, for now. He had his liberty. That was the most tenuous prospect for the foreseeable future. What

that left was the pursuit of understanding. Just who are these people holding a thumb over his game piece? And who got to be king?

Night turned, the sky grew light; the angel of Morpheus picked up her negligee and slipped away in disgust.

Michael rolled over and felt along the edge of the bed for the table. It was daylight, mid-morning. A six inch gap in the blackout drapes let a knife of sunlight cut cross the room. Somewhere somebody was talking. Somebody was calling. The maid.

He slid out of bed. South Miami had changed. It was apparently a bad neighborhood now because during the night, while he slept, his thirty-five year old body had been switched with an eighty year-old arthritic dock worker. With face to match. Stiff hair, fuzzy tongue; droopy Jockeys and black socks. The classic scum bum. The maid pitied him. She backed out of the room.

Time to move on. He took a long, steaming shower and set out for a cup of coffee, expecting a pair of cops to screech up and put him in handcuffs in the parking lot. It didn't happen. Successfully escaping the motel, Michael nursed himself back to life at the nearby IHOP.

Families were having brunch after church. The fathers eyed him warily, leery of the itinerant nightcrawler with

the disheveled face and squinty eyes. Mothers scrunched their daughters closer on the vinyl seats. A boothful of happy Dolphins fans kept their aqua and orange hats on and passed around the sports section of the Miami Herald. Normal life.

Michael sat in a booth and sorted out his lot. He was loaded with cash, that was an odd aspect of this depression. Usually, when somebody felt like a royal turd he counts poverty among his miseries. Or, put another way, having tens of thousands of dollars usually cheers things up considerably. The cash was not making him feel particularly wonderful. It was almost a curse, a burden. The cash, and the remaining money in his bank account, was evidence of wrong-doing. He was red-handed. But it was money, good money. It was a resource.

He shuffled through the notes and doo-dads in his pocket and laid it out on the sticky table like beggar's solitaire. A match book from the Blue Note, his Overtown watering hole. Keys to the Merkur and a bloody napkin. Two football tickets and the phone numbers on Marisol's fridge, one of which Michael recognized as his own.

Her apartment had not been cleaned, had not been scoured. They never expected him to get in and root around. He was supposed to get snagged in the airport net but the right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing and the fish got away. So, what was the prize? What did the apartment tell him? She was gone, gone for more than

just an afternoon -- that was what the rectangular impression of the red lacquer chest in the bedroom rug told him. Where she went the altar was sure to go. But they may be expected to return.

There had been no major stripping and blocking involved. No moving another blond woman into the flat who meets him at the door, blinking and telling him she'd never heard of Marisol Luna. No attempted Twilight Zone charades. Hector and Marisol's plan to use the dumb American didn't extend as far as perfecting the exit strategy. It probably indicated they didn't give a fuck.

But that could have been a mistake on their part. Or could turn out to be. Michael looked at the note papers. Maybe one of the phone numbers was Lt. Col. Oliver North. Maybe Brig. Gen. Clarence Shipley. Maybe Willy the human mongoose. It might be possible to get one of these players by the balls and force a deal that kept him out of jail. Get Col. North by the short and curlies and negotiate a deal. Federal witness, state's evidence; something like that. Trade the Fibbies one little fish for a big one.

It was the only hand to play. Michael gathered up his stuff and crammed it back into his jacket. He downed the last of his third cup of coffee and dropped a dime on the breakfast bill. Time to move on. The church folk sat easier, the waitress was delighted with her five-ten tip on a four-ninety meal. Michael walked out. The Dolphins fans

watched him through the big window.

He relocated. Took himself into Little Havana where the buildings came in closer and there were more people on the streets. Michael parked next to a phone booth and began checking numbers. He rang up his own number and disconnected as soon as he heard Wolfe's voice. So far, so good. Wolfe was where he should be. The next number rang ten times without being picked up. It was Sunday. A business number would be unattended. Of course the telephone directory hanging in the booth was ripped to shreds and water logged. No sense trying to look anybody up.

The prefix was 430. That was the exchange. A quick look around showed a tow truck with a 430 exchange in the phone number painted on the door. Fajardo's Chevron Service, the gas station where he was. So the number was ringing somewhere in Little Havana, in an office. It could be Calvado's office. Or Willy's digs, only he wasn't currently in.

It didn't seem profitable to pick on the little professor any further. Calvado had no leverage in this scheme. And Willy, well. It was hard to imagine Willy providing any information. No, what Michael needed was big fish.

A carload of football fans went down SW Eighth Street heading for the Orange Bowl, horns honking, pennants flapping. Dolphin fans. Fins fans. Fishheads.

Michael couldn't get within a mile of the Orange Bowl. He parked in somebody's front lawn for five bucks and joined the crowds surging along West Flagler toward the stadium. It was like salmon swimming upstream, like a jolly lynch mob. Thousands of people caught up in some sort of Sunday ritual. By the looks on their faces and according to all the crowing talk, Miami was doing well this year with a new quarterback named Dan Marino. He, Dan, was taking the city to the superbowl. All the way.

He, the one who gave Marisol and Hector two complimentary tickets to this game, was going to provide Michael Hayden with his next clue in another game. It could be a false hope, a nothing. When Michael got there he could be sitting with a bunch of Salvadoran football fans. But the inscription, 'Our compliments,' had been written in English. That seemed to eliminate the Salvadorans, Calvado and Matamoros, the lawyer. It was not Willy. Maybe Mr. and Mrs. Horn were sitting in the adjacent seats, sipping canned salty dogs and munching on pork rinds. Dallas Bob and Betty. How was Dallas doing this season?

Michael followed the signs and followed the ushers' directions to the north side, top of the first level, on the fifty yard line. The stadium was filling up, the bands were booming. Police whistles, airhorns, the rattle of

snare drums and cheerleader's megaphones. Great audio, enough for a stone blind football fan to enjoy the game. Hotdog vendors calling out, babies crying. The whole biomass of professional football contained within the iron girders of an ancient coliseum.

He bought a Dolphins hat and a Dolphins orange Number One finger, a kind of oversized foam rubber mitt. He bought a program and a beer.

Then almost without looking hard, Michael saw a familiar head. A close-cropped haircut with a three-inch crescent scar behind one ear. It was the general. Next to him was Mrs. General, a blue-haired lady in swept-wing sunglasses. And the two empty seats right by them. This was a major fish.

Michael lowered himself to the hard wooden bench. "Hello, General. Fine day, isn't it."

Shipley looked around, still smiling and in the mood to have fun. But his expression changed rapidly to one of curious annoyance. "Mr. Hayden, what the deuce."

Mrs. Shipley leaned forward and put a hand on her husband's arm. "Hi, there. Who's our guest, Clarence, Honey?"

Shipley kept his eye on Michael's face, running his glance over the bruises and the flat eyes, the hollow look. Shipley's gaze softened. He managed a smile and turned to his wife.

"This is Mr. Hayden, Mildred. You remember him from

Coquina Knolls that night."

Mildred Shipley remembered, or played along. She turned her head askance and frowned. "What happened to your cheek, there, Mr. Hayden? My Lord."

Michael touched his cheek bone. The swelling had gone down a lot. "Mugged," he said. He gave her a little smile, looked back to the general and kept the smile up, just to keep him comfortable with the visit. But not too comfortable.

"My Lord," Mildred said again, feeling her own cheek in sympathy.

Gen. Shipley used his eyes to warn Michael he wasn't all that amused. "Well, Michael. To what do we owe this pleasant surprise?"

Michael held up his ticket stub. "Thanks for the compliments, General. I really think Marino's going to take us all the way, don't you?"

Mildred did. She began her analysis of the team's chances and talked about her beloved Redskins. The Miami Dolphins had lost to the Redskins the year before, but that was before Dan Marino. Mildred loved Dan. The general looked around and settled his gaze on the field.

"You know," Gen. Shipley said when Mildred got to a pause, "American football is a perfect metaphor for the American way of life. Now, I know it sounds like an old sermon. But think of it: You have teamwork and yet it all

depends on each man doing his job competently, giving his hundred and ten per cent. You have strategy and halftime adjustment. But at the same time, the game is won or lost in the clinches; the clash between opposing lines, offense and defense. Every down is crucial. Every man has to do his best."

Michael smiled at Mildred over her husband's shoulder. "Even the coach, eh?"

Shipley turned and fixed his gaze on the interloper. "Especially the coach, Michael. It's the nature of the game.

"Take for example the difference between Latin American futbol and the American sport. In soccer, a bunch of individuals run around all over the place, kicking the ball into each other's zone; getting control, losing control, until finally somebody manages to get the goddamn thing through the goal and the crowd goes nuts. Meaningless action leading to an unexpected, almost random goal. It's a reflection on the society. Compare that with out capitalistic ways, Michael. Teamwork, goal-oriented step-by-step drives to accomplish success. No wonder those people can't win for losing. They have no concept of how to play the game."

Michael drained his beer. Mildred was training her binoculars on the sidelines. Michael wiped his mouth. "Well," he said, "of course the Aztecs did play the game a little different. They had to get a rubber ball through a

narrow hole or else. Losing team was dinner. No next week. Some games are still played like that. I just don't appreciate being the ball."

Gen. Shipley looked around. "Let's go get another beer, Michael. OK? Millie, we'll be right back."

Michael watched Shipley as they edged out of their seats and walked up the ramp. Opposing team captains were approaching the center of the field for the coin toss.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Hayden? I thought you were going to Brazil." Shipley leaned against the iron railing overlooking the parking lot. Latecomers passed by hurriedly.

"Calvado called you."

"Of course, Calvado called me. Young man, I. . . ." Shipley leveled a finger at Michael's face and then shook it off. "I don't want anything, ah, desperate to happen. You were dealt a hand -- play it."

"Take the money and run."

"Goddamn right."

"What if I'm not the kind of person you and Hector figured? What if I decide not to kick my life into a cocked hat? Maybe I don't want to go to Brazil or the Bahamas or anywhere else."

Shipley took a breath and wagged his head. The crowd roared, probably with the kickoff, making the stadium hum and rattle. Shipley eyed the younger man sharply. "It's

not so much what anybody thinks you are, it's what role you play. Maybe one day you're the coach, one day you're the waterboy. You never know how the assignments are going to come up. Thing is to play the game."

"I can play the game, Shipley. Next time I get in the interrogation room I'm gonna sing like a nightingale. I'm gonna name names and lay out the whole plan. And on the witness stand, if it gets that far. You guys should've killed me when you had a chance."

Shipley tried to suppress a thin smile. "That's so pitiful, Christ. You dumb fuck."

"You can't push a man this far, General, goddamit."

"You stole twelve million dollars, Mr. Hayden. Now go right down LeJeune Road there to the FBI and convince them you didn't. Go ahead. Go. Make your play. You've got the ball, run with it."

Michael stuck the end of his foam rubber finger up under Shipley's chin. "I'm getting tired of this football shit, General. I never followed the game. Far as I'm concerned, the team can suck dick. I don't play, I wasn't invited. I don't want in, I want out."

Shipley nodded. "Of course, of course. I want out too."

The man showed all of his fifty-something years of military servitude in a flick of the eyes. "But I can't leave. You can."

Michael watched him for a moment, then gave up. His

attempt was falling sickently short. He had no power, no plan. He couldn't coerce the big fish or kidnap him or anything like that. He started sorting through 'desperate' options, but finally just took off his Dolphins cap and 'We're No. 1' finger and dropped them into a trashcan. He couldn't look back.

"Mr. Hayden," Shipley said, taking a step after him. "Forget football. The fact remains, we're in a complex game here. Both of us. You and Calvado and me. The girl. There are forces and processes that take place above our heads. It goes on all the time. You happened to get caught up in something. It's big business, it's the government. Hell, don't you think General Motors would chew me up and spit me out on the sidewalk if it meant a tenth of per cent profit? Don't you believe the government would use you and a dozen like you to keep another Mariel from happening this year? Shit, son. It's about money, it's all about money."

"Money."

"Yes, yes. Is that so foreign a concept? Jesus! Castro pulls the chain and the United States of America is held hostage to another goddamn flotilla of unwashed and demented spics. Six weeks later Miami's got a crime rate higher than Los Angeles, federal penitentiaries are jammed. Dade County schools are busting at the seams. On top of the last time. That's overtime and teachers and new

schools and new prisons. Add it up. It's expensive, it's a drain on our resources. What do you think we ought to do to prevent that kind of cultural warfare, Mr. Hayden?"

Michael waved his hand. "So invade, General. Fuck Castro. Bomb the sonofa bitch."

"Can't use conventional means. Not since Bay of Pigs. Too risky, too smelly. That's the political cost."

Michael stared at the man, unable to believe he was standing in the Orange Bowl fucking around about civilization and its discontents. "So, so. . ."

Shipley helped him out. "So we use the only weapon this great country ever really had. Money."

Not courage, not honesty, not holy purpose. Nope, nossir.

Shipley smiled. "Think about it, Hayden. How much did Mariel cost us? What is it worth to us? It's the government's job to take care of its people by any means necessary. That's what's going on."

Michael waved him off and started looking for the exit signs. "Another conspiracy, general?"

Shipley laughed. "Yes, precisely. Miami is spook central. This is the jumping-off point. So many games going on they bounce off each other. Of course, it's a conspiracy."

Michael nodded. "Like the Navy boys and the FBI. Bouncing off each other."

Shipley nodded back, then took a blank expression.

"Navy boys?"

Michael shrugged and pointed vaguely in the direction of the airport. "The Navy; ONI. Naval intelligence. The FBI didn't know what they were doing."

Shipley nodded. "Exactly."

Neither man moved for a moment, neither looked away. Both became aware of the fact that Brig. Gen. Clarence Shipley had no idea what Michael was alluding to. Neither had any idea what the Office of Naval Intelligence was doing in this game plan.

"Make no mistake about it, Mr. Hayden," Shipley said as Michael rounded the turn, "You either get out or go in. Highway or the Bighouse. The next twenty years is up to you."

Michael kept walking, picking up speed on the down ramp, letting the spiral of gravity propel his decisions. Shipley's parting shot rang in the steelworks and blended with the crowd noises. "Play your position, my boy. Run the play like it was drawn in the sand."

TWENTY-EIGHT

It wasn't that Michael was sure the general wouldn't do something at that point, he simply disregarded the importance of it. Of capture. He knew the old man was capable of planting the tickets on the refrigerator in Marisol's condo and waiting for the sardine to volunteer for his can. Shipley could have gestured when Michael turned his back to walk down the ramp and a dozen agents could have materialized from their camouflaged positions and had their quarry tied up in a second. But they didn't.

In fact, it was apparent nobody was really trying very hard to get him. Maybe because they all expected him to take a bus. Maybe they knew they could reel him in anytime it suited the schedule. Michael called Wolfe at the studio.

"I got somebody here you should talk to, Mikey. I think you should listen, OK?"

Michael's first thought was of her. The voice that came over the radio wasn't.

"Michael, this is Hector. We need to talk. There's been a development. I need to talk to you."

"Go ahead."

"Not like this. Look, I know you were at the professor's house the other night, all right? I won't fuck with you, don't fuck with me, OK?"

"You won't fuck with me? Is that what you said? You won't fuck with me? I can't handle this, I can't get my breath. I'm having an acid flashback. Tell Wolfe, tell him I thought you said you wouldn't fuck with me. Tell him I need a Thorazine, OK?"

The line was silent for half a minute, Hector muzzled the receiver. Then Wolfe came back on. "You're right, Mikey. You're right, he's an asshole. But this is about Marisol, man. And Willy. You hear me? He's with her. That's all I'm gonna say."

He didn't need her, didn't need to bring back up all the grotty little feelings that accompanied her whole persona. There were dangling things left over, like a fantasy of marrying into the family. Shredded. And things cut off clean at the base, like the impression that he could love and be loved by a woman. Cut and oozing clear white plasma. But Marisol and Willy. It was one of those combos like peanut sauce and oysters you never think of until somebody puts it together. But in this case, it wasn't Thai food, it wasn't a good thing. Not at all. It was bad.

After peeing red and eating pain pills for three days, Michael had no heroic reactions. He was not riding off to do battle for his love. No. Not in this dimension.

Michael drove to the studio. The only clean alternative was to do what Calvado said. Bug out. Go to Brazil. He had fifty thousand in the sea bag and could withdraw the rest by wire. Maybe. But how was that a winning move? It would not last him a lifetime unless he lived the typical on-the-lam freaked-out in the favelas with the typical teen-aged prostitute dead-by-thirty-nine kind of lifetime. If he spent the money on a good criminal defense lawyer he might be back at square one in a year or two. But then, maybe not.

This was all because his prick led him to a tantric yoga joint in search of the magic twat. It was not that simple, yeah-yeah. If it was, he could walk away.

Wolfe had the back doors open. Michael drove in. Wolfe closed and latched up behind him. Hector sat in the sling chair and smoked a cigar. He got up when Michael approached. Something had replaced his Napoleonic posture.

"Michael, I know you and I have issues between us. I intend to do everything I can to put it right. I need your help."

Michael looked at Wolfe. "Balls of bronze, Wolfe. This man thinks I believe him. Is that funny, or what."

"I'm serious," Hector said. "I just got back from Bimini. I was supposed to meet Willy and the boat this afternoon. I called them, just to check their progress. Willy came on. He's taken over. He killed Octavio Matamoros and is holding Mari hostage. He's kidnaped her."

Michael shook his head. "The problem is I don't believe you, Hector. This is a creative mobile of lies tied onto other lies. Very artistic, in a way. I get it now. It's John Dean covering up for Ehrlichman and Haldeman, and Haldeman and Ehrlichman lying to cover up for E. Howard Hunt, and Nixon lying to everybody about everything. Very creative. No thanks, I've had enough politics. I don't buy it."

Hector put his cigar in an ashtray on the floor by the chair. "I'm going to tell you everything, Michael. You, too, Wolfe. You can't repeat this, but listen. We have very little time.

"Double Fortune is an NSC program -- the National Security Council. The people you met at Coquina Knolls in Boca Raton are the people who put it together. The idea is to divert money from AID to the Contras. OK? Now if you tell anybody I said that, I say you're a liar and a thief."

Michael walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out half a pack of Polar beer. "Very pretty, Heck. Obviously, you had me parade around up at the country club so everybody would know who I was. So my name would have a

face when the FBI asked questions. Just like me driving the BMW out of the showroom. It was all calculated to integrate me into the system so I would be a believable suspect. It's brilliant. Now you want me to go out after Willy. Both pawns cancel each other out, right? If you're lucky, we both die. Simultaneous gunshots. PaPow! Brilliant."

He snapped the caps off the beers and handed them out. Michael tipped his bottle to Wolfe, who returned the toast. Hector put the beer down.

"Ninety per cent right, Michael. Every step of the way, failure was to our advantage. If you got mugged in Nassau, so much the better. We told you you were covered, you weren't. But you made it. Our people in Salvador reported the money missing an hour after you left there. But the FBI missed you at the Miami airport. Fine. A better crook. But Mari knew next to nothing, Michael. You must believe that."

"Yeah, sure, I do. The less she knows, the better she does her job. I can see that. But you let her on a boat with that fucker? That's sick."

Hector pulled himself out of the sling chair and strode over to the skeletal armature of Wolfe's newest statue. He hiked up his waistband and scratched his temple, examining the tall, gangly frame of steel. He turned around to Michael again.

"She came into the plan after Jose and Nancy

disappeared. They were supposed to do all this. Nancy was working for us, for Calvado. She drew Jose into your role. When they took off, we had to scrub the mission or go another way. You sailed into the picture at the right moment."

"And your sister?"

"Mari knew. She knew. But she fell in love. . ."

"Spare me, Hector. You let Willy get ahold of her? How?"

"A fishing trip. He was on board as crew in Nassau. If you managed to convince anybody of your innocence, we had a paper trail leading to him. And he would have the boat. Believe me, he was never intended to kill anyone. No one was supposed to die. No one."

Michael upended his beer. It was breakfast. There was a dizzying progression in all of this. Spinning from the close-up warmth of Marisol's arms; the vista of her face, her breath like a warm breeze. And then stretching outward too fast to Boca Raton and Salvador, and the concentric rings of deception. Exploding from intimacy to some kind of historic ream job. And it went on.

"Michael," Hector said, his voice and manner devoid of the Latin swagger, "I need somebody I can trust, someone with an interest in this. I know you, know everything about you. And I know you wouldn't do anything to harm Mari. If you come with me, I'll put it all on Willy. You

can keep the money. Help me get her back and I'll change everything. You never handled the money, Carlos gave it to Willy."

"Easy as that, eh?"

"No, nothing's easy. But I can do it."

Michael shook his head and grinned. He went to the refrigerator and pulled out a lime. "You people think you can manipulate the Second Coming. Everything's movable, everybody's expendable."

"No, Michael. Some people are not expendable."

Hector's gaze burned across the room. He held Michael's eyes for a beat. They knew who they were talking about.

"Calvado told me he thinks Willy killed Nancy and Jose Romero, the ones we had set up to do this before." Hector maintained his direct stare as he spoke. "And maybe one other, too. I don't know why. But Nancy was murdered, probably Jose as well. Could be Willy likes to kill. Maybe he was six steps out ahead of me all along and knew the best way to get his hands on the money was to get Marisol. Michael, he's a killer. And not very polite about it."

Michael held his hand up to break the gaze. He was seeing the ugly fucker with Marisol. It seemed like a grainy B&W 16mm porno flick from Tijuana. Beauty and the Beast.

"OK, Hector. Suppose I'm with you, what's next?"

"He will call in six hours. He's going to another location before he contacts me again. Last call was somewhere between Chub Cay and Alice Town."

"On the Bahama Bank? What does your boat draw?"

"Three and a half feet, three on plane."

Michael nodded. He cut the lime into quarters on the counter. "That's a lot of territory. He'll have to go to Bimini, or Andros, to refuel."

"That's another reason I need you," Hector said. "The reefs, the cays. You know the terrain. Fuel onboard is a factor, a big factor."

Wolfe stepped up, talking to Michael. "So you find him, then what? Let me go with you. I'm a cop, I'm better at this than you are."

"It's a two-seater," Hector said.

"Get a bigger boat."

"It's a plane."

Michael interrupted the contest. "Stay here by the radio, Wolfe. This isn't your fight. The way this operation is going, he'll probably double back anyhow. Stay here."

Wolfe didn't look assuaged and convinced.

Hector stepped over to the sling chair and opened an attache case. He took out a triangular vinyl bag and put it on the counter. Michael unzipped the bag and laid it open. The Sig Sauer 9mm pistol -- one of them -- lay on a

rug of red velour.

"Ah, of course," Michael said. "This was in case somebody got shot. Or needed to be shot. Bought on my card, registered in my name, complete with my fingerprints. Right, Heck? Exhibit A?"

Hector was only slightly apologetic. "It was a back-up, Michael. Yes, in case. And I hope to God you will not have to use it yet. I pray to God."

Michael picked up the weapon and pushed the magazine eject with his thumb, just the way Hector had taught him. The clip slid down and he caught it. Fully loaded. Fifteen rounds. He pushed the clip back up into the handle. It felt good in his hand, just the way it was meant to. Play your position, strap on your gear. Look across the line and don't flinch.

"Why am I doing this? Why did you ask me?"

"Because you've already been paid, because if you don't you go to prison. Because of Mari. And because you're the only one I can get on short notice."

"Finally, a touch of honesty. Where do I meet you in six hours?"

Hector closed his attache and picked it up. He took the first sip of his beer. "Yardley Marina, next to the Chalk seaplane base on Watson Island. You know the place?"

"Sure. You'll call?"

"Yes. Otherwise, be there at three o'clock this afternoon. Bring your passport."

"Yeah, bring the money."

Hector looked back with his defiant macho face again. He walked over to the door, turned and looked. He opened his mouth and thought twice.

"What," Michael said.

"You were selected to fail," Hector said. "Don't fail now."

He left.

TWENTY-NINE

When the heir apparent left, the studio seemed missing something. Like when Wolfe had finished one of his colossals and moved her out. Hector was a work of art. Michael chewed on a wedge of lime and up-ended his beer.

He drew his lips back and wiped his mouth. "Some fun, eh, Wolfe?"

Wolfe picked up the knife and the remaining lime slice. "Let me make you a real drink, Mikey boy. You have six hours, you should get some sleep. Willy probably wants to use the moonlight tonight to switch Mari for the money. He'll call at three and put it off for another six hours."

"You figure?"

"Yeah. These people work better in the dark. Take a nap."

Michael walked over to the stereo rack. "Sure. No problem. Take a nap."

Wolfe put a new bottle of Seven Daggers 151 proof on the counter and cracked the seal. "We need a cutter's punch, old boy. Mellow you out."

Michael put an Earl Klugh CD in the machine. Jazz chords as crisp as dragging satin panties slowly across the mike. Wolfe handed him a tumbler of rum and OJ over cracked ice. No cherry.

Michael kicked back in the sling chair. "They ruined my business so I wouldn't have anything to protect, Wolfie. Hector and Shipley and whoever planned this thing put some government types onto my bank account. Filed that EEOC suit against Billy Zemek. Called in the union. Total control. If they want you, they got you."

Wolfe leaned on the counter. He hoisted his drink. "To the government," he said grandly. They chugged.

"I met your friends Haggars and Benedict," Michael said. "Big guy, crewcut; little guy, natty dresser."

Wolfe looked curious. "Haggars, the big one. That's what happened to your face?"

"Oh, they were just kidding around. Worried about my hygiene. Played a variation on the old, 'Don't bend over to pick up the soap,' gag."

"Oh." Wolfe was a bit sheepish. He had probably visited some con on the lawn to convey the same pointed sense of consequences. A free-form interview on the subject of powerlessness and victimhood in the prison shower. It was effective. Soap was an effective crime deterrence devise if used in the right context. Some cops like to offer a tube of K-Y for the same message.

Wolfe perambulated around the studio. "It's seems so

well-planned in a way. So inside. Hector and them, Mikey. How'd they know so much about you, eh? In only hours. Think about it: You contact the girl in the water, wake up the next morning, and that night you make a date with her to go to the banquet in Boca."

Michael nodded. "Yes. Uncanny efficiency. And why me? I keep asking myself why, of all people. But I was just available. I was there. And Hector said he had me checked out before my boat even got back to the marina. They knew a local loser would respond to a little carrot and stick approach. They ruined me and offered me chicks and cash. That's 'why me.'"

Wolfe stared down at his friend. Appraising the complexity of the professional screw-job. And the long-term effects such a demoralizing sucker punch would have on the man's so-called future.

"You want to stretch out, man," Wolfe said. "You look beat."

Michael rubbed his eyes. He drank another mouthful of his cane cutter's anesthesia. "Yeah, beat. Literally." The drubbing he took made itself known in the ribs and abdominals with every breath.

He went over to the cot by the wall and eased himself down. Wolfe stayed by the counter.

"You have to ask yourself," Wolfe said, "'Why did I fit in so well? How did they pull it off?' Like they had

inside help, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you ask, 'Why did they pick me?' when the answer is, they didn't pick you. They picked me."

Michael squinted at Wolfe. "You lost me."

"They didn't pick you, not out-right. The brass in Operation Double Fortune followed Hector's investigation to me. I'm the one in their Rolodex; I'm the one who owed them. When they needed a replacement for Jose the banker, my name came up in the local asset list. Then there you were, already primed. When they found out you were my partner in this studio -- bingo."

Michael lifted his head. "Bingo?"

Wolfe drank some of his OJ. "Yeah. Bingo -- Shipley's word. Bird in hand. They had me already on the payroll and you already profiled."

"Wolfe, what are you talking about? You work for Hector? For Calvado?"

"No. Shipley. The 'Community.' Why did I get fired from the Miami Police? Falsification of employee documents. What was my assignment? Come on, you know this."

"The Nixon compound on Key Biscayne."

"Bingo again. You don't think an out-of-work cop can take up metal sculpting without a little pension, do you?"

Michael dropped his head to the pillow. The room began a slow grinding torque to the right. "Jesus H.

Christ."

"Fucked again, eh? They found you, then found me, then with a little inside help, put together a total package. The agency needed somebody, I gave them you. Sorry, man."

Michael felt a little sick in his head. "Why? Why did you set me up?"

"It was there. You found the girl, the girl volunteered her medallion. You don't get that kind of opportunity everyday. Then they find out you have no family, no real social support. Your only friend is a burnt-out informant who's willing to sell out his best friend to save his own ass. Bingo. That's the way it happens. Like vampires: Somebody bit me into the business and I bit you. If you live through this, I guarantee you some day you'll sell your soul to save your sorry ass. Then, the bite."

"No."

"You will, Mikey. You will."

"Fuck you."

"You're in the family now, man. One day you'll betray your own blood."

"Fuck you, Wolfe."

Wolfe nodded. Fuck Wolfe.

Michael's mouth didn't work well. His throat was dry. Cotton balls, chemical slime. He couldn't keep his eyes

open.

Something was ringing. Somebody was calling. The phone, in another room somewhere, rang and rang. Fire alarm in a tin-roof shack. Far, far away.

Michael felt like he'd been straining Sterno for a long week-end under a bridge. Hung-over was woefully inadequate a word. It hurt to blink. He got off the bunk and grappled for the phone on the counter just to shut it up. It was Hector.

"You ready, Michael? He called. Meet me at Yardley's in ten minutes. OK?"

Michael leaned on the counter and supported his head with one hand. The phone smelled like burnt shit.

"Hector, he, ah. Wolfe slipped me a micky. He drugged me. He's gone."

"Wolfe? He's gone?"

Michael looked around the studio, just to confirm, but he knew. "Right. He put something in my drink. I just woke up. He split."

Hector thought it over a second. "He's gone after Willy."

"Yeah. He told me all about it, Hector. I hope you both rot in hell."

"Yardley's, Michael. Five minutes. We have a deal, right? You need me, we need each other. If I don't make it, you have a price on your head. Get it?"

Michael closed his eyes. "Bells on."

Yardley's Marina almost predated the City of Miami, which it faces across the Intracoastal Waterway downtown. Michael drove the black Merkur over the Waterway and pulled off onto the blacktop leading around a helicopter landing field. Yardley's was on the western edge of the plot facing the Intracoastal, Chalk's seaplane base was around the corner on Government Cut. Three huge cruise ships lined up across the cut like a steel city. A big Grumman Albatross taxied up on the ramp, dripping water from her wheel wells and pontoons. Michael's brain bounced around on top of his aggravated spinal column with every reverberation of the noise.

Hector stepped out from the low marina building. He wore Polaroid aviator glasses. Michael parked and got out. The Chalk's plane finally throttled down and relaxed.

"You look like shit," Hector observed.

He didn't await a return comment on that. Michael looked up at Hector's back disappearing around the concrete block building. He followed.

"Hector, wait."

Hector looked back and gestured. They were walking toward an unlikely looking seaplane riding in the water like a dragonfly in repose. It was small enough to sit on top of the Grumman and looked more like an enclosed airboat

with wings.

"Wait a minute, Hector."

"He's had a six-hour lead on us, Michael. Let's go."

Michael stopped. "Wait, Hector."

Hector continued out on the finger dock and hauled open the door of the plane. The whole front end seemed to cantilever and lift up. It bobbed on the water with the exertion. Michael walked down the dock. Hector pulled in on the bow line to move the plane closer to step in.

"Wait a minute, goddamit," Michael said.

"Get that rope when I start her up," Hector said.

Michael hauled the shorter man up by his arm and turned him around. "I said wait, goddamn it. Now, wait!"

Hector shook back, Michael released him. Hector stared.

"I have been used and seduced, Hector. Every time I turn around I find out the last thing I found out was false. Now you expect me to get in that thing and fly across the Atlantic Ocean?"

Hector took a breath. "No. Just across the Gulfstream. Fifty miles to Alice Town, Bimini."

"Yes, I know. I've been there several times. Nice little beer and bait joint. Adam Clayton Powell used to swear by it. Takes about half an hour by fast boat. Why do you want to fly?"

"I have an FAA multi-engine ticket, Michael. You will be safe. I'm not seducing you into anything. You are free

to go home."

Hector untied the bow line and tossed it onto the dock. He put one hand on the open door.

"Wait," Michael said, in resignation. Marisol, Willy. Now Wolfe and Hector. Let's all go to Bimini. Shit. "Can I at least get a cup of coffee first?"

Hector just stared. His aviator shades had that ovoid, indifferent look devised over the last century of flying to communicate quiet contempt for the land-bound. Latinos never miss an opportunity to endanger themselves and let you see it. Michael took Hector's long look for an affirmative. He walked back to the marina, looking for a coffee pot. His head was pounding.

Taking off was unrelenting terror. The plane vibrated as the engine revved up higher and higher, the chop on the channel threatened to bounce them up and stuff the bulbous nose into the water at any second. A tug boat at the far end of the channel got closer and closer but the plane held onto the water far longer than Michael expected. Finally Hector pulled back on the yoke and broke the hull free and the aluminum mayfly sprang up off the pond with instant agility.

Michael nursed his Styrofoam cup of coffee to his lips as they climbed out over South Beach and gained altitude. The Sig Sauer 9 was eating a hole in the small of his back.

His passport was in his shirt pocket. Ten thousand bucks in hundreds bulged out his jeans. This was patently crazy.

"Hector, tell me. How did I walk out of that bank in Nassau with twelve million dollars, man? I mean, I had a fraction of that, right? I actually did carry one one-thousandth of that out and took it on the plane to Salvador. It was fairly bulky, weighed maybe six or eight pounds. Half a chord of firewood. How did I carry twelve million?"

Hector kept his eyes forward. "You signed for it, an armored car service transported it. Both Gustavo Choy and the armed guard are on affidavits to that effect."

"Paperwork," Michael said. "Money is messy, isn't it. Sooner or later the accountants trace down every penny. What is it, the OMB, the GAO -- General Accounting Office? So your benefactors said you could have the Contra money if you could convert it to cash. Right?"

Hector acted like he was alone in the plane. He kept his eyes forward. "We had to get it offshore," he said finally. "No IRS forms; foreign banks are not so meticulous about certain things. But how did you get so smart, Michael? When you were so dumb a few days ago."

Zing. Easy answer. Trust. He thought his enemies were out on the street, not behind the desk. Or back home. But don't let him change the subject. "Cash is relatively liquid, and anonymous, right? But in reality, once the money is converted to cash, you've solved one problem and

made another. End of the paper trail but now you have a hundred pounds of cash to deal with. So you put it on a boat."

Michael slapped his forehead. "Jesus, is it on the boat, Hector? Of course, that's why the boat went to Nassau, right? Only Willy doesn't know, does he."

Hector turned his mirror eyes. "If he knew, there would be no reason for this trip, would there?"

"And no Marisol," Michael added.

It felt like swimming into an invisible tangle of monofilament and getting progressively more and more tangled. Realizing more and more just how tangled you have been for a while.

He looked at Hector. "So who bit you, Hector? How did you get into all this?"

Hector took off his headset and pushed a trim wheel on his left to level the plane. He held the control yoke with one hand resting on his knee. "My family is one of the fourteen landed families in El Salvador. I was born into it. There is no other life. You have a choice, I have family."

It sounded simple, and unforgiving. Like Afrikaners in Capetown who accept their burden of patronage. But which American can advise a colonial about treating their indigenous population fairly? Not so simple.

"And Marisol is really your sister?"

Hector looked over again. He nodded.

A radio message crackled on the overhead speaker. Hector flipped a switch and put on his headset. After a minute he acknowledged and signed off, pulling the earphones down around his neck.

"That was the dispatch at Yardley. No word from Willy or Wolfe. That's good, I suppose."

Michael nodded. He squinted out through the big side window at the blurry line where pale blue merged into dark blue on the horizon. In Penny Lane, this trip across the Stream is one undertaken only after careful planning. Weather, seas, provisions. Water, fuel. It could take twelve hours in the wrong wind. Bimini would feel like a distant shore. From ten thousand feet, on a clear day, you could almost see both countries simultaneously. Certainly, in an airliner at night, the party lights of Bimini and the immense carpet of lights of Miami were visible at this point.

Maybe it was all up to him. Maybe the one they called Michael Hayden -- she called Miko -- was going to be the difference. It was Willy now. He was the factor. And Hector. Michael Hayden was in the middle again. Between two continents of intent and purpose. Neither back there, in all that passion with her. Nor out there, in that toxic reaction he felt when it became obvious she had used him for practical, or 'patriotic' ends.

Stupid, frenzied postal workers and haywire clerks go

nuts imagining their wives or girlfriends fucking another man. Or thinking about the woman they love and trust deceiving them in the very act of trust.

Men are so much more tender about all that. They sense the female ability to lift their legs and close their eyes and become one with a man for other than passionate purposes. It's always made over about how men see sex as mechanical and external. But that's not true with love, when the sex is making love with a woman he sees as his own. She is special, she is holy, and she only does the dirty deed because she loves him. The guy considers the sex act a magical rite, he must submit; the girl is able to watch it from a distance. It is the root of male fear. Men don't trust the female libido.

But Michael Hayden, not too hopelessly caught in the Libra middle on this question, knew for a fact that she had loved him. That he had loved her. It was possible this awful prolonged episode was just one of those rough spots. A transition. And they would be together again. At least, if he could keep Willy Lopez from taking it all away.

THIRTY

David Wolfe had crossed the Stream at three-quarter speed. The Baja 42 got up and sliced every wave it met, smacked down on every irregular crest, danced her chines along on the swells. The boat, a vermillion red luxury job, had a torn yellow evidence sticker on the windsheild and still had smudges of black powder on her where the lab had dusted for latent prints. She was named Katana by her previous owner, a Cuban farmer and race-car collector who ran afoul of the law for some reason. Until the unlikely event that he actually came back to Miami to stand trial, some of the ranking cops had their way with his boat. Wolfe had called in a chit to get her.

Used but not too abused, Katana purred along on twin Lamborghini 12 cylinder engines at an easy fifty-three nautical miles per hour. Loping across the Gulfstream.

Wolfe idled through the marina at Alice Town, unable to find the Greta, but he had never expected to see her here. He refueled at the Shell docks and took a heading of 110 degrees east by southeast across the shallow Bahama

Bank. His boat was almost twice as fast as Greta and drew only twenty-two inches of water at high speeds. He could close. Willy could only go to two places out of Chub Cay and be assured of fuel.

But Wolfe's greatest advantage was knowing the endgame, the objective.

He headed south.

Hector brought the plane into Alice Town Harbor and landed with full power and no flaps in order to keep the thing from setting down on the water and taking all its momentum into the drink. Eventually, enough friction on the hull slowed the craft sufficiently to throttle back and taxi in. The two had a beer and steamed shrimp at the marina. Michael tried to rub the color back into his knuckles and wondered aloud what he and Hector were doing.

"It's four-fifteen," Hector said. "The original rendezvous was five. First things first. Here comes the bobby."

A Bahamian customs officer in a khaki uniform came strolling up. The man wore his khaki socks stretched up to his knees and kept his mufti just so. Passports were checked, pleasantries observed.

"We're meeting a friend," Hector said.

"Another pilot?" the officer asked.

"No. Fishermen. They left ahead of us. Wolfe, and

Matamoros."

The officer pulled out his notebook. He put the tip of his pencil to his tongue. "Messieurs Wolfe and Matamoros, you say? No. Not in Alice Town, Mr. Luna, no sir. Every foreign national must pass Bahamian customs and immigration, as you well know. Your friends have not entered this harbor."

"They may be down at Gun Cay. I'll give them a call."

"Very good, sir. Enjoy your stay in the Bahamas."

The man touched his pencil to the beak of his cap and walked off.

"That doesn't mean anything," Michael said. "The Bahamian Police force is totally out of their league."

Hector wadded up a napkin and tossed it into his plate. "Wolfe isn't helping anything. I don't know what he thinks he's doing."

Michael peeled open a bottle of aspirin he had bought at the marina. Missing in all the rush at Yardley's before they left was any discussion of if or why or where. Without Wolfe's confiding his part of the Contra plan to Michael, his actions would be totally baffling. Maybe Hector knew more about Wolfe's gambit. David Wolfe could have been the original bag man in this deal, he owed Shipley. He was next up in the rotation until it became obvious the perfect patsy was already in play. Wolfe volunteered his best buddy. Now he was trying to put it

right.

"Running interference."

Hector looked puzzled. More football, the inevitable language of warfare. Michael was beginning to hate the sound of it but there it was.

"It's an American thing," he said.

By the time Wolfe got across the Great Bahama Bank, daylight was draining away at his back. He let the boat drift at idle while he examined a chart. Pine Cay wasn't far from Chub Cay and relatively tiny. It did have facilities, including phone relays and fuel, but it was far enough from Nicholls Town on Andros Island to be private as hell. Willy didn't know him, didn't know the boat. If Marisol was cool enough he could search him out without being secretive about it. And she was, she was. If she was still alive.

The current between Pine Cay and Andros was vigorous on the outgoing tide. Enough for Willy to put out a second anchor at an angle to the first. He felt the line go taught and walked back to the lower controls at the port rail of the cockpit. When Greta snugged into the strain and swung a little to the right, Willy went up the ladder and turned off the engines. He pulled out the keys and put

them in his pants. Then he pushed and pulled out the fuses for the radio and pocketed them. Before coming down, he flipped on the white anchor light atop the half-tower mast.

A wind was blowing along with the current to keep the boat lined up and stable. It was cool enough to shut down the generator and AC. Willy clipped open the cabin door and peered into the gloom. He stepped in and turned on a dome light. Marisol refused to look at him.

"Time to eat, eh? You hungry, senorita? You want to eat? We got plenty of shrimp."

Marisol's mouth was not gagged, she could have replied but she didn't. Her ankles and wrists were bound up together with duct tape. Her hair was tangled. She sat on her hip with her legs drawn in under her and propped herself back against the settee cushion.

He could read the look in her eyes, even with her look averted. It was the apotheosis of all the looks from all the women. Men also looked at Willy Lopez like his very footprints stank of garbage. Like his shadow rubbed off on them. But the women, oh, the women. They looked at him like he was covered in dogshit. They turned away and looked at walls and other people and animals in the gutter. Anything. But not his direction.

Lest some unknown observer should interpret their look for any sort of caring. Any degree of kindness toward him. No. And their contempt for him escalated with their beauty. The plain Jane would give him the time of day, the

pretty little pussy wouldn't dare breathe the same air. But the great haughty beauties had a lifetime of training in disdain. Since their blond ringlets and lace panties days they were taught to see him as worse than bee stings, worse than passing wind in church. The great beauties; how he loved them. Cold, smooth, perfect.

And this one; so regal, so refined.

Willy put one knee on the settee and leaned close to her. She kept her face away. "Are you comfortable, senorita? Can I loosen your feet? Let me make it more comfortable for you, no?"

Willy produced a short knife and cut the tape between her ankles in a single swift move of his arm. Marisol caught her breath and held her shoulders back, unsure for a moment whether she was cut.

"There, that's better, no? Let me help you. The little toes must be sleeping. Let Willy rub them and make them wake up."

He traced the back edge of the knife along the calf of one leg. Marisol did not react. She held herself still. As if the tape was still there. As if the tape was everywhere on her body. Wound all around. She was still, but not rigid; careful without seeming to care. As if the tape protected her, wrapped all about so wherever he touched, it would be the tape. It would not be her.

"I make you more comfortable," Willy said again. But

he didn't seem to be addressing her the same way. It was Willy singing to Willy. "I make it better."

He brought the knife up her leg to the inside of her knee.

"You know how a woman is split down the middle? God made them so they open easy that way. So you can put in your thumbs and open the woman like an orange. You know how that is? God made women so that is. You believe in God?"

"Yes," Marisol said.

Willy was surprised. She turned her face. "I do, yes. But not in the way you might think. My view of God is different."

Willy grinned and stood up. He played with the knife in his fingers.

She lifted her chin, shook back her hair. "You didn't know I was a yoga practitioner, I suppose. Tantric yoga. Have you ever heard of that? Of tantra?"

Willy jerked the knife up to his face, in the line of sight between them. "I only want to hear one thing from you, my little senorita and that's where that fucking lawyer put the money."

"Do you think my brother would tell me that?"

Willy's response was another round of slashing cushions and prying teak panels off the entertainment center. He ripped up carpet, peeled off wallpaper, smashed louvered doors. Following the murder of Octavio Matamoros,

Willy had chopped into every one of the frozen packages and pulled back the heavy hatches over the engine compartment. He had directed a flashlight into crevices from the keel to the flybridge before calling Hector.

"No, no. Never mind, senorita." He breathed hard and wiped his face. "I don't want you to tell me. It makes no difference. Hector Luna will come to me and he will bring me the money. It is in Miami, maybe. Or back in Nassau. It doesn't matter. He will hand it to me or he will get his little sister wrapped up in all those stinking frozen shrimp boxes, you hear me?"

Willy calmed himself, swallowed his breath, forced himself to smile. "That's what they did with J. Paul Getty's kid. The people sent his old man an ear and he didn't answer so they sent him his kid's finger and the prints matched so the old fucker paid."

He looked at her. "I wonder which part of you is worth the most, eh?"

"I wonder," Marisol said, "if you do. Do you? You asked me if I believe in God. What about you?"

Willy walked to the counter and fumbled through a rack of bottles. "I believe Jesus had a hard time supporting his weight with nails through his hands and ankles. I think he looked down and saw his mother and regretted he never nailed her when he had the chance. I mean, how much can they do to you, right?"

He came back to her with a bottle of rum. "Is that part of your religion? Is that in, what -- tonka?"

"Tantra," she said. "It's very special. Tantra has three colors, three branches; white, which is love; red, which is sex; and black."

He turned his head, looking with one eye and then the other, as if measuring the distance by paralax. "What is black?"

Marisol pushed herself around and let her legs over the side of the settee. "What do you think black is, Willy? What is black?"

Willy brought the knife back up. His grin was gone. He looked at the woman from a slight turn of his head, regarding her carefully. "You santera? You a bruja woman?"

Marisol took a moment in answering. "No. I'm not a witch woman, no. I am a tantra woman. Tantra is the power of the serpent that lives within."

Willy stepped to the side and kept his eyes on the woman. He flicked the knife down into the table. Marisol followed his movements with her eyes.

"The snake? You worship the snake?"

"The snake that lives inside us, yes. I know the snake."

Willy watched her. It was getting dark. He hefted the bottle of rum.

Black snake, black night. Tantra.

It was going to be a night of the snake. As full and inevitable as he had looked forward to this night for so long, it now began to look even better. It was a night for rum. A night of the snake.

Willy eased himself down onto the settee next to her. He lifted his head at a sound. The throb of big engines moving at idle speed came from outside.

THIRTY-ONE

The fishing fleet lined up at the docks, all the tuna towers and outriggers poking into the night sky like construction steel.

Halloween in Bimini meant nothing except another excuse to drink and dance and hoot a little longer and louder, during which the ethic of fishing displayed its true Dionysian face. Serious tournament fishermen would drink like sailors on shore leave and get up at dawn. Depart land the annointed hunters, still under the influence. Defy good sense. Sail the rail. Speak of Hang Chow and bring up an ugly subject.

Michael and Hector, embroiled in a less symbolic quest, occupied a table outside where they could monitor the harbor and stay by the phone. Michael was on his umpteenth coffee and Hector was just sitting. Women from Dubuque and men from Corpus Cristi made fools of themselves close enough to really be annoying. By nine o'clock the second woman went in the water. Tits were out on one boat. Flares went up.

Finally, the desk clerk at the marina came out with a radiogram. It was from Wolfe via SSB. He had spotted the Greta off Pine Cay. Michael and Hector ducked back in the marina office and pulled out charts.

"Pine Cay," Michael said, dragging his finger across the light blue zone designating the Bahama Bank between Bimini and Andros. "He's going south."

Hector squinted at the chart. "That's right at the tip of Andros Island. He could go either way, east or west. What makes you think he's going south?"

"Two things. One, if he wanted to go back to Nassau he would've turned back off the Bank and crossed the Tongue. Andros Town is that side. He wants us to find him, right? He wants to trade Marisol for money. If he was going east, he could keep going at night. The moon's good, seas are down. No problem. He calls us from Andros Town or Nassau to make the switch. But he's anchored off Pine Cay which means he doesn't want to cross the Bank at night. Too shallow."

Hector straightened up. "And the second reason?"

Michael looked around. The clerk was reading a magazine half hidden behind a rack of T shirts. "ONI," Michael said.

Hector looked puzzled. "ONI? What's that?"

"That's the bunch that interrogated me in the airport."

"What airport?"

Michael pulled Hector around away from the chart and the clerk. "Hector, the reason the FBI missed me at the airport was they got scooped by another federal agency. The Office of Naval Intelligence."

"I don't get it."

"It's the branch of the Navy Department involved with international espionage. This shit is international."

"I know that. The Contras. . ."

"No, forget the Contras. Who's involved in this thing that the Navy would be interested in?"

"The Navy?" Then a light went on over Hector's razor cut. "Oh. . ."

"Yes, 'oh.' Lt. Col. Oliver North, U.S. Marine Corps. A jarhead attached to the NSC. Only, the Naval intelligence people don't like it. They know he's doing something, they get bits and pieces of information. They asked me if I'd heard anything about Double Fortune. I didn't, not until they said the words. They're trying to get the goods on Oliver North because somebody in Joint Chiefs or Congress or some Democrat wants to pull North's bars off his shoulders."

Hector looked impatient. He may have known every word of what he was being told. He wanted Michael to get to the end. "Michael, why is Willy going south? Don't get lost in your little spy drama here. None of that means anything unless we can use it to get Mari back alive. Why do you

think Willy Lopez is going south?"

Michael took a breath and folded the chart. "Because he's going to Cuba."

Willy came up on deck but stayed under the overhang. Against the remaining glow on the horizon he saw a silhouette of a speed boat turning slowly about thirty yards up current. The boat had running lights on as well as a white anchor light on a stern pole. The captain was on the bow manhandling a line overboard.

Willy looked around. A few lights ashore on Pine Cay were showing. Homes in the Australian pine thickets. Across the cut, a more widely scattered array of lights in Nicholls Town. The breeze was letting down for the night. The stranger came aft and cut his engines. It was quiet again. The man faced the Greta and held his hand up in greeting. Willy gave no response. The man went below. Salsa music came across the water.

Anyone would anchor out in the breeze, and far enough from land to miss the mosquitoes. Another boat, a big motor-sailer was anchored half a mile behind him. Half a mile.

Willy watched for another few minutes and returned to the cabin.

"Black magic, eh? I want you to tell Willy about your snake power, OK? I want you to. OK?"

Marisol had not seen the boat. The large side windows

were covered by heavy curtains. But she had followed everything well enough to know Willy would be on alert. Unless it was a Coast Guard cutter, the arrival of another boat only put an unnecessary edge on an already ragged individual.

"I have always wondered about you, Willy. Do you know that?"

Willy pulled the cork out of the rum with his teeth. "How you mean? You wonder about Willy."

"Because a woman sees something in a man's eyes. You know, when I was swimming or out on the boat in my bathing suit. You know I got pretty comfortable with you. I learned to ignore you. But I wondered about you."

"How?"

"You never looked at me like other men. You never looked at my breasts or my body."

Willy bristled. "You think Willy's funny, eh. You think I'm one of those cocksucking boys. You think that, you think that I don't like women?"

"No, no. Not at all. That's not it. I don't see that, either. What I came to see was a power over sex. You know? I said, 'This is a man who is in control.' I could see you had the serpent coiled deeply, deeply in your belly and never let him out. That's true, isn't it?"

Willy drank the rum the way he liked to. He stuck the bottle in his lips and lifted the bottle and watched the

bubbles boil up as he charged the burning liquid down his throat. Burning rum, rushing down through his guts like a river of lava.

When he lowered the bottle and looked back at her, his eyes glistened behind a film, the pupils squeezed to pinpoints. He wiped the cool glass of the bottle across his mouth.

"What's true? You think you see me? I have the snake wrapped around and around. He wraps around my pinga."

"Yes." Marisol sat forward. "I knew it."

"You knew what?"

"You have the serpent power. He is within you."

Willy moved slightly on his feet, shifting weight like the boat was still moving. Beads of sweat had come up on his face and neck and ran into his eyes. He wiped his face with his hand and held the sheepskin bag at the base of his neck.

"When I was in prison, I never let them know. I never let the men see Willy. They had me, they had me where they wanted me. 'Take it like a man,' they say. They laugh. 'Take it the way a man takes it.' Fuck. But I was just a boy, you know? It was that way. The serpent, he twisted tight and tight. All night long they would laugh at Willy. The next night, and the next. And the Chinese men they say, 'Be strong.' And I was. I am very, very strong."

He had begun to look away, to talk to his bottle as if he were alone with it. Marisol lifted her taped hands to

pull the hair away from her face. The cabin was getting hot in the still of the night and with the door closed. The smell of rum and Willy's sweat was thick in the damp air.

"That's what I saw in your eyes," she said. "A woman knows when she sees that. A smart woman. You said the Chinese saw it. That's right, they know. You have the power."

"God damn right."

"But you need the black tantra. You are a natural, Willy. The blackness is native to you. With the right training you could be a siddhi, a brujo."

"Brujo, yes. The snake."

"We can awaken the serpent."

"I like that."

Marisol stopped the banter. It was no longer a matter of negotiation and persuasion. He saw it, he was there. She would teach him to wake the serpent. The rituals, the diagrams, the postures. And all the coiled spring of hatred and sexual tension at the base of his spine would be brought up. Ready to strike.

For her efforts, all she could get was two free hands and a split second decision.

The water was warm. And calm. Wolfe slipped over the side away from the Hatteras and came around under his own

bow. Heat lightening far away to the east flickered silently to mark the demarcation of sea and sky. He adjusted the .45 Government Colt tucked into his wetsuit jacket. The pistol would be soaked, but the old, clunky tolerances of the 1911 would work fine after a simple shake. Six shots. Big, slow, heavy slugs.

The current had slacked with the tide. It was still running a half knot toward the Greta, just enough to assist him in his approach. But it was too quiet. The Afro-Cuban radio on his Baja was loud enough over here, but by the time he got to the Hatteras every ripple and every careless breath would carry like a megaphone across the surface.

The current did its job. He moved with little commotion, with very little roiling the glossy surface. His nose and eyes came up, then his chin lifted for a breath and he went back down for another three breast strokes. Hide in plain sight, disappear. Don't be there if the punk comes out for a piss over the side.

He kept his eyes on the boat as he got nearer. Half way, he was a sitting duck, no matter how stealthy the duck he was. If Willy had made him when he pulled up and anchored then this was going to be a bad swim. Any other night he would have thought of sharks. These waters were home to some frisky grey reef sharks and white tips. The occasional great hammerhead. But that was chance. Speculation. Out in front of him, in the boat, was something far more certain.

In another ten minutes he was close enough to fall below the shadow of the hull. It was possible for a casual observer to miss seeing him. Willy might come out to piss, yes. Or to look for the stranger on the other boat. But such an opportunity would work only if Wolfe was in position to take advantage of it.

He let the current carry him down the length of the boat to a one-inch pipe outlet at the stern, probably the live bait overboard dump, near the transom. It was just big enough to get a finger in and hold position and swing around to grab onto the starboard exhaust. So far so good. No waves, no splashes. But the transom seemed ten feet above the waterline. The tuna door was shut. The next step was going to be very, very dicey.

"Cuba? That's ridiculous."

Michael pulled the chart closer and ran his hand across from the northern tip of Andros. He flicked the paper. "Cay Sal. He'll go to Cay Sal and call us. Probably run down along the outer edge of the bank where the 'Stream is weaker and cut over to Damas or Anguilla. That's what I'd do."

"What are you talking about?" Hector rumpled the chart with his hand to get Michael's attention.

Michael waved his hand and lifted his chin. "You see your rendezvous, Heck? Any of your Contra dudes out there

in the marina, waiting for Willy and your boat? How come the hand-off isn't happening?"

Hector was still working on the Cuba question. "You seriously think Willy Lopez is going to make a run for Cuba. Back to the country that imprisoned him for most of his life. Why would anybody do that?"

Michael watched the future Salvadoran president grapple with something he was supposed to be in control of. "Try to figure out Willy's motives," Michael said. "You and Calvado thought it was a case of Jose and Nancy running off together. But that's dumb, Hector. They wouldn't split before payday. Willy killed them. Look, neither you nor Calvado knew anything about my little interview with ONI, right?"

Hector shook his head, preoccupied with his thoughts. Michael lowered his voice. "Neither did Shipley. I've been asking myself about that. Obviously, there's another level to the shell, here."

Michael reasoned out loud. "They never asked you and Calvado questions because they knew everything about you. They showed me pictures, they had the name of the operation. And they wanted to know if Oliver North was in on the deal. ONI picked up on this scam at the corporate level, you're just middle management, Heck. ONI's not privy to NSC operations and they resent the hell out of one of theirs getting to play with the big boys. They want to

embarrass the eagle scout. Stop me if I'm wrong on any of this."

Hector looked uncomfortable, even worried, but obviously racing to get out front of the logic. "Willy was hand-picked and protected by federal authorities. Hired as a guerilla warfare expert."

Michael started re-folding the chart. "I'm sure he's a good one. Willy had his own cops making sure he got along all right, his own keepers. FDLE has a team workin full time to facilitate this plan. Nice guys, I met them. Hygenic. This thing was coordinated by federal, state and local authorities; set-up through local Cuban groups, tied-in with several governmental services. Everybody in Washington knew about this, how could it be a clandestine operation to wash AID money to the Contras? That's the cover."

Hector looked confused. Michael tossed the chart onto the rack. "Am I wrong, Heck? Aren't you and Calvado and your sister and us all pawns? Call it Triple Fortune, I guess. The money isn't being washed by Calvado's Pan-American Initiatives for buying arms in El Salvador. The money is being washed through us to go to Castro. Willy's the Fed Ex boy. He gets immunity and Castro gets the spending money."

Hector's face was white. "How can you say that? That's absurd."

"Absurd is a good way to put it. I've been asking

myself, 'Self -- why isn't your ass in jail?' Why did Hagers and Benedict rough me up and then let me go? What was the message in the soap? It was, 'Leave!' Big time. I'm supposed to take the blame and conveniently disappear. The twelve million is supposed to be in my pocket. But it's not. Willy has it, right?"

Hector was trying to connect the dots. "If the pentagon and the NSC and the Florida cops know about our plan and do nothing to stop it, it means it's been green-lighted from the top."

"Yes, and Willy isn't just your ordinary psycho killer. He's been placed and protected by the whole organization. You can't just assume he's being the crazy and taking Mari hostage on his own accord. He wants the money. He's acting according to plan -- Shipley's plan, not yours."

"Jesus." Hector was moving from disoriented to angry in giant strides.

"The brass, Heck. Shipley, or a bunch of them. You thought the transfer was going to be in Bimini. It's not, he's heading for Cay Sal. Look at it. Almost exactly equal distance from Miami and Nassau. Closer to Cuba than anywhere else."

Hector walked five steps and turned around. He held his fingertips up to his temple. "Willy's expecting me to meet him with the money."

He pounded a rack of postcards, sending it spinning and wobbling. The clerk looked up from his magazine.

"That son of a whore Shipley did this."

Michael caught the rack. "Yep, the head coach. And then somebody pulls his string. Castro probably agrees to hold back on the next 'liberation' of immigrants in return for the money. Shipley practically told me as much, at the stadium. 'It's all about money,' he said.

"And he's right. It's a good deal, I suppose. Twelve million in direct costs would have been a bargain during Mariel. The US spent that much on Atlanta and Belle Glade Corrections alone. Chump change. Better to give the money directly to Castro. Foreign aid, right? For all we know, there's a dozen other Willies and a dozen other idiots like you and me. And Castro gets the payoff. But nobody in DC could write that check. Not Reagan, not Carter. So they use ol' Eagle Scout Ollie North. He'll catch the shit. When this hits the Washington Post it'll be us who look like traitors and assholes, not the politicians."

Hector gave the postcard spinner another twirl and sent all the lovely scenes flying all over the aisle and fluttering into a basket of dried shark jaws. Souvenirs.

The sleepy clerk pushed himself up and peered around the yellow T shirts and closed his magazine. But the white men had left.

THIRTY-TWO

Night on the Bahama Bank. Still and warm, an incubator for shrimp and fingerlings and plankton as numerous as the stars. Each one engaged in its individual struggle for life at the expense of its cribmates. Survivors of the previous day holding on for dear life through the passage of another long night.

Marisol rubbed the sticky tape residue on her wrists and raked her hands back through her tangled hair. Willy leaned one elbow on the nav station table and nestled his bottle close to his sternum like a teddybear.

"Find a candle," she said. "And something to draw with, something black, and something red."

Willy flashed a grin, then let it drop as if the momentary thought had flickered too swiftly across his eyes to catch. He pulled the rawhide thong over his head and unwrapped the contents. For the marker he looked around and rummaged through the pens and dividers and charts on the table and in the teak cabinets. Marisol pulled a low rattan chair back and cleared a space on the gray nylon

carpet of the cabin sole. It would do.

She made the sign of the cross on her body, her eyes closed, then looked up. Willy presented his short white candle. Good. And a dark red lipstick from some unknown guest on the boat, not her. She pulled open the sweaty cotton gown she had worn for two days and let it drop. She wore a white two-piece suit beneath. Good. Red would be better. A matador's cape.

"We sit here," she said, showing him the space on the carpet. "Take off your shirt, Willy. And sit. Put the candle in the middle."

He complied, lighting the candle and dripping a puddle on the carpet without hesitation, and deftly, as if he was familiar with such ritual. He set the candle in its viscid base and placed the tiny effigy next to it. Then took another short slug of rum and offered the little black-faced Santa Barbara her liquid oblation. The bottle was half gone.

Marisol asked for the marking pen he had found, a black label marker. He handed it to her. Sitting in front of her, his eyes traveled up the length of his arm to her hand and focused beyond. On her long, tawny legs. The way the triangle of cloth tucked into the crevice between her thighs and her pudendum. A hint of the cleft behind such very thin and supple fabric. The rift. There, coming up from below, so hidden, and so obvious. The seam where

women are temporarily joined in halves.

She sank to the carpet, sitting cross-legged facing him. Her face entered his view.

"You must focus on my eyes, Willy. We are going to waken the serpent. The first step is to wake him, then we are going to show him the way, up and up. Then we are going to teach him his name."

"His name?"

"Yes. Willy. You will name the serpent. Then his power will be yours. When you move, you will move like the snake. When you strike, you will strike with the speed of the snake. It is the way you are."

Willy kept his eyes on her. His gaze drifted around from lips to eyes to neck. He became aware of the glistening mounds of flesh above the bikini top. He could smell her. Her sweat. Her sex. Like vanilla and wet grass. And he felt her heat. The red luminous body of heat sitting a few inches from him.

"Take a deep breath," she said. Willy snapped his eyes back to hers. "Push your butt out and sit forward. Then sit up. Now the breath can go freely down to the second chakra where he lives. You will make the breath go down to the snake. Do this."

She put her hand on her belly below the navel and pressed gently. To direct him. "This is where he sleeps, Willy. Your snake is waiting down in here. Put your hand down on the pubic bone and push in. This is waking the

serpent. Do it."

"No. No, no." Willy shook his head. His lips spread in a wide grin. "You're a witch, you told me so, yes. In my country we burn you."

"It's tantra, Willy, not witchcraft. Tantra uses your own power, witchcraft is a power from outside you. I am not going to hypnotize you or do anything to you. You do it, you do it all."

He kept his grin, as if amused by the situation. "You're worth a lot of money to me, bruja. Lot of money. But I can snap you like a chicken bone if you start with me."

Marisol was silent, she offered no retort. He needed time to find a way to do what he wanted to do. It was up to her to make him want the snake.

"Put your hand below your navel, Willy," she said, careful to hold his eyes on hers. "You can do as you wish. Put your hand below your navel if you wish."

Willy moved slowly, as if he wasn't sure where his body was. As if the hand and the pubic bone were associated but disjointed. He watched her face as she took a deep breath. The way her chin lifted, the way her shoulders went up, her diaphragm went in.

"The air is blue," she said, "when it goes in. Take the cool blue air deep into your body. Breathe short, quick breaths to bounce the column of air a few inches.

This awakes the serpent. Yes.

"Then the air is warm and turns red. See it is red when you let it out. Do not let it rush out too quickly. Make it flow out with the same speed as it came in. Count from one to eight as you inhale; bounce the column of air for a count of eight; then let it out; one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Do it with me."

Willy watched her breathe in. He copied her. He felt the air go in cool. Saw it blue like the cool sea. He moved the air inside up and down, like she did. Breathed with her. As if they were musicians playing a flute they had swallowed. A smooth tube up and down the center of their bodies that whistled and rang as the column of air quivered up and down.

And he felt the air hot and red as he let it out. Slowly, to the count of eight. Hot and smooth, like the flow of blood from a mortal wound. Blue blood in the veins; red blood on the gray street. Blue in, red out. Round and round.

"Take the red lipstick, Willy. Mark the path upward for the snake. Draw it like this."

Marisol traced her fingers up from the top of her bikini bottom and between her breasts to the base of her throat. She saw the man's eyes widen and then react to the journey they took across her flesh. "Do it, Willy. Pick up the red marker. Draw the path for the snake."

He watched her. But when he looked at the big cones

of hard flesh sticking out on the white material across her breasts, he saw something bad. He saw his mother's big, pale teats spilling over the top of her nightgown. Her stockings rolled down to her ankles, her lipstick smeared. She put folded newspaper up under her arms to block the stains because in Cuba there were no cosmetics like that. But it did nothing to block the sweat.

When Willy looked at the place where the rubia's legs joined her body as she sat cross-legged in front of him, he saw bad things in his mind. The putas who lived in his apartment and were always around. The red rubber bags and hoses they used to wash themselves out and hung in the bathroom over the tub. The very young little whore, Mesalina, who had sores on her pussy lips before she had any hair down there. This bitch with her long blond hair, she was like them. They were all like that. Sewers of sperm and corruption.

But when Willy let his eyes stay on her eyes and the distance receded between them, the soft edges of sight encircled everything else around them. And her eyes, like his, became the only sharp things. The tunnel, the passageway from his eyes to hers became straight and smooth while all other things became blurry and far away. In those moments he saw something else.

It was the boy. His brown eyes still intact. Quick and sure. His voice was thin and sweet. His shoulders

were tanned and smooth as caramel, living out of doors all day and night. The warm air of night, the too sweet aroma of the sugar refineries. The rum like molasses in the air. Rum air, rum skin. Brown rum eyes.

He picked up the red lipstick and inspected it, twisting the base, watching the moist red wax spiral up and down like a dog's cock in its sheath. He smelled the putrid flowers in its substance, the rouge of whores and queers. The red wax was soft against his skin. It felt warm and silky. He drew the sinuous line up from his waistline to the base of his neck like she did. The stuff remained active on his skin. He continued to feel it. Like the soft flick of a thin, forked tongue.

He felt the movement in his belly. Turning, stretching, hunching back. Uncoiling. Rising.

"Now I see the look in your eyes, Willy. Now, I see the snake, don't I."

Willy felt the snake stiffen and rise. The sleep, the long sleep. "Yes," he said. He smiled.

Wolfe reached into the wetsuit jacket and took out the .45 and gave it a short flick. It was chambered and ready to pull the hammer back. But there was no way he was going to get up that transom without splashing or making a bump against the hull. The lightning on the horizon was getting closer but it could be hours before it got this far, if at all. The storm, although it could cover his movements, was

not the answer.

He rested back and let the water take most of his weight. The gun went back between his chest and the neoprene jacket. There was one possibility, the tuna door. It was low enough -- that's what it was designed for, to haul heavy marlin or tuna or whatever into the boat. But if it was latched on the inside as it was supposed to be, he was not going to get it open.

Good having fingernails. And the hand strength of a scrap iron welder. Wolfe pried the edges of his fingernails into the flush seam of the door and exerted a steady wedging motion against the hull with his thumb. The door moved a quarter inch and then slipped off his nails and went back into its thick fiberglass jamb with a dull thump. It was low and dull but the kind of noise that traveled through a boat and was felt at the other end. It was just a thump, a muffled thud. But Willy could put two points in a straight line: The strange boat anchoring too close, then an hour later, a thud. He could put two and two together.

Wolfe waited. He kept his left hand wedged into the exhaust pipe to hold on and he kept the .45 automatic with the hammer cocked back pointing up at the transom rail. If Willy was coming out to look there would be only one shot. Wolfe would have to shoot first. Or be fish in a barrel.

Nothing. Nothing on deck; no movement, no noise. But

down below, in the water at his feet, something moved. Mother Mary. Do you watch over fallen Jewish boys? Chango, king of the Bahamian sea -- is that you? If there was something down there, the tuna door would have to open. He would have to get his fingers into the crack this time and make sure it did not thump.

Willy lifted the bottle high and let the warm liquid course down his throat. He lowered the bottle and slobbered the last ounce around in his mouth, pushing a thin jet out between his teeth. His lips curled up to the side in a twisted smile. Marisol watched his eyes.

Wolfe had the .45 out ahead of everything else. He squirmed and shimmied onto the deck like a trained seal but kept his gun trained on the door to the cabin. He could see in through the smoked Lexan to the inside. Willy's back was to the door. Marisol would spot him first. If she reacted, it would set him off. If she had already seen the man, now slowly climbing to his feet, she was deliberately looking away. She kept her eyes fixed dead ahead. Focused on her captor.

Wolfe veered right and braced against the side of the cabin out of the line of sight. He scanned the pipe tower and looked forward along the side to the bow. It was assumed Willy was acting alone. There could be another on board. He was assuming the man with no shirt sitting on

the floor with Marisol was Willy. Assumptions were tricky. If lucky, you get to go back over your assumptions and sort them out. But it appeared he was alone on deck. Anyone else down below would have to be dealt with in turn. One at a time. He had six bullets, he could deal directly and abruptly with six individuals. One at a time.

Time to get in out of the burning moonlight.

Willy watched her eyes. It was the way he could keep the culebra up, its hood fanned out and stiff. It felt sweet, it was alive. In her eyes his body felt like the little boy. And the little boy grew by inches every second. Rising at last.

Any minute it would come. Any second the climax would come.

Wolfe came around to the cabin door.

Marisol's eyes flicked from Willy's eyes past his head.

Wolfe wrenched open the door with his left hand. Willy rolled to his left and swung the empty rum bottle around in a broad arc, smacking it against the side of Marisol's head in mid-swing. Wolfe leveled the .45 at the moving form on the floor. The candle fell over and went out. The cabin was now lit only by a single dome light over the galley

sink.

Wet bodies moving left and right; hot, humid air coming up. Wolfe pointed the gun and tightened his finger on the trigger. Salt water ran into his mouth.

Willy's hand continued its swinging arc as the bottle separated from his fingers. The bottle traveled the short distance from Willy's fingers to Wolfe's face in a tiny fraction of a second, striking him on the bridge of the nose and forehead.

Willy came up, Wolfe staggered back through the door. Willy snatched the thin knife from the table and brought it with him after the stranger.

Wolfe turned his head to clear his vision. Darkness and blurry light. The glare from the overhead anchor light. The moving hand, a glint of steel. He had his target. Willy braced his left hand against the stranger's wrist, his gun hand. With his other hand, the Culebra pushed his knife into the hollow beneath the stranger's sternum. It went all the way in, almost burying itself in the bone. Warm, sticky mess came gushing out. Warm and sweet sticky stuff came flowing out onto Willy's hand.

David Wolfe fired. The flash and explosion seemed like a memory. Had he remembered this? Do all cops have the same dream? The bad guy presents himself in the stark shadows of night. In your own hallway. Or in a convenience store. There are people, innocent people around. The perpetrator is without any remorse, unburdened

with any hesitation. The cop aims his weapon. His fingers close around the trigger. But he can't.

Do all cops have this dream? Was there any pain?

Wolfe went over backwards into the water. His .45 Colt automatic tumbled with him. The Cuban music carried well across the surface.

THIRTY-THREE

Michael had to admit his Cay Sal-Castro scenario was only a theory. Before Hector would accept it as plausible, he had to try reaching Wolfe. Or Willy. He and Michael went to the radio room.

It took half an hour of trying to reach the Greta and Wolfe via VHF and SSB to convince Hector it was futile.

"It's a big ocean," the radio operator said. It was a stock comment.

"Yeah. Tell me," Hector asked, "has there been any Cuban transmissions tonight? Anything in Cuban dialect?"

The young man looked up. "Are you kidding?"

"You'd recognize Cuban dialect?"

"Certainly, sir. I only log messages to or from this station but there's Cuban traffic out there all the time, all the time."

"Anything special? Anything close?"

"There's a Russian trawler, a big one, talking to a GN patrol boat. Close, too."

"Guardia national?"

"That's right. It's actually busier than usual, now that you mention it."

Michael and Hector thanked the radio operator and tipped him, then walked out along the docks to get away from the party noise and the music; no longer as concerned about catching a phone call or radio message. The over-amplified resort band was hard to get away from, as insidious as the iodine reek of fish guts on the night air. Hector was in a brittle mood.

"Willy is a professional killer, that's why he was so attractive to Calvado. That's why Shipley got him involved."

"I know the guy is some sort of political hero or something, but why is he in charge of all that money?" Hector seemed backed into a corner. His eyes looked naked without the shades. "All he had to do was crew the boat. After the transfer of money in Bimini he was to get the boat as reward. But we underestimated him. If Willy killed Nancy Fisher and planted incriminating evidence in her apartment, he's not dumb."

Michael walked along. "Maybe the cops planted it. Nothing any of us did in the last two weeks has gone unwitnessed, Heck. FDLE cops told Wolfe about me dating Marisol. You were under surveillance all the time. Add in the Navy and the FBI. Crap. Whose idea was it to write me into this plan? Yours? Or Shipley's."

They stopped at the end of the dock. Hector's plane was anchored at the edge of the light spilling off the spotlights. The harbor shuttle was putt-putting on the other side of the wharf.

"Shipley's idea. I told him about your meeting with Marisol on the bay and he ran your information to see if you were playing for the other side. He came up with Wolfe and they handled the next move. I talked Mari into it. She knew what was going on, she knew about Jose and Nancy disappearing. I think she intended to go only as far as she wanted to. As far as seeing you again. Like I said, the beginning was all spontaneous. That was the beauty of it."

Michael suppressed his next thought. Something about people like Hector and Shipley taking the beauty and whoring it to the ground.

"OK," Michael said, "We have two alternative theories here. One, Willy is a rogue and is acting alone. And two, Willy is acting out part of another plan you didn't know about. Is that about it? We can head for Pine Cay or we can head for Cay Sal. No sense waiting around here. Can you fly at night?"

"Sure, I have complete navionics on board. But I don't want to land at night, not even with a good moon."

Michael checked his watch. Eleven. The last time he was faced with killing six hours he got a cutter's punch

full of chloral hydrate. That little micky was still reverberating in his spinal column. But the idea of sleep was beyond funny. No way he was going to relax and nod off.

"What if we get there about dawn?" he asked.

Hector had already arrived at that prospect. "It's a hundred and sixty-two miles. We'll leave at 4:30 and overfly the bank. Touch down at 6:00. It will be good to be there before Willy. That is, if we can guess the right island. We could miss it. If he refueled at Pine Cay there's nothing to say he won't make contact in open ocean."

"Wrong," Michael came back. "He doesn't know he has the money. He can't make any transfers until he has it. And knows he has it. As long as he thinks you have the money, Marisol has a chance."

They looked out into the inky horizon beyond the reach of the harbor lights. "And somewhere," Hector said, "there's a unit of some kind out there waiting for their cash pickup. Probably a Cuban patrol boat. Maybe a Russian trawler."

"Maybe," Michael repeated under his breath.

Hector kicked a dried shrimp off the dock into the dark water. A slurpy commotion below indicated something was appreciative of the tidbit.

"Maybe we are the only ones with an air perspective, eh? We have the airforce. Maybe, we can throw the long

bomb."

Michael saw the twist on Hector's lip. "Very good, Heck. We'll make an American out of you yet. All-American Heck, second-string quarterback from Notre Dame. You could have a career in the military."

At ten minutes before midnight, their timetable was scrambled by another message from the Bimini operator. The message, delivered to the lobby -- no rooms were available -- came in from Miami, from Hector's contact at Yardley Marina. It told of an emergency beacon emitting from a bearing 110 degrees relative to their current location. Pine Cay or somewhere on a straight line between Bimini and the northern tip of Andros. The EPIRB -- Emergency Position Indicating Rescue Beacon -- was designed to alert high-flying commercial and military planes to a boat or plane in trouble. The beacon would float and begin transmitting automatically if the vessel sank. It did not guarantee anybody being alive.

Nor, in this case, did it necessarily mean the emergency beacon was coming from Wolfe. It could have been any wayward craft in trouble.

But it was too much to ignore. Hector revised his appraisal of night landings. They woke up the fuel lighter and topped off the plane, then bought an inflatable raft satchel in case Wolfe was actually in the water. Or in

case they found some other hapless son of a bitch who needed help. They could assist. But the plane would not carry three people. The CO2 inflatable life raft came packed in a nylon case the size of a medium suitcase and virtually filled the space behind the seats. Michael bought an arm load of sandwiches and sodas, thinking of just how ill-prepared they had actually launched off on this drill. He was running on cold pizza and coffee.

The neoprene wetsuit had kept Wolfe afloat with his face just high enough to give him air. For most of an hour he watched the stars and took in short sips of air through his lips and kicked back toward the red Baja. Wolfe's nose was broken and swollen shut, his eyes burned from salt water. Only part of a lung would draw air. But the knife that rose up out of the water with every inhalation and sank again with a sizzle of escaping air probably plugged the hole in his chest and allowed him another miserable few minutes of life. Enough to climb back on the Katana and trip the radio beacon.

It was cold out of the water. He shivered and threw up a quart of dark pulpy blood. But it was better on board. At least he would have the honor of a quiet, peaceful death. No disemboweling sharks. Life had its little rewards.

It was hard not losing it. It was extremely difficult to maintain a positive attitude under the circumstances.

The circumstances of failure. Nine years ago, on a night like this, he had been an eager young cop working extra duty at the Presidential compound on Key Biscayne. Smoking and joking with the German brain trust, Erhlichman and Haldeman. Holding the door for Nixon's inner cadre. Bebe Rebozo and Robert Vesco, to name a few. Like with Mikey, it all started with being in a certain place at a certain time. And taking the bait when the recruiters made him a pitch.

Mikey, what the fuck have I done? Mikey? You hear me?

The Cuban radio station was off the air. The night was still. Wolfe heard the twin turbo diesels of the big Hatteras fire up and roar off. The slimeball was ramming straight across the coral reefs and sandbanks in the dead of night.

So now he was alone with the stars, finding it hard to fight off the waves of shock without company.

Fifteen minutes out, after a take-off into blackness, Hector got word over the radio that satellite receptions of the emergency beacon had triangulated and fixed the location. It was the channel between Pine Cay and Andros. Other boats were making for the spot, boats from Nicholls Town.

When the plane arrived, the shore was dark but the

channel was sprinkled with a collection of fishing boats and pleasure craft. Hector landed with the boat lights as a reference to where the water's surface was and taxied in close.

A Mako 21 gave them a ride to the Baja. The Bahamian thought Hector was the doctor who had been called. The man on the red boat was gravely hurt, he said. Michael didn't know it was Wolfe until they saw him.

The deck was slick with blood. The orange EPIRB canister was rolling around, still clicking and flashing its red strobe. Two fishermen had a blanket over Wolfe. He looked as pale as the moon. Michael knelt down close.

"What it is, Bro."

Wolfe looked up with hooded, tired eyes. Michael folded down the blanket and saw the stainless steel knife handle sticking out of his friend's chest, encased in a mound of jellied blood. Wolfe was dead.

Dawn was visible early from five thousand feet. Hector took a long route around the Cay Sal Bank, a remote oolitic limestone bank about midway between Florida and Matanzas province in Cuba, but part of the Bahamas. Visible in the early light in addition to the islands and limestone rocks, the blue holes looked like deep purple bomb craters in the turquoise sandy bank, the big ones a couple hundred yards across. The old Bahamian fishermen

swear they have no bottom, that they are all connected in their depths. They say boats are swallowed down into them sometimes when the tide rushes out and the water swirls down like a giant toilet being flushed. When the behemoth yawns open its gaping mouth.

It was a quiet journey. The delicate beauty of first light coming up out of a thin purple glow in the east contrasted painfully with the realization of its finality. Some sun-ups are the last. The sun always comes up. But Wolfe didn't get this one. The sculptor, the one who rubbed his hands over a piece of chrome steel and made a woman, would miss this sight. And the next one, and the next.

In his silence, with the thin patina of dawn reflected on his face, Hector Luna knew his war was very specific. Like Michael, who now had one. A personal war. It was not a battle of ideas, or nations. For the pawns, it never is.

Several boats were spotted on the bank, most in the vicinity of Damas, Anguilla and Muertos Cays. One near Dog Rocks. Hector buzzed them all.

"Looks like the Air Force is early," Michael said. He pulled open a warm Coke and offered Hector one. He declined. Michael ate a stale sandwich.

"I think we should split up," he said.

"What's the plan?"

"No plan. But if he's watching one of us, the other

may have a shot."

"Michael, we bargain for Mari's life. Nothing else. The plan is we contact him face to face and negotiate. No John Wayne shit."

Michael stared out the side window. "I'm going to get him, Heck."

"We're going to get Mari. Once we have him spotted, that is. There's a lot of water down there."

Michael reached between the seats and pulled the handheld VHF radio out of his bag. He pulled out the antenna and turned it on to channel 16.

Hector watched. Michael began calling the Greta and then called for Willy Lopez. No answer. Then he lit on another tack.

"Any vessel, any vessel. This is -- " he looked on the wing and read out the number -- "N-50567 over Damas Cay. I'm looking for a fifty-five foot Hatteras sportsfisherman, Greta, out of Miami. Vessel is stolen. There is an immediate ten thousand dollar reward for the boat who spots this vessel. Repeat: Ten thousand dollars to the person who spots the boat. Hatteras fifty-five out of Miami, the Greta. Over."

Hector was unfazed. "That should do it," he said.

"Now we have a navy."

"If he's down there."

The VHF began to crackle with boaters breaking in on each other trying to get confirmation. Michael repeated

the description and the reward. Hector flew in a broad triangle over the bank at a thousand feet, keeping one eye on the gas gauge and another on the horizon. Then the call came in from two different spots. The Hatteras was spotted off Dog Rocks and Anguilla Cay. The first, the landfall closest to Andros and Pine Cay; the second, closest to the Cuban coast. But almost fifty miles apart.

The first claimant, a woman on a dive boat named DownTime, won the decision when she said there was a woman and an ugly dude on the flybridge. Hector banked over and headed for Anguilla Cay.

THIRTY-FOUR

Michael reached behind him and took the 9mm automatic out of his waistband, checked the clip again, and put it back. His desultory ignorance of guns was gone and replaced by the look in Wolfe's dead eyes. So tired, so disaappointed to be dead. The feel of the gun began to satisfy the urge to pull the gooey knife out of his friend's once proud chest and stick it in Willy's face up to the hilt. The fit of the gun in his palm made the prospect attractive.

Hector nudged the throttle out another quarter inch and lost some altitude to gain speed. The sun was up and the water was flashing silver when they crossed the easterly heading. It was going to be a bright and hot autumn day, the first day of November.

A cluster of boats appeared on the edge of blue water three miles off Anguilla Cay. Hector swooped in close enough to spot the Greta by her transom lettering.

"They're both on the flybridge, Hector. She's alive. That's the dive boat, the big one."

Hector veered off and turned into the wind for his landing. The surface was almost invisible but the touch was smooth. They coasted to a stop and nosed up to the stern of DownTime. The Greta was ahead of her. A husky woman in her fifties threw Michael a rope and pulled the plane in. They stepped aboard.

She shook hands. "Charlotte Wicks, 4950 Bonefish Way, Tavernier, Florida. Is that the vessel?"

She pointed forward to the Hatteras. Charlotte was covered with freckles and bulky muscle. She wore zinc oxide on her lips and nose. Willy and Marisol were standing on the flybridge, watching all the fuss. Silent, unmoving. For a long instant Michael entertained the idea the bastard had killed her and tied her to the railing with a board lashed to her back.

"That's the boat," he said, looking back at the dive captain. Michael pulled the three-inch roll of hundreds out of his pocket and handed it to her. It still had the paper Solar Bank band on it.

"Count it later. Get on the horn and get these other boats away from here. And keep all your people aft."

Charlotte put the cash into her tank top between prodigious bosoms. "Aye-aye. It's your cruise, mister."

A dozen assorted SCUBA enthusiasts stood back in the open cabin, watching. The DownTime looked like a converted aluminum crew boat, a medium-range dive boat out of the Keys. The divers looked annoyed. But unwilling to debate

priorities with her nibs. Charlotte keyed the PA and shooed off the small flotilla of second-place non-winners. They pulled back a few hundred feet, circled and bobbed.

"He was idling off plane when I spotted him," Charlotte said. "And when I veered over to him he actually waved. He looks confused. Looked like he was expecting somebody. Then I saw the girl, I knew we had the boat. She don't look happy."

Michael looked along the length of the dive boat to the Greta and the two figures on the flybridge. He looked back at the dive captain. "You did good."

"Roger that."

Roger. For the first time, Michael suddenly realized he might die. He was looking at this whole deal like a rational man. Things were not rational. People were dying.

Time to settle up with the ugly dude.

Willy was watching the chaotic action without apparent concern. The tantric episode with Marisol had sapped him more than the brief, spasmodic violence. He stood on the roof of the cabin, at the very back of the flybridge, outside the steel railing. Behind him, standing just inside the railing, Marisol remained equally still and seemingly poised. But her posture was not her own choosing. Still in her white bikini, her eyes were dull

and sleepless; her expression inert. Streaks of sweat stained her cheeks and a dried smear of blood on her temple caked into her hair. A bruise was coming up on her cheek bone.

Michael came forward on the dive boat lugging a nylon suitcase. The bow rose up six feet over the stern quarter of the Hatteras where Charlotte had pulled up close. She had lassoed her boat to the Greta with a line around the fighting chair -- an act of piracy by the book. Willy watched. He lifted a boning knife to Marisol's neck. Everybody else was back out of sight.

"Willy," Michael called out, straining to see the man clearly against the bright sky. "I've got your money, Willy. The deal is simple; I throw it on board, you let her go."

Willy took his time. "These people all your friends? They came to help you? How nice. Nice to have friends like that."

Michael dragged the suitcase to the bow rail. "I can throw the money on the deck and you can let her jump into the water. OK? You OK, Mari?"

Marisol did not answer. She moved her head slightly in response. Michael realized her mouth was taped. Why was she behind him? Willy held her arm and held the knife at his shoulder to threaten her neck, as if protecting her body with his own.

"Nothing like friends, eh?" Willy said. "To help you out in a time like this. Don't you think? Or did you pay them. You paid them, didn't you."

Michael squinted and adjusted his eyes to the glare. Marisol's legs were together, her hands unmoving. Bands of gray went around her calves and wrists. She was taped to the back railing of the flybridge like Joan of Arc to the rick. The asshole was playing his bait.

"OK, what do you want to do, Willy? It's your game. You call the shots. Name it. What do you want?"

Willy smiled.

Behind Michael, in the pilot house of the dive boat, Charlotte and two of her charters were shouting at each other about intentions and delays and who gets what. More lawyers.

A rolling, thin noise came high overhead and split the morning stillness. The air shattered with the blast of a low-flying jet fighter streaking across the water. The roar was deafening.

Michael squatted and turned to follow the plane as it shot up and came back, rolling rightside up and pointing at the cluster of boats. The next pass was lower and directly overhead, close enough to feel the hot exhaust.

Charlotte Wicks shouted to Michael through the front window of the pilothouse. "That's a MiG-25, my friend. Something like that. It's the Cuban Defense Force. I'm leaving."

One of the smaller dive boats on the periphery of the flotilla made a big deal of cranking up and churning away at full speed. Another one wheeled and went the other way.

"He won't shoot! What are you worried about?" Michael said over his shoulder, still trying to keep his eye on Willy. "Trust me, he won't shoot."

"On or off, pal," Charlotte said. "I found your boat. Now I'm leaving. On or off."

"Wait. I'll double that. Give me five minutes."

Charlotte ducked back inside to think it over. Another pass by the MiG would probably tip the balance. Michael edged the bag halfway through the rail and put one leg over.

"I don't give a shit what you do with this, Willy. Keep it. Take the boat, the money, everything. Go to Cuba, go back to Andros. Go to Brazil. Yeah, that's my advice."

"Let me see the money," Willy said. "Bring it closer. Bring it to me."

Michael put his other leg over the rail. It was a long jump. And he didn't want to let the money get ahead of him -- what Willy thought was the money.

"I'm gonna untie, pal," Charlotte said. "Time's up."

"OK, just a minute. Throw that bag over when I get on board."

She didn't look happy about it but wanted to get it

done. Michael climbed down and dropped onto the stern of the Greta. Charlotte hefted the bag and swung it down.

"Good doing business with ya," she said, bending down to push through the thick nylon line at the chock. She gave Michael a quick wink.

"Open the bag," Willy said.

Michael looked up. "Sure. It's your money. But I need something in return for the look. Let her talk. Let me hear from her. How do I know she isn't hurt?"

"She's fine. Open up, let me see."

"Fine." Michael knelt down and pulled the zipper a few inches to one side. The CO2 mechanism was blocked from Willy's sight. Michael stopped and looked up. "Take off the tape. Let her tell me she's OK."

Willy leaned his head to the side. Michael could see him clearer. He had a red line drawn on his belly; a wavy red lipstick line coming up from the beltline of his khaki pants to his neck. Two lines in smeared black ink circled his nipples.

"What are you afraid of?" Willy said. "You're scared. What you got to be scared of? I can smell it from here. You're pissing in your pants, ain't you."

"Take off her tape, Willy. Let me talk to her."

"You got the gun, I ain't got no gun. You see any guns up here?"

Willy waved the knife carelessly. Then he reached back and grabbed the railing to steady himself. Michael

ran his eyes from Willy to the railing and to Marisol. She had not moved. She kept her eyes on him, on Michael.

"We take turns, Willy. You cut her loose; I open the bag. You have to meet me halfway. Come on. That's the way we do it."

Willy looked weak, he closed his eyes and one knee buckled. The red line, the black circles -- it meant some crazy shit during the night. Michael was sickened by the thought of Willy holding sway over Marisol, using her in some perverse game. But she looked relatively unhurt. She looked no worse off than her captor. She had used the long night to soften him for the eventual confrontation. Marisol, the heiress, had expertly planted some sort of dart in the bull.

Willy teetered and caught himself. Michael saw Marisol's head move when he jerked back. It became obvious now. Willy had himself tied to her. A length of outrigger chord was looped around his neck and hers. He had her rigged so she would be strangled if he was shot. His fall would hang them both.

Michael turned around. The dive boat was gone. The other boats had pulled back a half mile and most were gone. The seaplane was drifting a few yards back.

"You have her tied up like a wahoo," Michael said, said it loud. "Very clever boy. I see what you did."

Willy smiled.

"Rope from her neck to yours. I get it. Very clever, these Marielito bung-hole fuckers."

Willy's smile dropped.

Michael came to the base of the flybridge ladder. Willy's feet were overhead and a yard to the right. Michael put one hand on the ladder. A fall would still snap her neck before he could catch either of them.

"The money's yours, asshole. Now let the girl go."

Willy reached up and jerked the chord, making Marisol's head jerk toward his. "I don't care, you know?" He put his hand on her neck and massaged her throat, playing with the soft tissue. He dragged his hand down to her breast and inside the halter.

"It's just meat, you know? Fucking woman, she's fucking evil. Got this, this way of making a man suck up like a dog. I was you, man, I'd be gone. You go to Cuba, You go to fucking Rio Brazil. This cunt ain't worth no million dollars, man."

Michael watched her eyes. They kept a line between them as taut as the chord around her neck. She had no tears in her eyes.

"Million, Willy? Is that what they told you? A million?"

Michael put one hand on the ladder and pulled himself up a rung.

Willy laughed. "Don't bother, man. No, man, you can't do that. I know it's twelve million dollars. Don't

think you can get me with that. This shit is handled, mojon. You saw that plane, man."

Michael heard a rasping noise; a ripping, hissing. For an instant he thought it was the plane again, just breaking out of the sun. But the ratchety, scratchy sound was not coming from the air. He looked back and the nylon satchel popped open with a bang and a whoosh, inflating itself half-way in a second. He and Willy watched it swell open and take shape on the deck. So much for the suitcase full of money.

Michael pulled the automatic out of the small of his back and leveled it on Willy. He tried to keep it from shaking. Willy pressed himself against his hostage and jerked the knife up to her throat.

"You lie to me, you pissing dog." Willy sputtered with anger. "Where's my money? Where is it? I going to cut her open for that, I don't care. I don't fucking care, man. You lying piece of shit!"

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" Michael squeezed the gun in both hands and then switched it to steady himself on the ladder.

A flush of heat came up on his neck and cheeks, a film of red descended over his eyes. He wondered if he would shoot, wondered why the gun had not already gone off. Blood pounded in his ears and in his fingers wrapped around the gun. The hot cloud of rage came up to his temples. He

could shoot the goddamn gun by pulse alone.

"Now step back over the railing, Willy. Hear? I don't care either. You killed Wolfe, that's why I'm gonna kill you. I don't care. Fuck the money, fuck the girl. Fuck you."

Willy's face twisted up. "Go ahead! Do it. Shoot! You go ahead. Fuck yourself, man! Fuck you!"

Michael pulled himself up another rung. Willy lifted both arms out wide and lifted his chin, daring Michael to shoot him. Marisol was holding her captor in balance with her neck.

"The money's on the boat, Willy," Michael said, speaking to him quietly now. Easing them both down from the geyser of adrenalin foaming in their veins. "It's here all along."

Willy looked down at him. His face looked calm, even relaxed. "No it's not. Your friend Hector lied to both of us, gringo. There's no money on this boat."

Michael tried to refute him but choked for lack of any ideas. Hector lied: No he didn't, yes he did. What evidence was there? How could he look at this crazy idiot and feel any better, any closer to the truth?

Willy saw it all over the gringo's face. He smiled at the man with the gun. "It's OK, though, man. I don't want the money. Me and my baby here are going away."

Willy looked at Marisol. "You like Brazil, senorita? How 'bout going to hell with Willy? Eh? You decide, OK?"

Brazil, hell; hell, Brazil."

He looked back at Michael, a faint smile fading on his lips. "I don't get the reward, amigo. Neither do you."

"No, you're wrong, Willy. You get the boat, you get to take off outta here. Free as a bird. I got money, it's all yours."

Willy stared down, shook his head slowly. "No," he said, "No free, no money."

Willy lifted his arms again, spread them out wide and lifted his face to the sky. "The culebra is ready now," he shouted. He looked up at the bright sky, his arms and fingers reaching out for the horizon. The knife dangled in his outstretched fingers.

"Now I'm ready, man. Madre de Dios me absolva, Cristo me absolva."

Michael stepped up, waving his hand. "Wait! Wait a minute, goddammit. I'll show you where the money is. It's right here on the boat, give me a goddamn minute."

Willy lowered his arms and looked down. "You know I am not a thief. You know that."

Michael squinted back at him. Willy's knees were within arm's reach. "Yeah. Yeah, Willy, I figured that out. You just did your job. You're just the middle man."

"So where's he put it? Where is it? You get it and we'll split it."

Willy grinned. Michael rested back on a lower rung.

He looked down and wiped away a bead of sweat.

"Mami, ya venga" Willy said quietly.

When Michael looked up, Willy had his hands and arms outstretched again, extending his neck and chin to the sky. His black, stringy hair separated in a breeze and blew across his face. He looked like he was going to do the swan dive.

Michael put his hands out to push Willy's legs. "Now! Hector! Now!"

A thump. Willy twitched. A red shaft erupted from his chest, at the top of the wavy red line. Blood spattered outward with the force of the missile.

From the front of the cabin top, Hector yanked back on the line. The spear slid back against Willy's collarbone and wedged there with the spring barb open to hold it. Willy slammed back against the railing. Michael jumped up the remaining rungs and grappled with the body, pinning him upright.

"I got him," he called to Hector. Michael hauled back on the chord around Willy's neck and bent his head back. Blood poured from the wound and soaked down the front of his body into his pants.

Hector kept the tension on his line, the spear gun clattered to the deck at his feet. He wrapped the line around the handrail at the front of the flybridge, pulling a loop up into a knot, then climbed over the windscreen onto the top. With a bait knife from a side locker, Hector

cut the chord holding Marisol to the killer. She let her head fall forward and rest on Michael's shoulder as her brother cut through the duct tape holding her to the railing.

Willy was trussed up, his head bent back with the spear sticking out of his back. Gazing at the sky like an ugly St. Sebastian.

THIRTY-FIVE

Marisol stretched out on the floral sofa in the cabin. She was dehydrated and exhausted but unhurt. Michael looked around the cabin, at the circle and the burn on the carpet. Ripped up packages of shrimp and shredded cushions were everywhere. Hector stood in the open door, still dripping salt water.

"Was he right?" Michael said. "Is the money on the boat?"

Hector rubbed his hand down over his face and flicked off a splash of brine. He turned around. "Come here," he said, stepping out onto the deck. Michael followed.

Hector knelt down and used one finger to pull up a flush-mounted D ring in a stainless steel fixture on a small hatch. With the ring he hauled up the three-foot square of teak boards and laid it aside. Michael squatted opposite him and looked down into the hole. Hector unscrewed a six-inch threaded circle in the fuel tank.

"You were right to think about where they stopped, Michael," Hector said. "Fuel was an unknown factor."

When the metal plug came off, Hector put his fingers inside the aluminum tank and found a string. When he pulled, a white PVC tube bobbed up into the hole. He took it out and two more of the same took its place. He and Michael stood up.

Hector handed the tube to Michael. It was capped and sealed on both ends.

"Forty-four of those," Hector said. He wiped the deisel fuel on his pants. "He was sixty gallons low on fuel but the gauge never showed it."

Hector took the canister and tossed it in the hatch where it rattled to the bottom of the bilges. Michael went back into the cabin. Marisol nursed a paper cup to her lips. He watched her. "You knew it was there all along," he said.

She nodded. "Of course," she said.

Michael pulled open the refrigerator and took out a jug of orange juice. "Mari the Dragon Lady, Mari-Hara the Salvadoran Freedom Fighter."

She looked at him, lowering the cup. Her cheek was bruised and the tape had irritated her mouth. But her eyes were unsullied, unaffected. "You sound like my brother now," she said.

"I never wanted to be your brother."

"And I never wanted you to take the deal. I wanted you to say no."

"Oh, good. Now you're Nancy Reagan. 'Just say no.' You know, you have a future in the theatre. You could do character studies, one-woman shows."

She turned her head.

Hector called him on deck. Charlotte Wicks and the dive boat was coming alongside. Hector's plane was in tow. Charlotte and Michael tied up with fenders between the boats. Hector went on board the DownTime to secure the plane.

"I decided you can keep your money," Wicks said, handing Michael the roll of bills. "I took out a hundred for the spear gun. Doesn't belong to me."

Michael took the money and gave it back. "It's yours. Give it to charity."

"OK."

She looked up at the dead turkey in the rigging. "Bad karma, you know. Bad money."

Michael looked at Willy. Willy continued to look for God.

"Real reason I came back is to warn you," Charlotte said, talking to Hector as he came forward with the plane on a long rope, leading it and pushing the wingtip back. A couple of the divers were helping him wrangle.

"There's a blip on my radar," Charlotte continued. "I bet that MiG has something to do with it. Coming this way fast. Could be the Bahamian customs boat, could be the Coast Guard. But I bet it's the Cuban Defense Force."

Michael looked out at the horizon. "Where away?"

Charlotte shaded her eyes with her hands. "Just about 240 degrees true, in blue water."

"That's Willy's contact," Hector said. "We intercepted him before he got to the rendezvous. They want their delivery."

Charlotte looked back and forth between the men. Marisol stepped out of the cabin. "Well, it's been real," Charlotte said. "I'm gone for good."

She shook hands with Michael and Hector, gave a cursory salute to Marisol. Then thought about it. "You all right, Miss?"

Marisol smiled. "Yes, thank you."

Charlotte was convinced she was, gave her the sister-to-sister chance to sound an alarm. Charlotte looked around once more and stepped back on her own boat.

As the DownTime backed away and turned, the SCUBA divers all stood watching like yardbirds. Marisol waved good-bye and a woman waved back.

Hector brushed off his hands and wiped a bead of sweat off his brow. "Mari, get your things."

She took a moment. He changed his tone. "Whatever you can carry," he said. "Put it in a bag."

She went in. Hector and Michael waited on deck. Michael looked out west southwest at a dot on the horizon. Marisol came back on deck with a canvas bag. She had her

sacraments, the red lacquer chest was too big.

"Give me a hand with this," Hector said. He pulled up one of the large engine hatches.

"That's a lot of taxpayers down there, Hector. Hate to see it go to waste."

Hector stepped down into the bilges and reached around the starboard tank. "It won't. Not at all. 'Legal tender.'"

Michael watched Hector working on something. Then he got the smell of diesel fuel. Hector came back up with a short length of black rubber hose in his hand.

The two men looked at each other and at the hose. Hector tossed it into the bilge and wiped his hands again. They stepped under the overhang.

Michael looked at the horizon, looked at Marisol. Time was on a pinpoint, time was almost gone.

"Marisol," he said. She kept her eyes on his. He tried to figure out his next word. What is it you want, Mr. Hayden? What do you want to happen?

"Come up front a minute," she said, stepping up on the side, leading him along the cabin to the foredeck. Michael followed.

"We're leaving," Hector said, loud and clear.

Marisol and Michael stood face to face in front of the cabin, one hand on the flybridge for stability. "We have matching bruises," she said, forcing a smile.

"Yeah. Mari. . ."

"When you call me that, I don't hear you, I hear my brother. My uncle. When you called me Marisol I was the girl with the moon on the water."

Michael was halfway between ridicule of her naivete, of her princess affectation, and admiration for her faith. Through it all, she was beautiful.

"What happened last night?" he asked. He immediately wanted to take it back, not at all sure he wanted to hear.

"Your friend died trying to save me."

"I know. We found him."

"Good. I'm glad of that."

They both looked at Willy who looked still alive, in some demented S&M obsession, some bondage act.

"This one had a lot to atone for," Marisol said. She brushed her hair away from her face. "Seeking absolution of his sins."

Michael eyed her askance. "You know, your accent got increasingly better as time went along. Your English. Do you realize that?"

She laughed self-consciously.

Hector called out from the stern, more insistent than before. "That patrol boat is getting closer, Mari. Let's go."

The edge to 'Mari' was very obvious now. Michael and Marisol smiled at the big brother voice.

"Look, Marisol, I have to appologize for something.

Back there, when I had the gun on Willy. I said some things. I said I didn't care. . ."

She put her hand to his mouth, like she had that evening on the balcony. A gentle kiss of her fingers to his lips. "No. It will take me a long time to understand everything that has happened between us, Michael. I cannot answer now, you musn't try to explain."

He took her hand and brought the fingertips back to his lips, let the skin speak across the space between them where words could not go. He held her hand to his chest.

"I understand some of it," he said. "Like blood is thicker than Brazilian lime-ade. Like blond Latinas. Who to trust, and how far."

Hector boomed out another urgent warning. Michael turned to look. The patrol boat was getting larger.

"OK, you've got to go," Michael said. He let her hand down but held on.

"Miko, you understand, though. You know I had to do it that way."

Her eyes looked tired, wet and glistening. "Yeah, I understand," he said. "Just playing your position. Doing your job."

He led her to the walkway beside the cabin and helped her down to the deck.

"Sorry I can't carry you," Hector said. He had assembled a cluster of boat equipment at his feet; binocks, flare kit, handheld radio. And Michael's supply of stale

sandwiches. He put Marisol's canvas bag on the transom and pulled in on the tether. The plane nosed in close.

Michael put his hands in his back pockets. "I'll get a ride." He looked around. It was a mile to the island. "I have this raft. I'm sure there'll be a boat along soon."

Hector looked back over the plane. There were a few small boats anchored near the island. "Sorry about your friend," he said. Michael saw Wolfe's staring, disinterested eyes.

"Yeah."

Hector reached down and picked up the flare gun. He put it in Michael's hand.

There was no parting kiss. Marisol climbed into the plane and stowed her bag behind the seats. She had her big sunglasses on. Hector untied and got in. Michael pushed the plane off with his foot and it drifted back with Hector holding open the big door.

Her lips moved as the plane turned. 'Bye,' she said.

Then Hector craned his head out one last moment. "Do you want me to do it?"

"No, no problem," Michael said, raising his hand.

Hector put the door down and cranked the propeller. The engine caught and roared to life. Michael pushed the rubber raft overboard. Marisol and Hector were silhouettes behind the tinted Plexiglas.

Michael lifted the orange plastic flare gun in salute. Then he took aim and shot into the hatch. He opened the gun, reloaded from a clip holder on the top and fired another one into the cabin door. The diesel fuel flashed up and started a good, black smoke and fire.

He went over the side into the raft and pushed away from the Hatteras. One flare left. But the Greta was 'fully involved,' as they say. Save the last flare for rescue purposes. One of those dive boats or fishing boats by the island would see the fire. Then he'd lob a flare up.

The approaching patrol boat was now a good deal more than a dot on the horizon. And it was making smoke, coming full-bore. Not likely US Coast Guard, definitely not the Bahamian Customs boat.

Willy looked like an elaborate figurehead carved by some tortured and lonely Spanish sailor of the last century. The agony of Sebastiano, the perdition of Calaban. Oily black smoke boiled up around him from the cabin door, orange flames licked at the windows. The money was going to good use.

Some CIA junior exec or some Pentagon brigadier would have to explain this to the brass. Some government nebbish would have twelve point one million dollars deducted from his pay.

Or tall, wily Gen. Shipley, survivor that he was, would insist the money was turned over to Castro and the

old fart was lying about the fire.

Right now it was a contest of who got here first; the Cuban patrol boat or one of the outboards that had seen the fire and was coming half a mile away. Bet on the outboards.

THIRTY-SIX

Guy meets a girl and takes a deal with her brother which turns out to be a setup. He does twenty-three hours and forty-five minutes in federal detention, batting his eyelashes and claiming confusion. Walks on habeas corpus. He gets to keep about forty thousand bucks when it all wraps up. Which goes to the lawyers.

There is no indictment. No arrest record. His previous legal bullshit problems, which don't seem too serious anymore, clear up. All a misunderstanding. The car is repossessed. He gets a postcard from India a month later. Unsigned. With a picture of two snakes loosely wrapped around each other on a field of red.

For her the guy harbors no recriminations, only longing. Like she said, it would take a very long time to sort out all that happened between them.

Her yoga worked. For that, she goes into his personal record with the calendar of Marilyn Monroe which hung by the phone in Gillespie's Garage and that scene in Boy on a Dolphin where Sophia Loren comes up out of the water.

Icons of sexuality. He is finally over his divorce. Not that simple, yeah-yeah. Nothing ever is.

It worked on Willy, too. Whatever took place that night on the Bahama Bank changed a professional killer into a sodden mass of guilt and desire for oblivion. The Willy that met his maker on the railing of the Hatteras fifty-five that morning was only a remnant of the Willy that stalked this whole transaction in the shadows. She softened him up, she did her job.

So did Michael. A kid he backed was turning into one of the year's biggest Latin crossover hits. Good kid, nice voice. Changes his name back from Jon to Juan. He signs with Emilio Estefan.

But the Guy still has his sailboat. The meaning of all this is clear: he must change the name. How about Mar y Sol. Too obvious. Lobo, in honor of an old friend. Double Fortune? Too cryptic. Penny Lane has that dated, Carnaby Street naivete that has to go. Too 60s.

Michael cranked the starboard jib winch and flattened her down a touch. The boat responded with another degree of heel. She gave those smooth little gurgling sounds from the stern wake that sailors associate with speed and happiness.

Wolfe used to say getting fired from the Miami Police was the best thing that ever happened to him. Michael saw that as a statement of liberation, of un-pent creativity.

Now he knew there was more to the story than that, more than he would ever know. It's just the acceptable margin of ruination the brass hats and pencil-necks take for granted in their day to day interference with American lives. Like A-bomb tests and shit. Always an allowance for human waste. Wolfe did eventually get clean.

With every molecule of saltwater that rolled and skidded past the gelcoat hull the residual river slime and grunge was that much eroded away. It would take years of sliding through clean water to wear away the grime of the last few weeks. Michael had her berthed at the Miami Beach marina, away from the oily effluents of the river.

He left the Miami channel marker behind and kept open ocean in view. It was always tempting to keep on going, keep on into the blue water. The Gulfstream always beckoned.

Michael reached into his pocket and draped the chain on the binnacle, the medallion swayed down like a plumb bob away from the stanchion. The twin snakes twisted around and around, glinting sunlight off their opposite sides. Penny juttred into the waves like a filly into the bit, feeling not for the bottom but for the open sea.