

**LAST OF THE
GOOD GUYS**

**LAST OF THE
GOOD GUYS**

MARK IRWIN

Copyright 2008 by Mark Irwin

All rights Reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the author or publisher. There is one exception. Brief passages may be quoted in articles or reviews.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Irwin, Mark, 1944-

Last of the good guys / Mark Irwin.

ISBN 978-1-926582-04-7

I. Title.

PS8617.R87L37 2008

C813'.6

C2008-907141-7

Dedication

LCDR WB IRWIN MMM CD

CHAPTER ONE

Shipside

A Bayou In Southeast Louisiana

Early Monday Evening

Bobby identified the second shot from the here and now, the first staying webbed into his dream.

He knew without pleasure what the gunshots meant. Though he hadn't known Howie more than a couple of days, he had become predictable. The lunacy of the disconnected.

He pushed the tarp from his head and realized it was still daylight, with the sun backing decisively into evening. Uncomfortably covered with two days of sweat and grime he headed astern without thinking about it. Slowly, getting his legs under him, he moved in favor of the aches in his body. He hoped that everything would take care of itself by the time he got there.

When he got to the aft quarterdeck he found Gomez sitting where he'd slept. Their eyes met and Bobby saw without speaking that Gomez didn't want to know, didn't need the involvement.

"Let's go, Gomez!"

"No, amigo." Gomez's flat words and anchored posture made his statement. "Demasiados problemas, Bubby."

The dull echo of a ricochet and partially muffled wail mingled abrupt and abrasive through the aft hatchway. Both followed by the cacophony of a ranting Howie, the content unknown but the perspective obvious.

Gomez's eyes again connected with Bobby's, his face drawn tired from the labor of years and the immediate concern. Bobby didn't bother to ask him again. He stepped over the entrance edge and headed below, alone. The fading evening light moved him into dim silhouettes quickly. Crossing the steel grating slowly, Bobby gave his eyes time to adjust to the light, not looking to startle anyone. He called Howie's name and heard a bullet ricochet a response.

He found himself on his belly across the grating before he actually thought of doing it. Instinctively silent, he waited. He heard nothing and rose cautiously to his knees, still crouched low across the walkway. He peered through the grating into the darkness below and saw nothing. "Howie!" He shouted into the silence, maintaining the crouch.

Behind it all, Bobby thought he heard an obscure and unspecific undercurrent of sound, like distant night noise. Several seconds passed before Howie's coarse, "Get the fuck down here!"

Bobby heard it and obeyed, questioning his wisdom. "I'm coming down, Howie!" He stayed loud, having no plans to invest in a panicked bullet. "Relax!"

"Get the fuck down here!"

It took time. *The Lady* stood three decks deep and

making his way to the engine room involved effort, care, and energy. He stopped at the watertight door, one of the ones they'd closed badly, an ineffective piece of fakery. Probably one of the first failings Forster'd noticed. Maybe the one that had got him the trouble.

"Howie?" It's a question, a soft one.

Silence. "You alone?" Howie's voice came through worried and strained.

"Yeah," Bobby said. Who did Howie think he might've brought with him? The cops? God? He answered with apprehension in his voice. "I'm alone." He thought about the doors on those quiz shows, a prize behind every one. He had the strangest thoughts at the strangest times. He needed to laugh and thought it might be tasteless. "I'm coming in." He saved the laugh for a more appropriate moment. "Okay?" There was no response. Bobby steeled himself and stepped through the open watertight door.

He saw Robert Forster immediately, on the far side of the engine room on his back, floating on the sludge, half submerged, eyes glazed, soft moans issuing from his unmoving body. The fouled water at his chest carried a red tinge. Bobby figured the wrong man bought it, hadn't realized until then that he had a favourite, a stranger. He couldn't see Howie. That worried him.

He stepped off the catwalk and went knee-deep into the tainted water, stepping and slipping across to the dying man. He was drawn to him for no obvious reason, maybe no more than misery

and company. Forster let out a muted murmur as Bobby put his arms under his shoulders, lifted him a little out of the water and dragged him floating on his back across to the catwalk. Blood oozed onto Bobby, and onto the steel of the catwalk. He couldn't escape the *deja vu* wandering in from the past.

"Is the motherfucker dead?"

Bobby flinched. Howie was behind him, in the corner, propped against the burned-up electrical panels.

"The fucker shot me, Bobby!"

Bobby looked over at the crimson spot on Howie's leg, a small hole leaked blood.

"Is he dead?" His voice carried a bratty whine, as if somebody who'd beat him for a long time had just been paid back.

"You shot him, Howie." Bobby wondered why he stood in the middle of it. How come Gomez got all the brains? "He's hurt bad."

Howie's face twisted with disgust. "Fuck him! Help me!"

Bobby heeded the selfish child coming out in Howie's voice, the definitively psychotic perspective.

"What's he doin' with a gun? What the fuck is a ship inspector doin' with a gun?" His voice maintained an insistent childlike whine as he moved. "Get away from the bastard!"

"Are you nuts, Howie?"

The bullet splattered part of Forster's face onto Bobby. "Christ!" Bobby cringed from the warm, sticky paste of flesh on his skin as his nose

tightened from the acrid smell of powder burning into flesh. He jerked himself sideways, awkwardly, across the propeller shaft and into the water. His head went under while he longed to turn fish and stay there. It didn't happen. Water, slime, and grease ran across his face, into his eyes, stinging and blurring everything. Totally expecting the next bullet to be his, he felt let down by the lingering silence.

"Come here, amigo." Howie's voice, breaking uninvited into Bobby's walk into infinity, emerged calm. There was a very quiet, unnerving, smoothness to it, the kind of switch a psychotic can command. "Come here and help me, or I'll blow your fuckin' head off."

Bobby rose out of the slime. There was no chance for any option but cooperation. Howie'd already demonstrated his control over Bobby's destiny. "I'm coming over, Howie." He kept his still-stinging eyes on Howie, intense, pleading. "Relax. I'm going to help you." He slid back across the shaft, slipped to his knees, got up, and kept wading forward. He stopped a couple of feet from Howie, his face staring into the forty-five.

Howie grabbed him hard by the shirt, jammed the barrel of the gun into Bobby's mouth. A tooth splintered, unnoticed, in the impact.

"Listen, man!" His voice had gone sick again — low, growling out the words. "The motherfucker tried to kill me! You hear me?"

Bobby nodded, fear showing in his face uninvited. Despite it, he managed to hold hard on Howie's eyes.

“Now he’s dead. I can do the same for you. Now? Later? Whenever I want.”

He could get no contact inside Howie’s eyes, watched him pull the hammer back.

“Your choice?”

As Bobby saw himself dead, he saw his daughter’s face. It was about all he’d miss — Tanya and the ocean. He saw her playing outside at school, as Sister Maria and the other nuns watched over her, right then, in that very instant, teleported for his anonymous good-bye. He knew she was safe and waiting for him, smiling, in Mexico. He smiled back at her, couldn’t help it. He noticed how that smile perplexed Howie. He knew she’d grow up a Mexican lady, cultured and graceful.”

It was such a good thought it caused his smile to grow around the gun barrel. It’s okay, he reasoned as his mind left the sunny playground. *I can die. Do it Howie. Kill me.* She’d be okay. His eyes grew with the thought. And just before he died, Howie smiled back and let him go.

From far away, a little girl had saved his life.

“Okay, amigo.” Howie’s crazed grin grew. “We’re the same people, me and you.” He pulled the barrel from Bobby’s mouth.

Bobby’s smile expanded, turned into laughter.

Howie fell into it for his own reasons, and started chuckling.

Bobby laughed louder, spit blood, and felt for his tooth. He picked it out of his mouth, held it up to Howie, and that’s all it took to get them both hysterical. The two of them, for a full minute, had trouble getting their laughter under control.

As the laugh track finally wore into silence, Howie smirked and pointed. "The briefcase."

Bobby's eyes followed the pointing gun.

"Get me his briefcase."

Stepping away, Bobby reached up to the ledge, secured the case, and handed it back.

"It's all in here, Bobby — signed, sealed, and delivered." He tucked it under his arm and groaned as he put his weight on Bobby. "Shot the motherfucker once before he decided to sign." Bobby caught the sick feeling again. "Then the bastard pulls a gun on me, shot him again."

He eased Howie through the sludge, onto the walkway between the engine housings.

"What kind of businessman carries a gun, eh?"

As he jerked with the leg pain, the twist in his face brought a little light into Bobby's trials.

"There's extra cash in this for you, man. Gonna see to it." He looked at Bobby as if they'd become blood brothers. "Buddy."

Struggling to get Howie up to the deck, Bobby made it halfway and went for Gomez. The two of them finished the rescue, got him topside, and eased him down where Gomez had been. Howie bitched his way through the ordeal, rambling about being close, staying tight, looking out for your mates. Bobby figured he was sliding over the edge, and hoped for it. He suggested lots of drugs and Gomez went for painkillers. Howie gobbled while Gomez, the designated medic, dressed the wound as best he could from the inadequacies of the first aid kit.

The sun sat low in the sky now, evening cool-

ing off, bugs on the prowl as Bobby waited and watched in silence for Howie to die or for the new plan. Preferring the former, he expected the latter. He knew there'd be one. Howie would move on it. He always did. Bobby was planning his own exit once the pills kicked in.

"Algiers or Honey Island?" Howie said it as if he'd spotted the New World. "The car and him." Howie pulled himself to his feet, the bleeding slowed but still there. The way Howie moved around while he talked indicated his pain was climbing into the back seat as well. "Get the faggot bagged up good. We'll take some cash off the car in Algiers. Dump the worm in Honey Island."

Bobby had trouble with the new plan. It sounded a lot like accessory time to him.

"Howie?" He said it softly, sensitive to his thin-ice realities with Howie.

Howie, very tentative with everything at the moment, still held the gun. He could easily decide they should all die, particularly if he thought he might do a permanent wilt himself.

There was no other weapon around. Bobby saw it made sense to play it soft, as soft as necessary. He tried again, smiling a lot when he spoke. "You're going to sell the car this guy came here in? You're going to do it in the city he came from?" Just getting the sentence out tired Bobby. "What's it worth, anyway?"

"Won't sell it in New Orleans. Across the bridge." Howie made the bridge sound like a connection between continents. "In Algiers."

Bobby kept his words calm, low, and

unassertive. "Algiers?"

"All the criminals in New Orleans live there."

Howie waved the gun in Bobby's face and menaced him with a death look. End of discussion. The three of them hobbled off into the dark, Howie cursing with every step. They clutched and grabbed their way to the gangway. Blood ran a little thicker from Howie's leg.

Getting Howie ashore required significant effort. The only up side for Bobby and Gomez came from Howie's discomfort. They took turns apologizing whenever they bumped him against something hard. Moving Forster came easily. He floated, didn't need to breathe, and he had no pain threshold.

Howie decided to do the Honey Island run first. His leg could wait. He wasn't really interested in the island, but rather the swamp that ran both sides of it, he said, all the way to the Gulf. The whole of New Orleans could disappear there.

Bobby drove. Howie occupied the passenger seat while Gomez and the body kept each other company in the back. They had thirty miles of highway to cover before turning to the swamp. The public road worried Bobby.

So did the phrase "accessory to murder."

They headed south towards the swamp. Bobby watched in fading light as the Louisiana bayou formed and unformed.

After forty minutes they got off the highway and onto the matted root road running alongside the Pearl River. Driving into it, Bobby saw changes quickly now, turning thick and wet and

overgrown, bayou marshlands into outright slough. The smell of salt water drifted in the still, heavy air, wafting in through the open window and mixing with the clammy staleness of the swamp.

Bobby figured they were moving closer to the Gulf. To him it felt like the right place to end the world. He wanted to stop the van, get out, and watch the whole thing sink out of sight. There were a lot of things he would like to see disappear into the swamp. He absently struggled with the van to get under and through the deep overhang of the roadway. He peered ahead into the dark, free associating subway tunnels, chutes into a black hole, funnels for Alice's slide into Wonderland.

"Honey Island," Howie rambled, working to stay conscious. "Honey Island Swamp. We're deep into it now. Places here no man's ever been."

The shapelessness of the landscape grew more peculiar, more surreal.

"It's black in there." Howie said it like he was reading Bobby's mind, unnerving him even more. "It's the tupelo and cypress. They're big and dense. It's really somethin' in the daylight." Howie chuckled from the shadow beside Bobby. "But real spooky at night, eh?"

Bobby ignored the comment and fought the wheel across some ancient root banks.

"We got swamp all 'round us now, boys. If you got a boat, she's easy to move in. Otherwise you're fucked real good if you get more than twenty feet off this roadway." Howie enjoyed the tour-guide

attitude; it probably helped the drugs take his mind off the leg wound. "She's big. Fifty miles long, fed by three rivers runnin' through her into the Gulf."

Bobby glanced into the darkness where the voice came from, wondering if Howie was holding a *National Geographic* on his lap.

"You could wander around in here for a long time, then wait for your body to float into the Gulf if the gators didn't get it first."

"You know about swamps, Howie?"

Howie came back solid and surly. "Yeah, Bobby. I know 'bout this one. I kicked around the whole eastern bayou a lot, especially Honey Island." He reached for his bag. "Great place to holiday when you ain't lookin' to be found. I done it." He popped a couple of uppers, chewed them with his words. "The northern part's where we are. That's where the monster lives." He flung a chunk of paper back at Gomez. "Right, Gomez?" Howie laughed with himself, flicked his head in Gomez's direction. "He's been here before, the place scares him shitless."

Gomez, who now returned only some muted Spanish, had said nothing the whole journey. He sat in the back, on his spot; looking like he figured the devil himself rode with them. His eyes rarely left the homemade body bag, almost waiting for it to move, to reach out and grab him.

"Gomez." Howie blurted. "Tell him, you seen it, didn't ya?" Howie got himself laughing again.

Bobby and Gomez both worked hard at ignoring the monologue.

“Over there. Pull off.”

Bobby stopped suddenly, startled, thinking about swamp monsters. It took a minute to realize over there was pretty well nowhere in particular. He killed the engine, headlights peering blankly into the concealed unknown ahead of them. Nobody moved.

“Well I can’t do it, can I?” Howie talked as if they were idiots and he must outline everything. “We gotta unload, boys.” He slammed his hand down on the dash, authoritatively, a judge with a gavel.

Bobby, letting out a slow breath as if he couldn’t believe he were part of it, opened his door and headed to the side of the van. He pulled the body out by the feet as Gomez followed with the other end. Letting it drop to the ground, they rolled it into the obscure darkness. As Bobby’s foot caught part of the tattered canvas, the sound of the tear spooked them both. Soon the footing got soft, then wet, then just mud sucking to the calf. Both of them sank to their knees waiting to be eaten, while Howie shouted for them to get it out further. They pretended and made a panic withdrawal instead, glad to exit.

Stinking of swamp mud, they climbed back into the van without a word, pleased it was over and glad it wasn’t them. They would come back here only if they could drop Howie in as well.

It took ten minutes to get the van turned, foot-by-foot; the night sounds growing with the absolute containment of the surroundings. Nobody spoke as Bobby worked the van out of the road-

way. No accumulation of drugs could keep a leaky bullet wound together forever. Howie was missing a lot of blood, definitely close to doctor time. Bobby hoped it would be too close.

Howie did manage to pull himself together long enough to give Bobby a Brownsville phone number and some information to pass on before losing consciousness. Maybe there is a God, Bobby thought, maybe Howie'd buy it, couldn't happen to a nicer guy. Twice Gomez mentioned they should kill him, but Bobby rejected the temptation, not without consideration. Instead they listened to him moan while bouncing their way out to the highway.

Gomez knew the route to Pierre's and the Deep Sleep. Pierre would get them a doctor, take care of the car, all part of Howie's instructions before he passed out. Making the call at the first phone, Bobby kept it secretive and brief. Identifying himself with a first name only, he said there'd been a problem, a death. It had been all taken care of. No problem. They were staying at the Deep Sleep and sailing tomorrow. When he got a lot of shouting in return, he hung up. Didn't know the guy, Hertz, from anywhere — didn't really want to.

They doubled back to *The Lady Inca* and picked up the Lloyds' car. As Gomez took over the van, Bobby quietly liberated — from one of Howie's private boxes — a pair of work gloves, a lonely thirty-eight, and a handful of bullets. He figured it was time for him to even the edge, just in case. Following Gomez into New Orleans in

Robert's immaculate vehicle, Bobby made a point of touching nothing without the gloves on. He spent the duration of the trip foreshadowing sirens, cops, and guns.

By the time they got to the Deep Sleep, it was close to midnight. Bobby told the fat man to get Howie fixed up and then he could have the car. Bobby and Gomez said little else, apart from wanting food and sleep. They didn't have to; Pierre appeared to grasp the situation quickly, with a lot of businesslike calm. Bobby watched the auto resale calculator going off in the Cajun's head as he shouted for Marie.

Walking partway with them, Marie pointed, gave them room numbers, and told them she would return with something to eat. Although Bobby managed a quick nod to the food offer, he got inside, saw the bed, and knew he'd never get around to waiting for it.

He slid the thirty-eight under his pillow and remembered thinking something about Howie dying. He fell into an exhausted and troubled sleep, certain they wouldn't get that lucky.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dunes
South Padre Island, Texas
Early Sunday Morning

Robert Forster was dead on that Monday night, but that particular saga had started for Bobby almost two days earlier, on a quiet Sunday morning as he slept in the island dunes.

And before that, he'd spent a lot of time crossing from Canada into the States, out of the States into Mexico, and back across the Texas border again. For that effort he'd managed to get his pretty little treasure, Tanya, safe with Sister Maria in Mexico, for the moment.

He'd been living on the dune for a long week now. He was eating sand and needing currency, hoping to use his diving background to land some work on the Gulf oil rigs. He was desperate — far from secure.

He was running out of ideas short of armed robbery when the man's dune buggy screamed across the top of the dune behind him, driverless. Airborne briefly, it flew fifty feet for several long seconds before inverting itself a yard from Bobby's head, its tires spinning uselessly.

Bobby hadn't moved — he hadn't had the

chance. He was covered in sand and bits of debris, a little blood running off him. His mind wandered to the side effects of hunger, isolation, and stress, finding some relief in the obscene reality of the screaming curses rising behind the dune.

“Motherfucker,” the man screamed as his bow-legged knees buckled. Head and gnarled hands first, the man’s scraped and bloodied body slowly stood upright. His cracked and rattled bones held him erect for a moment.

Bobby watched him bounce and tumble down the dune towards him, a spastic rag doll thrashing to an unceremonious halt beside him. The man and his machine — one drunk and the other apparently destroyed — owned the same destiny.

He raised himself on one arm, laughing hysterically, spitting sand and saliva. “Hit that dune like fuck, man, sucked me up like an asshole between motherfuckers!”

He interrupted his monologue abruptly as he watched the last spinning motion die away from the wheels of the upsided buggy.

“Howard Rupert motherfuckin’ Morgan, Howie for short, at your service, amigo. I’m lookin’ for a few good men!”

Howard Rupert Morgan was built like a burnt-out tank with heavily weathered features, and a mouth that just wouldn’t quit. “I’m a salvage man. Floated my first barge out of the Hudson river when I was nineteen. A leaky dinghy, a bicycle pump and some rubber. Made myself ten grand in two weeks. He interrupted himself. “And I’m crazy like loco weed. Get me some help

amigo.”

“Not a chance. You got yourself here, you get yourself out of here. I’ve got my own trouble, don’t need yours.”

Bobby turned away as he finished.

“Best of luck to you, Mr. Morgan.”

“A grand. A fuckin’ grand. I’m lookin’ for a few good men. I ain’t the priesthood, amigo. Okay. Two grand. Get me out of here and I’ll give you five days’ easy work. Get a taste of lovely Louisiana.”

Hearing the money talk, Bobby slowed his exit.

“I’m hurtin’ a little here, amigo. I could die,” Howie said.

The quick spit of a bullet sprayed sand on Bobby’s boots. He turned around, unsure whether his motivation was the bullet or the two grand.

Howie laughed irritatingly. “It’s a two-shot Derringer, muchacho.” He smiled. “Business is business, amigo. Just jokin’. Honest. I won’t shoot ya. Not into killin’ people.” He gave the look again. “Not today.”

Bobby knew it was a bad news offer but he hadn’t been getting too much else, so he picked him up and took him out of there, hurting him as much as possible while doing it.

Howard Rupert motherfuckin’ Morgan just kept laughing and wiping blood from his face.

It wasn’t as serious as it looked. They were in the hospital less than two hours.

Bobby wondered about Howie as he sat in the back of his beat-up van. It had to be one hundred and ten outside, an unbreathable one thirty inside, minimum. The dry heat and smell of garbage burnt the inside of his nostrils with every breath. *Welcome to south Texas summer, asshole.*

They made one stop at Howie's trailer to grab drugs and dirty underwear, then collected Gomez on the fly and headed for the salvage yard. Howie stood hard on the accelerator as the guards scrambled to get the gates open.

Howie left Bobby and Gomez loading equipment at the back of the offices, unable to see ten feet in the dust cloud. Nobody smiled but Howie.

As quickly as Howie disappeared into the cloud, Bobby took the opportunity to size up Gomez. Dark skinned, not a big man but muscular. His face showed signs of having lived a life. Hard to make much more of the silent Mexican, hadn't even acknowledged Bobby was there. Bobby didn't take it as rude, figured maybe he didn't speak any English, maybe just quiet. Bobby sensed the man had some character, some strong background that let him do this work and stay proud — he could see it in the way Gomez carried himself. He figured he'd find out soon enough.

Charley appeared. "What the fuck you guys doin' here?" He swaggered closer. "Who told you to load this stuff?"

Bobby ignored him. Gomez accidentally spit on Charley's shoes. Charley caught him on the side of the neck with a two hundred and fifty

pound backhand, sending Gomez to the ground.

Gomez spit again. "Putal!"

Bobby liked Gomez more already. Charley didn't seem to share the same opinion, and stood over them while they finished the job.

The van was loaded in ten minutes, coinciding tidily with Howie's return. Charley growled at him about 'keeping the asshole wetback out of his way' and 'watching the dust on the way out'. Howie just kept strutting.

"You got a bitch," he said, still talking while he climbed behind the wheel, "you tell Hertz, fat boy."

The tires spewed a mass of dust and gravel at Charley while Howie yelled back at him. "Do somethin', ya fat pig!" He laughed. "I'm king shit here, and you're a fat pig!" He groped around the cab for pills while he said it.

With the badly-stowed cargo bouncing about, Bobby dug himself in for a long ride. His six foot plus frame started cramping almost immediately.

For a while he watched a pistol bounce about under the driver's seat, imagining a random discharge into his brain at any given moment. If he had an unconscious death wish, the Colt could be a potential ally. The thought amused him.

His eyes roamed the back of the van aimlessly. Howie kept a heap of crap useless to anyone but him.

"Foresight's real important."

Howie called it foresight.

"Preparation is necessary!"

Bobby heard it more like, 'the necessity of des-

peration.'

"Like the night the coast guard sank me in the Gulf. Floated for three motherfuckin' days on a sea bag stuffed with fast food containers."

Howie kept rambling while Bobby tried hard not to breathe, trying to emulate Gomez's foul air breathing method. He took small breaths, always through the mouth, and slow. Gomez was sitting there as if at home watching TV in his living room. Bobby wondered if the cigar butt clamped between Gomez's teeth made any difference.

Bobby had no investment in the guy. He knew his own circumstances made him judge the Mexican by the questionable standard of his own status. Stumpy at best. Bottom line he figured this guy Gomez was here for the same reason as him, money. He'd just wait and see on this Mexican.

Bobby talked himself into lightening up and cautioned himself about generalizing. Two grand for five days riding a ship. Nothing, he thought. Just don't kill anybody and don't get killed.

"Get comfortable back there, boys. She's seven hours and seven hundred miles to New Orleans."

That made it a hundred-mile-an-hour average. Bobby confirmed to himself that Howie liked to think big. He figured it twelve hours minimum. If Howie got lost a couple of times, it would be fourteen.

Howie wrestled the van, trying to get comfortable. He bent across the engine box, his good arm scrounging the glove box for amphetamines. The other arm in a partial cast, was trying to steer. Bobby wondered how Howie had survived this

long. Maybe fate had just waited for Bobby to show up.

He dropped the thought — thinking had its drawbacks at certain moments. Looking on the bright side of it, he saw being in Howie's company more reason to like Gomez.

“My guts hurt like shit.” Howie said.

Bobby cheered silently at the news. Closing his eyes, he started working his way towards unconsciousness. Pushing Howie, his new employment, and other cold realities from his head. He listened to the crazed lurch and roll of the van singing its unmuffled, heavy metal lullaby.

He slept, or thought he did, in zombie fashion, the false kind that gave no rest. Somewhere in the blur he remembered stopping, falling from the van and urinating against the side, more than once. He remembered eating fast food and hearing Howie bitch.

Bobby knew the trip had gotten too numbing when his ex-wife walked into his sleeping thoughts. She'd told him she never loved anyone else, and never would — the ‘only man forever’ syndrome. She told him that a lot, whenever she wanted something, whenever she wanted back.

She apologized often — even when it wasn't necessary. She apologized just before she left. He got it in a note delivered by a guard while he was in custody, awaiting trial. She was gone for good this time, to California, with some salesman. She hadn't taken Tanya, didn't have her to take. The courts had her.

They were close, Bobby and his daughter

Tanya. When he wasn't at sea she'd been with him. Women are replaceable, he thought in his half-committed dream state. Daughters aren't.

Bobby managed to spread it over the fourteen hours. An absence of motion pulled him back — he'd landed somewhere. Howie wrenched open the side door of the panel van.

“Out, lads.” The decision was made for him.

“Come look at our beauty.”

Bobby eased out silently. Gomez followed, cursing. The two of them stood almost asleep. He smelled the salt mixing into the dank swamp scent of the bayou. To the east, across the bay, was a lighted skyline. He guessed it was New Orleans.

“Around front, gents. It's all 'round front.” Howie was still running on speed and painkillers. Close up, the smell of cheap wine rose from him.

Gomez and Bobby made their way to the headlights. Once there, their eyes followed the beams to the endless run of rust along the sides of Howie's ship.

“Let's get on board.” Howie, drugged and drunk.

“Let's talk daylight.” Bobby's voice was low and shapeless, and conveyed his solid disinterest in a dead of night stupidity adventure. “Howie. Nobody boards a strange ship in this black shit.”

Howie, further up the beam, squinted back blindly at the van, his eyes wild and glazed, seemingly unable to locate either of them and remind-

ing Bobby of animals he'd seen transfixed in his headlights, before contact and death. Bobby and Gomez stood between the beams, offering not even a shadow for Howie to rant at.

Bobby slid down between the lights, his back against the van. If he had to be out there in the middle of the night, annoying Howie seemed the only compensation.

Howie fired curses. Bobby realized irritating the man didn't justify the dinner he was serving to most of the Louisiana mosquitoes. He didn't notice them bothering Howie and wondered to himself about the real logic behind the "stink like hell" philosophy. Keep away from soap and water. There may be more to it than just keeping people at a distance.

"This is fuckin' New Orleans, Louisiana, Bobby. Louisiana! Swampland. Bayou country. Bugs. Snakes. Gators. All kinds of bullshit. You wanna get bit and die, or what?" Howie had a way of being in your face without really trying. It remained a mystery to Bobby.

"Gomez! Gomez!"

Gomez stood locked into the same trance he started the journey with, responding to minimal, direct orders only. Howie seemed to know this. "Get the hook amigo. And rope. We'll pirate our way up my lovely li'l motherfucker."

Gomez grumbled and appeared to obey.

Howie wandered out of the line of light, his voice coming from darkness.

"She's big, boys. She's big. Big money here, lads. Big money. The specs got her four hundred

and fifty feet, nose to toes.” Howie reappeared in the headlights again. “We got twenty-four hours to safety her. The Lloyds’ suits’ll be here tomorrow to sign her seaworthy.”

Howie couldn’t stop talking as he strutted up the beam. He was a drunken dictator, his body weaving in and out of the shafts of light. Gomez re-entered.

“Let’s get on board.” Howie grabbed the boarding hook and chunk of rope from Gomez. “Get an early start!”

Bobby wasn’t finished. “If she’s four hundred and fifty long, then we’re talking at least thirty feet to the deck.” Bobby was emotionless and tired, with no edge of conviction in his voice.

“It’s too dark to be doing this.”

Logical input and academic overview were things Howie had no use for when they weren’t coming from him.

“It’s a stupid idea, Howie. Somebody can get hurt.”

Howie heard Bobby’s complaint and shoved the equipment back into Gomez’s arms, pushing him forward as he turned back towards Bobby. He stumbled and strutted across the broken up mud flat, shouting advice at Gomez while he retreated.

Both shadows danced eerily as the two of them cut in and out of the beams. The whole effect intensified the absurdity — four bad legs and a couple of disconnected bodies.

“What the fuck do you know about ships, Bobby?” Howie stood directly over Bobby at the

front of the van.

“Is that a question you want an answer to?” Bobby’s voice was quiet. “Get yourself surprised, maybe.”

“I’m givin’ ya a fuckin’ break, just givin’ ya this fuckin’ job, amigo! Wanna talk appreciation?” Howie’s attention moved like malfunctioning radar.

“What the fuck’s wrong with Gomez?”

Bobby followed Howie’s voice, spotting Gomez stumbling in the fringe of the headlights thirty feet away — there, then gone, as if Howie knew it was going to happen. Psychic. Maybe he’d dropped the hook, the rope. Maybe his watch.

“Gomez! Gomez!” Howie shouts. “Where the fuck are ya? Bobby, where’s Gomez?”

“Swallowed up by the bayou ghouls, Howie.”

Bobby didn’t really have the energy for it at the moment, and didn’t really care. “You find him, Howie. You brought him.” He turned and walked his way along the side of the van. “See you both at daylight.”

He wasn’t inside three minutes before a wet and stinking Howie joined him.

“Yeah. Grab some zs. Get an early start.” Howie said.

“Where’s Gomez?”

Howie mumbled something about camping out. Bobby decided it wasn’t worth getting wet looking for the dumb Mexican fuck. It would be better looking for him in the daylight.

Bobby listened to Howie’s half-conscious voice fade into a deep, heavy-throated snore. He de-

cided to work at it for himself.

There were fewer bugs inside, but they were bigger, and hungrier. Bobby stopped fighting them, lying there moving in and out of sleep. He tried to develop a positive attitude about purpose, the real meaning to sleeping and eating, him and them, and drifted with it. This could have been penance for all the Red Cross ads he never answered, a sin if you're RH-, and he was. Maybe it was just evolution for the bugs, strengthening the strain.

Anything to help, he figured.

CHAPTER THREE

The Estaphan Estate
Houston, Texas
Late Sunday Night

Antonio Estaphan, young compared to his uncle, Luis, greeted the senator at the Houston airport with a hug and a perfectly pressured handshake. “How was the flight?” He asked as the senator struggled his bulk into the back of the limo, making the already diminutive Antonio appear even smaller.

“Okay. No problems.” He looked at his watch. The senator was never one to put off anything. “My question is, what *is* the problem?” He said, fidgeting slightly. “I don’t understand what Luis wants with a meeting at this time of night.”

“The old man’s pissed off.”

Antonio and the senator went back a long way — University of Texas Law School and before that growing up in an upscale part of Brownsville. Antonio moved after his father died and his uncle, Luis, gave him an opportunity to come to Houston and learn the business first hand. Something Antonio’s father would have never permitted when he was alive. It was convenient for Luis Estaphan as he never had a son of his own, and Antonio was

as close as he could get to keeping the business in the family. The senator, on the other hand, had let his law and political goals dictate *his* move to Austin.

“He’s heard some disturbing things about this guy Hertzell Markovitz. About the company too.” Antonio looked for a reaction. “And since you brought this guy and his company in, Luis thinks it only fitting you should take some responsibility for what goes on.” Antonio watched for reactions as he spoke. “We put money into this International Salvage because you represented Markovitz to us as a legitimate business. We don’t need heat for peanuts.”

“What kind of things?” The senator was still at the beginning of the conversation. “Why talk to me about it?”

“El Salvador.”

“El Salvador?”

Antonio noticed his supposed puzzlement with the answer, pursued it. “Scamming the old man isn’t a good idea.” Antonio looked ahead at the approaching skyline. “Houston’s got one of the most impressive skylines in the world, don’t you think?”

“What the fuck’s going on, Antonio? We’ve known each other a long time, so knock off the bullshit!” The senator stared until Antonio gave him eye contact. “Give it to me straight!”

“If you don’t know about it, you got nothing to worry about.” Antonio rolled down the limo partition and said something in Spanish to the driver. “I hope you’re clean. Remember, I’m the one who brought you in originally. It’s not going to look

good on me if you're part of it."

"I got no idea what you're talking about." The senator's breathing got a little labored, and not from his weight. "El Salvador. International Salvage did a job there a couple of months ago. So what?"

"So don't worry about it." Antonio leaned back against the seat, and offered just a little more cheese. "I heard it was a little messy, a little less than legal. I really can't tell you more because I don't really know any more. The old man will lay it out for you. Relax. We're almost there."

Antonio and the senator said little more, each of them looking out their windows, each of them in their own thoughts.

Another twenty minutes found them in front of some large steel gates, the old man's place. In other circumstances, the senator would have been honored. A security check to the house got the limo through. It was obvious the senator worked against his nerves as the car manoeuvred the winding drive, pulling up in front of the pillared mansion.

Inside they submitted to the mandatory probe of a metal detector. Luis' nephew didn't object and the senator took it as his clue that this was normal procedure. Two bulky gentlemen who said nothing and looked dangerous ushered them across the spacious marble reception area, through eight-foot doors, and into a drawing room.

Seated and left alone, drinks in hand, staring at an immense, unoccupied desk, they waited. They both knew they were being watched, so

much security and then none. It didn't bother Antonio, he wasn't under question here, but from the senator's stiff and uncomfortable posture it was obvious he felt the scrutiny — like the eyes of the devil were on him. Neither man said anything to the other — to be watched was to be taped. The senator was paranoid and building on it.

Ten minutes dragged by. It was Luis Estaphan's traditional worry time for his prey. Antonio watched the senator spend the time faking an admiration of the decor. He knew he had heightened the visitor's discomfort through the conversation in the limo. That had been the plan, plant the seed and see what grows. Antonio, like his uncle, enjoyed power at other peoples' expense. And he had definitely gotten the senator waiting, and unready.

Finally, the doors opened, causing both men to stand abruptly, together, as if rehearsed — Antonio out of respect for his uncle and the senator out of anxious trepidation. The same two giants now led the way for Luis Estaphan's wheelchair.

He was small and frail, almost lost in the chair, and the woman pushing it made an equally noticeable impression. Lorraine Walton was tall and well proportioned, with a very distinctively striking facial structure. She wheeled him around the desk, lifted him out of the chair without effort, and set him gently onto the carved oak chair. The ancient creature looked at no one, fiddled absently with a letter opener and waited for the nurse to return with water. The bodyguards retreated slightly, their eyes never blinking.

The senator had met Luis Estaphan only briefly once before. He'd had the same problem then — believing this seemingly helpless creature was so powerful. Luis Estaphan looked more like a cadaver than a Mexican American mobster. Henry was used to the typical bulk and bluster that replicated his own style. But this — Luis Estaphan's almost absent presence — reinforced Henry's confusion. Estaphan's style belonged in a movie, one that would scare anyone.

Everyone lingered. When an absent nod signalled them to sit down, the senator followed Antonio's lead. The chairs stopped shuffling, the silence returned; everyone watched the old man replace the letter opener and stare blankly at his desk as though senility was unexpectedly claiming him.

Finally — still without eye contact — he lifted his head slightly. It seemed to float atop his neck, as if it wasn't firmly affixed.

"I appreciate your coming on such short notice, Senator. I'm certain you are a busy man. I will try to be brief." The voice had a squeaky quality, high-pitched and childlike. "It seems there is some confusion with regards to International Salvage and the work they did in El Salvador a couple of months ago. I should say, there is some confusion."

"I don't understand, Mr. Estaphan." He looked at Antonio for clues, got nothing, and noticed the solicitor nephew and heir apparent busy trading discreet glances with Lorraine.

"Our business depends a great deal on per-

sonal connections and commitment.” He still didn’t look at anyone, but everyone listened. “Let me take a minute and tell you what I mean.”

That minute passed while he sipped water. Lorraine stroked his throat while he swallowed.

“Antonio is an attorney. He is also my nephew, close to me. I trust him. We do a lot of work for a lot of important people. Like them, I like to keep my business in my family. But we are big and we have to adapt to our opportunities.” He paused, felt for Lorraine’s hand on his shoulder, and almost looked at the senator.

“My nephew Antonio mentioned this salvage company, International Salvage, the one you have silent partner status in, was in some need. We could help you, financially, and you could help us, with legitimacy.” Again he paused, moving his head like a composer listening to his own music as he looked around the room for his next thought.

“And you, Senator, a bonus for us. He was a smart man, the kind of person who could understand and be sympathetic in a political environment. People help people. Do you understand what I mean?”

As the old man stopped and waited, the senator got the cue and nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. On Antonio’s advice we buy into this little salvage business, like I’ve said, a legitimate investment in a time of financial trouble. But our real goal has always been involvement with you in a political sense.”

The room stayed silent.

“The help with your salvage business was, and

is, no more than a favor between friends," he said.

Henry nodded, still wondering.

The eyes came up directly at the senator — hard and cold and sudden.

"Suddenly, my people tell me there's an investigation going on with regards to International Salvage and some shady business on a salvage job down in El Salvador a couple of months ago." He kept staring. "Yes, an *international* investigation into a company that we have a forty-nine per cent interest in." He looked absently at the wall. "Legitimate businesses don't blow up ships and kill people for insurance money."

"What?" The senator blurted it loud enough to make the bodyguards tense up. He went silent again as he felt Luis Estaphan's eyes burning through him. "Sorry."

"We don't need the publicity, Senator." Luis continued. "We have diverse interests and powerful associates who are not happy with the Federal agencies getting gift wrapped reasons to nose into our affairs." He paused. "They are quite capable of finding enough reasons already."

"Wait a minute." The senator could see where this was going and he had no plans to be the fall guy for Hertzels greed. His voice started to rise. "I'm a financial partner in International Salvage, just like you. I don't know any more about this than you do."

"Keep your voice down." Lorraine said, putting her hands gently onto the old man's shoulders. "Mister Estaphan doesn't like loud noises."

"Sorry." He said.

Although unaccustomed to controlling himself on command he picked the message up the way a keen student should. "Guerrillas, Mister Estaphan. They blew it, not us—" He checked himself. "At least, that's what I was told. I don't know anything more about it." The senator's mind was working Hertzels name while he talked, thinking of things to do to him.

"And who does know more about this, Senator? Estaphan asked.

"Hertzels, Hertzels Markovitz." The senator squirmed, but wasn't surprised at how quickly he rolled Hertzels over. "He's the operating partner. He told me it was the Sandinista guerrillas. He runs the business." It was obvious the senator knew little else. "As a matter of fact it paid off quite well. We got the insurance money and never had to tow the ship anywhere. Guerrillas. That's..."

"I'm certain it did pay well Senator." Another pause for water and a throat massage. "But my people tell me this investigation is ongoing. We have lawyers involved as we speak."

He paused, his eyes narrowed.

"People died in that explosion, Senator." His voice grew raspier and his eyes burned harder. "No one dies and no one does anything illegal anywhere in this organization unless *I* say so. Do you understand that Senator?" His stare hadn't left the senator for five minutes.

"I want to speak with this Hertzels Markovitz. Soon." His eyes came off at last. "Clear the air."

Luis motioned to his caring attendant, and the

meeting was adjourned. She picked him up gently and set him back in the wheelchair. They stood. As he passed close to the senator, he raised his hand slightly and Lorraine stopped the chair.

“I certainly hope this doesn’t jeopardize our political opportunities, Senator. In my business we can’t afford sloppy work or loose ends.” He closed his eyes. “Tomorrow. We will meet tomorrow. With Markovitz.” He paused. “It will be an interesting moment, meeting this Markovitz.” A smile almost crept across his face. “It’s been a long time since anyone crossed us up.” He laughed. “Good night.”

The senator rode alone in the limo, not to the airport but to a hotel. Antonio’s advice was to stay in town and clear it up — now. Get this Hertzell Markovitz up here, and lay it on him.

Henry’s own mind filled with dark paranoia and concern about personal danger and political suicide. If someone had to be on the list, let it be Markovitz, the poked little bastard. He felt like a fool for believing Hertzell and his bullshit. The money-grubbing little son of a bitch could cost him everything.

Play the right side of the fence, he thought. Set Hertzell up for the squeeze if pushed, but play the right side of the fence on this one.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shipside

A Bayou in Southeast Louisiana

Early Monday Morning

His chromatic diving watch read six-thirty. Bobby hadn't slept well. His first morning in the backwater came up short of even modest fulfillment: Louisiana summer at six-thirty inside a van was too grim to get cosy in.

He wanted to sleep, but couldn't. There was no alternative but to get up. He crawled over Howie's distorted crumple, careful to disturb him as much as possible, particularly the injured parts of his body. Howie's semi-conscious cursing brightened up Bobby's day. Every little bit helps, he thought to himself, and smiled as he dragged his knee across the man's rib cage.

"Sorry, Howie."

The man's unfocused groans and sickly appearance made Bobby think of body bags. Needing to relieve himself, he wanted to do it on Howie. Instead he went for air.

Outside, within a foot of the high tide, he thought about getting stoned. Smoke a joint, head for a highway out of there. The mud oozed between his toes. Recently, the water had been

higher, had fallen back. If Howie'd pulled any closer, the van would've been an aquarium. The lucky bastard.

He stretched the ache in his body as the sun glanced off him into a long shadow that exaggerated his features. He rubbed his strong hands across his stubbled face — a face with strong, distinctive lines to it. He stretched his body more, flexing his shoulders, arms and torso; all of him proportioned well to his body — very much a man's physique spread over his six foot two frame. He wasn't a Hollywood handsome guy, but he was very much a man — a diamond in the rough.

Bobby focused on his energies and priorities. He didn't want to mess with Howie's karma, didn't want the trouble. Howie's cosmic structure should stay his own. If luck got to be the lady to bale him out in this, he didn't want to irritate her with insults.

He squinted into the sky. It was bright and hot. Howie'd actually found the place. Bobby saw luck in front of him again, and thanked God. He closed his eyes, pushing them in hard as he rubbed. He stretched some of the cramp out of his body. His stomach hurt for lack of food, and his throat felt caked shut, like the drying mud he stood in.

Tall and loose, Bobby had never slept well cramped up. A large, soft bed and a woman's warm heart were the comforts of choice. He hadn't been there for a while, not since the marriage in hell. He missed it, not the marriage — the heat of a beating heart. She did have a warm heart,

very warm. He shook off the thought and labored to bring some focus to the present, to the situation at hand. *The situational predicament*, he thought. He liked using the words; he was an academic kind of guy – the thought made him laugh at himself.

The water kept retreating with the tidal action of the Gulf. He wondered how far the water had risen where Gomez slept? Where was the Mexican? The thought hit him that Gomez may have drowned. The guy hadn't gotten close to Bobby, but compared to Howie, Gomez rated high as a soul mate.

He went to the front of the van and got a look at the ship, the only show in town, he mused to himself. The water, ankle deep there, felt soft and cool on his feet. Glancing at the tidewater between himself and the ship, he moved forward slowly, the soft mud bottom of the Mississippi delta oozing under his uncertain footing.

The ship's silhouette stood in the backdrop of his vision. He ignored her, concentrated on feeling his movements, on avoiding whatever danger lurked in the deepening brown liquid, the living waters of New Orleans, a sad testament to progress. Gators weren't into salt water, he hoped. His concern focused more on beer bottles and New Orleans sewage.

Suction cupping foot by foot, he looked back to get his bearings from the night before and lined himself up with the van to get an idea where Gomez had disappeared to. Thinking for a brief second about waking Howie, he imagined Howie

ranting into oblivion about Gomez's whereabouts, and decided he didn't need the help. Besides, the knee in the ribs didn't rouse him, so concern for Gomez certainly wouldn't. His progress slowed as he closed the distance to the ship, outpacing the receding tide line, as the water reached to his waist. With each step, the mud slid further up his leg.

He was half way to the ship, and the water was to his stomach. His effort increased, but there was still no sign of Gomez. He stopped to rest, let himself sink into the mud, close enough to take a decent look at her — sizeable and silent, genuinely spent. He picked that up quickly. Rust ran everywhere, burnt-up paint peeled away from her steel as if a ton of stripper had rained down.

She listed at least forty-five degrees towards the open water. From her plimsoll markings, Bobby figured her to be sitting at least fifteen feet into the mud for the entire length of her keel, deeper by the stern. She would be a bitch to pull free, and even more trouble to tow.

He was close enough to feel her too, nothing really intimate, just an introduction — first date stuff. He knew of relationships with ships, what the ship means to a sailor. Him. His father. His grandfather. The two of them dead on the sea — one in a war, one in a storm.

He started toward her again, moving slowly, with effort, watching her, looking for a name while he fought the mud and garbage. He wanted to board her.

And she watched him in turn, still alive —

beaten and bleeding — but still alive. He knew it; the sense for it had been in the family for generations. A person had to like ships, like the ocean. They needed to understand the relationship between a ship and the water — an egg and a hammer — a serious relationship, something to be held in deference.

Bobby first heard it sitting on his father's knee, when he was home on leave from Korea, when he talked to Bobby of his own dad. Grandpa had told him about ships talking, about ships having souls. Both men died on the water. The day he shipped out he held Bobby tight, so tight it hurt. The only time Bobby ever saw his dad crying was that day on the wharf — like he knew already that he wouldn't come home.

He was close to her now, could feel her dignity, her one-time sense of self, precision and manners. He acknowledged her then, saw her now — grace raped, a lady beaten by a beast.

Bobby knew she held many stories. Ships were like people to Bobby, some good, some bad, some indifferent. This one had soul. He knew this because she told him as he stood belly deep in the water before her. Told him not to see her as she stood now.

He had enough water to pull his feet free and swim the last thirty feet to her. The water was dirty but wet and cool, like a bath. He swam easily to the rope ladder hanging from the gangway and swung his leg through an underwater rung. The gangway rattled welcome as it shuddered above him in answer to his presence, while the

rope ladder moved with the shift of the gangway. He pulled himself out of the water and came up fast against her hull. He pushed himself onto the gangway and started checking for missing skin and scraped shoulders.

The gangway slowly steadied against the hull, solid but for missing hand lines and loose plating — no real problem. Life gets easier, he thought, as he topped the gangway and stepped over her low-rising bulwark onto the deck. Like everything from the top, it looked a long way down. It reminded him of a lot he'd like to forget.

He squatted on the deck to rest and scan her up close. She was easily four-fifty, maybe five hundred in length, with a sixty-foot beam and a high-sitting forecastle. There were two holds forward of an island bridge amidships, two more holds astern. A single stack just forward of the quarterdeck rose off her stern, a deep sea ship with strong lines torn through by chaos. Carnage everywhere.

She'd burned, a cruel death for a ship. It was better to sink, end it, and be final. Go down fighting, pride intact.

Everything had been stripped from her decks that weren't actual structure. Now the plan was to cut her up, bit by bit. To eat her, maggots on rot. Bobby didn't like it, didn't like being part of it, but he was. Just like them, he was in it for the money.

He pulled himself to his feet and headed forward, angling himself against the list, stepping around the broken lines, buckled plates, and gen-

eral refuse. Birds, rats, and bugs were the only obvious tenants today.

He climbed up her steps to her forecastle and the highest point on board. New Orleans proper sat directly across her bow. He could just make out the skyline across the smogged-out bay of Lake Pontchartrain. New Orleans, the port city — nothing but harbour and backwaters around the entire lake. There were only two ways in or out, one was the coastal waterway down the Mississippi and she was definitely too big for that, and the other — accessing the Gulf through Chandeleur Sound to the west, obviously how she'd originally arrived. So it would be harbor tugs out Chandeleur Sound to a Pilotown rendezvous with a sea tug.

He moved to the starboard side of the forecastle, turning his back to the bow as he scanned the shore. There were swamp trees draped in spidery overhang and more birds than an arboretum. He noticed the sounds from the swampland had diminished, nothing but the birds moving. Maybe it was the growing heat, maybe the nature of the place at this time of day.

He slid himself down the starboard handrails to the main deck, walked the two hundred and fifty feet past the partially covered forward holds. Stale air, dark gloom, and an echo rose up as he passed. He stopped with the sound. It spooked him. He stood and thought on it. The sound seemed to have come from the waterline hold, down there with the bilge. He waited and listened, then heard it again. He stepped over the

two-foot coaming that protected the holds against deck wash in foul weather, and tested the rusted steel of the ladder. Looking into the black below decks, he descended, slowly, spooked a little.

Bobby was thirty feet below deck before he attached Gomez to the noise below. If Gomez was making the noise Bobby felt happy the man lived. The fact he'd gotten spooked irritated him. Letting feelings get to you aboard a dead ship wasn't a good way to begin a seaboard relationship.

He kept lowering himself carefully, getting more settled. He wasn't sure why. Maybe it was being inside the ship, feeling the ship around him. Maybe it was the absolute stillness, the hot shadowy quiet of her belly — some kind of primordial reassurance that goes with containment. It may have been no more than Bobby's schizophrenic aptitude. Either way, he'd lost the goose flesh, and picked up the reality of Gomez, alive, below decks.

Below the upper hold line, the air cooled considerably. The mud burying her sides and the insulation of the two upper decks kept it that way. Bobby was glad of the cool. It wasn't the first time he'd secured a ship for insurance. There was a varied abundance of dirty, menial work to do in the lower holds. There were bilge hatches, watertight doors, hold tarping, and all manner of incremental realities.

He'd found the engine room before he'd worked very far into that list. She'd been stripped pretty clean. The engines would probably be out of her, leaving the propeller shafts with no purpose, an unpleasant reality to neutralize. Bobby remem-

bered noticing topside how the ship had more burn astern — more charred rigging, more buckled plating. In contrast, the forward holds appeared relatively unscathed, the planking untouched. Only the acrid aftertaste of fire lingered, the smell of scorch hung perpetually.

Bobby knew all the work they did readying her for the Gulf tow meant little — with no ballast, no engines, she was big and cumbersome. If she had trouble, she'd sink. Crap, he thought, if the sea tug crew found trouble with the tow they'd drop the line, let her go. They would, too, the bastards, at the first opportunity. Bobby knew for a fact the money was better if the derelict didn't make Brownsville. Maritime insurance payoffs were like that.

Bobby continued down. He got himself below the waterline, fifteen feet from the bilge floor running beneath the lower hold. Absolute bottom. The smell in the lower hold changed too. It was heavier, more moist. Someone unfamiliar would call it stink. Not Bobby, he considered it the uniqueness of a personality, the kind of smell that stayed specific to the ship. She drew him into her with it, settled him on the bilge planking to rest.

He was tired, deep tired. It reminded him of the kind of fatigue he felt in court that day back in Canada. He sat there all over again, on tranquilizers up to his eyes. It all looked legal enough. He was a spectator watching the proceedings. He had been labelled violent, with criminal aptitude, schizophrenic disorientation, and tendency to antisocial behaviour. He'd heard the suggestion, the

“considered opinions”.

He watched Tanya across the room, wondering why she couldn't run over and hug daddy, wondering why he didn't cross and snatch her into his arms. He wanted to pick her up and swing her high over his head while she squealed in glee. He hadn't seen her since the first hearing, when he lost control and they decided further evaluation might be appropriate. That was over a month ago.

He caught bits and pieces of the jargon, and hoped he could get the strength to come at them again. He wanted to lose it, get up, and beat them. Especially the judge. He wanted to get up there, get to his face, stick the gavel down his throat and take her. He wanted to lift her up in his arms and take her out of there like Superman. He couldn't do it, though, couldn't do anything — the tranquilizers.

The lawyer smirked as he delivered his remarks about Bobby not being in a position to give care at the moment, “having gone from an assault, to a second assault in this very courtroom, to psychiatric assessment, to treatment.” The judge wasn't listening.

It had been a bad marriage, him left alone with his kid. They had history together, the two of them, nothing but each other. Every day he thought of it.

Then he hit a scumbag and they took her.

The judge talked now. Bobby twitched on the planking as the gavel hit the stand. They took her hand to lead her away. She called out to him. Her eyes were full of fear. She pulled free and ran for

him. He stood up in the prisoner's box to catch her, pick her up and carry her away. No dice, not that day.

The smell of the ship filled him again as he moved his body stiffly, lifting and stretching. Again he heard the sparse, dull sounds coming from her stern, breaking the silence.

Slowly, he made his way across the planking of the bilge floor to the bulkhead door leading astern.

"Cucha!"

He heard Gomez before he saw him. He heard the barely audible curses mixed in with the grunts.

"Este chingado sheep! Puta sheep!" More grunts. Conversational Spanish and torn up English mixed in an unfamiliar harmony.

Until that moment, Bobby had been unaware that Gomez spoke any English. Bobby figured the grumbles and curses equalled hatch resistance, the softer bits of communication going as praise to whatever cooperation the twisted steel offered, a fine sample of communication without actual content.

Bobby got halfway across the hold before he could make out Gomez's shadowy figure, bent almost double at the far end of the hold. As he'd suspected, Gomez was struggling with a bilge hatch.

Bobby headed for him slowly, paying ample attention to the flooring, avoiding the dark jumbles of broken gear. He concentrated on his own footing, not thinking to announce his arrival. He was

close enough to chuckle at Gomez working in his underwear, when he startled him. He frightened him so badly he had to move quickly to avoid the heavy chunk of pipe Gomez swung with his fear.

Avoiding the first wild stroke, he fell backwards over broken crating. On his back, he looked more than just defenceless. Gomez was on him instantly, the jagged length of pipe raised to kill whatever haunts threatened him. He was all fear and menace.

“Gomez!” Bobby shrieked at him, arms over his face, more to avoid watching himself die than as a useful defence.

Gomez held the steel tubing over Bobby for eternal seconds, caught himself, cursed and eased up slowly, his body dissolving into the antithesis of its former intensity. The pipe dropped behind him, arms falling to his side as he slid himself to the flooring. “Putá! Putá! No Me Chinge! Pendajo, Bubby.”

Bobby knew now he wasn't the only spooked one on board as he pulled himself up across from Gomez. He watched the exhausted expression on the Mexican's face. It reflected the empty state of his own strength, rest and hunger indicators not registering on any of his gauges. Both of them were in sad shape.

They said nothing. Slouching and looking like a pair from the dungeon, they sat in silence, staring at each other through dust-laden obscurity. They were getting to know each other in some subtle, unspoken way, destined to be shipmates, locked together by chance.

“Hatch no es bueno, Bubby. She burn up bad, mucho. Everything bend, nothing fit bueno. Puto sheep.” Gomez rolled his eyes with unplanned comedy. “Hijo de puta, sheep!”

Bobby spotted the rolling eyes amid the Spanish curses and smiled. The absurdity of their circumstance struck them both simultaneously. They turned to humour because there was no other tangible option. Sluggish grins turned to chuckles, then wholesale laughter. Neither of them seemed to know exactly why they laughed.

Gomez reached for his crumpled pants and pulled a twisted joint from the pocket. Bobby didn't ask how the Mexican had anything dry. Gomez gestured in his struggle with broken English. “Esta bueno, Bubby?”

Bobby smiled and watched Gomez fire up the weed, sucking hard and long. The smoke trailed off the end of the heater and into the shafts of light as Gomez held his lungs shut. He exhaled while he spoke. “Amigo, Bubby?” He passed the joint across. “Companeros. Si?”

Bobby took it and drew. He sucked it deep into his lungs, holding back a cough. He smiled. “Companeros, Gomez.” The smoke floated from his mouth as he spoke. “Buenos amigos, Amigo.”

Gomez returned his half-toothed smile, took the joint from Bobby's fingers and held it up like a salute. “Companeros viejos.”

Bobby and Gomez scrutinized each other through the lazy drift of the smoke, looking for texture, common bonds. Getting familiar would be a slow process.

A little time passed silently before either of them found the energy to get up, but they did. Gomez got back to the hatch covers and Bobby went to the forward bulkhead to start sealing the watertight doors as if they'd worked together before for a long time and knew what the other expected.

Bobby heard the muffled curses starting up as he moved away. He looked back and saw Gomez, hunched, losing shape — disappearing like a ghost into an eerie, dry night mist.

CHAPTER FIVE

Shipside

A Bayou In Southeast Louisiana

Monday Morning

It's the chaotic nightmare state for Howie, dreaming of the fiasco in El Salvador a few months back — dreaming it like it's a premonition of things to come. There he was, in the hold with the agent, hitting him again and again. Howie was high and didn't notice the man had long since lost consciousness. In the early morning dream it went on even longer. He watched himself set the charges while he wiped the dying man's blood from his hands.

He ran like hell down the gangway, less exciting in the nightmare, and onto the dock. The dying man's arms reached after him, pulling him down the hatches, into the forward hold beside his battered face. Howie liked that part.

The little red light of the charge beeped neon in his face. Howie struggled inside the ordeal, heard himself silently screaming, saw himself pushing the nightmare forward — keeping it there. He managed to get himself convinced it was real and it cheered him up, made him decide to stay in it. He liked it.

The dead man's face grew big inside Howie's head. The explosion killed him as he jerked to consciousness. It was over, yet his eyes stayed shut. He didn't want it to end, liked the action. He couldn't remember where he was. Who he was. He'd done this to himself many times before, too many times. It was easier to stay in the nightmare. Still, he refused to open his eyes, demanded the sweet horror to return. He begged it to stay, it denied him and slid away.

He felt some other things instead, real things, pain. He wished that was a nightmare too, but there was too much pain and too much light. It was the morning and he cursed reality. With the absolute minimum effort he found solutions, groped pills from his pocket. Still refusing or unable to open his eyes he selected from memory and habit — size and shape. Analgesics. Pushing three into his mouth, he swallowed, lay there only a few seconds before fingering the meth, and downed three of those as well.

His throat was dry and the pills didn't make it down. They dissolved in the middle of his throat. He didn't notice. A couple of pills fell between his fingers. He moved back to semi consciousness, the wait mode.

Fifteen minutes passed. Again, he wished he could stay in his nightmares, avoid the realities. Reality was worse, it always had been. Even when he was a kid he liked his nightmares. They were comic relief from the beatings. It was just about then that the analgesics hit his body. The collective chemicals roamed broadly through his

nervous system, growing bigger than life — speed chomping at the bit, body looking to run pain-free.

Five more minutes and he noticed sounds and surroundings, particularly the barely breathable heat. Another five, and real thoughts of asphyxiation twitched his eyelids apart. Reality faded the recollection of El Salvador. He realized he was alone. There should be others and they were absent, but he can't yet remember whom. That inability stirred paranoia and grabbed his mind. He groped for the briefcase, another automatic action. Like the pills, the briefcase always stayed close by, where he could find it without help from a thought pattern.

He opened it, peering over the two-inch edge, one eye squinting inside. The presidential heads stared back from the dull green piles, their eyes as dead as his. The bastards forgot the money. He wanted to laugh, but it wasn't possible. Which bastards, he wondered.

Time to move. He took two more speed, slid his hand under the bills, and fumbled. He gripped the warm handle of his Derringer at the bottom of the briefcase and squeezed it like a wife.

The van veered wildly in and out of ruts. Howie bounced with the struggle as he rode the hard dirt tracks out of the bayou backwater. He had the shakes. He clung to the wheel, and it seemed to give him control. He kept his foot down hard on the accelerator, thinking he'd outrun something.

Having taken a couple of extra darvon, being very familiar with the rules governing body pain,

he was pleased the havoc inside his head kept moving off — somewhat. The pain from his injuries was not disappearing quite so quickly. Nevertheless, the amphetamines and the painkillers were slowly doing their work; helping him get in sync by the time he made New Orleans.

He swayed with the growing action in his brain, his mind racing. New Orleans. Port Authority. Supplies. Lloyds. Bullshit. Consolidated Ocean Tug? Food? Harbour tugs to pull her off? Cleanup. Mississippi clearance? Motel? Get her out on tomorrow's tide. Six in the morning. Lloyds. Bullshit inspection. Gomez? Bobby?

Time is money.

The bastards better be there when he got back, he thought, better be at it. The plan was all there — something for everything and everything for him.

He rounded a curve, almost rolling the van, and located a paved road. He couldn't remember anything from their arrival the night before. He figured he must be a genius. Two hundred yards down the highway he pulled into a one pump gas station, less than a dot to the world.

Howie's desperate appearance caused the attendant to give him a peculiar look, and ask for cash up front. Howie cursed and paid. Glancing in the mirror, he understood. He looked like death, and stunk like it too. Incurably filthy. He wondered if he had cleanup on his New Orleans agenda, thought he did, got the urge to maim the little bastard at the pump just for noticing, but didn't — he had priorities. Instead, he screeched

off without his gas cap.

He took a hard right onto the road, blinked, and the station was gone. He ran lead footed through a few indiscriminate miles — past shantytowns, rundown greasy spoons, and weather-worn fillups. Then the highway expanded and the stature of the buildings grew as he closed in on New Orleans.

The skyline faded into the harbour sprawl as it traversed the entire southeast of the lakeside. In the Gulf entrance off to the west, the water mingled brown to greener blue as it fanned out into the open expanse of the Gulf. The Mississippi curved brown and snakelike directly behind and to the south of the city proper, a spectacular sight, but not to Howie Morgan. No time to relish a panoramic landscape, he thought to himself. Besides, he'd seen it before.

Flushed with meds now, he was rolling, getting into sync. He ordered his thoughts. He was moving; there was no pain, just flash and hustle. He knew this town. He had done all kinds of business here.

He rolled south to Pontchartrain Boulevard, the city showpiece. This was the affluent business district — the 'looking good' side of New Orleans. There were skyscrapers, suits, business, success, the up and down of the free enterprise system. Howie thought this was the kind of town to handle his action. There were fancy cars and women everywhere. He loved it.

He got his kick at the lights, pulling up beside a favorably finished lady. She sat in the passen-

ger side of the Mercedes. He got his window down, looking like shit. Country music blasting from his radio as he banged time with his hand on the outside of the beat-up van door. She looked, and he did the madman's drool for her.

Distinguished stuff. He couldn't get enough of it. He headed for the nobody part of town — old New Orleans, onto Canal Street, past Bourbon, and right down to the Mississippi Wharves. Poydras. Bienville. Toulouse. Vieux Carre. Nothing but memories for Howie. He had to have a quick look for old time's sake.

It was the real city, the steaming real Mississippi bayou spirit. Here he could cook. There were no fancy shirts and bullshit — just cash and hard heads. The bullet law.

He'd driven a circle around the entire French Quarter. A quick left on the Esplanade and the half naked woman on the neon sign at the Deep Sleep rose up in front of him.

He ran the van right up in front of old Pierre's face. The fat balding Cajun didn't open his eyes, didn't even blink. His massive frame was spread on the granddaddy couch he kept parked for himself in front of the motel office.

"You lazy old bastard!" Howie howled as he dropped from the van before the engine had time to die. "Don't you ever move that fat ass of yours?"

"To fart, Howie," Pierre drawled, "To fart and count my money." The Cajun in his voice sounded like another country. "I get everything else delivered." He laughed the deep belly laugh only a fat and authentic bayou Cajun can own. "You look

like shit, boy. Like you got a dead man chasin' ya."

It wasn't news.

"Just gotta clean up," Howie said. He rubbed his hands over his head and face. "Gonna stay one night, maybe two. I want a room with the vibratin' bed and the dirty movies."

Pierre sucked on his drink. "Marie! They all got it now, Howie. Progress boy, progress. I got some new women, too." He bellowed a second time. "Marie!"

A pretty young mulatto appeared in the office doorway and scurried towards the two of them, spilling the edges of the drink as she moved.

"I didn't want no fuckin' drink, girl! Let this upstanding gentleman into number twenty-two. Don't forget his bags, neither."

"Yes, Mister Pierre." She turned to get the keys, the drink spilling more as Howie ogled the tight cling of her skirt against her buttocks.

"And leave the stinkin' drink, girl. I ain't buyin' for the sidewalk."

"Yes, Mister Pierre."

"Manners, Howie." Pierre turned philosophical. "Girl ain't no good to a man lessen she's got manners." He smacked her hard on her backside as she set the drink beside him. "And respect." He laughed in his guts. "Right, Howie? Respect is real important in this world."

"Right, Pierre," Howie replied, his eyes staying fixed on the soft, warm flesh of the young woman ahead of him. He held the stare all the way down the walkway.

She let him in and set his bag on the bed. He

lunged for her but she anticipated, and had herself out the door like an all-pro halfback.

“Later, baby.” He laughed while he said it. “Count on it.” He faked another lunge, laughed, and wiped the stray saliva from the edges of his lips.

Howie was cursing his way to the dirty movie channel when the tug office answered. He ignored their irritated tone. No problem. He could crap into the receiver if he wanted — harbour tugs were always looking for business. They’d agree to anything. Being able to do it was a secondary issue. Six in the morning was high tide.

He wanted two of them there. He didn’t have to tell them where. They knew her. They told him he needed at least three tugs to get her off, maybe four. She was fifteen feet into the mud, minimum. They were right but he didn’t tell them. Instead he bitched about junk tugs and crap captains before he agreed to three. He insisted on a flat rate. Fifteen hundred each. They would get her through the Sound and down to Pilotown, with a guarantee she would come free. They’d be there, but with no guarantees. They mentioned the coming storm and Howie told them it wasn’t their problem, the sea tug would handle the Gulf. They both hung up.

Now the tough one — Lloyds. The paperwork had all been done from Brownsville — Hertzell, his Jew boss, was good at long-distance paper. He had no idea what these bastards were like to deal with in person. They were all paperwork and procedure.

He focused on his angle. Georgey Fenton: He

got pictures on him once, pictures his wife didn't want to see. The kind of thing to make you indispensable to an operation like Howie's. He needed the inspection that afternoon. She was coming off in the morning. Fuck everybody. She was coming off. The phone rang while he smiled at the thought of Georgey that night.

"Good morning, New Orleans Maritime Underwriters. May I help you?"

Howie got stuck right away. "I want Lloyds. Lloyds of London. George Fenton."

"One moment, please." The wait music came on.

Fucking bitch! Howie had a real problem with communication. Fucking, fucking bitch! The noteworthy part was how well he did it. The words kept rolling through his mind, fucking bitch. He knew he was a little out of his league. Fucking assholes! Suits were never his strong suit.

"Robert Forster."

"Uh, yes, Mister Forster. Howard Morgan here." He straightened himself as if Lloyds had a camera in the room. "I wanted to speak to George Fenton. I'm with International Salvage, Brownsville, Hertzell Markovitz. I wanted to arrange a shipboard inspection. This afternoon if..."

"Name of your vessel, Mister Howard."

"Morgan." Howie got the kickass feelings going again. "Howard Rupert Morgan." Howie emphasized the Rupert in his name. Somebody once told him it had class. He agreed.

“One moment, please.”

The bastards were pushing it, trying to get him to fuck up. He steadied himself, fiddled with the remote control, flicking between porno movies. Love that Pierre — he knew how to live. One of the women on the television is teasing a black snake with her vagina. It was a big snake, and Howie was impressed. He envied the snake. He thought it cared, wanted to be a serpent himself someday.

“I’m sorry, sir. I have no papers from International Salvage on the Howard Rupert Morgan.”

“That’s my name!” He grabbed his patience and lost sight of the snake. If the bastard had been in the room he would’ve beat him.

“I’m sorry Mister, uh, Morgan. I asked you for the ship’s name.”

“*The Lady Inca*. I think. Yeah. I mean yes, *The Lady Inca*. That’s it.”

“One moment, Mr. Morgan, I’ll bring it up on the computer again.”

There were two women on the screen now, a brand new movie.

“Yes Mister Morgan. I have it here. Everything’s done but the inspection.”

Howie braced for the argument.

“Did you want to take care of that today?”

Howie laid some momentary dead air himself. What kind of trip was this guy on? No argument? Today? Came around real quick, maybe he could work a bribe. Maybe. He grabbed the offer. “That’d be outstanding.” Howie figured he owned the guy. “We want to get her off tomorrow morn-

ing.”

“Is she inspection ready?”

“Yeah.” He lied. “Right straight seaworthy for a burned-out derelict.” There was no response. Howie tensed, realizing he shouldn’t have gotten casual. He worked to cover himself, and sound serious over the phone. “A *seaworthy* derelict.”

“I hope so, Mister Morgan.” Robert Forster’s voice was sober, hinting at reproach. “We don’t insure derelicts.”

“Of course not. She’s seaworthy. We put a lot of work into her.” He laughed. “She’s safe as a bank. Two very skilled crew to ride her.”

Robert acknowledged none of it. “Your submission says you’re taking her out through the Sound and into the Gulf proper.”

“Wha’d ya think? Run her down the Mississippi? She’s too big, nobody’s that stupid!”

“You’d be surprised at the kind of subterfuge people involve themselves in to save a few dollars.”

Howie bought the ‘you and me know’ tone. “I can imagine,” he responded, not certain of the word ‘subterfuge’. “You must have to be real careful with all the con artists runnin’ around.” Howie believed in a simplistic approach to deceit — do it.

“Shall we say five o’clock this afternoon?”

“For what?”

“The inspection, Mister Morgan.”

“Oh.” Howie was caught in the movie again. “Yeah. Perfect.” He needed some more stimulants. “Does George know where she is?”

“George who?”

“George Fenton.” Howie started back pedalling here. “He’s, uh, done other inspections. Just figurin’ he knows the company and all.”

“Mr. Fenton is out of town.” The voice on the line was all business, calm and professional. “Don’t worry, we have many people here who can look after you. And don’t worry, we’ll find you.”

“Well she’s lookin’ good, Mister Forster.” He lied so well, he figured he must’ve been born with it. “Lookin’ very good.” Howie killed the line hastily, could only handle so much of their bullshit. He figured he’d done pretty well. The bastard made him nervous. What was that ‘we’ll find you’ stuff?

It was eleven-thirty, and he pulled off the rags he had masquerading as clothes. All he had left to do was the marine salvage for equipment. He decided to call them and throw it in the van when he got there. He applauded himself. He’d grab a few days’ provisions for the boys on the way out of town. He didn’t want them to starve. Couldn’t work a man on an empty stomach he mused. He soaked the thin forearm plaster from the dune buggy mishap and pulled it off while he sang.

It had gone real good, he thought. He kept thinking about what a dynamite guy he was. He wanted a piece of ass, but business first. A professional to the limit, he praised himself. Besides, he’d get the ass tonight; remember to tell Pierre to keep a special reserve. Maybe he’d get a little blow too. He’d earned it. Maybe some booze for the boys. He’d take care of everybody, he figured,

he was that kind of guy.

Out of the shower now, he popped the painkillers and speed again. He kept thinking about his men. Yeah, maybe even get them a little smoke for the cruise, a going away present. Why not? It was that kind of attitude that made employees love their boss. Yeah. He was on top of it right now. He had the brain, that was what made him the boss. That and the balls.

CHAPTER SIX

*Los Hombres Restaurant
Houston, Texas
Monday Noon*

“I’m listening.”

Hertzel was still settling himself. He was uncomfortable with the way the senator’s eyes followed him. “Relax Henry. I just got here.” He pushed towards a defensive perimeter. “I get a phone call from your secretary at one in the morning telling me to be in Houston at twelve noon. No explanation. Nothing. Just be here.” Hertzel noticed the unflinching intensity of the senator’s glare. He let his thin frame slump, looked for a little empathy. “I need a drink.”

“I’m still waiting. You’ve got fifteen minutes before Luis Estaphan arrives,” the senator said.

Hertzel waved at a waiter as if he should be hailing a cab out of town. “I have no idea what this is about, senator. Waiting for what?”

“El Salvador.”

Hertzel placed his drink order, switched it to a double as the senator watched him carefully.

“What about El Salvador?” Hertzel played it out, but his pocked face was changing color slightly and he’d started fiddling with the cutlery.

“Don’t fuck with me, Hertz. Not today!” The senator remained intense, blood slowly rising into his face. “You can talk to me now, Hertz, or you can talk to Estaphan and his people on your own.” He leaned his meaty body across the table, voice lowering, flat and foreboding. “Luis Estaphan wants to meet you, Hertz.” The senator took Hertz’s bony hand in his, pressed it knuckle-down on the table, hard. Hertz’s face showed the discomfort a two hundred pound man could bring to bear on a set of fragile knuckles. “You do know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

Hertz wrenched his overwhelmed knuckles from the senator’s grip.

“You do remember who Estaphan is, don’t you?” The company that baled out our little salvage operation? The company looking for legitimate businesses?” The senator shook his head with faithless disbelief. “Is there a problem with your fucking memory, Hertz?”

He leaned back from the table and stared mutely while Hertz rubbed his knuckles and fidgeted from more than just the pain.

The drinks arrived. Hertz downed his while the senator kept wafting for an answer while he watched his partner’s uneasiness.

“El Salvador happened like I said it happened.” Hertz was coming around, had figured the terrain and had made a choice — lie through his teeth. “The fucking Sandinistas blew it up, Henry. Estaphan should be happy. We made money.” He was whining his way towards self-righteous. “We made more from the insurance

than the salvage would have got us if we'd towed her back! A quarter million more. You know it!"

The senator kept the cold stare going.

"What's the problem, Henry? What's the fucking problem with this Luis Estaphan?" Hertzels hands were moving as fast as his mouth. "He'll get his cut. It's in the books."

Hertzels'd run his course. The senator sat for a minute.

The silence lingered until it grew dramatic. When the senator finally spoke his voice had a low, strange calm in it. His face was set deadpan, "Let me educate you, my friend. This is Luis Estaphan's restaurant. You're drinking Luis Estaphan's Scotch. You're sitting at Luis Estaphan's private table. You probably got here in one of Luis Estaphan's cabs. Luis Estaphan owns a lot of things. Luis Estaphan owns you."

The senator paused to let it sink in. "But make no mistake about it, Luis Estaphan is not a respectable businessman. But it's very important he invest his money in respectable businesses. That's what he thought he was doing when he took forty-nine per cent of International Salvage. And whatever happened in El Salvador two months ago has got the law chasing him." The senator paused to make sure Hertzels was still with him. Twenty years ago, Luis Estaphan was an executioner. The Feds had him. He could've put half the Mexican American mobsters in Jail, but he didn't. Today he's a very important boss. He's a very connected old man." He paused again. "A very serious old man, you asshole."

The senator stopped talking because he was getting himself nervous. He waited, checking Hertzels intake before he wrapped it up. "The only thing different now Hertzels is the fact he doesnt do executions anymore. Somebody does them for him — now.

Hertzels bought into the point of view, his pockmarks showing a little more distinctly with the loss of color. "Ive got nothing to hide from the man. Ill tell him what happened, just like I told you."

The senator chuckled softly, cruel menace riding through his voice. "He thinks youre fucking him, putting him at risk here. He didnt buy heat Hertzels; he bought a legitimate company. He doesnt want people making problems where there shouldnt be any. The senator leaned forward. "I know you let that idiot Howie blow that ship up down in El Salvador." His eyes never left Hertzels. "Ive got political ambitions here, Hertzels, and Im not backing your bullshit on this one." He sat back silently and smiled. "Want another drink, big shot?"

Hertzels glanced at his watch and nodded. He couldnt see the entrance from his position at the back of the restaurant, but he knew something was happening. The place had taken on an air, a little extra silence, the maitre d straightening himself as he walked past with a quickened pace. Hertzels fought the temptation to turn around. He knew well enough what was happening. Instead, he finished off his second double. No need to look anxious, he thought. He forced himself to relax,

knowing apprehension could look a lot like guilt.

The senator was nowhere near as discreet, shuffling and stretching, probably figuring he had less to worry about. He looked like he was wondering if he was sitting in the right spot as he awaited the approaching entourage.

Hertzel noted it and found it didn't do a lot for his anxiety. But two doubles and he couldn't resist. "Relax, Henry, it's my ass on the line, remember?" He enjoyed watching the bulldog-like senator step down from the number one spot. He ordered himself another double scotch. His confidence grew; he knew he could handle the situation, no problem. Everybody liked money.

"You dumb shit. This is serious. Don't play games with this man."

The shifty salvage dealer didn't even notice the senator standing for the arrival of Luis Estaphan and his people.

"Sit down." It was Enrico's voice, Luis' lieutenant, and it came out from behind the two giants preceding him. The senator's etched-in-stone smile did a quick fade. The giants walked past him, checking the rear area of the restaurant as Enrico came up beside them, his five-hundred-dollar suit shimmering.

"Now, stand up."

The senator pulled himself up from his chair again.

"Turn around." He obeyed and underwent a quick frisk.

One of them returned from the back, indicated it was secure, and headed toward the front of the

restaurant.

“Your turn.”

Hertzel looked quizzical. “Me? You don’t need to search me, my friend. I’m a businessman.”

“Get up!” What Enrico lacked in subtlety he made up for with nonnegotiable authority. “Get up and turn around. Now!”

Hertzel got the impact and buried further discussion. He preferred nonchalance. “Okay. Suit yourself.”

Enrico did, making a point of handling him roughly, spinning him back around close to his face. “Sit down.”

Hertzel sat.

His introductions over, he stepped back as Lorraine, Luis’ eye-catching companion, joined them.

“Mister Estaphan is not in the best of spirits. I advised him not to come.” She looked directly at Hertzel. “But he insisted on meeting you, Mister uh -”

“Markovitz.” He stood and held out his hand. Finding no takers, he repeated his name. “Hertzel Markovitz. And I’m honored.” He was flattered over the man’s desire to meet him, despite his poor health.

“I wouldn’t necessarily consider it good news,” said Lorraine.

The disdain in the woman’s comment brought Hertzel’s imperious thoughts down several units. But who was she? Some dumb bitch secretary, he thought. “Well,” he said, “perhaps we could get on with this meeting?”

She smiled coldly. "By all means." She turned away as if he was never there.

Enrico stepped back against the small partition that separated them from the main dining area. He stared hard, moving quickly and intensely between the two of them. Cold and penetrating, a bird of prey.

Within minutes, Lorraine returned pushing Estaphan. Hertzfel found the whole picture perplexing, not what he'd expected of a big-time mob boss.

"You were expecting something else, Mister Markovitz?" Estaphan smiled weakly. "Al Capone, perhaps?"

Hertzfel laughed nervously. He started to stand, to introduce himself properly, got Enrico's menacing look telling him not to bother, and went conversational instead. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mister Estaphan."

Estaphan nodded the acknowledgment and addressed the senator. "How are you, Senator? Well, since our meeting last night?"

"Yes, thank you." The senator was quiet, abnormally so.

When a glass of bottled water arrived by Luis' side, Lorraine held it to his lips while he sipped the tiniest amount. Everything waited while she helped him drink. She helped him with a lot of things. Hertzfel glanced across at the senator, half-thinking the whole thing a joke, some monstrous gag the senator had cooked up just to mess his head. The senator refused to return the look, kept his eyes on the old man, where his bread got

battered.

"I certainly hope I haven't inconvenienced you, bringing you all the way up here for such a modest reason." He was looking at Hertzel. "I wanted to meet the man who can turn a hundred thousand dollar salvage operation into a quarter million dollar insurance claim."

Hertzel said nothing, got confused, and glanced quickly across at the senator for hints. He got none. "Well, uh, I don't know what to say." He didn't know which way the flag flew at the moment, at least not on the basis of the senator's earlier input, input Hertzel figured might be no more than jealous sabotage because the old man liked his style. Hertzel thought he was figuring it.

"No need to say anything, Hertzel. May I call you Hertzel?"

Hertzel nodded, smiled congenially and confidently.

"Most people today are afraid to step out, to take a chance. But you, an entrepreneur." He stopped for another sip. "And far away. El Salvador. Very good. Very, very good. Reminds me a little of the old days. How exactly did you pull it off?"

Hertzel couldn't help acknowledging the compliments to his skills, couldn't help putting himself in the little old man's lap. "No big deal, really, Mr. Estaphan. One hundred thousand if we'd towed it back here, cut it up and sold it for salvage. A quarter million from insurance," he winked at everyone, "if something should happen to it beyond our control." A self-satisfied smile

crept across his face. "So my people -" He corrected himself, "our people blew it right out of the water one night. Blamed the Sandinista guerillas."

Hertzel watched the old man chuckle, and figured he was in forever.

"It was perfect." He knew Estaphan was concerned about publicity, "Cops nosing around a little, no big problem. It didn't even make the papers up here."

The old man's chuckle had faded by now.

"I wanted to speak to you personally because I need to be certain we understand each other. I have many business interests, but the one I have with you is legitimate. Honest." He paused and looked reassuringly at Hertzel. "The trouble a couple of months ago in El Salvador, I will let go. I can assume you didn't know better. But if it ever happens again, any kind of trouble for me with the authorities because of my business interests with you and the senator — and you are a dead man."

Hertzel heard the word, dead. It got his attention, almost. Hertzel's biggest problem was his thinking everyone else was as full of idle talk as he was.

"You see, I like to reward people relative to what they do for me."

His leggy companion leaned over for no apparent reason, whispered.

Luis Estaphan got a look on his face like a frail but ancient child at a premature bedtime. "I'm told my time is up. Age, you know. Medication, constant attention to these old bones."

Enrico and the two giants started to scan the exit.

Estaphan turned to the senator while the woman wheeled his chair from the table. "Sorry I can't stay to eat with you. You two enjoy. Anything you want, it's on me." He turned to Hertz, his voice growing very diminutive, unobtrusive. "I want to thank you again for coming all the way up here on such short notice."

Hertz stood up. "It's no problem, Mister Estaphan. I had business here anyway." He couldn't say enough nice things. "Pleasure to meet you. Appreciate what you said. Count on me any time."

Luis Estaphan didn't have to stay long. He'd met the man who had crossed him, and marked him. He disappeared behind the woman's body as quickly as he'd arrived. The restaurant seemed to unconsciously sense relief at their exit.

Hertz flagged the waiter, while continuing to sit there like a Cheshire cat, all pumped up and purring. "Well, let's eat, Henry." The Cheshire cat turned into a wide grin. "Guess you were wrong, eh? That's the difference between you and me. I'm a businessman, and he is too. I know what makes that old man tick. Business, good business. Smart business. He appreciated what I'd done because it made cash for him, even if it brought him a little heat." He passed a menu across the table to his silent partner, one who was planning to get really silent if Hertz didn't get a little smarter. "You, you're a lawyer, and a good one." He winked. "And a politician."

The senator just stared at Hertz, his face stony. "Hertz, if you fuck up again he said he was going to kill you." He paused. "What about this salvage you've got going in New Orleans? Is Howie in charge of that? The man is fucking crazy Hertz, you know that. He's a loose cannon."

"Killing me is a figure of speech." Hertz leaned across the table like he was going to impart some great wisdom. "He had to say that, let his people know he's the boss. But him and I, we understand. I made an executive decision and I made some money for him. Simple enough. I'll make sure we don't get into any more cop and crime stuff."

"What about the job Howie's on now?"

"Nothing, nothing. I can control the guy. No problems with Howie. He does what I tell him."

"Did you tell him to blow up half the port in El Salvador?"

Hertz paused before answering. "No, not exactly, but I might have if he'd been able to get in touch with me, if it'd been the smart thing to do."

The senator broke off the stare he'd been holding on Hertz. "Well it wasn't the smart thing to do." He turned his eyes to the menu as he finished. "Was it?"

"Okay. Relax." Hertz'd had too many drinks to just shut up. "Nothing fishy's going to happen again, not on the New Orleans job or any other job." He raised his hands towards the silent senator. "And I can handle Howie. No sweat."

CHAPTER SEVEN

*A Marine Salvage Yard
New Orleans, Louisiana
Monday, Noon*

Howie'd done well, loading up at the salvage yard for a good buck. A single grand to Jack got him everything he needed — survival gear to keep Lloyds happy and a dummy receipt to put a grand in his own pocket. Not to mention the couple of eighty-proof grams for his head. He'd already had a taste with Jack. It was good stuff.

They'd jammed the van with every conceivable piece of equipment, some of it nearly new. But not the drinking cans. They'd held gas, but he figured they'd work as well for water. Besides, he wouldn't have to drink it. He had chain, about a half ton of it, all sizes, mostly big, heavy-link stuff, and the life raft. It would please the boys, he thought. It was a little small but seaworthy, never used. The safety stickers had expired, but they were like the food stores, best before.

He liked himself. The coke helped. If Howie had a particular skill, it was acknowledging himself. He was always impressed with the way people bought his bullshit. Without doubt, he thought, it was the single most powerful item in

his repertoire — bullshit.

He fondled the walkie-talkies Jack had thrown in free. Why not, it hadn't cost Jack anything, and his boss trusted him. Trust was great, Howie thought. Besides, it was on the Lloyds' list. They didn't work worth a damn. So what? Nobody would notice until they were at sea. He'd talk up the life raft and the extinguishers.

Howie got back onto the road, manhandling the burdened van back across the Pontchartrain, the body pounding hard on the frame every time the tires crossed an expansion grid.

He talked to the van trying to convince it to take him home. The method always worked — lead foot her into crisis, and then sweet-talk her back from the edge, just like his women. “Come on, baby. Love me. I'll never do it to you again.” The old shitbox always bought the lies.

Just like his women. In his last marriage, his wife would wait with his kid in the sweltering trailer for days, weeks, once for a month, without word. He'd done it to her a lot. His bullshit dreams got her to follow him out of New Jersey. He used to give her the bonanza story. “This is the big one, baby. After this there ain't no more worries for us.” He'd say. Eventually it stopped working. He'd figured it would wear out anyway, but he was free mileage until then. Women will buy anything, he thought. Until it got too used, like everything else about Howie.

He noticed how he always thought about her

when he was sweet-talking the van into overwork and abuse. Sweet talk worked on her for a long time. It might still be working, if it wasn't for the beatings. Not that she didn't deserve them, he thought.

The thought made him realize his drugs were wearing off. He started feeling the fatigue and ache moving back into him and decided he needed to drop some help, but he needed to eat something first. He was genuinely down on fuel.

He felt around behind him, running blind as he looked back and pulled the first package he found. Oreos. He ripped them open and jammed several into his mouth. Gomez and Bobby'd better appreciate what he went through for them. He'd gotten them provisions and equipment and he'd done without. The skipper is always the last in line, he thought. He liked the romantic tone of that.

A blaring horn motivated him back to his own lane. His stomach tried to throw the Oreos back up at him, but he fought it, compromised, and spit whatever remained in his mouth out the window. He must be desperate, he thought. How can Gomez eat that shit? What kind of nourishment is that for a grown man? But it was cheap, and he smiled. He shopped with Gomez in mind. He bought Oreos, Pepsis, chips, hot dogs, hot sauce, some miscellaneous canned everything.

Howie finally rolled off the causeway, screeching to a halt at the drive-thru menu.

Time for some real food.

While Howie ate 'real food', Bobby stood exhausted on the stern side of the last watertight door in the upper hold. He'd managed to wedge it shut with some makeshift tools. It wouldn't seal, but at least it shut — something less than a labour of love. It wasn't good enough, but it looked right. That was all they wanted. How didn't count.

He dropped onto the catwalk that ran the perimeter of the engine room below. Covered in sweat and grime now, he was stripped to his underwear, an oily rag for a sweatband. He was weak from hunger and dehydration, from the labor, the kind that dried you up and wrung you out.

The doors on the forward holds of both cargo decks had been relatively undamaged by the fire. But here, in her stern where she'd burned with serious heat, the real nightmare lived. The bulkheads directly forward of the engine room had been cooked so furiously he could see the rolls in the walls. With the bulkheads that badly damaged, he understood the watertight doors' resistance to anything resembling conformity. It would be a primary struggle to get them swinging, much less lashed shut and sealed.

Bobby faked the seal on most of them. He hadn't done badly, considering his access to equipment. Unless Howie could bribe Lloyds, he knew there was no way some of the doors would pass.

He looked down into the engine room. Sludge and debris floated everywhere, a couple of feet of it. He smelt it, the usual engine room odors with

a twist — oil, grease, sweat, and smoke too. It was the pungent, lingering stench that went with fire. Despite that obvious blanket, the still smell of men drifted through his nostrils, sat in his throat with the rest of it. He could taste it, the residual of long-time toil, as though sweat itself had a soul. It had earned the right to stay in remembrance of those whose pores it had come from, those who had lived it.

The engines were visible through the steel rungs of the gangway steps. Two of them, big as trucks, sitting there like the sphinx, knew everything and told nothing. It surprised him to see them still intact. Probably someone would cut through the side in Brownsville and take them out whole. The propeller shafts, one for each engine, stood four feet high and twice that around. The same dark mud like sludge covered the bottom two feet of them. They'd have to be chained down.

A competent sea tug would carry her at five knots in good weather, and that meant the screws would turn just that fast. If they turned, they'd spin the shafts into dead engines. It was bad enough in itself, but in reverse it was a lot like winding a watch inside out until it imploded. You'd have gears, springs, and hot bits the size of truck tires flying everywhere.

Bobby'd seen it happen fifteen miles off Halifax, pistons the size of a small car engine punched right through the hull; a man he'd known for five hours lost his guts when a chunk ripped into him. It was indiscriminate specificity. A man hurt in the vitals could suffer a long time before he died.

Bobby'd heard that before, but to him, on that day, it became an eternity. Firsthand wasn't something you could get out of a book. Nobody wrote that well. He remembered, too, how nobody really gave a damn. He recalled carrying his buddy up out of the engine room so they could bag him.

The owners didn't lose a word in their bitch about engines blowing apart, who was responsible and what it was going to cost them.

Bobby told them to blame the carcass if they were really desperate. He saw the lights go on. He laid the man on the open body bag atop the stretcher. He didn't hesitate. He walked back to the fat mouthy one whose lights were still flashing from Bobby's suggestion.

Bobby squeezed him tight by the neck, rubbing blood and slime all over him before he dropped him onto the deck. "Yeah, you fat fuck! Blame the carcass!" He wasn't thinking consequences when he jammed his boot up under the throat and slammed the man's head down hard on the steel deck plating. "I guess this screws my bonus, eh."

The other two had backed way off, looking for cavalry. He lunged at them and laughed his way off the gangway. Didn't even get off the docks before they had him for it. Beat him generously in the back of the patrol car.

He was sentenced to two years less a day, the fat man ended up with partial paralysis. Bobby didn't give a damn about that, it was losing his daughter over it that made it tough to handle, made him lose his cool in custody and get a couple months psychiatric evaluation time. He never got

to the legal time. One night he climbed a fence, stole his daughter back, and ran. He still figured it was worth every minute.

The night he climbed the fence, he said good-bye. He blew the fat suit's car to pieces. It didn't kill him, didn't hurt anybody. Bobby just wanted the soulless grunt to walk around looking over his shoulder for a while.

He thought about it while he sat there and could see the limping bastard sitting at his breakfast table, gulping coffee and bitching at his kids, sending the wife out to start the car.

Bobby smiled at the thought — what some women would do for security.

The memory faded as he stood there in the engine room, knee deep in the sludge as his eye caught the soot covered brass nameplate screwed to the engine room wall. He waded across to it and started scraping the filth away, uncovering it like a relic. It was written in Spanish, "*Inca Tupaq yupanqui*". He stumbled through the pronunciation while he wondered why no one had stolen it. Usually there'd be a fight over it. They must have missed it beneath the filth and black char. He polished the edges, spoke aloud to the nameplate, "I'll call you *The Lady Inca*". He considered it an introduction. It was good to be on a first name basis with a lady of the sea, no matter how bad she had been mauled.

Bobby stayed with the thought until the dull, ongoing repetition of the van horn extracted his attention. Howie the dynamic. Bobby wasn't looking forward to the bullshit, but if there was

food he could tolerate a lot at the moment — even Howie.

He pulled on his pants and dragged his fatigue topside, to the highest point on board besides the bridge amidships. The heat hit him as soon as he stepped over the coaming; hot and dry, not a trace of air moving anywhere.

He watched the van careen and recoil in and out of the dirt tracks, wisps of smoke shooting off the wheels every time the low riding chassis struck a high spot along the rutted mudflat. He didn't know what Howie had in it, but knew he'd find out while he unloaded it.

As he crossed to the quarterdeck, he saw Gomez for the first time in a couple of hours. He'd come topside earlier to jury-rig a loading platform. From the distance it looked respectable, almost professional.

Gomez's initiative lifted Bobby's spirits considerably. The sight of his accomplishment drew the energy for a shout and a clenched fist acknowledgment out of Bobby. Gomez gifted Bobby with his large, toothless grin and a thumbs-up.

As Bobby slid himself down the railing onto the well deck, he got a closer look at Gomez's appearance. He was only wearing pants, his upper body covered with filth and his face etched deep with fatigue. Bobby saw death for an instant and swept the specter aside abruptly, figured it was just a mirror anyway. Eat something, and they'd both get better.

Bobby slapped him easy across the back. "Muy bien!" Pulled back a step to admire the cre-

ation and returned the thumbs up. "Muy bien, hombre."

Gomez smiled and patted the boom like a favourite pet.

That was all the communication they indulged in. Turning in unison, they let the deck rail take their weight and watched Howie slither up through the drying mud of the low tide line.

The engine hadn't died before Howie was out of the van, clean clothes all around, and a black baseball cap pulled down tight. Spiffed. He was still a little ragged in the face, but otherwise greased and racing, his mouth moving on automatic.

"Ahoy, me hearties! Avast!" He swung the rear doors open. "Let's get the boom down here." He'd noticed. "Unload. You boys bin workin' your tails?" He pulled equipment from the van, dropping it indifferently onto the mud, tiring quickly. "Get down here! Help me unload this shit!"

Bobby stepped on the coaming, gave Gomez a look the Mexican understood and enjoyed without benefit of the language.

He smiled. "Is okay, Bubby. If it break, it break when Howie on it, si?"

Bobby intensified his concentration. Gomez's smile turned into a chuckle as he grabbed the winch line, pulling the cargo netting up close enough for Bobby to step onto. Bobby shook his head and pulled himself up on the bulwark, he grabbed an overhead line to balance himself while he tested some tentative footing on the shifting netting.

Gomez let the winch line out slow. "Adios, amigo." He started cranking.

Bobby had no solid footing, and could feel himself starting a body spin off the overhead line. He grabbed a second line and suspended himself by his arms while he got his feet wedged in balance between opposing squares in the netting.

He turned his attention to the approaching mud, to Howie and his anxious intensity. Saw 'lid poppers' written all over him and his movements. He wondered what the drug of the day was. Dospan? Dexedrine? Darvon? A little Demerol for miscellaneous pain?

Howie's cleaned up appearance had faded quickly with the brief effort he'd put into unloading. Bobby knew who would finish the job.

He stepped off the netting as it touched the mud, slid a little to get his footing, impressed with Gomez's skill. Howie jabbered. Bobby didn't hear a word of it, absently reading the inscription across the front of Howie's cap while he looked for food.

Howie noticed the lack of attention and got in Bobby's face, working for the acknowledgment of eye contact."

"Gotta get movin' here, Bobby. Bobby!" Howie jumped into some tantrum-like gestures, a kid who got his favourite toy swiped. "You listenin', Bobby?"

Bobby enjoyed the irritation but let go of the routine anyway, squinting as he read the hat. 'Sometimes I wake up grouchy and sometimes I let her sleep in.' Bobby gave a phoney chuckle be-

fore letting his eyes drop to meet Howie, retaining the distance. "That's pretty funny, Howie. You're looking real spiffed."

Howie felt the chill of indifference. Bobby let him, talked business. "Gomez closed off the bilge hatches. I worked the watertight doors down, tight as I could. Some of them are screwed. You'd better look at them." The last statement was a combination of afterthought and command, both concepts that rubbed Howie the wrong way. "And you'd better get down and have a look in the engine room."

Bobby paused, gave Howie a no-bullshit look, and let it settle for a second. "Me, personally. I'm real hungry, Howie. Real tired. Real dirty. So don't bother me right now. Okay?" He turned back to the food search. "Thanks for asking."

It bothered Howie to have his pre-eminence usurped, he wasn't used to it, Bobby could tell.

Bobby had the food separated from the rest of the supplies and made a brief check of the equipment already tossed to the mud. He saw nothing that qualified as immediate need and made his way to the side of the van.

Howie climbed on top of the netting and started shouting and gesturing at Gomez to winch him aboard. Bobby climbed out of the van to enjoy Howie's comic struggle with the netting.

Once it was topside he could hear Howie's disembodied voice exploding all over Gomez. Better him than me, he figured.

Gomez winched the netting back down and Bobby loaded the edible provisions first, filling the

net's remaining space with only enough to keep Gomez from overworking himself on the winch. He took a solid grip on the overhead lines and shouted up for Gomez to take him aboard.

With the load as light as it was he still went up a lot more slowly than he'd descended. By the time he got to the top, Howie'd disappeared.

Bobby dropped to the deck, guiding the load down the last few feet. Neither of them said anything. Gomez located the Oreos, gulped a couple without chewing and washed them back with warm Pepsi.

Bobby wasn't so quick with his choice. It took some examination. He had to work his way through the Oreos, Cheezies, marshmallow cookies, Gummy Pops, and packaged cupcakes. On and on. His search ended at a can of Irish stew, the only one, and some white bread.

Without ceremony he crashed the can lid with his buck knife and spread the cold, lumpy gelatinous mixture onto the bread. It tasted just fine, he told himself. He finished the entire can in minutes, wiping his arm across his mouth, the knife blade across his pants. He pulled out the bag of dope he'd liberated from the van.

Gomez had slowed his Oreo assault to the mop-up stage, but kept at it between tokes.

Bobby was stoned. He took the time to close his eyes and drift out of it.

Not much time had passed before Howie shouted from the quarterdeck. Bobby figured he'd been in the engine room, and was feeling very needy about getting to it. He had very little time

before the new Lloyds man, Robert Forster, arrived with his little black book.

From that point on, Howie actually did something, took care of the miscellany, closing off loose start up circuitry, lashing down or removing anything unattached.

Bobby and Gomez spent the best part of their time taking turns dropping under the slime in the engine room to feed chain through the underside of the propeller shafts. It was sizable, heavy link chain, about as large as could be procured and still be workable. It had to be wrapped both ways, starting at the stern and working forward. Then the same procedure was repeated from the point where the shafts ran into the engine housings.

Howie belched unrequested commentary between demands for more effort in less time. Bobby thought his personal wiring was fried worse than the engine room's. Probably was, long before it happened to *The Lady Inca*.

Neither he nor Gomez paid him much attention, both too strung out to put effort into anything but getting the shafts chained and getting themselves out of the slime.

Two hours had passed quickly. Robert Forster had only been waiting on shore for a few minutes before Howie entertained him with an unceremonious plunge into the water on his way to pick him up in the life raft. The spectacle wasn't high on anybody's list of things to watch, and it was humorous to Forster until he realized he would be

riding back to the ship with the guy. Nevertheless, Robert Forster was acquiring his own sense of what lay ahead.

He watched the raft approach as he changed into his work clothes, sliding the strap for his waterproof document case over his head.

He could hear Howie jabbering in his very own inimitable voice as the raft pulled close. Forster looked through the string of profanities immediately, and quickly categorized Howie, confirming his own suspicions.

He put his focus into the task at hand as he made his way carefully through the knee-deep water. Really slippery, like Howie, he thought.

Robert squatted in the tiny raft. He didn't have to try too hard to have nothing to say — Howie wasn't the first idiot he'd shared a raft with.

“She's good, real good! No need to worry 'bout nothin'! It's a real inconvenience for ya Robert, I know. Sorry to hear 'bout George. We could as easy sign the papers back at the office, save ya going to all this trouble for nothin'. Take my word for it — she looks bad, but she's real tight — tighter than a nun's pussy!” Howie laughed. “If ya know what I mean!”

Howie turned for a response and threatened to capsize the dinghy, Robert nodded in understanding of the metaphor — he could see he was frustrating Howie. He also knew guys like this didn't give up easily.

“I'm tellin' ya, you're wasting a lot of valuable company time and you're gonna make a real

fuckin' mess out of yourself just gettin' on board."

"I appreciate your concern, but the company insures my person and my property." Robert fixed his focus on the approaching rope ladder. "It's all part of the job."

The more Robert heard the man talk, the more thoroughly he wanted to do the inspection. He smiled at the hole Howie was digging for himself, at how easy it was to read this one. He expected to be offered cash.

"What's so funny?" Howie blurted it out of the corner of his mouth, between grunts.

"Nothing, Mr. Morgan. Just thinking to myself. Enjoying the day." Robert smiled again, unable to hold back. "The view."

Robert grabbed the rope ladder and lifted himself onto it with the skill of someone who'd done it often. The sudden shift in weight threw Howie backwards over the side.

Robert looked back briefly as he used his upper body strength to climb his way to the swaying steel gangway above his head, using his feet to bounce himself off the hull as he climbed.

By the time Howie corralled the raft and made his way topside, Robert had the documentation out of the waterproof case and was busy making notes, focusing himself. More competencies to irritate Howie. Robert couldn't help but notice Howie's efforts at reading the inverted writing as he stood dripping water onto the deck in front of Forster.

"I'm sorry about that little slip down there." Robert said it without meaning a word. "You

okay?"

Howie stood before him, exhausted and breathing hard, not at all the man who arrived shipside a few hours earlier.

"Where do you wanna start? Engine room?" He said between breaths. "No problem there. She's in great shape."

Robert registered Howie's attempt to gloss over the situation.

"Real tight. Don't need to bother." Howie wasn't making eye contact at the moment. "Like I said, Rob." Howie worked the familiar now, one last try. "This is a formality, nothin' more. We can sew the whole deal up quick. Let's you and me sit and talk. Work somethin' out. Do the papers and we can all have an early day." Howie's body got spastic, his words and motions like two songs on the same radio station, same time. "What do you say, Rob? Earn your pay the easy way?" Howie rubbed his gut and gave a burnt-out smile. "I sure as hell do! What do you say, Rob?"

"I'm going to start in the engine room, Mister Morgan. I would prefer to do the inspection on my own. I know my way around and if I have any questions, I'll find you."

As he turned and headed astern, Howie's face showed distortion. He stopped, turning in time to catch Howie's expression. "And just for the sake of propriety, so nobody thinks there's anything inappropriate happening, I suggest we stay on a last-name basis." He mocked a wink. "We wouldn't want anyone to think there's collusion involved in this inspection, would we, Mister Morgan?"

“Absolutely not!”

Bobby had been watching it all from the aft quarterdeck. He'd seen the show, admired the man's skill with the ladder as well as his creative impudence — letting Howie go for the unscheduled swim. That was something Bobby wouldn't do, but then he knew Howie a little better than Forster did.

As Bobby rounded the front of the quarterdeck he almost stepped on Gomez asleep under some partly rotted canvas up close beside the quarterdeck cowling. He moved past his sleeping mate, passing Forster about a third of the way amidships. They didn't acknowledge each other beyond a nod. Bobby wondered if Forster'd noticed the slight smirk in his eyes, the admiration.

Encountering Howie at the hatchway into the hold, Bobby figured Howie's state of mind from the violent, vibrating blaze coming up through his body and out through his eyes. “Take it easy, Howie.” Bobby lacked the energy for conversation.

“Motherfuckin' faggot asshole!” Howie slammed his fist hard into the watertight hatch cover. “He's gonna fuck us up! I know it!” Foam accumulated around the corners of his mouth. “Where the fuck's my briefcase?”

“Chill out, Howie. Bobby grabbed him by the arm, trying to soften his words, staying non-threatening. “Get some sleep. Let him do the inspection. Then deal with it.”

Howie wrenched his arm out of Bobby's grasp. “You got any uppers?”

Ignoring the question, Bobby gave up the conversation. He turned and continued forward, his words trailing behind him. "I'm gonna get some sleep. I'll be in the forecastle."

Howie stood in the hatchway, bitching his newly buggered hand and mouthing all the things he was going to do to the faggot inspector if he fucked them around for any reason.

Bobby heard it behind him, background noise, Howie's *raison d'être*. He kept walking until he couldn't hear it anymore, found himself a little shade forward, and pulled some rotting canvas over his head.

He fell asleep telling himself Howie wasn't crazy enough to kill anybody.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*A Beach House
San Diego, California
Late Monday Afternoon*

It was just before seven o'clock. Rachel Forster had been there since early afternoon. The movers had come and gone. She stood in the middle of the living room, admiring the furniture. Her tall, lithe body appearing regal amidst the setting. The sound of the Pacific breaking in across the long expanse of white sand drew her to the deck, taking the fresh-brewed coffee with her. She wanted to get a little more of the stunning solitude before she returned to the realities of the Club Lucky.

The evening breeze blew gently across her aristocratic face. She was tall, with rich ebony hair, and a slightly elongated face. She had a certain look to her that had more going for it than just beautiful. She was unusual, desirable. The motion in her mind made her face move in certain undeniably enchanting ways. Whether she was dressed in full-length evening gowns, jeans or mismatched socks, she was always a comfortable contender in any situation. There was dignity in her carriage, and at times arrogance — an almost

imperceptible blend. She didn't appear older or younger than her years, just thirty- one.

Too much time in the city, she thought as she watched the sun throwing reddish-orange and yellow shafts across the sky in front of her. It was her first sunset at the place. She'd arrived late Sunday night, and she'd already had the pleasure of a sunrise.

She sat down on the new lounge furniture and sipped the coffee as her thoughts wandered to her brother Robert and how she'd found him twelve years ago after the two of them had been orphaned into separate foster homes. He'd run from his when he was fourteen and spent six years working the streets. For six years he'd been involved in drugs, gang wars and extortion — all the things an East L.A. gang member did to be reputable, to be somebody.

When he was twenty, he was going to do some serious time when she walked into the court with a fancy lawyer and got him the navy instead. She walked up and hugged him that day. She saved his life. Until then he hadn't known he had a sister. Blood ran deep for Rachel, and since then, for Robert. She had connections.

They'd stayed in touch ever since. She'd watched him through the navy and then into Lloyds where his love of ships had served him well. They'd gotten close. Things had been working out. He'd gotten a promotion and a transfer, from New Orleans to San Diego — her town.

An hour had slid by quickly while she reminisced. She let the colours in the sky above the

panorama of the Pacific fill her mind before acknowledging the need to head back into San Diego.

She rose a little stiff from the chair, her body remembering the day's involvement with furniture arrangement. The soft, white, loose-fitting cotton filled with the cool evening air as she walked from the deck, through the sliding glass doors and into the house — the ocean floating behind her as it ran up against the sky.

She surveyed the interior once again. A woman's prerogative, she thought. It was genuinely open, with clean, classic lines throughout. A spiral staircase led to a second floor full of windows and balconies. The House was not over furnished. She was pleased she'd kept it to a minimum, and what she'd acquired fit the place. There was no clutter; Robert would like it.

She played with the temptation to keep the place for herself and let Robert move into the penthouse. He wouldn't mind, although she knew he'd prefer something out of town, near the ocean. For a fact he won't have anticipated her buying the place for him.

No, she decided, still enjoying her fantasy, a deal's a deal. He deserved to live here. After all he got her to do it. She should have bought some country long ago, but she'd always been too busy. Three hundred thousand dollars, easily worth four, another special deal from an old real estate acquaintance.

She made her way back to the deck for a last look, still smiling at the thought of being Robert's

landlady, thinking of an amusing way to tell him that the landlady had visiting rights.

Deciding to give herself a few more minutes to relax, Rachel settled back on the lounge. It had taken a long time and a lot of effort, but life can work out, she thought.

It all made her feel exceptionally satisfied. Robert was all the family she had. They would be even closer now. She wondered what the parents she never knew would think of their kids now.

Another twelve hours and she would pick him up at the airport, she couldn't wait — but he wouldn't be there, Howie'd just seen to that.

It was late that same night and some three thousand miles away, but Hertzell had no intention of waiting until morning — he didn't have to, he only needed a telephone line.

He pressed hard on the expensive, monogrammed pen, his irritation working, as usual, against his better judgment. The fine gold tip gave in to the pressure and jammed itself into the shaft. Every time he thought of Howie and the death announcement he just got from some guy who wouldn't give his name, the pen took a little more pressure. The phone continued its distant ring. He snapped the pen and flung it to the garbage.

“One moment, sir.”

In silent anger, he noted it had already been several. He took the hand-sized pyrite paper-weight into his free hand. He couldn't break it.

Maybe he'd throw it, through a window.

"I'm putting you through, sir."

Hertzel managed to work physical hostility into his tone. "A definite understatement, lady!" He hurled the paperweight at the wall.

The oversized oaf, Charley, stuck his head in the door, looking for the cause of the noise, and Hertzel shot him with his eyes. Charley picked up the bullets and slipped back out as discreetly as his size would allow.

"Thank you for waiting." The line clicked, and then clicked again, threatening to disconnect Hertzel's Brownsville — Austin link.

The call went through to a mechanical voice, infuriating Hertzel more, telling him all about the senator from the Rio Grande and how they would be glad to take his call in the morning, or if he preferred, leave a message.

Hertzel got close but avoided breaking into curses. He had the vocabulary, but it just wasn't part of his stress behavior. He didn't like the mentality. He tended to sweat and break things instead.

When it clicked in he started talking, fast and hostile. "Answer it, Henry. It's Hertzel!" He knew he was there; having tried his house and had the senator's tight ass wife lecture him about the time.

"He's working late. Bother him there!"

He knew the Henry Sanchez better than the wife. He knew he was there, and knew his idea of working late. *'I'm sorry, honey. I won't be home. I'm screwing my secretary.'* Hertzel stayed with it.

“Answer the phone. It’s Hertzels and it’s urgent!”

“Hello.”

Hertzels imagined her standing there in her panties and bra.

“May I help you?”

“Get Henry on the phone.”

“I’m sorry, he’s unavailable at the moment. May I take a message?” A voice like that was a real vote getter, he thought, or so the polls said.

Hertzels coerced himself into absolute calm. “This is Hertzels Markovitz.” He looked down at his desk, realized he’d run out of things to fling. “You tell him who’s calling. Tell him right now. Tell him it’s life and death.”

“He’s not going to like this, Mr. Markovitz.” The voice turned very cold. “One moment.”

Hertzels figured the Henry must’ve been close to an orgasm. Her too, probably.

“Hertzels!” The senator’s voice was all over Hertzels’s ear. He had a way of flooding the arena with his presence, particularly when he was angry. “What’s the crisis, Hertzels? My secretary tells me you’ve got your ass in a real knot. Why are you calling me here? At this hour. It can’t wait till morning? I’m real tied up. Got documents to get out.”

Hertzels stayed silent on the line, letting the senator run out of complaints. “There’s been a killing at the New Orleans job!” He heard the silence talking big-time to him from the senator’s end of the line. Knowing he’d gotten the senator’s veins bulging made Hertzels sweat a little less. He was happy when he could spread the trouble

around. And the senator thought calling him so late was a problem. Surprise, Hertzelt smirked to himself.

The line stayed silent for a solid minute.

When the senator's voice did return, it came back swollen and predictable. "And you're calling me at my office to discuss it. You know everything coming into this office goes on tape. Jesus!"

Hertzelt didn't give a damn about the senator's paranoid practices. He could almost see the veins on Henry's neck swelling as blood pulsed his stress level to new heights. Nice to have someone to share the anxiety with, he thought.

"Who?"

"A Lloyds man. Howie did it. Don't worry. We got the coverage." Hertzelt presented his business-first attitude.

The silence was ominous.

"Are you nuts?"

He heard a ruckus and the secretary started to scream.

"What's wrong?" He wasn't looking for anyone to die over the news. "What's going on?"

Although there was no answer, Hertzelt heard the senator's voice distant from the phone.

"Shut up, you dumb bitch!" The senator didn't have a meaningful relationship with compassion. "Shut the fuck up!" Things quieted down and the senator was back on the line. "There's going to be hell to pay over this, Hertzelt. You and that fucking idiot you got working for you." The senator had put the pieces together pretty quickly. "You don't murder a Lloyds' man over insurance."

“It didn’t happen like that.” Before dialing the senator, Hertzelt had known he’d show some stress over the situation, but hadn’t expected this. He tried to back it off a little. “The guy pushed it.” He lied. “Howie had to defend himself. Everything’s working out. The insurance got signed off. We’re out of there tomorrow. The guy just ends up missing.”

“Who knows?”

“Nobody but the deckhands.” Hertzelt kept pushing the truth, “They’re okay.”

“They’re not okay. We’re going to have to deal with them. Get that Howie Morgan fuckup out of there right away.” He began the checklist. “Get over to New Orleans, now. Get the ship out of there. Make sure the crew are on it.” The harsh, commanding tone did more than imply an order. “I’ll be in touch with you.” He paused. “Get the ship and the crew into the Gulf.”

“Okay Henry, okay!” Hertzelt heard the list and started feeling vulnerable. “I’ll take care of things. We’re clean.”

The senator’s voice turned low. “Hertzelt, do you remember a little meeting we had not twelve hours ago? I can’t help but think this may upset Mister Estaphan, just a little.” The senator’s voice oozes sarcasm. “What do you think?”

“It just happened. What could I do about it? It wasn’t planned.”

“Just like El Salvador, Hertzelt?”

“Who needs to know?” Hertzelt shuffled behind his desk. “Nobody can prove anything. Who’s ever going to find out?”

Another menacing silence before the senator spoke. "Estaphan could find out about this just as easily as he found out about El Salvador." He paused. "And he doesn't have to prove anything, Hertz. Just get down there and do what you're told."

The line slammed dead on Hertz.

Hertz sat with the dead line in his hand, cursing under his breath. 'Estaphan could find out about this just as easily as he found out about El Salvador' was still sliding back and forth between his hemispheres. He hadn't thought the senator would take it so badly. He worried about the cover-up, and more about the senator's reaction — what he was planning to do with the information.

He stood up suddenly, his legs weak beneath him as he supported himself against the desk, working to calm his own sudden fears. He picked up a pile of papers from the table beside him and placed them in his opened briefcase with meticulous and unnecessary care. He closed it, and then opened it again. He rearranged the contents for no good reason, closed it and picked it up. He took two steps towards the door and flung the case violently against the wall.

CHAPTER NINE

*The Deep Sleep Motel
New Orleans, Louisiana
Early Tuesday Morning*

Robert Forster's murder and Bobby's part in burying him in the swamp had given him an unpleasant sleep — one he wanted to wake up from and find himself somewhere else.

At first Bobby thought the sounds came from inside his head. He was certain of it, at first. He accepted the pounding as long as it wasn't a judge's gavel ordering him to jail for his complicity in Robert Forster's death the night before. He'd slept poorly, Howie's murder of Forster stayed with him the entire night. He knew it hadn't been a dream, they only lasted seconds. He fought it long enough to realize the nightmare of Forster's death inside his brain was distinct from the pounding. He craved sleep desperately, but wanted out of the nightmare remembrance even more.

The pounding continued. With consciousness came recall, and with recall came alarm as he slid his hand under the pillow, around the butt of the thirty-eight he'd taken from Howie's van arsenal the night before. If it was the cops he needed to

dump it, quick. If it was a new boss, another lunatic chapter in his employment, he might use it. If it was Howie, he should — a small step for humanity.

The lock popped from the pressure of the blows, the door slamming into the wall behind it. Howie stood there, returned, suddenly, from the dead, grinning. Bobby gripped the handle of the thirty-eight, thought it over, and let it go.

Howie was cleaned and his leg wound tended — dressed and bug-eyed again.

“Drop your cock and grab your socks!” He strutted across the room, stiff-legged from his wound, and pulled the blankets from Bobby. “Get it up, amigo. We’re outta here.”

Bobby pressed his eyelids tight, fighting the reality of Howie along with the early morning sunlight racing through the door. He was silent and sullen, a prisoner before the gallows, refusing to believe the nightmare lived. It did. He hauled his spent and naked body across the bed and to the shower. “What time is it?”

“Fifteen minutes.” Howie kept bellowing. “Food in the van. Want an upper? Where’s Gomez?”

“Two-oh-five.” Bobby turned the water hotter, hoping to scald himself and get hospitalized. Repeated his question. “What time is it?”

He didn’t get an answer — Howie was out the door. He was gone to room two-oh-five. He hoped Gomez killed him. The water beat hot and hard. It couldn’t be more than six in the morning. He could’ve slept for two days.

He stepped out of the shower, noticing his improved appearance in the mirror. He fought his thoughts, deciding to skip them altogether. He took a rain check on his memory as well. He wished he'd stayed on South Padre, on the dune, hungry and cold. He could have snuck back into Mexico, got Tanya, bought a burro and got himself deep into the hills, forever.

He squeezed the thirty-eight into his boot, safety on. In all, it took him about seven minutes before he stepped out into the hot Louisiana sun. Six o'clock, he figured, no more. He climbed through the open panel door at the side of the van and started working his way through a couple of take out containers. Drowned his coffee in packets of sugar, holding it between his hands, staring blankly out the opened door at a New Orleans morning. The good life could be anywhere. He noticed Robert Forster's car was gone. Maybe it *was* a dream. He wished it were nothing more than last night's nightmare. He shook his head. His life was distorted, but it wasn't making him that stupid.

He watched Howie through the windshield, talking to Pierre, pulling money from his briefcase, favoring his leg. Gomez, dripping wet and shirtless, wandered up to the rear door looking a lot as if he was sleepwalking. He climbed in without any acknowledgment. "Gomez."

The Mexican opened one eye in time to catch the containerized food. "Gracias." He mumbled the word, looked over where the body bag used to be, almost looked at Bobby, took a bite. He kept

eating while Bobby watched in silence. Difficult to figure, this Gomez, hard to know what went on inside his head. It was an easy out to write him off, as Bobby had initially and erroneously. But this Mexican inexplicably held himself beyond all of them, in his silence, inside himself. There was something ancient about the man, something of another civilization, someone's reincarnation. Bobby figured it, looked at him, and realized nobody could disguise himself more completely.

Howie limped to the van. "I've got a lot of pain here, guys. I'll get the job done despite it — me and the Demerol." He looked for sympathy while he glanced through the window at them.

He got nothing but blank stares. He put a look on his face as if mommy had just sent him to his room without dinner and if he's lucky she'll come up and beat him later — confirm she still loves him.

The pout didn't last long. Howie wasn't able to avoid himself much. His mouth was moving before the van cleared the parking lot. He talked about everything, anything, including how proud he was of his boys, Gomez and Bobby. It nauseated Bobby and made Gomez even more remote, head slouching a little lower, a little further into the distance.

It was a new day, and, according to Howie, they're 'gonna get her off this morning. Nothing can stop us now.' Somebody important wanted to meet Bobby, he said. Took care of things real good last night. Nobody fucks with us, he said. The gospel according to Howie, as the blood seeped

through his new bandages. But Howie wasn't noticing. It wasn't part of his timetable. It was high tide in thirty minutes. They bounced hard along the back road to *The Lady Inca*.

The trip took fifty, but not because Howie didn't try. Bobby spotted the limo before *The Lady Inca* came into view, wondered how they ever got it down there intact. He figured it was part of the important person message Howie babbled about on the way out. As he nudged Gomez, the Mexican responded, a small crease of a smile playing his lips.

Hertzel Markovitz, the same — tall, thin, a big nose centering a pocked face, an expensive suit chasing attention, stepped out of the limo as Howie pulled up beside it.

“Wait here.” Howie threw the command out as though there was a desired alternative. His bad leg hit the ground first. Gomez and Bobby shared the pleasure silently.

Bobby watched the conversation. It didn't last long before Howie stepped aside and climbed into the back of the limo. Hertzel walked over to Bobby's side of the van. “Bobby?” Hertzel held out his hand. “Step out here. Let me shake the hand of the man who's going to keep this job on line.”

Bobby's eyes ran over Gomez quickly as he climbed out. He shook the hand loosely.

“Howie tells me there's more money in this for you, five, maybe ten depending on how well you look after things.” He paused, glancing at the Mexican. “Keep your eye on things.” He searched

Bobby's eyes for acknowledgment.

Bobby gave him an absolute minimum.

"Howie's not going. You're in charge." The words came out of his mouth in staccato. "You'll take the Mex with you."

Bobby watched for his mouth to move, trying to figure out how words could exit so fast when the entrance barely stirred.

"A piece of cake. Forget about that touch of trouble yesterday. Nobody knows anything, right? You listening to me, Bobby?"

"Yeah. I'm listening." He was listening to bullshit and knew it — bullshit and trouble. "When do I see some of this responsibility money?" Bobby's words stayed cold and dry, but full of intent.

"I'll give you five now, the other five when you get her to Brownsville."

Bobby held out his hand.

Hertzel smiled and pulled five tight little bundles from inside his jacket, bank wrappers and all. "When you get to Brownsville, I want you and Gomez to take a vacation. The company pays. Unless by chance the Mexican has an accident." Hertzel's eyes narrowed, his words slowing as his voice turned to a whisper. "That could be worth a little bonus." Bobby nodded. "Get the money out of sight and get yourself aboard. There're three tugs waiting, we've wasted enough time."

Ain't it the truth Bobby thought as he held his eyes hard on Hertzel for a few seconds, to be sure the man bought the agreement. When a man gives you money he owns you, or figures he does.

Bobby wanted to be sure Hertzelt figured it that way.

“You hook up with the sea tug at Pilotown. Should take you three days to get across the Gulf and into Brownsville.” He smiled at Bobby. “Good money for a holiday at sea.” Hertzelt half turned, loosened his tie slightly as the sun started into its seven o’clock burn. “Any questions?”

“How’s the van getting out of here?” Not that he cared, other than wanting everything clean until he picked up his other five in Brownsville.

Hertzelt motioned to the limo. It rocked as Charley exited. “Charley’ll drive it. Take Howie with him.” By the time he covered the thirty feet to the van he was soaked in sweat. “Bobby, Charley.”

“We’ve met.” Bobby smiled as he said it. Charley snarled a response.

Bobby collected Gomez and headed towards *The Lady*, Gomez snarling curses over his shoulder to Charley as the behemoth struggled to get behind the wheel.

They worked to get themselves aboard, but it was getting easier with practice. The high tide line did a lot to help the climb. Bobby followed Gomez, watching him, thinking through the order of events as he struggled with the rope ladder. Howie kills Forster, Bobby kills Gomez. Very tidy, but who kills Bobby? Hertzelt hadn’t mentioned that part, at least not to him.

There were a few things Hertzelt hadn’t mentioned to Bobby; like the near hurricane weather brewing in the Gulf, like the ten grand he paid the

sea tug captain to cut them loose in the middle of the storm – yes, that and more. But without doubt, he'd told Bobby enough to let him know nobody was watching anybody's back.

Once on the deck, Bobby wiped sweat and looked back at the shoreline. The van had disappeared. Hertzels stood indistinctly beside the limo, watching. Howie was nowhere to be seen, hadn't been for years. Invisible. He shut it out of his mind and moved to the task at hand.

He wanted one tug astern and two by the bow. Put your strength where the resistance is least. They're close enough to the tugs not to need walkie-talkies.

Gomez and Bobby chased down the lead ropes from the tugs. The senior tug ranted through its loudspeaker about losing the tide, a commentary they ignored as they hauled line at a pace they could live with.

Bobby used the radio to signal the tug crews to pull slack, test the lines, and test the radio.

"Stern and forward tug." The walkie-talkie crackled with defection.

"Roger," voices blurred back, seeming more distant than the few hundred feet. "And ready."

"Stern and forward. Give her throttle."

The tugs let go their throttles slowly. Bobby and Gomez moved well forward of the lines, right up into her bow, out of the way of the ropes. From the distance they watched the water pop as the stress pulled the ropes taut.

The revs built. They watched the sterns churning foam as the engines accelerated. Bobby

talked to her under his breath, encouraging her to rise. As if in answer to his wish, *The Lady Inca* shuddered suddenly under him like a colossus from a bottomless slumber.

“She moved.” he said abruptly into the handset, the noise of the tug engines drowning everything around him. “Keep on her. Keep on her.”

“We’re three quarters and she ain’t movin’ enough.” The forward tug commented through the two-way.

“Keep on her. She moved.” He shouted it this time, “She moved! Open it up! Open it up!” Bobby felt like God ordering *The Lady’s* bones from the grave.

The wash from the tug props thrashed against her sides. The revs from their engines merged into her urgent shudders. She quivered heavily and abruptly, through the whole length of her. Bobby moved with the vibration, almost missing his footing to dodge some loose plating as he ranted into the two-way. “Power for me, you motherfuckers!” He screamed it into the receiver. “Power! All you got!”

Gomez gripped the forward boom, unnerved by Bobby’s intensity. Gomez prepared. If she popped loose too quickly, the momentum could roll her right over.

Bobby saw her deck rail moving against the shoreline. He talked to her, breathing the words, encouraging her to rise up. And she heard him, shuddering to her core, shifting, pulling up and sideways, and starting her lurch to port, to water. Steel groaned as she pulled even, her stern twist-

ing free. The whole length of her was now pulling level, building to the roll into freedom.

The awakened colossus came off her side, out of her entombment. Nothing was lashed to the deck, and the entire abundance of collected refuse started racing.

She was into her port roll now, time to worry. She kept peeling towards the bay, ten, twenty, thirty degrees. Bobby and Gomez headed up the landward railing. With her gaining momentum and rolling so quickly, they seemed to run in place. The land disappeared behind the tilting deck before them.

They propelled themselves hand over hand up across the deck railing and onto her side, preparing to run right across her bottom — forty, fifty, sixty degrees, and still going. She terrorized the tugs with her potential to bury them. The flat rusted steel of her side slapped hard against the water, sending an avalanche of water flooding across the nearest tug.

She was still rolling to port when gravity and momentum changed her mind, slowing her, pitching her back to starboard, easing the cradle slower.

Safe from the rollover, Bobby and Gomez relaxed too soon, for it was now they must watch for the unexpected, the happening not anticipated. They were absent for a just a moment when a boom hook the size of a basketball fell loose of the forecastle deck, bounced densely off Gomez's neck and shoulder, knocking him over the swaying rail.

Bobby grabbed for him automatically, holding

him by the back of his pants. Struggling to hang on, he got him wedged against the railing, and held him there, pressing himself hard against the Mexican until the cradle stilled. It took all his strength. If he'd lost him, Gomez would have slid the length of her side, into the water, and been slapped limp against her hull by the wave action. The silence was broken by the tug crews cheering, shouting victory. Why they'd stayed in it — the American way.

She'd rolled at least seventy degrees to port before coming back. It couldn't have gotten closer without going right around.

He heard the slaps of flat steel on water still as her belly settled. Slow and slow, until she stood straight and high in the water. Bobby sensed it — feeling her breath, afloat all around him, confirmed in her existence, one more time.

He eased Gomez away from the railing. He ripped his grimy T-shirt and had Gomez put pressure on the raw wound.

The radio cackled static. "Let go one set of lines." Another metallic command. "Keep one bow and one stern on her." Static. "Now. We need it now."

"I'll be back, amigo." He made eye contact. "Take it real easy."

Gomez tried a nod and winced through it, went to his smile instead — still there.

Bobby watched the pain sneak through that too.

"Si, gracias."

Bobby climbed the forecastle deck to crowbar

one set of lines free. Bound lines were a challenge, but once freed, letting them go was a lot easier than hauling them aboard.

He was back at Gomez's side before the lines had slid from the deck. In his absence, Gomez had managed to pull himself into a sitting position. He hurt. The expression on his usually unreadable face left no doubt. His shoulder wouldn't move, and blood still ran from a second, smaller gash across his head. But he was awake, and that was a good sign.

"Gotta get you off, amigo."

"No Bubby, I stay."

Bobby heard the words — firm, just a touch of pleading.

He grimaced in an attempt to deal with the pain. "Muy bueno."

"You're crazy." Bobby calmed himself as he glanced at the spreading blood. "A doctor, you need a doctor."

"I need stay, Bubby." He said it very quietly. "The money. Yo trabajo, muy bueno. No worry."

It was more like supplication than pleading. He tracked down the first aid kit. The shoulder cut was six inches long and deep. At least no blood spurted back at him. As he put the new compress in place, he set Gomez's good hand back on it for pressure.

Gomez's broken-toothed smile leaked back through the pain. "A trabajar, Bubby. We sail home now." There was no conviction in his voice. "Easy money, now."

Bobby got up from beside him, nodded, and

headed astern. His thoughts went with him. He didn't like the idea of floating across the Gulf watching a man expire. He'd been to that movie. It was too close — too hard to get out of your head once it's over.

Fatigue climbed all over him as he double-timed securing the lines that remained aboard. He voiced affirmation to the tug and took his first opportunity to look around while they tightened her up and straightened her out for the channel. The next stop was Pilotown, if she didn't sink in the harbour. He couldn't see the limo. He wondered if it was ever there.

They had momentum. He returned forward to check Gomez. The bleeding had slowed considerably, but the ruptures were still deep, open and ugly. Gomez would be making the trip, at least to Pilotown. Bobby hoped he'd improve despite the obvious. If he weren't any better, he'd get him off there.

Bobby started work on a shelter near the fore-castle for the two of them. He got the basics together and moved Gomez with as little discomfort as possible. Gomez tried hard to play down the injury. Bobby settled beside him. His watch said seven-thirty, but it felt like he'd done a full day's work already as he peered up into the sun starting to blaze hot overhead. They weren't far enough into the bay yet to catch a breeze and escape the arid heat of the bayou backwater. The motion of the ship created some breeze of its own, hot but moving.

It would take the full day to get to the Gulf.

They would have to push it or risk spending the night waiting to tie on to the sea tug. That was money they didn't want to spend. He dropped the calculations, rolled a joint and held it to Gomez's lips. Neither one of them spoke. Bobby watched as his partner drifted off with the smoke — or thought he did.

He finished the joint and walked to the rail. He squatted so he could watch the water move against her hull, wanting to be near the sight and sound.

CHAPTER TEN

*The Estaphan Estate
Houston, Texas
Tuesday Morning*

Lorraine Walton, Luis Estaphan's companion, heard the timer go off next to her, ran her hand across the beam and silenced it before Luis was disturbed from his childlike curl beside her.

She slipped silently out of bed, still feeling understandably soiled from the preceding evening. An evil and repulsive old man, Luis Estaphan. She could bear almost any of it except when he wanted inside her. It wasn't often, but once was too many times, and last night was once again — the only part of the job she actually detested. But she let it happen, whenever he wanted. She didn't have a lot of choice. Besides, the money was good, very good.

She called down for his warm milk and medication before taking herself to the shower. Just walking across the enormous, lavishly appointed room and into the bath eased the sick repugnance she felt inside her.

The water beat down hot and soothing as she reminded herself, this morning and every morning, of his will. It was part of her contract, a quar-

ter of a million, annually, for life — once he was gone. And she kept thinking it could be soon. She watched the water stream soap from her body as she rinsed her long auburn hair. Her hands felt good on her skin. It made her think of Antonio's hands all over her, made her wish Estaphan was gone and she was finally with the nephew. Soon, she hoped, very soon.

One of the kitchen staff arrived with the milk, medication, and messages just as she started the water running onto the marble of the walk-in tub.

She had done this for two years now, and her timing was down to a science. The old man was very demanding about his schedule and his needs. Actually, he was a truly terrible little bastard, she thought to herself as she poured the salts into the water and glanced through the messages. Silently, she figured which to present in what order to avoid the greatest amount of displeasure. She saw the urgent messages from the senator and slipped them to the bottom of the pile. She knew how to warm him up with pleasant effects — absolutely nothing with 'urgent' on it.

With the messages ordered and the milk in her other hand, she returned to the master bedroom and set herself for the wake-up routine. Sitting quietly beside him, she slid her hand under the covers and down to his scrawny groin. She took hold of his shrivelled penis, wondering, the way she always did, if this was the day it didn't respond — the day it just lay there, dead, like him. No. Today as always it twitched the negative to her unspoken wish. It was where he always woke

up first, in his balls. Often he told her how it kept him alive. And if his genitals were any indication, she figured he was going to live forever — except for the fact her and Antonio had other plans, and were only willing to wait so long for natural causes to solve their little problem.

He moaned and coughed as she gripped him softly, squeezing gently, just the way he liked it. Everything she did was just the way Luis Estaphan liked it. The tiny little figure squirmed in his bed, like a child being touched for the first time, feeling the pleasure and thinking he was dreaming. It didn't take her long to get him off. She knew how to get it over with without appearing to do so. Each man had his preference. She called him baby, whispered to him to be a good little boy, to give it to mommy. It made him come, a small jerky ejaculation, like a little phlegm on her hand.

He moaned quietly and curled back up into a tiny ball. It was over. She kissed his baldhead while she wiped her hand into a tissue. She waited a minute before rolling him over gently, still pretending to be his mother. He kept his eyes closed as she propped a pillow behind him and started feeding him the warm milk, slowly.

“Messages?” The voice was very tiny, his eyes still closed as he spoke.

Lorraine fed him one tinier sip before picking the messages from the table.

“There are three of them today, Luis.” She kept her voice at exactly the right early morning pitch. “The first from London.” She paused to let

the focus settle in, "The financing is in place. Returning to Houston today. No problems." When his head moved just slightly, she read good news from the motion. "A second from Enrico. The staff in Detroit has been let go." She knew somebody was dead. The smile inside the many creases of Luis' face confirmed her assumption.

She knew him well as she paused before the final message. "From the Senator."

His eyes opened the tiniest bit. She could see the black pits of his iris. "He needs to see you. Says it's urgent."

His eyes closed before opening wider, a larger and darker hostility within them as they focused into the distance.

It also told Lorraine Walton the message part of the morning was over. She stood up from the bed. The bathwater would be ready now. She leaned over and pulled back the covers as she picked his tiny, wrinkled frame into her arms.

By the time she walked into the bath, his eyes had closed again. He always tended to drift back off to sleep while she bathed him. She bent and eased him gently into the heavily salted water. He liked it salted. He believed it would keep him afloat in case he was left alone.

Luis Estaphan learned long ago you couldn't be too careful.

Three hours later Estaphan sat in his wheelchair under a table awning, taking in the view from the terrace. He wore a hat, sunglasses, and

was wrapped in a down comforter despite the hundred-degree heat of a Houston midday. He had real circulation problems. He had always insisted they came from his hardships as a child.

The morning had passed smoothly for him, and he expected the senator at any moment. He hadn't hesitated in having the meeting with the senator set up as soon as possible. As far as Estaphan was concerned he was still looking for an opportunity to teach some lessons the old fashioned way. He was not a man to be liked; he didn't want to be. He liked the power that came with fear.

The trouble in El Salvador with International Salvage had provoked him. He was dying to give the idiot Hertzell Markovitz an education about respect, knowing your place — and the consequences of making problems for Luis Estaphan. He knew he was secretly hoping the meeting with the senator would be just that opportunity. To Estaphan, an urgent message translated into problem in his vocabulary, and anyone who worked for him solved problems. If they made problems, he didn't need them — and his idea of firing someone had fairly permanent connotations.

Luis Estaphan was an old mobster, and very set in his ways. He hardly looked the part as he sat almost invisible beneath his protective apparel, only his chin, lips and a tiny span of forehead discernible. To a passer-by, he could easily be a child wrapped up after being in the pool too long. If his physical presence was barely there,

the activity inside his head more than made up for the lack of body.

He'd never made a mistake, chose to refer that stigma to people he put in charge of things. And this one belonged to his nephew Antonio, his heir of choice. Antonio was bright, but still young and by far not ready for the demands of the job. It had been Antonio's recommendation to buy into the ailing salvage operation, mostly to get the senator onside for political reasons.

A frail snort ran up through his throat. All of them needed large holes through their heads just to keep air going to their brains. He snorted again, can't get any good help any more — not like the old days. They'd all be better off as part of the foundation in an office tower.

His small eyes moved across the extensive grounds of his estate. He wished he were thirty again. Things would be different then. He would have shot them both in the restaurant as they sat in front of him. Problem solved. He drifted into remembering his last personal execution, drawing pleasure with the memory.

The senator followed Lorraine across the patio area and towards the now dozing Estaphan. Lorraine had given him an absolutely frigid greeting when he'd arrived. He wanted to grab the oxygen pack she was carrying and jam it up her ass.

"I suggest you don't upset him. He isn't in the best of moods." Her words trailed behind her as she kept up her pace.

He hated her but appreciated the warning, his feet unconsciously getting weightier with every

step. He worked at getting his thoughts in order. He could have tried to keep the murder a secret and work it out without anyone knowing, but he now realized from experience that there wasn't much about Luis Estaphan's business that Luis Estaphan didn't know or wouldn't find out about — one way or the other. And when this stupid murder eventually came out, he didn't want to be any part of holding the bag.

He fell back on his legal instincts — when your position is untenable, get it in front of the judge quickly. Go for empathy, imply undying appreciation, flatter, grovel. Whatever it took.

All he had to do was convince Estaphan he was his man, that he was here to report all the other miscreants. Whatever Estaphan wanted, the senator would take care of it. His best chance was to be up front, get directions from the old man, and act on them, keeping the barrel pointed somewhere else.

“Good morning, Senator.”

The voice came out punier than the senator remembered, friendlier than he'd expected.

“Morning, Mister Estaphan.”

“It's beautiful out here, Senator.” Luis looked up at him behind impenetrable glasses.

“It certainly is.” The senator's confidence moved up a little with the small talk. “A beautiful place you have here.” He figured things might move easier than he'd anticipated. What was that about a bad mood? He didn't see it, and figured the broad just disliked him.

“Sit down. Would you like anything?”

“No. Thank you. I ate on the plane.”

Luis turned to Lorraine while the senator was in the midst of declining. “Maybe you could leave us for a few minutes, my dear. We have a few business matters to discuss.”

She set the oxygen pack on the table, smiled more ice at the senator, and walked away knowing.

She was barely out of earshot. “Okay. Let’s have it, Senator.” Luis’s voice stayed tiny but acquired an unmistakable authority. “What’s the problem?”

The senator braced himself. “A murder in New Orleans. A ship inspector.” He kept talking, wanting it all out before he lost his nerve. “A Lloyds man. We got...” He corrected himself. “They got the inspection and then the guy ended up dead. I don’t have a lot of details.” Like a sinner at confession, he figured, come clean and get absolution, or better yet, spread the sin around. “The same guy who caused the problems in El Salvador. Howard Morgan.” Spread it all around. “Hertzel’s man.”

He stopped, waiting. Watching Estaphan, he waited for a cue, didn’t get it, and went with his own prompt. “I guess I’m here because I want you to know about it first.”

Still no response.

“Want to know how you want me to handle it?” That was it; he’d made his pitch. Don’t oversell. Wait. He thought he detected the old man breathing a little heavier, but thought maybe he imagined it. He wondered if Luis had heard a word of

it. He flashed on checking for a pulse or getting the bitch back over here to do it.

The silence lasted seconds but felt like eternity for the senator.

"They've got to go, Senator." The wrinkled little mouth barely moved as the words came out. "You know that, don't you?"

"Who, Mister Estaphan?"

"All of them, Senator. Every one of them." He removed his glasses. The small, beady black eyes locked onto him. "Everyone but you. You're going to be our man in government, aren't you?"

It wasn't a question to be answered, and the senator knew it. He felt a distinct relief just to hear he was still going to be in the plans.

"Hertzal?"

"Everyone. All in due time." He replaced the glasses. "My eyes just can't tolerate the sun any more." Adjusted them. "I understand that ship is already destined to die in a storm. The senator thought he heard a chuckle, "More money to be made in an insurance sinking that as a cut up tangle of steel." A small smile played the corners of his mouth, "And that takes care of two of them as well, doesn't it."

The senator nodded, didn't have any words. He'd just been told plans to eliminate a few people, told as casually as if he'd been offered a chair. Whatever ran through his mind, he knew better than to plea-bargain. He was pretty certain his name wasn't on the list. When the judge handed down the sentence and you got off, it was every man for himself.

Luis seemed to enjoy watching the senator compute it all, seemed to like watching people sweat. "Don't worry about details, Senator. Enrico is due back from Detroit today. He's very experienced at this sort of thing."

A disarming smile played across the table to the senator.

"I'll have him come down and help you sort the matter out. Tell what's his name — Markovitz — he's there to help out, keep an eye on things. Nothing else."

The senator sat across the table, listening, nodding appropriately, his mind racing panic with the unnerving realization of being owned. He wasn't really certain how it happened, but better owned than dead.

"I appreciate your coming to me with the state of affairs down there. When things settle down, we'll dump the company. I won't forget your loyalty, Senator." Luis managed to move his entire body forward ever so slightly, pulling himself close to the senator.

He seemed to wait for Henry's attention level to get right there — right on the lip of God's word.

"When the time comes, Enrico will take care of this business. As I said, he's very good at it. I want you to be as distant as possible from all this. It wouldn't look good on a state legislator, would it?"

"No." The senator couldn't agree fast enough. "It wouldn't."

"All right then. It's settled." Luis had his way of bringing meetings to an end. "Don't worry. En-

rico will be in touch with you.”

The senator took his cue and stood up, feeling it was a minute to midnight and he'd just been pardoned.

“Would you send Lorraine back on your way out?” He extended his hand.

The senator shook it, weakly.

“Have them take you to the airport. In a few months, when this is over, we'll sit down again and outline some political strategy.”

The senator backed away as if he was leaving a deity, turning away only when the old man did. He watched Lorraine return to his side almost immediately, slipping the mask over his head and turning on the valve. He drew several deep breaths as he stared out across the enormous garden.

The senator was glad to go.

And at about the same time, out on the Pacific coast, Rachel Forster waited at the San Diego arrivals gate until long after the crowd started forming to greet the next flight. Rachel knew it wasn't Robert's style to stand her up. He used to be like that all the time, but in the years since she first tracked her brother down, he'd become nothing but dependable.

She'd called Monday night to confirm his flight with him, to tell him about the place on the beach. He wasn't home then, either. Now his flight from New Orleans had come and gone with no Robert Forster aboard.

She retraced her steps through the busy terminal building, bumping absently into several rushed flight chasers. She hoped there'd been a mix-up in flight plans, but wasn't even slightly convincing herself. She was feeling more irritable than usual at the stares from the executives waiting in the limousine lounge. She'd always had that effect on men. Usually she didn't notice, but at the moment it bothered her.

The Mercedes sedan didn't have official limo status, but stood impressive enough for Jimmy to attend it, right beside the sign reading 'Reserved for Limousine Service'. Jimmy was big, black and imposing, with a face like a homeless bulldog. He passed more easily as a bodyguard, a serious one, than as a driver.

No one had ever really put a job description beside Jimmy's name. Rachel sometimes introduced him as the Club Lucky mascot. It was not the kind of humor she indulged in often. Jimmy used to be a pretty good heavyweight, ending up looking a little rough — from too many greedy managers.

He used to clean up around the gym where one of Rachel's well-connected gentlemen would take her to see his latest discovery — the powerful and their gladiators. She took a liking to him. He used to open the door for her and she'd slip him twenty bucks — work a smile from the man with the dark, sad eyes. She was that kind of lady — a soft spot for hard luck folks and stray dogs.

Those years living by her wits taught her a lot of things, like how to take care of herself; capable

of making some men feel they're getting their testicles shaved with a dull sabre.

She stayed smart with her money and worked her connections. She kept Jimmy with her all the way, and she'd moved a long way up. She had that kind of talent, that kind of tenacity.

There weren't many around now who knew her history very well — Jimmy and a few other old friends. It was the small clique she didn't forget from the good old days.

Jimmy didn't ask why Robert wasn't with her. He could look and sound oafish, but he wasn't stupid. He often knew without asking when there was something on her mind, and she could tell he sensed it now. She directed him onto the freeway, headed towards the older section of southern San Diego. He drove in silence except for a single confirmation she was okay.

“Yes, Jimmy, I'm okay.”

Jimmy thanked her for telling him she was okay and added, “Worryin' 'bout you ain't good for my heart Ms Rachel.”

When she exited him at Mission Boulevard he knew then where she was headed — Mission Boulevard ended up at Mission precinct, some old turf. She was going to seek out an old friend from earlier days. It was time to talk to someone who could hardball her intuition, get her some information. She wanted to avoid the typical “worrying for nothing” routine from a cop who didn't know her. After all, Robert Forster had only missed one flight; he could be on the next. She didn't want to hear it. Robert had once told her,

long ago when he still had many enemies in East L.A., that he would never stiff her. If he did, it meant he was in trouble. She remembered. Barney Matthews would know the worrywart label didn't belong to her, and would take the time to hear her out.

Jimmy waited by the car in the precinct visitor parking. As soon as she was out of sight he dialed New Orleans. Jimmy knew Rachel well; knew she would be on her way to New Orleans if nothing showed with her cop friends. Jimmy had a reputation in New Orleans, trained and fought there, lots of people owed him.

"Hello."

"Sunny, it's Jimmy in San Diego. Are you healthy?"

Meanwhile, Rachel ignored the eyes cops could give you just because they're cops. She walked through it into the precinct as if it wasn't there. She had other priorities. She had no trouble getting the duty sergeant's attention. "I'm looking for Detective Barney Matthews." She gave him her answers-only smile. "Could you direct me to him, please?"

She found him on the second floor, homicide squad room. He engulfed her in a hug. "It's the mermaid!" That had been her nickname when they worked the streets on opposite sides. They never locked horns on the street — she had too classy a clientele, and like any mermaid she could find the ocean easily. She helped him a couple times, though, when somebody was hurting people and needed to come off the street. And there were

the moments when he returned the favor.

She hugged him back. "And you. Still the big old whale." She squeezed him tightly, kissed the side of his face. "Some things never change."

"You're still a beautiful lady." He laughed with his own pleasure. "My Missus should see me now."

Rachel joined in the laugh, hugged him hard.

"Rachel, this is my partner, Tom." He looked at Tom. "Old friends, Tom." He winked. "And if this lady's here, then there's a reason."

"My brother's missing." Rachel wasted no time supplying her reason for being there.

"Since when?"

"Last night." She paused. "When he didn't arrive on his one o'clock flight from New Orleans."

"Well he could have -"

"I came here, Barney, because you wouldn't give me that 'could have' crap."

She stared hard at him and his partner. "I know my brother very well. We've been in touch for a long time now, and often, at least twice a week. If he couldn't make it, he would have let me know."

"Write down his name and address." It was the young partner, Tom. "I'll get it on the Telex. We should get something back in an hour."

"I like your partner, Barney." She smiled. "How'd he end up with you?"

Barney gave her a look. "Give me that, Tom." He took the paper and wrote in a priority code and addressed it to someone on the force there who owed him.

Tom went to get some coffee while Barney and Rachel went into a vacant office. He could see she was troubled and tried to keep it light. There was a lot for the Mermaid and the Whale to talk about, the old days. The talk only took the edge off Rachel's intuition.

Barney eventually moved to the point. "It's probably nothin', sweetheart. Relax. Your brother probably met the love of his life."

It didn't wash.

"Something's wrong, Barney. I know it. Otherwise Robert would be here or else I would have heard. I know it." Her eyes gathered conviction. "I'm going, Barney."

"Wait for the Telex." He put his gnarled old hand on hers, buried her long, soft fingers in his palm. "Let the police handle it. I know you'll hit me if I suggest you're overreacting."

She didn't answer; let her eyes talk.

He read it, smiled, and leaned back, ready to respect her insight. She was a gutsy lady — he knew that, knew she could take care of herself. "Wait a bit, baby. Let's see what we get back first."

"Okay, poppa."

His eyes locked in on her, the only person she knew who could call her baby and not end up castrated.

"You've got it." She acquiesced. "I'll go to the club and wait for the Telex."

She took her hand from under his. "But if I don't get something, I'm going."

"Good. We'll wait and see. No need to get sud-

den here, not yet.” He paused. “Better yet, I’ll call Le Clerc, the cop who owes me. I’ll contact him personally. No need to wait for the Telex.” He reached for the phone as she stood up.

“Thanks, Barney.”

“Go to the club and relax, the cops are on your case, again.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*New Orleans Harbor Channel
New Orleans, Louisiana
Tuesday Noon*

Bobby choked awake. The tarpaulin kept the sunlight off, the breeze out, and the heat in — a trade off. It let him know how an overcooked turkey felt. A small lizard skittered at eye level across the hot deck plates, right out of a Japanese monster movie. He assumed they didn't like the ride either. They weren't as smart as the rats that, he figured, must have a better sense of impending motion.

Gomez wasn't okay. He'd been sick to his stomach. His shoulder had seized up, and his head throbbed, he said. He fell in and out of sleep. Even then, the pain stayed with him. It was impossible for him to get comfortable. To Bobby, the fitful sleep seemed almost like semiconscious.

There wasn't much Bobby could do for him. While he was conscious, they talked a little. He moved the overhead tarp he'd rigged earlier to try to catch a little more of the breeze. Gomez appreciated it. It was a token effort on Bobby's part, but Gomez was a man not used to much.

Gomez reached for the water with his good

arm.

“Amigo.” Gomez seemed to be attempting to lighten Bobby’s concern. “My toothless smile to you, amigo.” He tilted his head in the direction of his shoulder as though he could read Bobby’s mind. “Is no bad, Bubby. I have worse.” He looked at Bobby intensely. “We go Brownsville, Bubby. Together.”

Bobby nodded in agreement. They understood each other. Bobby still intended to do the right thing. He had no plans to watch another man die. He checked his watch — three o’clock. He’d slept a long time. He examined his own condition and got himself up to date. He needed to eat. Both of them needed to eat — Gomez at least needed to try. He told Gomez and headed amidships.

Despite the discomfort and exhaustion, he felt relatively in control. Maybe it had something to do with being on the water, manning the ship. Never having been a captain before, he smiled to himself as he looked around at the catastrophe he commanded.

He sensed her riding light on the water, the plimsoll sitting higher than any of her markings, salt or fresh. There were no instruments to measure how low a ghost ship should sit in the water. To him, the lower the better. Right now she rode much too high. It made her skid, vulnerable to the seas. The high-riding ghost, that’s what they’d call her. He imagined it as he walked. She had only her spirit to defend her.

And here he was free to participate, drawn by her preposterous mysticism. It was something

only Bobby would see. He knew *The Lady* had that allure for him. Her motion enhanced it, and she hooked him into it without a lot of hesitation. He'd had the feeling in other ships he'd sailed. He saw it as the power of the water phantoms and the courage of the steel maidens who rode them — the mixing of the two in an unpredictable alchemy.

He arrived at the supplies, let the journey drop for the moment, and opened a tin of beans with his knife, flat-blading them hungrily into his mouth. He didn't chew much. Thick, cold beans weren't the kind of taste that improved with chewing. It was food and he needed it. Life could get so simple.

He finished half the can before he paused to let it slide into his stomach. He watched the ever more distant shoreline move by silently, figuring they must be pretty well in the Gulf entrance. They were making good time. It couldn't be more than a few hours before they'd rendezvous with the sea tug at Pilotown.

He'd had enough of the beans, poured some water out of one of the jerry cans, splashed it around his face. He opened a warm Pepsi, downing the can with little satisfaction.

He picked the two-way off his belt. "Ship to lead tug." He was late for contact, and wondered why they hadn't noticed. He figured they didn't particularly care. "Come back. Test." He cursed Howie and hoped the two-way stayed together for him. It crackled with the dead air. "Ship to lead tug. Come back. Over."

"Lead tug, roger." More static. "We have you

five by five.” More static crackle. “Where you been?”

“Sleeping.” Bobby felt the irritation with their question. Did they think he hadn’t shown up for work, got drunk, and took the day off?

“Stay with the two-way.” Tug captains can get neurotic. “One sleeps. One stands watch.”

He almost mentioned Gomez but caught himself. “Roger.” The two-way broke into static again. If it couldn’t run a five-hundred-foot span, he didn’t want to imagine trying to contact the sea tug when they had a half-mile of cable out on them. The air cleared again, momentarily. “Request hourly radio checks. Over.”

“Roger.”

“What’s our ETA? Over.”

“Four hours. Over.”

That would make it seven, leaving about an hour’s daylight. That would be just enough to hook up and keep moving. Sometime during the conversation he’d decided to keep Gomez private. It’s what the Mexican wanted anyway. If he died, it was his choice; Bobby had to respect that.

He worked his way back to more of Howie’s miscalculations. Bobby calculated for himself. It was Tuesday now. If they got a Gulf tow through the night, they’d see Brownsville late Thursday or early Friday, barring any problems. That was a big assumption, he knew.

He calculated the possibilities that could interfere with his timetable. He decided to inspect and stow the gear they’d brought aboard. Sorting the supplies in his head, he decided to look at

safety first, and checked through the raft compartments, flares, and waterproof matches. There was very little in the way of official emergency rations, and there was of course the unpredictable two-way. All in all, it was not an impressive list.

He was glad he'd decided to include his wet suit and tank even though it was personal gear. It always made him feel a little more flexible aboard ship.

He clipped the two-way onto his belt, and began the long raft drag forward. By the time he got to the quarterdeck gangway, he was drenched in sweat. He took a needed break before he unloaded and started carrying the gear up to the forecastle, armful by armful.

Gomez remained drowsy, in and out of touch, offering to help, not really knowing with what. Bobby gently declined, and told him he'd be done shortly.

The raft emptied but for the emergency gear, he secured it at the foot of the forward quarterdeck. Of all the areas available, the forward wheelhouse would probably make the best permanent shelter, something a little higher and more weatherproof than their present accommodations.

He hadn't been in it yet; he'd been too preoccupied. It was once the main navigation and communications center. It was the highest point aboard ship as well, still leaving the raft easily accessible.

The situation inside the wheelhouse wasn't half bad. Although most of the windows were in-

tact, all the functional navigation and communication gear had been pirated, right down to the two helm wheels.

The birds had made it a housing complex — cheap rent, safe, and besides, they could leave anytime. He laughed, imagining how nice it was to have options. It was the extent of the bird refuse that gave him serious second thoughts about camping in here. So much for the theory that birds didn't crap in their nest. It would be okay in a pinch, he figured. It was an option, at least, if the skies got wet.

He took the time to catch the view from the front of the wheelhouse. It was an impressive vista — the working tugs ahead, the Gulf opening up to swallow them, the sky clear, full of the color coming off the water — a fine panorama, and he took the minute to consume it. Standing high, and with the breeze coming through the wheelhouse windows, he realized the air had cooled. Out from the still swamp waters, into the cool zephyr of open water *The Lady* moved.

Back on the quarterdeck Gomez had been awake and in pain for some time. He said he felt better and worse. Either the pain was almost unbearable or he felt nothing. He took to banging the arm with his good hand to keep it going, keep the feeling in it.

After a while he forced himself to get up, little by little. He helped with the shelter despite Bobby's protestations, using his good arm and some body pressure as if he'd never had two hands.

Not able to put much effort together for any length of time, he didn't stay standing long. He squatted, resting to fight off the dizzy spells, to keep himself together. Bobby encouraged him to lie down and rest, take it easy. He had to get pushy with the request before Gomez complied.

Once his companion settled again into drifting discomfort Bobby left him and went below, into the hollow within *The Lady's* murky vitals. It was time to check whether she was safe below. In normal circumstances she would have the holds full of cargo, and her mechanics still in place. There would be a thousand and one other sounds accompanying a ship under power. *The Lady Inca* had none of these.

With her under tow, he heard other sounds. She was full of these sounds, all of them different from the norm. He felt a different motion too, awkward and pulsing, from the contrary pull of the tugs.

He descended further, more easily this time than before — had a better feel for her when she was underway. He could work more easily with her in motion, even with the unnatural roll through her belly as she reacted to the tugs.

By the time he got to her waterline hold he thought again about how unusually high she rode in the water. Everything was above the keel line. He'd noticed her hogging when he was topside, moving across the water instead of through it. *The Lady* had no trustworthy grip into the water, in tow and weightless to boot.

At least he couldn't hear the splash or smell

salt water running inside her, not yet anyway. He liked to figure it was going to be the silver lining, no internal water intake. With that in mind he moved through her slowly, watching his footing as he checked the forward bilge hatches. He found them secure, an important positive for his perspective on survival. The watertight doors remained as Bobby had left them — rusted, fire warped and half sealed. Maybe it was what Robert Forster noticed, not the kind of issue worth dying over, except maybe to Lloyds.

He moved deeper into her stern section, his intuition seemed to get stronger the longer he stayed below decks. More relaxed with it now, he actually started to enjoy the company. Ships and the sea — you have to be part of it to understand. Women never seem able to relate. At least none he'd ever met. And it only affected certain men. Robert Forster had given him that feeling, just passing him on deck.

Gomez had it too, but in a different way. Gomez, Bobby figured, had that kind of karmic relationship with everything in his life. Bobby could see the depth in Gomez, but just couldn't get inside it. He was a man close to his roots, at times eating them to stay alive, probably.

From atop the walkway gratings he could see the chains taut, locked on, bitching and grating noises coming from them as they bound against the torque of the shafts. It was the grotesque king of scream only steel on steel could make, but to Bobby it could just as easily be *The Lady*. He figured the chains were strong enough, but didn't

want to think about the power of an ocean tug pulling them in the open Gulf.

The beam from his flashlight ran across the shafts, dancing hastily across the bloodstains on the burned-up electrical panel. Somebody should wash them off, he thought. He figured that was Howie's job as his eyes carried him unaware to the dark water where Forster died. Seeing it, he flicked the beam off and cringed as the experience washed over him. He saw part of Forster's face splatter on him again. He tried to make everything still.

Still, the sight remained, as if the experience was all that was ever there. Inside the absolute darkness of his mind he saw it. There wasn't a lot you could do when the picture wouldn't turn off, when black was the medium. And it got spooky quickly for Bobby — surreal.

To escape, he had to leave. His eyes were only half open as he started his way along and up the inside companionway. He worked to calm himself while his pace quickened. Think simple, he told himself, make it nothing — the way it was when you're a kid and the crocodiles are going to bite your foot if you don't get it up into bed and under the covers. Or snakes. Bobby always preferred crocodiles. They were slower, bigger, and noisier, too.

It didn't help.

His heart pounded and the companionway stayed dark. The motion of the ship cooperated. The ominous sounds of the grating chain became her voice as the elements around him combined in

a strange unity. He felt her at his feet with each rung of the walkway, not wanting him to leave without the promise, reminding him with each step. The promise. She demanded it. The promise to avenge her.

His fear got him topside, into the late afternoon sun, into the world above, light and life. Leaning heavily on the stern rail, he watched the dead wake curl out from under her. He took all the time he needed to catch himself. For want of something to put in his head he noticed she sat a little deeper in her stern. It wasn't much, but it helped.

Somebody working the deck of the stern tug waved from the distance. He raised his arm absently, as Gomez slipped back into his mind. He wanted to check on him, get some human contact. He realized if Gomez died he'd get the money for nothing.

On the way he stopped off in the crew's quarters beneath the stern wheelhouse and scrounged some partially decayed blankets, heading out through the ransacked galley. There was nothing to take there; it had been stripped of everything.

Back at the forecastle, Gomez appeared to be sleeping. Bobby checked him to be sure it was just sleep. Satisfied he was not yet alone, he spread two blankets over his friend, trying to slide one under his head without waking him. Gomez moaned and produced low, inaudible Spanish. He pulled his own gear over close to him as the Mexican came around.

"Mucha siesta, amigo." Bobby said it low as

he rummaged for the sensimilia and rolled a joint. He drew a glow from it and held it out to him.

Gomez shook his head. "I stay, Bubby. "Yo trabajo mucho, amigo. Anything."

"Si, amigo." Bobby found it curious how the two of them interchanged the language now, figured it must be some kind of mutual compliment. "Companeros." Bobby smiled the words across to him.

Gomez emitted a soft noise with his response. "Gracias, mucho, amigo." It was the kind of quiet muffle that meant he hurt.

Bobby laid down on some of the cot matting he'd dragged from the officers' quarters earlier and slid the box of Oreos to Gomez. He wanted to tell him about the feelings he'd gotten from *The Lady* in the engine room but didn't. "Everything's under control." He looked at his watch. "It's four-thirty." Saying it aloud, he realized he was late calling in. He checked the tug, fighting the irritation of the static as he awaited a response.

They came back and reminded him he was late. Bobby was thinking motion and distance while his voice crackled and broke into theirs. It was done quickly and he was off the air as if he'd never been on.

Lying on his side now, Gomez is settled and quiet.

Bobby watched the menagerie of bugs running about under the chunks of rust and garbage. He fought to leave the spook of the engine room behind.

He wanted to sleep, to move only inside his

thoughts. They were his thoughts, nobody else would give a damn about them, why should anyone. It was irrelevant to everybody and everything but himself. But he had them — ownership through default. It was his world because he was the only one who showed up in it. He stopped himself.

Another lizard skittered across his deck level line of sight. He wondered if it was the same lizard. He wondered where he had been — where he was from. The lizard stopped suddenly and stared back at him — eyeball to eyeball. He was watching the lizard watch him when it opened its mouth and spoke to him.

“Justice, promise her justice.”

He did, and just like that he got safe.

It was almost six o'clock and they hadn't seen land for a couple of hours. Bobby figured they should get it back as they approached the Pilotown rendezvous. He'd known without looking they'd left sight of land. The sway and pull of *The Lady Inca* increased with the swell of the Gulf. It would be a roller coaster once they were secured to the sea tug and moving straight out into the open Gulf.

The thought enticed Bobby to linger in sleep. He took a few moments looking for a dream. Reality was too persistent at the moment.

The two-way jostled Bobby from his meanderings. Bobby answered. “Ship to tug. I read you, five by five.”

“Pilotown in sight. Make ready to transfer lines.”

“Roger.” The radio broke up on him.

“Let go bow lines first. Let them get you in tow before you detach us astern. Over.”

“Roger.”

“Are you shipshape?”

Bobby looked across at Gomez who knew the question without the English. “Roger.” He smiled at Gomez without conviction. “We’re healthy.”

Gomez said nothing but his eyes thanked Bobby for his silence. Bobby noted it and headed to the bow lines. He got his first glimpse of the giant sea tug coming at them fast from landward. He struggled to unbind the towlines while the sea tug closed the gap. It was a two-man job but he managed.

Waiting for the loudspeaker command, he let go the bow lines just as the sea tug came alongside. With the forward tug freed, *The Lady’s* bow started a drift shoreward as the stern tug pulled her seaward. They’d tow her astern into the Gulf current while the sea tug locked on forward. He knew they’d want her tied up fast once the lines came aboard. More work. He wondered how much line they’d let out once they were into the Gulf.

It was a solid half-mile to the shore. Visibility at that distance was poor, but the shoreline had lost its bayou appearance. He checked his watch — it was just past seven. The sky, too, said it was evening, but with a peculiar hue. He noticed the wind was up.

The sea tug was close up on the starboard, much bigger than the harbor tugs. She looked up to the job, almost new, capable of using a lot of power. *Hercules Two* was written across her bow-sides in large white letters. It made him feel better for no justifiable reason. The radar scanner sitting atop the wheelhouse helped, too.

Her captain stood prominently in the wheelhouse. He probably had a three-man crew. It was right alongside now, bumping rubber against the peeled steel of *The Lady*.

On a muffled word through the loudspeaker, the lead line shot up and across the bow, whistling past Bobby's head. "Thar she blows," he mumbled, expecting to see Beluga spouting nearby.

Scrambling across the bow he got the lead line, knew he wouldn't be hauling nylon aboard. These guys had the advanced technology. They'd go lead line to one-inch nylon to steel cable. Cable was a three-man job, bearable with two.

The loudspeaker vibrated sound again. "Feed through port bulwark."

He felt the weight grow as the cable cleared the water. Everything was heavier coming out of the water, he thought, just like evolution.

The cable took time, came up grating over the deck railing, grinding against the bulwarks. His arms started to ache from fatigue. The cable didn't flex easily. His gloves were ripping up from the jagged cable threads. Twice the cable pulled up hard against his bare torso. Thin red claw marks ran across him, small rivulets of blood mixing with his sweat.

From a distance the effort had the appearance of smooth, poetic metaphor, flowing rhythm. It was man's statement, his place in the struggle. Up close, it was sweat, curses and man in labor. It was noble perhaps, but there was no baby to show for it.

Bobby leaned back against the winch. Exhausted, he looked up into the sky where his daughter's face emerged, and cornered him. Her hope-filled eyes promised him eternity. He felt the sea breeze and heard *The Lady Inca* promise she would get him to her.

The steel slap of cable against *The Lady's* rail brought him back quickly. "We are roger and go aboard ship." He mouthed into the two-way, his first opportunity to check it against the tug's radio. "Take it up real slow, she's gonna mill tight. Over."

It was only a few minutes before the slack started disappearing. "Taking slack. Stay sharp up there. Over." The grind and rasp moved into full swing. The eerie metal scraping of the bind grew louder as the cable tightened. This was not a sound to sleep by. Grind and scrape, baby, he thought to himself. Wind yourself so tight you never come free. Just pull me home.

"You're tight. Cables secure." His own insurance policy surfaced. "Come back with weather. Over."

"Three day weather watch across the Gulf. Over."

Thanks for nothing. Weather watch could mean anything from light rain to the end of the

world. "Request four-hour radio checks. Over." He didn't want to be forgotten for too long, to get too ignorant about the weather movement.

"Cast off stern lines." The sea tug is taking charge. "You're under tow from us now."

He could feel the unsteady lurching already, the gnash and bang of the cable against the *Lady*. To Bobby it rang like life.

He watched the big tug start a slow turn to sea, cable reeling off her deck. "Ship to tug." He spoke as he headed forward. "Give me an ETA Brownsville."

The radio broke up. He slapped it. "Over."

"ETA Brownsville forty-eight hours." It died again, came back as static muffle. "Thursday. Same time. Over."

"Roger. Radio check." The two-way was leaving, but he kept talking anyway. "Midnight. Over."

It was done. They were underway. He noticed her hogging more severely than before and hoped it was because they were still running cable out.

Night started to close in. The sky grew clouded and full-blown, unlit and omnipotent. He got rations and weather lamps from the forecandle storage. He found Gomez half-asleep, fed the two of them, and talked a little. He tried to get comfortable.

Drifting off to the ocean around him, he saw his daughter's face before him. It was all he had, and it was enough.

CHAPTER TWELVE

International Salvage
Brownsville, Texas
Tuesday Night

The senator sat in Hertzels Markovitz's office at International Salvage. He tapped a pencil slowly and with irritating regularity as he listened to Hertzels alternate between arrogance and squirm.

Enrico, Estaphan's specialist in pest control, stood at the door, a big, shiny-suited statue — cold, smart, and very predictable.

The senator was working Estaphan's side of the tracks, following the party line. He presented a new, secretive attitude to an old business partner, letting Hertzels roast slowly, while he put effort into assuring Enrico knew where his loyalty lay.

"We picked him up at the ship this morning." Hertzels talked while he took a seat on the couch across the room. "Charley's driving him back, taking him to his trailer on South Padre." The strain was starting to show on Hertzels's face. "They got him to a doctor in New Orleans, patched him up."

He watched Enrico the executioner out of the corner of his eye. "It's all hushed, senator."

“How do you know?” The senator’s pencil tapping picked up the tempo. “We’ve got a lot of people still knowing about this.”

Hertzel was shuffling. “We can take care of the boys on the ship. No problem. They’re nobodies. Nobody’s going to notice.”

The senator surveyed the shuffle. “What about your ace idiot Morgan?”

“Charley called me from the highway a few hours ago. They should be in early tomorrow morning.” Hertzel got into his positive mode. “He’s okay. We can hide him out.” Hertzel said it like it was good news. “He’ll be okay.”

The senator questioned the intelligence of Howie’s continuing good health. He waited for Hertzel to absorb it before moving on. “What about the doctor?” “The gunshot wound? Is it going to end up in a police report?”

“Don’t worry,” Hertzel said. “We own the doctor. He’s a quack, no license, no need to report anything.”

The senator snapped the pencil, as it slammed hard on the desk. “You get some quack addict to patch him? We shouldn’t worry? You better start worrying, Hertzel!” He pulled his giant frame from the chair as the storm in his eyes headed towards rage. “I don’t want any loose ends here, Hertzel. Neither does Houston. There’s the doctor. And the other two — the ones still on the ship.”

The senator was almost talking to himself now. His voice had gone soft and wishful, as if it was his Christmas list. He glanced quietly be-

tween Hertzell and Enrico. "Some people might even consider adding your name to the list of loose ends."

Hertzell had clarification now. The implication was obvious.

"You've given us quite a list of loose ends here, Hertzell." The senator sat down. An eerie and powerful calm settled on him, as if he could crush Hertzell just with the words. "I guess a lot depends on how you handle yourself from here on in. How well you take care of some of these loose ends yourself."

Hertzell lifted himself from the couch, his eyes moving more than they should. "Relax, senator. This'll get sorted out. I already arranged for this Bobby character to take care of the Mexican." The senator saw he was looking to get off the list.

"Once he's back, we'll take care of him."

"And Howie? We're going to have Lloyds and the cops all over everything before this is over." The senator leaned back, his arms behind his head. "This Howie character is a loose cannon, Hertzell."

"Like I said, Howie's on his way back now. I can take care of it. No problem."

"Don't rush it on Howie." The senator kept his mind on business. "You said there were loose ends? The cops. Lloyds. We don't want him disappearing too mysteriously, too soon." The senator let the message linger. "Send him to the farm for a holiday. He won't get suspicious. He's been there before." The senator smiled, feeling a little more as if he'd gotten everybody in place. "Tell

him we got new whores up there.” He glanced over for Enrico’s silent approval. Estaphan’s man just kept staring.

“No problem, Senator. I’ll make sure Howie tidies everything up before I cut him loose to you. Yeah, loose ends. I had two calls waiting for me when I got back here. Some New Orleans’ cop.” He pointed to the document on his desk. “And Lloyds.”

The senator picked it up.

“They didn’t have a copy. We’ve got Howie’s.” The senator looked at it, kept listening.

“I faxed them a copy already.” Hertznel smiled. “It seems this Robert Forster never made it back.”

Nobody joined the humor wave, an intentional omission.

“No loose ends Hertznel.” The senator stayed tunnel-visioned. “None.”

“Okay. Okay. We keep Howie to talk to them.” Hertznel had the theme. “He’s okay when he’s straight. He can pull it off.”

“Then he’s gone.” The senator still didn’t look up from the document. “A vacation to the farm. A permanent one.” When he did look up, it was to imply the meeting was about over. “I’ve got to get a ten o’clock flight back to Austin. I’ll get this situation back to Houston.” He headed for the doorway. “Get me this doctor’s name and whereabouts. Tomorrow morning.” He was on his way out, Hertznel trailing him. “No loose ends.”

They got outside. Hertznel stood at the car door as the senator climbed in. “What about the goon, Henry? I don’t want him around. He makes me

nervous.”

“He’s here to keep an eye on things, Hertzell.” The senator gave him solid eye contact as he settled onto the seat. “I don’t blame you for being nervous.” He enjoyed the discomfort, figured it was time Hertzell got a feel for heat. “Be good to him. He’s got a lot to say about your future.”

The door closed as the window lowered. Hertzell followed the beckoning crook of the senator’s finger from the open window. Up close, he grabbed Hertzell by the throat like a vice and pulled him against the window frame, cracking his glasses against his forehead. His voice was low and cruel. “We’ve got some problems here, Hertzell. People will die to take care of your fucking greed. It’s very inconvenient, doesn’t look good.” Spit hit Hertzell in the face, “You should really start worrying about ending up with your balls up your ass.”

Hertzell gagged for breath as the senator released him, holding his throat, and wiping spit from his face. His twisted glasses fell to the gravel as the car disappeared into the darkness.

“You cocksucker!”

The senator didn’t hear, he was too busy smiling.

The shaft broke loose somewhere close to midnight; right after the faulty radio check with the tug gave a garbled weather warning. The screaming didn’t start right away, not until the free-spinning shafts had burned off most of the oily sludge

in the engine room, depriving her of makeshift lubrication.

The eerie increase of the noise and vibration finally started to pull him back from sleep. It had a supernatural quality to it, distant yet immediate. It was as if she was crying to him to set her free — cut the cables, abandon her, let her go her way.

That part of it bothered him most — when he got to thinking she'd come alive, had taken hold on her destiny. She walked right into his head and found the power to cry aloud to him, only to him, and to no one else. It frightened and strengthened him at the same time.

In that moment he jerked himself awake and shook with the peculiar shivers running through him. He checked his watch.

He would like to think he shivered from the weather change, the spitting rain, but he knew better. It was four o'clock. He thought with relief that night wouldn't hold him forever. It always ended. Soon — he would look at her soon.

Gomez wasn't moving.

Bobby picked up the two-way and tried the tug for some outside contact. He heard only static crackle, but still felt almost in touch. He kept on it until they finally came back to him, broken up but audible. The captain is sleeping, he was told. Bobby insisted on speaking with him. They shut the radio down on him while they went to pull their skipper out of bed.

He waited and the bad crackle of the two-way came back. The irritated captain reiterated the

obvious — they were doing five knots, the pressure from the props must have snapped the shaft chains. He promised to reduce speed, investigate, and repair at first light. There was no point stopping now, Bobby thought he heard the message. It was too dark to see or do anything.

The tug signed off and Bobby still didn't want to be alone in the dark. The kid in him wanted the covers over his head, feet tucked safely under the blanket edges. He decided to check in with Gomez. He suspected the Mexican knew. Gomez spoke before Bobby made the move. He had a way of reading Bobby's thoughts.

"You hear eh, Bubby. She break loose, Bubby. She angry *Lady*." Gomez rolled onto his back, slowly. "She talk now, eh Bubby?"

Bobby nodded invisibly in the darkness.

"Esto no esta bueno. We stop. We wait. No sail now. She burn, catch fire sure."

"They no stop, Gomez," His English was working like Gomez, "slow down until light." Bobby sat in discomfort and yet enjoyed the company. "Then we fix."

"Too fast." Gomez was a realist. "Chains no hold, we burn." He wiped rain from his face. "Weather, Bubby, esta mal."

They sat there in silence, swaying with the spreading roll of *The Lady* against the waters. They listened as plumes of spray banged off her sides, feeling the slow build of the wind through the rigging and the rain against their faces. They tried to gauge its growth.

Twenty minutes passed before Bobby got up,

his body rigid and unnatural. He rose as if God talked to him, startling Gomez. The Mexican watched as Bobby turned and headed astern. His words rolled back from him. "I'm going to look, I've got to see what she's doing."

The noise grew around him as he moved towards it, his motion unsteady from the seas, his footing uncertain in the rain. Three quarters of the way astern he smelled the sear drifting out of her engine room. It chilled him.

The faint beam of the flashlight at the top of the hatch outlined the smoky shadows drifting up and slipping out into the cool of the Gulf. He felt heat rising out of her, too. The heat and smoke combined with the anguished whine, making him decide to wait for better light.

He waited, spending the time thinking what might still be down there to burn. He remembered lots of sludgy oil. Once the water was gone she'd get hot enough to catch fire, that was a certainty. The thought didn't soothe him. He climbed into another door in his head, the empty room.

He came back when the sky started breaking red to the east. He couldn't wait any longer, and raised the tug, telling them he was ready — already below, ready to work. He'd say anything to get shut down and stop the scream.

He killed a few more minutes with the thought. The smoke didn't let up but the sound fell off to less than intermittent. The silence cheered him. In a world of no mercies, neutrality made him happy. No noise meant no friction, no

heat, less chance of her exploding into flame while he was below.

The lower he went the more it stunk — fresh burn. She made very little noise now, just tiny, whimpering sounds, coming with the absent roll and pitch. It was just bright enough to give him phantoms everywhere.

The light picked up a little through the engine room vents, the smoke drifting up thick in free swirling shadows against it. There was little visibility and breathing was almost impossible. He tied his kerchief across his face, something he should have done sooner. Acrid smoke slid into his lungs with every breath. He pulled the kerchief tighter, wadded part of it into his mouth, and sucked slow, shallow breaths. This did nothing to help the sting against his eyes.

He waded thick-legged and blind to the shaft. There was no chain anywhere. The slime was thicker now, the water evaporated from the friction. He worried they'd start moving while he was wrapping the shaft. He had no plans to turn into ground beef. There was already too much absent roll in the shafts just from her pitch.

He immersed himself in the effort, gagging and swallowing crap. Coughing up sludge, he worked submerged on the bottom of the shaft. He looked for chain. His fingers slid against the point where the links had parted from stress. Some of it he managed to double link. With some of it he reset the shackles to allow less play under pressure.

It took him twenty minutes before he knew he

must leave or lose consciousness. He was almost blind now. It would have to do. He started to believe he was going to die there. He tumbled across the shafts and groped himself onto the catwalk, certain he had left it too long. All thoughts left him but the quest for air.

Each step transformed him until he saw himself as a demon, at home in it, coming from there to the world above. He floated in the imagery, until he neared the top and fell against the hatchway, sliding back, losing consciousness. He was dying when the *Lady* took him, carried him the last tiny distance as a mother would her child.

Lying on the deck, he searched to find consciousness but couldn't. He collapsed in exhaustion, his body caring for itself, running on automatic. His lungs let go oil and smoked water.

His mind had exited; gone to visit Tanya, to talk to her, ask her about school and her pretty dress. Did she miss him today?

Time passed, minutes, days maybe. He stayed with his daughter, smiling. He saw her wide eyes the first time he ever took her aboard ship. She was a lady of ships, his daughter, like the lady in every ship, the strength, the dignity, the honor.

The tightness around his heart gave way as his lungs loosened their atrophy. He felt the rain on his face, and the conscious part of his mind found him. Keep breathing, it said. Get to your knees. Get to your daughter.

It took time before he stood on shaky legs, still coughing, and spitting slime. He staggered his way forward, noticing the worsening weather and

the increased roll and skid of the *Lady* as he worked harder for his footing. He hadn't expected anything else.

He found Gomez awake and more alert. He'd been securing their shelter a little.

"Estas muerto, Bubby?" His eyes took in the spectacle of someone back from the dead or heading to it. "Eres muy macho, Bubby."

It perked him to have somebody notice the wear and tear. The effort hadn't been in complete obscurity.

"You a filthy man too, Bubby." Gomez smiled.

Bobby squatted as Gomez stood. "I help now, amigo." He flexed his good arm. "Strong now." He grinned. He tried a Mr. Universe posture with his torso and slipped back into the pain mode. He tried to hide it as he forced his bad arm up again. "No pain." He fell into his "life's a bitch chuckle". It was second nature to Gomez. Gomez may be hurt but he was still in control. "Sleep, Bubby. I keep my eye for us."

Exhaustion and fear made Bobby easy to read.

"Life is for long time yet, amigo."

Bobby heard the soft Mexican chuckle again as Gomez looked into the driving rain.

"Maybe."

"They're gonna shred the chain again." Bobby spoke absently as he sank onto his bedding. "Between the pull and the sea..." His voice trailed away as he fell into exhausted sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*New Orleans International Airport
New Orleans, Louisiana
Wednesday Noon*

Like a lot of things that are supposed to be quick and easy, the flight proved slow and difficult. Rachel had gotten little sleep, bumping her way through deteriorating weather as she closed the distance to the east coast.

Rachel had never liked flying, avoided it whenever possible. She preferred limos and trains. She was just short of time at the moment. She couldn't afford the luxury right now.

She surveyed the city through broken rain clouds. From ten thousand feet it would be a beautiful view in good weather, but to Rachel it was dark and gray, smudged like a black ink drawing left in the rain. She felt as if she could sink into it and dissolve, getting the blues without trying.

She momentarily second guessed her decision to make the trip after getting Barney's "no news yet" call. All she had been able to get from him was a name, and an unsolicited caution about the New Orleans cop. Barney had given up trying to talk her out of the journey. He'd told her Maurice

Le Clerc was a crook and a letch, but if there was dirt in New Orleans, he'd know about it — a nice recommendation for a cop. She wondered what his resume looked like.

It had taken her two hours to pack, and a couple more at the club to delegate authority. Jimmy had driven her to San Diego International, concern written all over him, and since she wouldn't let him take her along — told her about his man, Sunny. She pretended irritation but he knew she approved.

Five minutes through arrivals and he was there. Sunny, the fast talking young Cajun Jimmy had arranged. Five more minutes and she was in the back seat of the Limo. The swarthy-skinned bayou baby hummed King Creole between city highlights while he careened her through the rain, and to the cops.

She appreciated his energy; it took her mind off reality. He was all manners and attention to detail. She smiled; thinking how Jimmy would have known this guy would suit her.

"No affront intended, ma'am," he said. "But Jimmy was right, he told me to find the best lookin' woman in the airport.

"None taken." She smiled into his rear view mirror. "I'm a fine-looking lady who enjoys hearing it from the right people." Her eyes closed while she said it, fatigue. Sunny seemed to notice and toned himself down. She longed for a full bath, hot and loaded with bubbles — just her, Mozart and some B&B over ice — and the bubbles of course.

She drifted for forty-five minutes that expired like a blink.

Then Sunny's voice arrived like a stranger from nowhere. "We're here, Ms Rachel. Downtown Precinct."

Her eyes opened slowly. "Just call me Rachel, Sunny."

"The champ told me you was Ms Rachel and if my man Jimmy says you're Ms Rachel, you're Ms Rachel." She smiled at him in the mirror and he smiled back and moved quickly to her door."

His smile ran right into her eyes. "You take your time Ms Rachel, I'll be waiting right here."

She smiled right back. "I should be fifteen minutes."

"Yes ma'am. You got yourself the most dedicated chaperone in the whole of New Orleans." He slid his cap back on his head, looking as if he'd just bought the Mississippi from the French, and planned to give it to her.

"No doubt I do, Sunny." Rachel looked at him, "No doubt I do. And I could use a friend right now."

She ran through the rain and into the less-than-state-of-the-art law enforcement building. "One hundred and fifty years proud" the fading wood placard humbly asserted. She wondered if it was the building or the sign. Probably both. Once an impregnable military garrison, the station looked more like a badly fortified barrio.

Crowds, dirt, and a sense of chaotic disorder greeted Rachel inside. She ran the usual police eyeball mentality. No letch like a cop, she

thought, as she worked Le Clerc's whereabouts out of the desk sergeant.

Ten minutes of walking corridors, climbing stairs, and retreating from dead ends finally brought her to the man's office and Maurice Le Clerc had zero to give her. He'd checked Robert's apartment, the recent John Does, and Lloyds, and came up with nothing — a little too much nothing for Rachel. She figured him out without much effort. The man was a character beyond even Barney's description. Fat and shifty, he was a coffee slurper who talked through the side of his mouth.

"Lloyds didn't expect him back. To their way of thinkin', he left for San Diego right after the inspection. Not expected to show for work in San Diego til Monday next." Le Clerc had an obsession for shuffling papers on his disaster desk while he talked. It gave the impression he had something to do, he just couldn't seem to figure out what it was. "They think nothin's strange. Didn't get the insurance documents before he left, but it happens."

Rachel watched the lust run from him while he talked, his eyes all over her — she half expected him to start drooling like a dog.

"Maybe finished late. Caught a flight. Fax 'em later. No big deal." He stopped to rub coffee into his shirt. "Lloyds figured to hear from him only if he got a problem somehow."

He offered her a chair, and she declined.

"We went to his office. He'd cleaned it out a couple of days ago." Le Clerc paused, wiped his hand across his mouth, and smeared chocolate

doughnut onto his cheek. "I figure your brother just wanted to party for a bit." He paused again. "I told Barney that. Told him a missing persons was stupid, too." He stared a little harder at Rachel, his eyes still horny.

Rachel wanted to believe the story, but it wasn't Robert's style.

"I can finish up here in a few minutes, baby. Why don't we go somewhere? Relax a little. You're all fretted up about nothing. We can talk it out." Le Clerc straightened his tie. "I'll show you a little of old New Orleans, just so you don't think you wasted a trip." He brought his shoulders up into his neck in a "what've you got to lose" gesture.

Rachel had tired of it before it even began. She focused her eyes in on Le Clerc as she leaned towards him, patience running between thin and none at all. Le Clerc pulled himself closer.

"I'm not your baby." Her voice was soft, seductive, like the kind of snake that hypnotizes before it strikes. "I'm looking for my brother and you're fucking me around, Tubby."

Le Clerc withdrew suddenly. "I got lots of work here lady, don't get two-bit with me, Ms..."

"Forster." She leaned closer to the shallow, irritated little leech. "Rachel Forster. I haven't got a lot of time. I've been on a plane most of the night. I'm in a pretty foul mood. Do you have a superior?" Her voice had sprung suddenly into a goading, staccato automation. "Did you check out the ship he surveyed?"

"Yeah!" Le Clerc seemed surprised by the ag-

gression. "He was there. He left."

"And by the way, Barney said to give you a message, if necessary." Her voice dripped cruel. "You listening, Tubby?" She stood, flashing arrogance and ownership of Le Clerc's weasel mentality as she stuck her index nail in his chest. "He said he would come here and personally squeeze your tired little balls off if you did anything but help."

She was still staring through him while he checked the room behind her.

"How do you know my brother was ever there?"

"The ship's gone." He backed away from the nail. "If he hadn't signed her off, she couldn't have sailed."

"What if they took him with them?"

"There's nothin' out there. No car. Nothin'. You think they murdered your brother? Loaded his car on the ship and left?"

"Did you talk to anyone out there?" She had him.

"I told you, they'd gone. Relax. Brownsville, Friday morning. We checked it out."

"Where's Brownsville?"

"South. Fourteen hours by car. You've got lots of time. I checked. They're due Thursday night, Friday morning at the latest." He paused, closed his eyes as if he wanted to doze off and wake up with her somewhere besides in the middle of his face. "Tex-Mex country, right there on the border. Ya wanna be careful down there. Some nasty men down there, not cops, they won't have to take any

shit from you.”

Rachel skipped the comment. Le Clerc got a paunchy little chuckle going. It didn't take much to sidetrack his better judgment. She let him roll, own back a bit of his macho, a trade-off as long as the information she needed kept coming her way.

“International Salvage,” he said.

“What's that?”

“Look, uh, Rachel, I got a lotta items to take care of here.”

She let him off. “I need to make a couple of calls.” It was a statement and she was in motion to his phone while she said it. She picked the receiver from his desk. “Well?”

She wanted privacy. He picked it up quickly.

“Yeah, okay.” He moved away as if he had something else to do anyway. “Quick ones.” Gave her the kind of look he needed to justify he was a cop and in control whenever he wanted to be.

“Thanks.” He disappeared from her mind. She called Robert's apartment, Lloyds and International Salvage. She decided to let Sunny figure out her accommodation for the evening.

Le Clerc had given her the minimum space, all the while glaring out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't help but get the rude tone going again. “Anythin' else?” He slid back into the leer. “Dinner? I'll tell you all 'bout being a cop in New Orleans.”

“Barney told me you could be an amazing asshole and I was ready for that.” She was halfway to the door. “But he didn't tell me you were an obtuse, stupid one.”

Her mind moved through the phone calls as she made her way out — Lloyds, Brownsville, International Salvage. The ship was expected Thursday at the earliest. She thought about the travel time to Brownsville, idiot cops and sleep. Her mind stayed with sleep — sleep and an early flight to Brownsville, wherever it was.

Sunny's smile found her like radar as she exited the precinct, and guided her like a beacon. "Thought you were never comin' back, Ms Rachel."

He was holding the door.

"Thanks for waiting, Sunny." She patted him on the arm. "Thanks for smiling, too."

"No problem on either count, ma'am."

It was well into the afternoon. As the weather kept souring, Sunny related the bad weather warnings, taking charge of getting her to a hotel near the airport. "Someplace respectable" was the way he put it. "No problem".

He delivered her to the desk, thanked her for letting him be of service, winked, gave her his number and told her he would be waiting. She took the full minute to watch him exit the place. Some things gave you a good feeling even when they end.

In ten minutes she'd settled into the fifteenth floor, ordering up bubbles and B&B but couldn't get Mozart — not today, not in New Orleans. She figured two out of three wasn't bad. She slid into the tub and let the hot steamy water comfort her exhausted body.

Events slowed down. She slowed down, caressing herself. Her skin was soft and supple

against her fingers, her body soothed and gentle in the water. The luxury of an untroubled bath could always make Rachel fold into herself. She closed her eyes and floated to some distant embryonic place, one a little closer to her soul, maybe.

A bath could do that to some women.

It was four o'clock Wednesday afternoon. Tossed suddenly from his bedding by a harsh list of *The Lady*, Bobby woke up wet. There had been many lurches, but he'd recovered, and managed to roll himself back and stay buried in sleep, once again fighting to keep himself somewhere else.

But the weather had been deteriorating for several hours, and now the *Lady* would let him ignore her no longer. The water was beating hard on her and pushing her contrary to the tow. He felt the dread in each shuddering vibration of *The Lady Inca* as she tore uncontrolled.

Amidst the turmoil he heard her cry from her stern and knew the chains had severed again. He assumed she was burning back there. But for the moment the weather overrode everything. He was sitting in it, soaked. Already there was a squall at the least, maybe worse. He wondered how he'd been able to sleep this far into it.

Gomez and the two-way were nowhere in sight. Maybe it would all go away and turn into someone else's nightmare. Maybe. Don't get panicked, he pressured himself, get methodical. The entire reality of the journey was too long-drawn

for panic to have a place at this point. Remember the easy money. Who should panic over easy money? Easy?

He set about stowing loose gear. If he was going to panic, he'd do it systematically. He thought about body heat as he pulled his wet suit from the stowage, got into it, and set off in search of his mate. He walked semi-upright, a bow-legged kind of stance against the wind, rain, reel and pitch of *The Lady* as she struggled.

She was hogging again as she battled the thrash of the seas against her sides, the grating crash and the harsh pull of the towline across her bow. Spray broke across her decks constantly, rolling her heavily with the pounding. She would have been okay in a calm sea, but in a cresting turmoil the seas breached her far too often.

He was far enough astern to hear the shafts screaming above the wind. He could see her engine room smoke, as if she was alive, making steam. She slid and weaved, powerless and without direction, like so many of the drunken sailors who had wandered home to her.

In her struggle, Bobby saw his own. He needed her to stay strong. He rode with her, he and Gomez. He surveyed the sky, dark overhead and darker on the horizon. He knew storms. Twenty knots was only a fresh breeze to a sailor, but she was blowing more than twenty. Fresh breezes can turn to gales, to strong gales, to anything over seventy knots — hurricane weather.

He figured they'd already worked their way into near gale. The thoughts made him shiver as

he looked up at the sky again. A good sailor could tell it all from the sky and in that moment the sky told him much more than he wanted to know.

The cascading slam of the sea against the starboard confirmed it, promising bigger and better. But with waves, bigger definitely wasn't better.

The concerns travelled with him.

Astern, he found Gomez sitting, slouched, head down, soaked through the ratty all-weather gear he'd found somewhere, his Yankees' cap covering his eyes, legs braced against the pitch and roll. Positioned out of the way of random spray, favoring his bad side, his eyes were closed. He was awake.

"The radio?"

"I call them, Bubby." His body didn't move.

Bobby waited for more.

"Grande storm come, amigo." His head finally moved, motioning towards the engine room companionway. "Mucho fire." He raised his eyes, widening them. "Which you like?" Gomez laughed, and Bobby missed the humour this time.

He stayed on topic like a good gringo. "Did you tell the tug to take us off?"

Gomez lowered his head, the laughter fading. "Don't give a sheet, Bubby. They scared for their sheet, too. Relax Bubby; no worry. Maybe we muertos, but no muertos from worry. Si?"

"Gomez!" Bobby had trouble with the 'muerte' part. "Gimme the fucking radio!"

"Seet aqui, Bubby." Gomez motioned with a slight move of his head. "We wait on God. He help us now, no the putas gringos."

Bobby dropped beside Gomez, and took the radio. He raised static, cursed and dropped it to the deck. Anger chased fear. He looked skyward again. If they were counting on God, the deity didn't look very happy at the moment. Bobby relayed the thought to Gomez, getting the Mexican chuckle for it.

His mind wandered back to the scale for storms, remembering they had numbers too, not just names. Five to twelve — fresh breeze to hurricane. He figured this one was a strong seven, working hard at hitting eight. It might skip right into a nine if the elements worked hard —that would give them no less than a full blown gale.

The two of them squatted there, braced on their haunches. They watched the smoke and listened to the screams of the engine room build with the growing yawl and twisting pitch. The wails blended into the winds like an orchestra structuring to fortissimo.

The sirens and the seas — Bobby flashed on vague myths from his uneventful days in a classroom long ago. Romulus and Remus. Jason and the Golden Fleece. Something like that. He got irritated with his attitude, and decided to work on reality — survival. He needed to get angry. That could keep a man alive when nothing else would. It had worked for him before.

He got up, keeping himself irritated, working on the anger. It was time to move, get something together. "I'm going forward, amigo." He said it as if he was walking into his backyard. "Get some gear together."

His shipmate raised his head painfully, his brown eyes stoic.

“Stay here. Watch our engine room.” He said it as if Gomez had the health to move around if he wanted to. He headed across the quarterdeck, balancing his movements against the action around him. Turning back, he grabbed the handrail to steady himself. “If it blows up you let me know, eh, amigo?”

It got a smile out of Gomez. “No worry, Bubby. I throw water on it.” He laughed and looked out at the tormented seas. “I have plenty help, no worry. Mucha agua aqui.”

It took a lot of effort to get to their gear. Bobby felt better hearing the cable slamming against her side, knowing the tug still had them, at least temporarily. He figured it was a proper gale now, eight minimum, sliding to nine. The wind was over thirty knots for sure. It was halfway to hurricane.

He got to the business, the reality of their troubles. *The Lady Inca* made no headway, burning in her stern and beaten upon by an enraged and fast-rising sea. There was no ballast to hold her in the water and no power to move through it, to create a cutting edge.

The Lady knew all this. She knew Bobby would fight alongside her, even though she had no more than her size, able to displace only that much of the sea. A mote in the eye of her aggressor, nothing more. Yet, she would not perish cooperatively, the instinct to fight — many years of it, had kept her standing, steel against water.

Many times she had withstood the water Satan, many times.

And defeat only once. And then she did not drown, the God of fire took her. A different enemy, not historic. Random. It was not her command to fight fire, never had been. In this the men who sailed her failed. She did not fail them, not then, and not ever before.

It was all a personal thing to *The Lady*. Heritage, maybe.

Many miles away, in the safety of her hotel, Rachel had finished her bath and eaten. She called Barney Matthews and then went to bed to sleep the night away. She did that at five-thirty. The wind and driving rain beating against her vista windows were working hard at thwarting her plans. That, and the phone call.

“How did you find me?”

“I’m a cop.”

“I’m sleeping, and you’re wasting your time.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, baby.” The nasty edge to Le Clerc’s voice kept Rachel’s attention. “This is business. I wouldn’t bother otherwise. Let you discover things for yourself, but that bastard friend of yours, Matthews, seems to think you’re entitled to more attention.”

“What is it?”

“Not over the phone. Meet me in an hour. The dining room.” The line went dead. More of Le Clerc’s style. The bedside clock glowed seven-thirty. She’d had two hours sleep.

The elevator ride to the mezzanine dining room was filled with tourists talking about their first hurricane type weather.

A window seat in the dining room gave Rachel a looking-glass view of the onslaught. The wind scattering debris, a driving rain, and black clouds full of lightning assaults made her decide to meet him and get back to bed to sleep through it. She tried to stay away from thoughts of Robert in the middle of it. She wasn't hungry, but ordered salad and wondered how she would get to Brownsville if this kept up.

Her seat gave her a view of the door and let her spot Maurice Le Clerc as he came through it. Nothing about him seemed to have changed since they'd met a few hours earlier — same suit, same stains, and same seedy leer. His appearance was just a little more wrung out, like he'd been drinking — and he had.

He spotted her and stared hard all the way to her table.

"I don't know what it is, but I get the distinct feeling you don't like me, *Ms Forster*." He smirked. "Something about me not being good enough for you, eh? A bum cop from New Orleans, eh?"

"What's the point, Mister Le Clerc?" She held her eyes on his. "You're a half hour late."

"Still the smart mouthed bitch, eh lady?" He paused. "Barney Matthews saved my life, lady. Twice. I owe him." He shrugged, as if it was nothing. "He covered for me a couple times. I'm here 'cause I owe him. I'm paying up." He stared hard

at her. “And he told me you phoned him. Said I was an asshole!”

“You are, Mister Le Clerc. What’s your point?” Rachel still knew nothing. “Do you know something about my brother?”

“I don’t know nothing about your brother. Nothing. There’s nothing to know. If he turns up, great. If not, shit happens and he got in the way of some of it.”

Rachel stood up from the table, didn’t see a productive direction for the conversation. “You’re wasting my time. I’m very tired.” Very tired, and irritable. “Excuse me.”

Le Clerc grabbed her as she stepped from the table. “Lady! Go home. Your brother ain’t gonna show!”

She tried to pull away from him. He squeezed her tighter, hurting her. He forced her close to him, her head pulling back from the stink in his mouth.

“These are serious people, lady. Don’t go looking for nobody. Real serious and real connected. Not the kind of stuff you come into town and start asking questions about.”

“Let go of me, Mister Le Clerc.” Her eyes turned cruel. “That’s not my dick pressed against your fat gut.”

He looked down at the tiny chrome revolver. He eased off, as much from surprise as fear. “They know you’re here, you dumb bitch.”

“Who knows I’m here?”

“I checked it out, lady. I got told not to, and I know when to listen.” He backed away from her

a little. "If you keep nosing around you're gonna end up nowhere like your brother." He pushed a chair out of his way. "You been told!"

Holding her arm, Rachel rubbed it while she watched him leave. Sitting down, she let her heart slow, collecting her thoughts. She waited ten minutes before leaving.

Back in her room she bolted the door and jammed a chair under it. She climbed back into bed and fell into an uneasy sleep, if it qualified as sleep at all. By midnight she was up again, sitting at the window, watching God manipulate hell and thinking about Le Clerc's warning — if someone knew she was here it was pretty certain he'd told them. She left that terror and returned to God's manipulation of the theme.

In some strange way she enjoyed the present terror. Maybe because it took her thoughts from the future. Never having been this close to a serious storm, she got riveted by its terrifying magnificence. On the fifteenth floor the weather had the kind of impact a front row seat at the center of creation should.

Frenzied arcs of lightning writhed across the sky, illuminating the torment of wind and rain. Chaotic debris whirled within it, thrashing against the window of her room. She'd never been in a swaying building either — something to remember.

The desk called several times, suggesting she come to the lobby. They called until the lines and the lights went dead. She chose to stay there. If she died in that hotel, she didn't plan on doing it

publicly. Besides, she could handle her own fear better than the mutual terror of dozens of strangers. Staying by herself gave her the freedom to hide under the covers, cry — whatever she needed to do.

At some point in the night, she fell into a kind of slumber right there in the chair, in and out of sleep, dreaming God's wrath as a hurricane.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Sinking
The Gulf of Mexico
Wednesday Midnight*

Bobby staggered to the dinghy. The journey forward had been a continuing struggle, the weather deteriorating with his every step. He struggled to collect what little survival gear there was, happy to have the dinghy. It was small, four-by-eight, a minute buffer. People had survived with less, he told himself, not believing it. It was always possible — stay with the positive.

He thought about dragging it astern and tying it off back there. The stern sat closer to the waterline when, or if they abandoned ship. Too late. He'd never make it back. Besides, the engine room was too unstable, could blow her ass right out of the water. He decided to leave it forward. He knew he couldn't make the trip now, anyway.

He did what he could, wondering how to get back and fetch Gomez. He was cursing himself for not dragging the amigo forward with him. It was then the Mexican showed up behind him, shouting unheard through the howling wind. He gave it up and smacked Bobby hard across the back with his good arm.

"*The Lady* have flame now, Bubby!" The wind made communication impossible without their shouting nose to nose. "She burn real fire."

Bobby heard his words, his mind still working to accept Gomez's survival of the trip forward. Another wave thundered over the storm railings, drenching them. He knew it wouldn't be long before the hold decks were awash. They were covered for the most part but not lashed or proofed. He knew a good breaking wave could easily bare them. If that happened she would fill fast. It would put out the fire and drown them both in the process. Feast or famine, Bobby thought as he spit salt water.

Only the breaking waves and the occasional freak managed to breach her, pounding down on her decks. It was the freaks that worried him. When the storm turned from adolescent to adult, so would the freaks. A real freak could bury a ship.

Movement around the deck was slow and artificial. Visibility was nil in the intense dark. Only the long, jagged bends of lightning permitted temporary vision a few feet in front of them.

They decided to make their stand below the forecastle, running lifelines back and forth across the deck. *The Lady's* violent and unpredictable tossing made it difficult to stay upright, let alone work.

Once rigged, Bobby hooked the two of them to both sets of lines. He crawled, dragging himself and Gomez up under the edge of the forecastle overhang. He figured the winds were well over

forty knots now, wave height at least twenty to thirty feet, freaks peaking out at fifty, maybe more. On a healthy ship a gale still permitted on-board control. But once you were past a gale, you moved in survival mode. By then the wind and sea became the master of the vessel — no matter who she was.

They waited now. Talk was impossible, and, for the most part, irrelevant. Hours passed. Both men were paralysed. Nothing existed a foot in front of them. Lightning broke constantly, the ship's rigging distorting into ghoulish, phantom-like apparitions.

An enormous jolt found the mainmast, ran down it, and sparkled with rage through the superstructure. The Fourth of July. Images you found only in animation — *The Headless Horseman running amok in Fantasia*. The thoughts merged as the charge ran its course, spending itself a hundred feet from the forecastle.

Gomez was huddled onto his side now, hands clutching the lines across his chest. Bobby heard him moan above the storm, call to his wife, his children, his God. Cursing his own casual meandering, Bobby longed for someone to call to, to save him. For him there was only the ship. He checked his watch as if he might be late for work. It was just after ten.

Through the cacophony he heard *The Lady* struggle. Her plates ground in defiance. He drifted away from it, drawn into the other sounds around him. He heard the screams from her stern as she fought fire and ocean, possessed devils in

conflict for her soul. He wanted her to stop it, to speak to him, to calm his fear, and withdraw the terrible vision from his eyes. He desired her to save him once more, find strength for the impossible.

The Lady heard his plea and pulled him closer to her bosom, holding him as she'd held so many others in their fear. He weaved in and out of her company, riding with her now across seas serene and savage. He ate in her galley, laughed with her crew and stood with each man at his watch. He talked amongst them, knowing them by name. He was one with all of them. He'd heard it happened to sailors before they died.

He returned as she screamed to him. A wave crashed across her beam, broaching her, throwing her to her side. Gomez and Bobby hung vertical with the deck, safety lines alone standing between them and the end. Thrashing like epileptic puppets while the top twenty feet of the freak collapsed tons of water over them, the two twirled in tangled line and black water, lost.

It was anything but peaceful, not the way Bobby'd imagined it many times when he'd thought about drowning. Time slowed while they hovered in a pressurized vacuum. Gomez's face passed close in front of Bobby, all mixed in with foam and debris. Bobby beheld his mate's pain — the sheer terror and impotence. His mouth moved as if he was in distorted conversation, chewing air from water.

Bobby'd been a diver for a long time, kept his mouth closed from habit, staying calm. He'd been

underwater before with no air. He knew the tricks — everything in slow motion. Make it a movie, a dream. Make it anything but reality. Reality means panic. Play the game, hold your breath until you wake up. There will be air again. He'd done it before, and lived.

He wanted to tell Gomez but couldn't find him.

And the end did come, as the peak of the wave withdrew, disappearing into the ocean bed as quickly as it had arrived. The sentence was suspended, for a moment, perhaps. Still, Bobby took the offer. His lungs sucked air as he fought the draining of the deck. He struggled through it to Gomez, strangled in his safety line, full of water, and drowning. Bobby heard himself shrieking to God. He pounded Gomez's chest while a slashing rainsquall pummelled him from nowhere. Gomez gagged, puked watered vomit, and contorted back into life.

The sea screamed for them. Bobby knew without looking the holds had ripped open. *The Lady* would have cargo at last — too much, to be sure. He sought her out again, entreating her to endure, to keep them with her.

The squall slackened and the waves came on again, growing. Sheering white foam tore in under the brow of the forecastle, his safety line cutting into him hard as the seas tried to tear him from her. Through it he stayed close to her, heard her saying she was tiring. She could deliver no more, could give him only the moment, no more. Wait for the moment, she murmured.

Bobby heard the seven short and one long

blast of the general emergency signal. He drifted in and out with it, not wanting to go. He prayed. She blew the signal again, seven short and one long, no mistaking it. Abandon ship.

Bobby moved between realities. The lightning skies talked to him, the wind climbed. Another freak and *The Lady* would roll right over. There was no doubt.

Again, seven long and one short. Again.

He crawled to Gomez, and shouted into his face, telling him *The Lady* was dying, they must leave. It was only a question now of how much time, ten minutes or ten seconds. Squatting there under the forecastle it didn't matter anymore, he didn't notice. He listened only for her now, for her voice. Again.

And again, she spoke within him, confirming the cataclysm, her Armageddon. Bobby affirmed her voice. He accepted it completely now, as his reality. Leave he would, on command, in her moment. It was what he believed.

He pulled close to Gomez, pressing his face against the Mexican. He shouted at him and hit him, looking far into his eyes, for he was far away. They staggered together to their feet. Floundering, they united in the conflict, cursing and screaming into the rage, the language garbled and universal, spitting bile and anger.

They made the raft. Bobby cut the lines and tied them to it. He was clinging with Gomez to the raft and the rail, the two of them joined, screaming allegiance, screaming it to no one. Clinging to her against all of it, the unceasing

pound disappeared inside her voice.

Water was everywhere upon her. Still he waited on her word. Nothing could take them but her command. Lightning broke and showed the sea standing mountains on all sides, breaking the length of their slopes as they avalanched down. His lungs sucked for air through it.

In that avalanche, Bobby died, hallucinating drowning. And in that moment she spoke to him, his eyes opened from death, untroubled, trusting. It was then that the wind stilled, the squall ceased, the waves quelled themselves. A clear full moon sat mute in the sky above him. Everything slowed to a stop. Now, she whispered softly, you are in the eye.

Obedient, he dragged them atop the rail. He turned back to her for a moment and went over, obedient. He watched himself topple, attached and fantasy-like, into the water, under it. It was warm and quiet, all around him soft. Womblike, he transferred into the dream state, knew he must hold his breath a long time.

It was okay, he thought. He had practice. He used to be a diver.

Rachel awoke at nine o'clock Thursday morning. The rain and wind still beat an evil tune against the fifteenth floor window of her hotel room. Rachel'd slept fitfully at best, her mind twisting in the storm, the conversation with Le Clerc, Robert's whereabouts, and her assumption of the worst. She couldn't evaluate what rated

which percent of her insomnia.

The thoughts brought her back to the tormented sky outside her window. The worst was over, but the clouds remained too impenetrable for her to see the airport, something she'd been told was possible from her vantage point. She'd been told something else — if you couldn't see the airport, you shouldn't fly. That narrowed her transportation options for the day.

She tried the phone and got nothing. She tried the lights and the television, and got nothing again. At this point she wondered if she could make the lobby, much less Brownsville.

Her forced impotence bothered her. She wasn't used to having so little control over her situation. Rachel made herself settle back onto the bed. She began to wonder about her meeting with Le Clerc. What was his purpose? The vagueness frightened her, made her think about the unthinkable. She knew she had to.

Should she just leave, go back to San Diego and wait? Let the authorities handle it? Maybe she would call Barney. Let him know what had happened. No, Barney'd want her out of there right away. If he got on Le Clerc's case, then she'd have him on hers, again.

If Robert was dead, what she feared was true, what was the point? She didn't answer the question because she didn't know. Only continuing might bring an answer. She decided to leave for Brownsville. She didn't know, but had come too far to turn back now.

It scared her. Le Clerc had scared her, but

there were things to know, some kind of answers. It had to be Brownsville. There were really no other leads besides Brownsville. She headed for the shower. She found no water. To her, it was the worst news yet.

She dry brushed her teeth and kept thinking. International Salvage. It was an old habit, her unrelenting desire to push forward. It always made them crazy at the club. That attitude had gotten her the club and made it successful.

She packed and got into the hall. She would have liked to check Lloyds one more time just to be sure, but there were no phones. No phones, no Sunny. It didn't matter, Brownsville kept giving her a bad feeling, and she would get there somehow. She cursed quietly as she bagged her way down fifteen flights of stairs, civil defence static and emergency lighting her constant companions.

The lobby was a disaster. Two plate glass windows had been blown in, chandeliers were scattered across the floor. Outside, a car had overturned just by the entrance. Hysteria had replaced the tourists' gleeful curiosity from the previous evening.

And they'd wanted her to come down there for safety; she smiled. Everyone was wandering around half-dressed and fully glazed. Bandages and bloodstains abounded. She could hear management figuring it. *Let's all die in one spot, one great big splat.*

She picked her way through the chaos to the hotel entrance. Here the doorman still functioned, incongruous but impressive, opening the

door for her.

“Another day another dollar.” His large warm eyes and broad smile said it better than the words.

Rachel valued the unexpected sense of humor and started a conversation. “Does this happen a lot?”

“It’s the season for it, ma’am.” He motioned to the overturned car. “I think this one had a little twister in it.” He glanced inside. “A little something extra for the tourists to remember her by.” He bent, posed a little fatherly. “I hear the situation could be better out there this morning, Ms.”

It was something of an understatement.

“You have any place in particular you’re heading?”

Rachel absorbed his nametag as she spoke, “Charles, I appreciate your concern in the midst of all this. I need transportation.”

“Well. Where you heading’?”

“Downtown, and then out of town.”

She watched his weathered face spread disappointment for her. “I think you’re going to have trouble getting any kind of transportation, anywhere, today, Ms.”

Charles said it the instant before the horn blared, as if there were plans afoot to make him a liar. Sunny’s head hung out the driver’s window as though his windshield wasn’t designed to look through.

“I guess you got friends in high places, Ms.” Charles smiled as he pulled open the rear door of the limo. “Good luck to you.”

Rachel had nothing but a good feeling for the

unexpected presence of the young Cajun. "A pleasant sight, Sunny. You're a pleasant sight. You have no idea."

"It's a mutual feelin', Ms Rachel." Sunny bent across the seat to greet her. "Thought you might be lookin' for some transportation today."

She felt like she'd run into an old friend. "How did you know? I couldn't call."

"I never left. I watched you talk to that creep cop." He looked at her. "I don't think you understand." He smiled at her. "I owe my life to Jimmy. He adopted me off the streets when he was the champ. It's a long story." His head moved with his words as though there was a song playing somewhere just for him. "He told me to look after you an' I'm gonna do just that."

He pulled away from the curb while he spoke, "Where we headed first?"

"First, Lloyds. Old town."

"The shipping Lloyds?"

"That's right."

They pulled away slowly, moving around a lot of things that shouldn't be cluttering the street.

"They're gonna be shut down, Ms Rachel." Sunny kept the car moving while he talked. "I think we check it but I think they shut down. Everything's shut down today. Maybe tomorrow too. We got hurt bad. Floods. No power. Cars upside down everywhere." He smiled his big smile, body moving with it. "I'm the only ride in New Orleans today. And you own it.."

"You're a good man, Sunny. I need you more than you know. What about Brownsville. Can we

get to Brownsville?"

"It's fourteen hours in good weather." He answered as water splashed high on either side. "If we get out of town, we'll have a chance. They got hit bad down in the border country. I heard it's still blowing pretty good south of here." The bottom of the car banged across tree branches. "If the troopers haven't closed too many roads, we'll do it. Doubt we can make it a one-day thing." He motioned to the dash, "You see what kind of time we're making right now? Lots more slowdowns ahead. Troopers. Washouts. Detours. When you gotta be there?"

"Today. Tomorrow. Soon as possible."

"You know what kinda country it is down there, eh, Ms Rachel. Don't want to be asking questions about why a lovely lady like you should want to visit a border town full of rednecks and wetbacks. You just hang on, Ms Rachel. We're going to Brownsville — Cajun style. Louisiana invasion. Take us a day and a bit, probably. Be there Friday. I know a nice place to stop over. You can get some local color."

"Thanks, Sunny." She leaned back into the seat as they picked their way past a closed Lloyds.

After an hour of inner city post-storm adventures they rolled over the Pontchartrain Causeway, picking up Interstate South. Twice the troopers stopped them, once checking for looters and a second time warning them about the road conditions, discouraging travel.

The rain picked up a little as they headed south, whipping onto the windshield in angry

sputters. Rachel felt the sway of the car against the gusting wind. Glad Sunny was driving, she was comforted by the fact he drove a big Detroit car. She didn't know the make, but it sat well on the road, the back seat big and comfortable.

They encountered little other traffic on the usually well-travelled highway, one small benefit of the conditions. She accepted Sunny's dictum about an overnight stop. It was just as well. Her sleepless night in New Orleans, not to mention the red-eye from San Diego two nights earlier, had taken its toll.

The motion of the car lulled her, took her mind from her thoughts like medicine, her body melting deeper into the soft comfort of the rear seat, her mind not far behind. Her thoughts worked hard at hanging on to her. She thought about the ship, *The Lady Inca*, due in some time Thursday night. She knew she wouldn't be there to meet it. They'd get as far as they could. Sunny was looking after the itinerary.

It felt good to let someone else make plans. They'd find a little motel in the middle of nowhere. There was something pleasant about the thought, about anonymity. They'd get there Friday. The Gulf weather wouldn't allow the ship to be there on time anyway.

International Salvage. Hertzell Markovitz. Howard Morgan. Her earlier calls to the salvage company had gotten her nowhere. Everybody was too busy, a communication stance that always got her edgy.

Hertzell Markovitz. She rolled the name

around her tongue and didn't like the taste. Howard Morgan had a similar flavour. There were lots of things she didn't know yet.

Three hours out of New Orleans and she had a pretty good idea of the monotony of a fourteen-hour drive through raw cattle range and semi-arid wasteland. The fatigue and the scenery finally got to her. Her eyes turned heavy, her mind roaming the memories of her childhood — her parents and younger brother, the farm they worked before her parents' death, before the foster homes.

Yes, there were reasons to make the trip regardless of Robert's status — regardless of the outcome.

It was near noon Thursday before Bobby began to differentiate conscious action from unconscious reaction. Still floundering badly on the seas, Bobby couldn't believe he was still alive.

The winds and still-breaking waves tossed them, tormented them without consent, without end in sight, helpless in the raft. Fifteen-foot swells chuted them about the Gulf, the lash of intermittent rainsqualls still beating on them.

Several times during the day they were tossed from the raft, Gomez rolling uncontested into the seas. Bobby managed to pull his mate atop, again and again. He labored intensely to keep Gomez with him. He shouted, hitting the Mexican, cursing him, and cursing himself. The sound of his shouts was reassurance that he lived.

The elements slowly continued to slack, but

exposure became the new, immediate enemy. It was cold and constantly wet. The loss of body heat worried Bobby. He knew Gomez was victim to it. Bobby was more fortunate, wet suited for more than just flotation.

He wrapped loose canvas over his amigo, hitting him on the bad shoulder and anywhere else hard and repeatedly as he tried to draw him back. Even the pain from Gomez's injuries did little to rouse him. But he did return — almost, for a little while — then went back into his drift.

Bobby watched him to keep himself conscious. He knew if he slept he would return, reliving the terror. Despite his best efforts, he drifted, falling off, falling back into the automatic, gagging struggle of those earlier predawn hours. He felt the innate dread of death by drowning.

Many times the demon dragged him under in the cold, black night, cramming water into him, filling his lungs beyond limits. The sudden, frantic grappling with the seas that mounted them as rapists, too sadistic to just kill. Death would be a relief.

He writhed within the monster's belly all that night, flailing, spinning about. Miscreant winds pushed the giant freaks over them for no reason beyond devious pleasure. Bobby relived it in his delirium that afternoon.

In death *The Lady* let them loose on rampaging seas to seek their fortune without her to stand between them and eternity. Faculty and judgment had no place in that dense monstrosity, only instinct was awake. The only law was gravity,

nothing more — a law from the same deity who gave them the eye in the moment they slipped away from *The Lady*. The only moment, the last moment, never to see her again.

But he wasn't there now. He only dreamt it. He knew not how many times he'd drowned that night, how many times he'd met God.

He journeyed in delirium into that afternoon, not aware when the sun snuck tiny peaks through the horizon.

For Bobby, so much began after it was over.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*International Salvage
Brownsville, Texas
Thursday Night*

“Don’t worry, Hertz. She don’t speak no fuckin’ English.” Howie grabbed the heavily made-up Mexican girl by the neck, smearing a drunken kiss across her lipstick. “See, Hertz, she loves me. Wouldn’t tell nobody nothin’ if she could.” He laughed, drunk, drugged, and belliscose. “Love conquers all!” He stumbled on the carpet and fell across the couch, seemingly suffering physical astonishment at the realities of gravity, the young hooker trapped beneath him.

“Where’d you find him?” Hertz asked Charley. The hostility in his words was aimed at the world in general, for the moment. “And why’d you bring the pig?”

“I pulled him off her in the alley, behind the Starlight.” Even Charley’s voice held disgust. “He wouldn’t come without her. It ain’t easy gettin’ Howie to cooperate anytime. He was pissed and stoned worse than this when we found him. He rubbed his shoulder. “Took three of us. Would’ve been easier without the chaperone along. You know, Howie don’t like strangers to

begin with." Charley threw in his own axe. "What's this Enrico guy doin' anyway, Hertzel?"

There was an awkward pause while Charley and Enrico traded cold glares. Hertzel ignored Charley's question. "You been stuffing that shit up your nose again, Howie?" He wasn't about to tell him people were worried about his ability to take care of business.

Howie was busy laughing. He tried unsuccessfully to straighten himself on the couch. "I don't snort no more, Hertzel. Fucks up my nose too much." Inventive pride slid across his drunken face. "I smoke it now. Sometimes I shoot." He winced. "But them fuckin' needles..."

Hertzel stayed focused. "Get the bitch out of here, Charley." He knew her presence added to Enrico's anger and didn't want anything but good news returning to Houston. He still figured he was the chosen one.

As Charley pulled her from Howie's clutches, Howie resisted with the strength of a drunken bull seeing red. Quietly, Enrico crossed the room and slapped Howie hard across the head with the barrel of a chromed beretta in response to his aimless lunge. The woman screamed as Howie fell back on the couch, and Enrico cuffed her hard with his other hand. Charley dragged her from the room.

The pistol whip had managed to break through the stupor, sobering Howie. Hertzel watched him sway on the couch. When he finally got some dazed eye contact with Howie, Hertzel started. "We've got to have a talk, Howie." He im-

itated a businesslike calm. "There's a few problems we need to discuss, some items we need to take care of here. Some loose ends."

"Like what?" Rubbing the side of his head, Howie centered his eyes on the blood on his hand. "Like how I'm gonna kill that piece of shit for smackin' me. Throwin' my lady around. Ruinin' my love life!"

"Howie, I want you to meet Enrico."

Enrico kept his glare fixed on Howie and his hand close to the beretta.

"Enrico represents the Senator and our backers in Houston." Hertznel's eyes bore in on Howie. "We need to have good relations here, Howie. We can't be unsettling anyone, fighting amongst ourselves. We're all working together, here, looking for the same solutions. We're a team, Howie."

"Somebody cut me, too." Howie felt the inside of his lip where a tooth had cut him earlier in the evening. "You call this lookin' after each other? I didn't do nothin', Hertznel. Nothin'!" Indicating Enrico, he yelled. "And keep this asshole away from me!"

"I didn't say you did." Hertznel's voice had the fatherly tone he knew Howie expected at times like this. "Relax." He'd always impressed himself with his knack for dealing with Howie. "You've got to listen. We've got business to take care of now. We need you to go to the police tomorrow, give them a deposition about New Orleans."

"Cops? Go to the cops? You nuts?"

"Yeah, the cops," Enrico reiterated. "Get yourself straight and do what you're told."

"I got no reason to see the cops." Howie said it to the room, but kept his eyes on Enrico. "Everybody's dead!" He slid very fast into arrogance. "Everything's tidy. No ship. No bodies." He smiled. "No problem." Getting himself up from the couch, he took a few steps towards Enrico. "Right?"

Hertzelt glared at him and Howie stopped, but kept talking. "The ship's gone. The tug cut them loose like we planned; we know that. And the Coast Guard won't even find flotsam out there this morning." He laughed at his own nautical humor. "I'm glad Gomez drowned. Don't get me wrong, I liked the little fuck. I wasn't looking forward to killin' him." He smiled. "But the other one, that would have been a pleasure." He looked at Enrico while he finished. "Just another know-it-all bullshit asshole!"

Enrico took the step this time. "This guy's got a big mouth, Hertzelt. Nobody's gonna like it."

Hertzelt got his words between the two of them. "I want you to stop talking about killing anybody." His face stayed deadpan, and authoritative. "Somebody'll stay with you at your place tonight while you get yourself straightened out." There was an air of consequence in his voice. "Tomorrow you're going to see the Brownsville cops at three o'clock. Fill out some forms. A deposition." Hertzelt paused for emphasis. "No big deal. You know most of them anyway." He faked a laugh nobody joined.

"Then he leaves town for a while," Enrico said, obviously working on Howie's nerves.

"Take it easy, Enrico." The bravado was uncharacteristic from Hertz. "Howie's a good man. He'll do what he has to do for us." Hertz held up his hand like a traffic cop, stopping Howie from blurting something hostile. "When you're done at your place, you get Charley to take you up to the senator's farm for a while."

Howie didn't say anything for a full minute — nobody did — as if the question was long dead. "And why am I goin' to the farm?"

"You tell them what happened in New Orleans." Enrico said. "Sign it and leave. Simple?" His tone and expression told Hertz "simple" was just too complicated a word for Howie at the moment.

Howie headed for Enrico again. "I'm gonna rip your fuckin' head off and jam it up your ass for ya, ya greasy fuck!"

Enrico didn't appear to move as he sent Howie sprawling into the corner like a sack of potatoes. Before Howie'd stopped rolling Enrico was kneeling over him, the beretta stuck hard into the side of his face. "You're one stupid motherfucker. Don't push it. Just tell us what you're gonna say tomorrow."

Some things Howie understood quickly, particularly violence. Enrico eased the barrel from the side of his face as Howie spoke. "Nothin' happened in New Orleans. The fag inspected the ship, signed it off, and left."

He smiled at Enrico as he eased himself to his feet.

"Don't call him a fag when you tell them."

Hertzel added.

Charley returned, breaking into Howie's hate glare. "Juan's got the broad in the car. We're ready to go."

"What about the farm? I got no reason to go to the farm," Howie said, pressing his ankle against his boot and feeling nothing.

Charley sat the derringer on the desk. "You looking for this? You pulled it on us at the Starlight last night," Charley glared. "You got a shot off too. Damn near killed Juan."

"Oh yeah." Howie muttered with sudden recall. "Sorry." He paused only momentarily. "Okay. I'll do it. Just like you want."

Hertzel got suspicions of the sudden cooperation. "Don't get this figured the wrong way, Howie." Hertzel tried to reduce Howie's paranoia. "We're going to look after each other. One big family." Hertzel crossed the room, got close to Howie, and worked his confidante number. "There's a broad down here somewhere, Howie, looking for her brother, the Lloyds inspector."

"How'd you know that?" Howie said.

Hertzel looked across at Enrico, acknowledging the value of connections. "She's looking to talk to you as well." He stood beside him now, an arm around his shoulder. "All you have to do is make the statement. Then disappear to the farm for a while. We've done it before."

Hertzel thought he was being followed obediently. "You know you've got a bit of a reputation for being unreliable."

Howie nodded, showing them his entire good-

boy mode. His paranoia talking to him silently.

“So it won’t look out of place that you’re out of town, whereabouts unknown.” Hertzelt smiled, buying into Howie’s sudden grip on it all.

“You got anything to drink here, Hertzelt?” Howie said. “I got it all straight.”

Nobody spoke. He looked around the room for a bottle. “Who’s this broad, anyway? Why not dust her?”

“I told you, the sister.” Hertzelt headed to his desk. “She comes down here. Nobody to talk to. She goes home. She feels good. She tried.” He opened a drawer and threw a wrapped bundle of bills across the room at Howie. “Here,” he laughed. “Vacation pay.”

Howie missed the toss, bending awkwardly to pick it up. He ran his thumb across the tight little bundle, sounding excited. Bullshitting everybody. “Okay! I’m in. I can use the holiday.” He smiled in a friendly way at Enrico, almost a grovel. “Count on me.” He kept smiling. “Sorry ‘bout the misunderstandin’, Enrico.” He held his hand out and Enrico shook it. He turned to Hertzelt. “You tell the Senator that, too.”

Howie moved towards the door. “Forget the drink.” Indicating the two-shot derringer on the table, he asked, “Can I have my friend back?”

“Not a good idea right now, Howie. We want you going into the cops real clean, eh.” Hertzelt slid another insider smile at him. “Wouldn’t look good to have your friend fall out of your boot, would it?”

“Right enough, boss. No sweat.” Howie threw

his arm across Charley's giant shoulder and laughed, "Let's go, amigo. I mean, roommate."

"You go out there yourself, Howie, visit your *senorita* for a minute. Charley'll be along. I want to set his timetable for tomorrow."

Howie nodded, still laughing as he left.

Hertzel watched the door close behind him, and waited for Enrico to check it. "Watch him, Charley. Watch him real close."

"No problem, boss."

"Take Juan with you. He can sleep there."

"I said no problem, boss. I mean no problem."

Hertzel nodded, motioning with his head for Charley to leave. He was more than a little uncomfortable with his knowledge of Howie, and what he was capable of. He didn't mention it.

Enrico walked to the window and watched the car leave as he spoke, "The guy's a waste of time. Be rid of him easy. I'll make it a pleasure."

Hertzel shuffled his papers, barely hiding his concern. "Don't underestimate this guy." He knew Howie wasn't the kind of guy to take lightly, could get psychotic real easy. "He's no pushover, Enrico." He was going to say more, but decided against it. He decided to let Enrico have his pleasure, and hoped he didn't find out the hard way.

Maybe they'd kill each other, really make Hertzel's day.

In the late black of Thursday night the breaking seas settled into giant rolling swells, the tiny raft rode them from crest to trough. The worst of

it was over. The skies were still cloudy, unnoticed in the black night but for the spitting rain. The wind too remained, cold and blowing.

Bobby still struggled to keep himself conscious, thinking survival. He made up lists and remembered the past. He talked to an incoherent Gomez. He prayed — anything to stay conscious. He kept fear high on that list. It was his best ally, and he had a lot of it. He didn't hide it well, he never had. He worried he'd do something stupid like get confident and die because he couldn't find his fear.

Every glance across at Gomez reminded him what happens when you relax, when you let go of your terror and fall into trust with the deceiver. The Angel of Death rode the raft with them, swirling all over his companion — close, waiting to take him.

Things had continued to deteriorate for Gomez, as he bled from old wounds torn open in the tumult. Dying of exposure on a supposed summer night in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico was an unacceptable absurdity.

Stay scared, Bobby, he could hear his shipmate saying over and over through his dulling eyes. Don't believe my safety. Stay anywhere but safe, because you aren't. It was a trick and I am caught in it. Fight them, Bobby; fight them for me, my amigo.

And Bobby did. He struggled for them both. The Mexican could not die on him, could not leave him alone. He decided to transfer the wetsuit to him. He untied himself to do it, got the jacket off

and went over twice in the effort, once taking Gomez with him, losing the jacket to pull the Mexican back. Now they shared the cold quiver of exposure.

It was a strange environment, a religious experience. Bobby had his first conversation with God in a long time. Here he made a covenant before God. Should Gomez die, so should he. In Bobby's mind he allowed no other truth. God would not kill him.

They both had children; he bartered. God would not kill fathers. Stand together. He spoke before God, for the two of them, keeping his young child's face before him while he bargained. He reminded God how she waited for him, needed him. For Gomez, it was the same. It all flowed together, he figured, to God's table — reasons to live.

Through it all Gomez faded. Pale, cold, moaning, unresponsive, his incoherence fed into drifting delirium.

Bobby knew if they could stay alive the Gulf would carry them home across the shipping lanes. Then he thought maybe it wouldn't be exposure. Maybe they would both die quickly in the night, becoming part of the froth in some freighter's bow. Or they could hope the seas turned torrential again. They'd die either way and find God. Work on it the next time around. He'd heard the theory, somewhere once, drunk in a bar maybe.

He could stay awake and watch for shipping, but he didn't. He couldn't. Instead he dreamt five minutes from eternity, almost like he was chas-

ing Gomez. There'd been a lot written about how to avoid delirium, but when it becomes an authentic, you don't. It was a very unifying experience. Simplicity. Priorities no longer stepped into place as ordered.

With nowhere else to go that night he slid into the past, him and his daughter, drifting, just for a minute.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*International Salvage
Brownsville, Texas
Friday Noon*

Sunny had got them well into Texas before they stopped for the night. He let Rachel sleep in a little on Friday. She couldn't get herself angry about it. She knew he'd made the right decision. She slept a good part of the morning in the back of the cab, not coming around until he stopped and woke her for a late lunch. Chicken fried steak, a Texas specialty.

That's when she started to notice the storm's agenda in Texas as well as Louisiana. Damage and debris had rambled everywhere across the wide-ranging Texas scrubland. There were tumbled buildings, flooded roadways, unhappy faces, ditched cars, and fallen power lines. South Texas had paid every bit as high a price, maybe more.

The final couple of hundred miles passed as if they weren't there. Long-distance driving was like that — after the first few hundred miles things turned automatic. She thought through some of her Brownsville priorities, then tossed the agenda and decided it would show its own order. Everything else had happened that way.

The farther south they got, the more definitive the changes. The landscape, architecture, and even the traffic were different. The cars were ancient, gas-guzzling beasts, fenders and hoods detached at random. The driver highballing with his head out the window for vision.

Sombreros and dark skins, culture and influence seeping up from the approaching border. The housing played between redneck trailer parks and Mexican peasant adobe. She'd heard of it before, but now began to realize that to understand Tex-Mex you had to be there.

They rolled past International Salvage, as Sunny took several minutes to ease his way through the kamikaze waves of southbound traffic and onto the shoulder. It took another couple of minutes to get turned around and headed back. She was glad she'd had the foresight to let her agenda detail its own timetable. If you happened to pass it, visit. It made her feel as if she was getting a flow to things.

It was a couple of miles before she saw the high metal fencing looming up on the left, and a large neon sign, International Salvage, proudly standing atop the buildings. Barbed wire topped the gates.

A rough-cut but uniformed security guard accompanied them as they wound their way towards the buildings. She watched the repair work underway on the place. It was a big operation, this marine salvage business. There was a lot of activity besides the storm repairs. Men, equipment, and acres of indistinguishable chunks of steel

mingled in sound, mud and sweat. It was business as usual, looking very legitimate. It intimidated her a little. She questioned her propriety for a second.

The guard ordered Sunny to park in front of the longest and best looking of the bank of buildings. Another guard, this one in a suit, came to accompany them. Someone called him Enrico while he was insisting that Sunny stay in the car, and the guard stay with Sunny.

She got a singular kind of feeling from the man, and it wasn't a hospitable one. She hadn't been in the state long, but had seen enough to know if you're in Texas you're a cowboy, a uniform, or a peon, not a suit. Suits — shiny, expensive ones — belonged in New Orleans and San Diego, maybe, but not at International Salvage. It seemed out of place on the fringe of existence down here with the burritos and the rednecks.

The whole place extended uneasiness, an uncertain itchy feeling. Cops would have a word for it, she thought to herself. You're welcome but don't come, and if you do, don't stay long.

Enrico left her with the secretaries and disappeared down a corridor. Ten minutes passed. She tried to admire the 1950's coifs on the secretaries as they eyed her. Just when she started thinking about looking by herself, Enrico returned, smiled his cold, distant smile, and led her back the way he'd come.

A man stood up to greet her. "Markovitz, Hertzell Markovitz." He held out his hand. She shook it. With a practiced motion he offered her

a seat. "Can I get you something, Ms, uh?.."

"Forster. Rachel Forster." She said it as if she expected him to never forget it. "No. Nothing for me, thanks." She took him in as she spoke. "I appreciate your making the time to see me." He was well dressed, a little pimpish, but polished. She could deal with it.

She got a look from him that let her know she should appreciate the time he was taking for her.

"Why, it's no problem. I understand you've been calling our office, wanting information on a ship we had under tow." He paused only long enough for Rachel to catch the word "had" before continuing. "I'm very sorry to tell you we lost that ship in the gale, lost it Wednesday night. All hands." Hertzels shook his head as if he meant it. "Tragic. We lost two good men on that ship."

Rachel sat motionless, uncertain or unwilling to believe it. She hadn't wanted that news, and watched doors closing all around her. Still, she had expected it from the storm that came close to blowing her windows out in New Orleans. "How do you know?"

"The tug lived. The coastguard search is still underway, but nothing by this time means nothing period. Nothing. If I understand correctly from your messages, you were hoping to locate your brother. Lloyds?" He stood up from the desk, as though he was at an awards ceremony. "He was a Lloyds man? Not one of our crew?" He worked a thoughtful caring into his expression. "Are you sure you wouldn't like a drink?"

"No survivors?"

He walked to the liquor cabinet. "You don't mind if I have one, do you?" His back was to her now.

Rachel noticed the smile as he turned from her. Even with his back to her she picked it up, the hint that kept her moving. "Would you know where I might locate a Howard Morgan?" She stood up from the chair while she spoke, turning to face his back. "I understand he was the last person to see my brother alive." She walked behind her chair, towards Hertz, dispensing to Enrico the distinct impression she didn't need permission. "He works for you, doesn't he?" She picked up on Hertz's momentary hesitation.

"He did." Hertz sipped his drink as he turned around, starting at her presence in his face. "But I frankly couldn't tell you where to look for him. You need to understand the character of the men who work in the marine salvage environment. A strange breed. They like the danger, the excitement, and the uncertainty. No roots. Rowdies. A lot of them. On the job, they're just what we need. Off it, they are a world to themselves. We don't... We can't keep track of them."

Rachel judged another door closing along with the conversation. She pushed it a bit. "Has he worked for you before?" Rachel saw the pressure on Hertz's face, noted it, and pushed more. "Payroll records? How do you get him if you want him for a job?"

"Just a minute." His irritation showed significance. He turned to his intercom. "Ms Mendez?"

"Yes, Mister Markovitz?"

“Could you see if we have an address for a Howard Morgan on file?” Hertzelt set his drink and moved towards the door, his eyes specifying the invitation to her. “If we have anything on him, Ms Forster, my secretary can give it to you on the way out.” He had busy man written all over his face. “I apologize, but I have a meeting in a few minutes. We’ve had a lot of damage here from the storm.”

Rachel followed his lead with little prompting. “Thank you, Mister Markovitz.” She stayed at her naive best. “I appreciate your help.”

“Anytime. If there is anything else, don’t hesitate to call. I think the police have probably investigated this issue. New Orleans has a skilled police force. I trust you’ve spoken to them. Lloyds as well. They’re both very thorough.” He held out his hand. “If Mister Morgan should be in touch with us, I’ll let you know immediately. Are you staying in Brownsville?”

“Yes, but I don’t know for how long.” She walked through the door, knowing it wasn’t over.

“The Matador.” Hertzelt smiled graciously. “I recommend it. Good luck to you, Ms Forster.” He gave her a look she could see the Grand Canyon through. “I hope you find your brother. Please see Ms Forster out, Enrico.” He looked at Rachel in a familiar, share-a-secret way. “We have dogs here.”

She gave him a hard look, her words trailing behind him as she turned away. “I’m certain you do.”

Bobby awoke into the warm sun and soft breeze of a Friday afternoon, uncertain how long he'd been unconscious. He knew Gomez was gone, sometime in the dead of the night. He felt outrage at the man leaving him — more a statement of Bobby's way of dealing with separation than any real attitude towards Gomez. He toyed with the idea that he too was gone, just as he'd bargained.

He didn't want to remember Gomez going, but he knew he did it. He knew he'd reached across in that foul night, spoken to the dead man, cut him loose and slid him free of the raft. After all, a sailor belonged to the sea.

He cried too, whimpered as the body disappeared quietly into the dark of the Gulf night. And he remembered how silent he stayed before throwing himself into the water, searching desperately to get him back. He couldn't find him and screamed revenge — for Gomez, for *The Lady*, for everyone and for no one, and for him.

He'd started remembering other bits and pieces from the night before, or at least what he thought was the night before.

He was so pre-occupied with his remembrances of the past two days that he didn't notice the signs until long after they'd started to appear — birds, bits of wood followed by more prominent chunks of refuse. They were signals of land. That meant people. When he finally did, it made him glad the oceans were sewers. He thanked the polluters for giving him hope. It proved the whole world hadn't gone down with *The Lady*.

He spent the afternoon spread-eagled in the

bottom of the raft, drifting, getting hot, cupping leftover rainwater from the rubber flooring into his hands and onto his face. He watched the drops as they fell between his fingers, thinking it all magical, life itself.

He didn't paddle, or get excited, inspired, or agitated. Not any more. He waited with his thoughts, watching the horizon grow as the afternoon passed. He'd never felt better. It all made sense to him. He didn't have to do anything, just be there. Life would direct him. He knew now he walked with a spirit and always had. The fact he was alive at that very moment proved it, doubtless.

He stared into the sun. It prodded him back into a drifting uncertain state, not quite the delirium of before, more a chosen move. He was comfortable at the moment, and he had time until he got a reason to exit. He stayed that way late into the afternoon, until he heard voices different from the ones inside his head.

When he finally peered over the edge of the raft he saw himself so close to a peopled beach he figured it was delirium. He was so close he could, if he wanted to, step out of the raft and pull it ashore as though he'd spent the afternoon floating in the sun.

He let the raft drift up really close before he tested the reality. He rolled over the side, lying immersed, his fingers twisted around the line that ran the perimeter of the raft. He felt his knees banging the bottom and started to get a grip on the fact it was real. He stood up out of the water

weak-legged, stiff, and with an agenda. He shook off his déjà vu feeling Howie's dune buggy was about to fly over the top of the sand rim behind him. Stiff and awkward, he pulled the raft up onto the beach. He left it and walked the twenty feet to the side of a dune, out of the sun. He got no more than casual glances from the sun and surf Mexicans. No one was close enough to see the cuts, blisters, and oil smears covering his body.

Everything was too normal, too ordinary, not like the movies at all. He watched them with his eyes half-closed, another day at the beach. He was glad he'd come. It was the right way to spend a day off. Forget the office. His lips cracked more as they curled into a smile, an odd chuckle sliding through his throat.

He closed his eyes. Rest a bit, he thought, deal with his future in a minute — had to find Jesús, he would help him, always had. For now he'd drift around God, meet Gomez, Robert Forster, maybe somebody whose name he didn't remember from a ship off Halifax. He let the momentum direct the journey, riding it back to *The Lady*. He stepped onto her decks from the silent calm she had given them. He owed her a good bye, a memorial. He watched her die by the stern as she disappeared into the measureless fathoms. Walking her decks, he felt her sigh — her release. Safe, he rode her down until she settled on the bottom. She was gone. At peace, never to be touched again.

He awoke on a crude cot in a thatched beach hut. It may have been minutes but could just as easily have been forever. Dreams were like that. In fact, it was late Friday afternoon.

An old man walked in as Bobby instinctively felt for the money belt he'd had around his waist.

"No worry amigo, I take nada." The old man brought him some water in a ladle. "Yo no tiento a Dios."

"How did I get here?"

"I carry you." He pointed through the side of the hut. "Not far."

"Where am I?"

"Cerca de Tampico."

Bobby was surprised. Maybe there was a God. He'd figured, if he made it, he would have come ashore further south, closer to Veracruz, but had no problem with his miscalculations. He had a friend, a good friend from long ago. The man who was watching over Tanya for him, Jesús Rivera. He pulled two hundred dollar bills from his wallet and asked the old man to go find him.

The old man shook his head at the money. "Esto aqui, amigo."

And with those words Bobby watched as the big, rough cut Mexican took all the sunlight out of the door. "I know you missed me amigo but what kind of way is this to come see me?"

Bobby managed a weak smile, "How'd you find me?"

"The old man found me." Jesús laughed his big coarse laugh as he threw some clothes on the foot of the cot. "You love me so much, all you say

in your sickness – Jesús Rivera. Posada Rosa.” He mimicked a high-pitched voice. “Posada Rosa. Jesús Rivera.” He laughed while he spoke, “You want to kiss me amigo? You love me so much?”

“I need you Jesús.”

“I am thinking si, amigo.”

Bobby cleaned himself up quickly, donned new clothes, left the two hundred dollars on the cot and limped into the old Ford flatbed.

“Where we go, amigo?”

His mind worked time/distance relationships – Tampico, Matamoros, Brownsville. It was six, maybe eight hours by road. It was also no more than three hours along the same coast road to Ciudad Victoria – to Tanya. He wasn’t sure when he made the decision, he just knew he wasn’t leaving Mexico without her – not going anywhere without her any more.

“Ciudad Victoria.”

Jesús said nothing. He knew who was there. He’d been watching over her since Bobby brought her down from Canada.

“There’s more to it, Jesús.”

“I’m sure there is, amigo. But first Ciudad Victoria.” He looked over at Bobby. “The little senorita will be happy one today.”

“She’s okay?”

“Si, but she miss you big Bobby.”

Bobby found time to smile before he settled into his thoughts as they careened down the beach. He figured it was payback time. Didn’t spend much time thinking it over. It was automatic, like watching a shipmate die in Halifax and

taking it out on a fat man's suit.

His pain didn't get a lot of attention. He was running on compulsion, commitment and revenge. Howie's face stayed on the big screen in his mind.

Payback time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Brownsville Police Station
Brownsville, Texas
Friday Afternoon*

The trip from International Salvage into Brownsville took an hour. Frustration from the news of the sinking and anger from the condescending stonewall Rachel had been given by Markovitz left her options shortened and her determination heightened.

There was of course no forwarding address kept with the secretary. Rachel knew Markovitz could locate him any time for the right reasons. The man reeked of deceit, all polish and duplicity. She wanted to think he lied about the *Lady Inca*, too, but brought herself to accept it. There was just too much pleasure on his face when he said it. The loss of the crew left her nothing but Morgan.

She thought again of giving it up. Then she pictured Markovitz sitting in his office chuckling while he counted his money. The vision chased the thought from her mind. She wouldn't give up until she found Morgan. Besides, she didn't like it much when people rendered her ineffectual. She wasn't the entertainment, never had been.

That alone got her energy cranking.

“You okay, Ms?”

“Yes.” Privately she admired his sensitivity. It reminded her of Jimmy and how well he could read her. “I’m okay. Thanks, Sunny.”

“It’s a strange place for a lady like you to be visiting.” His eyes caught hers through the rear-view mirror. “I don’t know who you saw inside, but the fellas hangin’ round me were some kind of mean.” He flicked his eyes back onto the road. “Lots of guns.” He paused. “I ain’t trying to pry into your business, but that’s a serious place.”

“Sunny.” She paused to collect her thoughts. “I appreciate your bringing me down here.” She knew he was right and wanted to let him off easy. “Maybe when we get to Brownsville I can give you something for your trouble and you can get yourself back to New Orleans. You’ve done a lot for me, and I thank you. I couldn’t have made it here without you. At least not when I needed to.”

“Oh no, ma’am.” Sunny kept his eyes on the road. “I’m not saying I want out of it.” His tone stayed very intentionally casual. “Whatever it is.” He reached under his seat. “Just wondering if you got a gun?” He lifted a snub nosed thirty-eight. “Cause I do. Jimmy told me to be serious and pay attention.” He still sounded matter-of-fact, watching the scenery as if it was a Sunday drive home from church. “You’re welcome to borrow it.”

“My brother disappeared. I’m trying to find him.” She watched his reaction as she talked. “I guess it could be dangerous. No need to be involved. No reason for you, Sunny.”

"My beautiful lady, you don't quite understand. This is duty, duty to Jimmy. Some day when we have time I will tell you all about why I owe him my life and a lot more." He smirked at her. "I got some reasons. Maybe I should hang onto the gun, become your official body guard?"

"Can you use it?"

He smirked. "The gun?"

"The gun?"

"I know how to use a gun, Ms Rachel." He looked at her in the rear view mirror, "Like I said, maybe when we have time I'll tell you why I owe Jimmy."

"Keep the gun, Sunny." Rachel reached into her purse, held up a small handgun where he could see it. "I've got my own. A single woman regulation, unofficial of course."

Finished with the employment negotiations, Rachel got into the reality. She was more than a little afraid, but she'd known fear before. She was tough and serious; it was in her background. She could even get a kick out of the excitement. Once, long ago, she actually enjoyed the rush, at a time when hoods and vice hovered around her at their convenience.

In Brownsville proper, now, Sunny made a stop to locate the police station. Rachel had stayed locked in her thoughts since the conversation.

"We're here." Sunny had a knack for sneaking up on police stations, she thought. A good sign.

Rachel got out of the cab, walking past a wired-looking degenerate and his fat buddy as she

entered. She made a point of ignoring the obvious leer.

Brownsville didn't qualify as big by any real city standards. There was only one police station and no maze of halls and cubicles and no way to get lost like in the stations in New Orleans or San Diego. She identified herself to a sergeant — a cowboy cop, hat and all, full of macho manners for a lady in need of assistance. She milked it to the maximum.

The sergeant corralled a young patrolman named Alvarez and ordered him to look after her. She got cooperation. He told her Morgan was no stranger to the police department.

He suggested it was a coincidence as he showed her the fresh deposition, telling her the ink was barely dry. She figured she must have passed Morgan on the way in. She finished reading and told him it smelled funny.

"Probably," he replied, almost deadpan. This is Brownsville. I know Howie Morgan. Know him well. Most everybody does. He's trouble."

"Why'd you let him leave?"

"No reason to keep him." The officer wasn't surprised about the deposition, routine in a missing persons investigation, and told her that. "There's no murder investigation going on here. No grounds for it. You need a body for that to start cooking." She knew that he wasn't playing games with her. "Morgan's supposedly the last person to see him. That's not against the law."

"Somebody in New Orleans wants to wrap this up," he said confidentially. "Don't get me wrong.

Morgan's a scum, crazy, capable of anything, but there's pressure from somewhere. It's just not getting the right kind of attention from New Orleans." He looked away. "At least not the way I see it." He looked back at her. "Particularly, with Morgan involved."

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"I wouldn't recommend you take that on Ms Forster. He's not a nice person." He said to leave it to the police and told her she shouldn't go looking for him on her own.

"This deposition wraps it up, doesn't it?"

He didn't answer her for a minute, and she kept waiting.

"Without a body, or a witness, or an interested police department, yes... ma'am."

"Do you know where he lives?"

It didn't take much to read the determination on her face. He told her Howie had a trailer over on South Padre Island and offered to drive her by the place.

"Thanks, but I've got transportation. I need directions."

"I'm off duty in ten minutes, and we take the cruisers home." He spoke half jokingly. "Ever ride in a police cruiser?" He got more serious. "The deal is, I show you where and we check it out together."

She thought it through quickly and realized the police ride gave her legitimacy. Outside at the cab she worked past the jilted look on Sunny's face as she gave him the orders. She told Sunny to check them in at the Matador and get himself

some sleep. She'd be back in a few hours.

Sunny didn't let it go until she'd given him Howie's name, general location and an understanding of what she meant by "a few hours". Silently pleased that he'd insisted, she told him what she knew.

Rachel and the young cop headed out of Brownsville to Port Isabel and across the causeway to South Padre.

On the way, he talked about punks — Texas-style punks, Gulf punks, Mexican punks, and red-neck punks. Howie Morgan qualified as some of all of them. Alvarez knew Morgan well. Everybody on the force did. He was something of a border town legend. "Howie Morgan is the kind of guy whose name can collect in the back of a cop's mind for a lot of good reasons." He looked across at her with caution in his eyes. "A crazy, but worse, not stupid crazy. Smart, psychotic crazy. Shrewd and mean."

By the time the conversation ended they were driving the causeway from the mainland to South Padre. It wasn't a big island, he told her. It was actually two islands, but only the south was inhabited. A few miles long, and thin, it was nothing more than a couple of sand bars gone domestic. The small talk continued while Alvarez picked his way around the aftermath of the storm.

The whole border area had been hit hard, and the island particularly. Although it served as a community, South Padre never had any real status beyond a random, semi-permanent shift of dune. The less stable parts were created and

moved at the whim of the Gulf currents. It was presently missing large pieces, immense gouges washed out of it as storm-created canals ran Gulf water through at random. The few resort hotels had suffered heavily from the storm. What was once their beachfront was now water washing onto patios. It took twenty minutes to plot their way along the alternate sand roads, evolved since the storm, covering the last few miles along the beach.

“That’s it.”

Rachel strained to see the trailer, heavily obscured behind dunes and struggling brush. A salt-corroded Lincoln sat beside the place, the price of a seaside residence.

“We should take this slow.” Alvarez pulled the cruiser up behind some rolling dunes a couple of hundred yards from the trailer. “I want you to stay back a ways.”

She waited until he’d started the walk before sliding the chrome pistol from her bag into her pant pocket, just in case.

Covering the last two hundred yards on foot, Rachel wished she’d chosen more appropriate desert footwear. A little closer and she could hear music drifting too loudly out over the sand. At the near end of the trailer Alvarez motioned for her to wait. He took the safety latch off his holster, drew the gun and disappeared around the corner towards the partly opened front door.

She waited a silent minute, felt for the gun in her pocket when she realized she wasn’t alone, just before the smell of sweat and alcohol slid into

her nostrils, just before the hairy, tattooed arm of Howie Morgan slid tightly under her throat, gagging her as he pulled her close against him. His hot, labored breath and body stink surrounded her. She could feel him tight against her back, his arm choking her hard enough to kill.

“Not one word, bitch.”

Her trapped throat didn't offer the option.

“I'll blow your fuckin' brains all over the sand.”

She gripped his forearm with her hand, tried to ease the pressure, and got choked more. She went limp in hopes the passivity would slack the grip, allowing her to get some air.

“How many cops?”

Her fingers indicated two. She heard Alvarez knock, announce himself and get no response. She heard the door open and then the sound of him inside the trailer. Silence lasted another long minute, the grip on her throat loosened slightly as she concentrated on breathing. Her eyes watched the barrel of Howie's gun as it protruded from under her arm. She thought of the absurdity of her standing there with a loaded armpit, waiting for whatever might come around the corner.

The minute passed, she heard the door open again, and knew her cowboy cop would come around the corner and walk into a bullet. She thought to scream, braced herself, and prepared for the right moment. She envisioned her neck being broken for doing it, but thought it was going to be anyway.

Howie flexed his grip on her throat, leaving her unable to breathe much less scream, and fired

two shots point blank into Alvarez's chest as he turned the corner. The young cop did nothing, stared straight into her eyes as if she was doing the shooting. He stood there for a few seconds, motionless before falling back.

Howie waited for the other officer, figuring he was still in the trailer with the body he'd already collected that morning. When he realized there wasn't another one, he loosened his grip on Rachel's throat just as she was about to lose consciousness. He spun her around and grabbed her by the hair like a rag doll.

She saw his eyes and knew he had gone over the edge.

He pulled her head inches from his and spit words into her face. "Two cops, eh?" He let go of her hair and slapped her backhanded across the face.

"Fuckin' bitches!" He spit the words at her as she sprawled onto the warm sand.

Bobby sat slumped, semi-awake in the passenger side of the flatbed; driving in Mexico did not really give you the comfort of dozing off. He noticed how rough Jesús looked, a Mexican reality — you didn't have to be shipwrecked to look like it.

Jesús proffered a half-full bottle of tequila he had wedged under his seat. Bobby gulped it excessively. He felt his throat seize and got into a near gag and puke as it burned its way down.

Within fifteen minutes they were into some

populated outskirts.

“Tampico, amigo.” The Mexican had the words out as the question came to Bobby’s lips.

“How long to Ciudad Victoria?”

“Two hours, no mas.”

“I’ve got to make a call to Sister Maria.”

Bobby had the image of Tanya’s face jarred from him as Jesús veered the flatbed off the road. The wheels seized as they slid across the gravel top of the heat-baked earth. Jesús battled them to an abrupt halt in front of the garish facade of a nightclub Mexican style. The dust followed them in a nuclear billow, engulfing the cab as it floated forward towards the whores and hangers-on in front of the dilapidated neon oasis.

Jesús swung himself out the door. “I telephone the sister. Tell her we coming for the little one. I get you some food you starving gringo. You stay.” He didn’t wait for the answer. Didn’t want the locals salivating over fresh gringo.

Bobby watched him disappear into the choking dust. He figured Jesús knew them. You don’t blow dust on just anybody’s Friday night, not even in Mexico.

He watched him emerge minutes later, arms loaded with tortillas and beer, laughing and throwing curses over his shoulder as if he was Mexico’s entry in the Olympic profanity finals. Dropping the pile onto the seat between them, he jammed half a tortilla into his mouth and popped a beer top with his teeth. “Eat, amigo.”

Bobby attacked a tortilla as he spoke.

“I called the Sister and everything okay.”

“Okay my friend. I find you. I put you some clothes. I clean you up. I feed you.” He laughed as he spoke through his mouthful of tortillas and beer. “What is the deal? Why do I find my friend almost dead on a beach? How you get to that?”

Bobby noticed the lingerers heading towards them.

Jesús’ big body rolled into his laugh, his eyes pointing towards the canteen. “They hate gringos,” he said, throwing a knife onto the dash, “but they like your money mucho.”

The engine roared suddenly to life. “Me, some gringos I like.” Jesús couldn’t hold his laughter. Tears filled his eyes as he revved the engine, popping the clutch. The crowd scattered as he drove through them, a torrential scream of Mexican epithets running behind them, crashing into the gravel spewing from the wheels, burying everything in the dust.

The behemoth Ford settled onto the paved highway. “Okay, now I save you again.”

“Where we go after we get your little one?”

Bobby just sat there, saying nothing. Words wouldn’t do a lot of justice to his thoughts.

“Bobby?”

Bobby responded with a strange calm, as if nothing had happened. It was as if he was in a limo, his every word a command. “I’ve got to get to Brownsville. Got to get there tonight.” He filled out his agenda.

Jesús raised his eyebrows as he pulled the beer from his lips. “Time you tell me Bobby.” Jesús looked at him hard in the eyes. “I do any-

thing for you amigo. You know that. But I know you good. Time you tell Jesús what it is he might end up dying over.”

Bobby thought about Gomez and found it easy to believe Gomez was walking around inside his friend’s soul.

“Consider Jesús your wetback Bobby.” The Ford veered sharply. “We take Mexico one-eighty and you see Brownsville in six hours.” He smiled. “If we drink mucho, cuatro horas.”

Bobby sat there in silence. He had nothing to say. He wasn’t in charge of anything at the moment. Fate can be like that. He let the words find him.

“I’ve got five grand here Jesús. If I get to Brownsville I’m going to collect more.

Jesús laughed real hard. “I like very much this story,” he paused and passed Bobby a wary look, “so far.” Bobby could see the wheels turning inside Jesús’ head. “I like America, very much.” He paused, “Mexico, I have many friends here.” He paused again. “Some enemies, too, but we don’t see them tonight.” Jesús always liked the action.

“Tell me what you need. I get you anything. What you need, Bobby?”

Bobby got a little smile going. “I’ve got to get Tanya. She’s coming back with me.” Bobby didn’t change his tone but the little smile faded. “And I need a gun.”

“You don’t tell Jesús much Bobby. You have secrets, amigo? No? Shipwreck. And you want a gun?”

“I need a gun. Need to get across the border, too.”

“You look for the man who sink your ship, si?”

“Si, maybe a couple of men.” Bobby was impassive, matter-of-fact about the whole conversation. “I got some bills to collect, and some debts to pay.” He looked over at Jesús. “Debts for a friend, a Mexican friend.”

“And you kill them?”

Bobby could hear the amoral quality in the question, the simplistic curiosity on Jesús’ face. “Maybe. They planned it, Jesús. We were on fire and they cut us adrift in the gale. I’m not supposed to be here right now and if they knew I was they’d kill me.”

Jesús asked more, his voice coming out of the sun as it shone from behind him, getting a little spooky. “They hurt your friends, too?”

“Yeah, a Mexican amigo, and someone else too, but I didn’t know them.” He adds, almost to himself.

“Any man who fuck up a man like you been fucked up, that man deserve to die.” Jesús got back to practicalities, “When you kill them, you take their money too, amigo.” Jesús looked at Bobby. “It is only right, amigo. Killing someone is big risk. A person deserves the reward, deserves it special if the man need to die anyway.”

“They need to die.” Bobby’s voice was cold. He wanted to ask him if he ever knew a Mexican named Gomez. He didn’t.

“And beside that, they have no use for it anymore,” said Jesús. “The hombres have bambinos,

Bobby?"

"None I know about."

"Is very good. For sure take their money when you kill them."

The conversation drifted into momentary silence, Bobby's resignation to the decrees of fate obvious.

"I get you to Matamoros. Tonight. Six hours. No worry, amigo. I get you everything you need. In Matamoros I get you a gun. Get you across, too."

They drove north, the dying sun coming from the west through Jesús' window, silhouetting him against the sky. Bobby sat slouched against the passenger door, sipping beer and chewing cold tortillas, watching Jesús lip-synch Spanish to the crackling radio.

Twenty minutes passed before Jesús stopped singing and asked. "Bobby, mi amigo, if we go north and find trouble, why you take the little one?"

"Why?" Bobby didn't say anything for a long minute. Didn't really want to talk about it; maybe because it was a good question he didn't have a good answer for." But he knew how much Jesús had cared for her in his absence, knew how much effort he'd put into keeping her safe. He owed him an answer. "I was dead on that ship, Jesús." Bobby spoke slowly thinking his way through the words. "I could never have seen her again." He looked across at his partner. "In the worst moments out there all I could see was her face – she kept me alive. I swore to God that if I lived I

would never leave her alone again.”

Bobby couldn't see Jesús' face, only the aura the sun threw around the edges of his head. It was as if he was Gomez's angel. He wondered about any lingering vulnerability to hallucination. He thought maybe he was still at sea, maybe dead already. Or better, maybe he and Gomez were riding God's flatbed across the highways of heaven. “Why?”

“When you kill them, kill them good.”

“Promise.”

“Maybe I help you Bobby.” Jesús lost the word-of-God tone, “Maybe you take Jesús to America. Maybe we rock and roll in California. Me and you and the little one.” Jesús laughed, sucked long on his beer. “And beside all those good reason, amigo, remember, es Friday night y es Mexico.”

“Si. Amigo.”

The sun was low in the fiery evening sky when Bobby got roused from an exhausted sleep. It took him a minute to focus on where he was, and why.

Jesús helped. “Ciudad Victoria, amigo.” He pointed into the falling sun. Bobby made out the image of a cathedral seemingly growing out of the sunset as Jesús jerked the truck up the winding driveway. He pulled right up to the front door like he was transporting the Pope, making a couple of nuns scurry out of the way for good measure. He leaned across Bobby and pushed open the passenger door. “I be here amigo.” He chuckled while

he added, "You look shit, hombre. You gonna scare them good."

Bobby unconsciously ran his hand through his hair. He cursed and gave it up, heading stiffly towards the big double doors.

He turned from the doors when he heard the children's voices coming from the side of the building. He walked around the corner and stood watching Tanya playing. He stood silently for a minute, listening to her laughing voice, watching her play. His eyes got wet with the sight. He said her name but his voice choked on him, the words coming out dry and inaudible.

Tanya turned suddenly as though she'd heard, stood looking at him for several seconds.

"Daddy?"

He knelt down and swooped her up in his arms as she ran to him. He squeezed her tight as the wet in his eyes turned to tears and his heart thanked God.

"Daddy." She pulled her head back to look in his face. "You smell bad." She got a little girl's concern going. "And you look bad, too."

Bobby laughed at her frankness. "Yep. I guess I do, my little angel. Don't worry. It's not permanent. I've been working."

"You're crying?"

"I'm very happy to see you."

She got suspicious. "Are you leaving again?"

"Not without you, sweetheart."

Tanya squealed like she'd opened the Christmas morning present she never thought she'd get.

"Senor Bobby!" The voice was familiar. Sis-

ter Maria, the diminutive Mother Superior had her arms around them before Bobby could turn, the "you look dreadful" expression on her face before he can react.

"I know," he said. "I look terrible." He looked at Tanya as he set her down. "And I stink." He smiled and took Tanya's tiny hand in his. "I've been told."

Sister Maria laughed as she turned. "Come. Come." She wasted no time shoos the onlookers and giving some commands in Spanish as she commandeered the two of them to her office. Mother Superiors have that way about them.

"I don't have a lot of time." Bobby wasn't even settled in his chair. "I've come to take her with me, Sister."

Sister Maria smiled with his immediacy. She couldn't resist. "Some things never change." She turned her eyes to Tanya. "Honey, I want you to go tell Sister Sophia to bring your bags."

Tanya gave her father the "don't you disappear" look as she kissed and hugged him hard before she got down off his knee and left.

The Mother Superior waited until the little girl had left the room. "Okay, my son. Okay." She walked over to him, took his face in her hands and lifted his head to her eyes. "I've known you for ten years Bobby. You've got the same mean business look on your face as the night you stopped on the highway and saved us from the malo hombres."

"The bandits?"

"Si, not ten miles from here."

He smiled back at her as he replied, "And you remember how angry you were with me because one of them died?"

She smiled, pointing to her habit, "That's my calling, Bobby." The smile disappeared just as quickly, "Are you sure this is a good time to take her. She's quite safe here."

Bobby didn't say a word. He just looked at her, his head nodding ever so slightly. Sometimes an expression can tell the best story.

"I understand." She nodded her head. "You should get cleaned up. Eat something while she says her goodbyes"

"Thank you Sister, but I have someone waiting, and I'm kind of in a rush. He stood up, took the Mother Superior's hands, kissed them and slipped three thousand dollars in wrapped hundreds between her palms. "Thank you Sister." There was moisture in his eyes as he repeated himself. "Thank you for watching over her."

Sister Maria stepped back, looking at the bills. "This is a lot of money, Bobby. I've known you for a long time. God knows we can use it."

Bobby read her fears. "I earned this money Sister. Every dollar." He held fast to her gaze. "And so have you." He kissed her hands again. "It's all I can give you right now, I wish it were more." He stepped back, smiling. "God's will, Sister." He nodded his head a little, looking for agreement. "You should know, you never stopped talking to me about it." His smile turned into a laugh. "Don't fight God's will."

She smiled at the familiar sermon, nodding as

she spoke. "We will use it wisely. Now go. I insist you take the minute to get cleaned up. Look respectable for your daughter." A last look of worry came over her face. "Be safe and we will see you soon."

Bobby took the moment to acknowledge her charge. He kissed her quickly on the cheek before she could pull back, smiling at the surprised look on her face. "Always wanted to do that, Mother."

She shooed him from the room, shaking her head as the worried smile returned to her face.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Howie Morgan's Trailer
South Padre Island, Texas
Friday night*

Rachel sat motionless, hiding her terror inside the silence. The side of her face showed a dark, swollen bruise where Howie'd struck her a couple of hours earlier.

She stared at the corpses in front of her. Alvarez, the nice young cop, whom she'd watched die for an hour and one other she didn't know.

"Want an introduction?" Howie pulled his head back from the pile of cocaine. "Juan, meet the bitch who was gonna bring me to justice." He paused while he sniffed hard up both nostrils. "Bitch, meet the wetback who was supposed to kill me." He swallowed, shivering. "I hate the taste of this shit." He guzzled tequila from the bottle. "They think I'm stupid. Hell I've taken people up to the farm and *they* never came back, why should I?"

Howie was insane, if not before then — now for a certainty. Rachel knew without wondering; it wasn't too difficult to figure out. What she didn't know was why she was still alive, suspected it wasn't necessarily good news, but was glad to be

breathing for the moment. She tried not to look at him sitting a few feet away, naked from the waist up, mumbling curses and talking to himself about having the last laugh -fucking everybody up.

His acrid sweat permeated the heat of the trailer. His eyes were glazed and distant. When he caught her looking, a bizarre smile crept across his face. The intense yet distant stare scared her outright. She knew there was more to come, knew he enjoyed it all too much.

“Why don’t you kill me?” It had taken nerve, but she said it. She knew she had to start somewhere.

“Don’t kill ladies, baby.” He leered across the room at her, chuckling while he spoke. “And when I do, it’s after I’ve tried to fuck ‘em to death.”

“What are you planning to do with me?”

“You’re the woman, ain’t ya? The one lookin’ for her brother, eh?”

“You know about my brother?” Rachel forced herself to be calm, pretending the situation was perfectly normal. She was sitting in her living room, maybe. She was used to having dead bodies strewn about her feet and having a conversation with a psychopath. It was perfectly normal.

“I know who killed your fuckin’ brother, lady. This whole bullshit is cause of them, both of them assholes. But the bastard drowned. If he hadn’t, I would have killed him.” He stood up like he was going to attack her, but laughed as he spoke, “I would have killed him just for you.” Rachel sensed a small opening as Howie kept talking. “Look at all the dead people cause of their bull-

shit!"

The actual statement of Robert's death hit deep. It hurt — the loss, the confirmation of it. She tried to keep the anger and pain to herself, telling herself she already knew. But it showed up anyway, in her eyes.

He stood directly over her, his nostrils flaring with each breath, his eyes glaring with every word. He reached down and tore open her blouse. His voice was soft and merciless. "You bitch! Quit feelin' bad 'bout it. You owe me for tellin' ya the truth."

He turned away while he kept talking to himself. "Always good to have company." He laughed and waved the gun. "A woman and a gun. Unbeatable combination."

"What do you plan to do with me?" She was repeating herself, but it was an important question.

"Well, I gotta visit a friend of mine. A piece of shit junk dealer. And I'm gonna take his money and kill him." He turned back to face her, his face distorted into a sick smile. "Kill him real fuckin' slow."

Rachel steeled herself and repeated her question. "What are you going to do with me?"

Howie fell back into his chair, took another long pull on the bottle of tequila, let it spill out of the sides of his mouth. "I'm gonna fuck you lady." He had a way with words. Like I said, probably fuck ya to death." He couldn't hold back the laugh. "And if I don't fuck ya to death, I might keep ya, or kill ya." He grinned. "Depends how

good a fuck ya are.”

Her terror battled her wits. A long moment passed. Something she couldn't identify made her stand up slowly in front of him. Conclusions and decisions came about automatically as she slid the tattered blouse from her shoulders. “Actually, I wouldn't mind fucking *you*, Howie.” The words came out just right. She had no struggle with them; her mind had gone back to the many nights on the street long ago. The nights she just lay back, closed her eyes, and let them have it so she wouldn't get hurt.

Howie's face showed suspicion. “Aren't you scared? You should be. You should be terrified. That's what I really like.”

She heard him. “Yes, Howie, you scare me.” She shrugged her shoulders. “But that's the way I like it, too.” She kept moving into the greatest performance she'd ever given. “I like real men, Howie.”

She slid her pants off and felt the little pistol resting in the pocket as she folded them neatly onto the back of the couch. She steeled her way into total commitment. For a certainty, it was the great performance in the midst of her terror. “Real men.”

Howie sat there, watching her naked but for her bra and panties. He watched as she stepped across the bodies lying between them. She slid to the floor in front of him, her hands moving to his crotch, unzipping his pants as she kissed his stinking belly.

“What shit is this?” He jerked her head up by

the hair, she squealed with pain, and faked the pleasure.

“You want a woman. I can be your woman.” She looked into the glaze in his eyes. “If it’s going to be my last moment, I’m planning on enjoying it with a real man’s cock, Howie.”

He grabbed her violently and flung her across the trailer. She whimpered in pain as she fell across the bodies already there. “You lyin’ slut!” Howie was much too paranoid to buy anything she was selling. He flipped her on her stomach and tied her hands behind her. “You wait right here bitch. I got some business and when I get back we’ll see just how bad you want to fuck me.”

She heard him thrash his way out of the trailer as she lay there looking at her pants and the little gun that they contained.

Bobby sat in the passenger seat of the flatbed, his daughter nestled under his arm as Jesús pushed the truck northward. Tanya and Bobby spent two hours of that late Friday talking and kidding — both of them safe in each other’s company. Both of them thinking everything would be all right now that they were together. Bobby didn’t mention the agenda ahead, just kept telling her they’d never be apart again — they were going home together and would stay together forever. It was all she wanted to hear. The little angel with the blond hair didn’t care where it was, just so they were together.

She fell asleep before he did, still nestled

under his arm, soft and warm — he'd brush her hair and accommodate her as she'd wriggle into a new position. Bobby got tears in his eyes several times on that silent drive north.

Jesús mentioned she was a fine young daughter, someone worth fighting for — like his own little girl. Like his son too and his wife. Family was all you had. It was sacred to both of them and they respected each other for it. When it comes to children, fathers aren't separated by nationality.

“Amigo.”

Bobby heard the voice through the depth of his aches and dreams.

“I have a present for you.”

His eyes opened straight into the barrel of a gun, so close to his face he could smell the powder in the bullets. He didn't get too excited. It wasn't the first time he had his nose close enough to smell powder. Besides, this could be part of some other reality. It was something he almost hoped for. No matter how scary dreams were, he never got hurt, at least not until he woke up.

His lack of reaction made Jesús look disappointed. It was hard to see in the dark of the deserted street, but it was there. The Mexican laughed despite the failure. “Maybe this make you more happy, amigo.” He handed Bobby some papers, Mexican ID for Tanya in his own daughter's name.

Bobby pulled himself upright, fighting his way through the ache as he gently slipped his arm

from around the soft, fragile body of his sleeping daughter. He took the gun and checked it quickly — the mechanism, the bullets, the line of sight. Setting it aside, he scanned the paperwork on Jesús' own little girl.

“One gun for one hundred dollars.” Jesús's broad smile filled the dim cab as he pulled a second handgun into view. “Two for one hundred fifty dollars. Expensive, but it is very late and I did get papers too, eh?”

Bobby nodded while he got his bearings. “You did good amigo, thanks.” He wasted little time getting to questions about location and getting him across the border.

“Matamoros.” Jesús pulled a beer from a bag he'd brought along. “The amigo, he gave me a bonus with the guns, instead of change.” He held one out to Bobby.

Bobby turned him down. “We've got to get across the border.”

“Si.” Jesús smiled. “You have a Gringo problem because you have no paper. Big Gringo deal.” Jesús laughed. “Mexicans cross these borders many times with no paper, like we walk into a room of our house.” His head nodded his own acknowledgment. “Come here. I show you something.”

Bobby stuck the gun in his beltless pants and stiffly followed his travelling companion to the passenger side of the flatbed. Jesús bent over and pulled the cab running board forward as if it were built for the job. He stepped back and proclaimed with pride. “Jesús' immigration, at your service.”

Bobby couldn't fight off the smile as he crouched for a look; saw nothing but three thick straps running under the width of the cab.

"Your paper is in order now, amigo." Jesús laughed and pulled on his beer, extending his arm like a maitre d'. "Now you ready to visit tus delinquentes en Los Estados Unidos?" He smiled as if he was offering Bobby a first class seat on the Concorde while he pulled a dirty rag from his pocket, soaked it in beer, and handed it to Bobby. "For dirt, and smell. It makes a more pleasant ride. Mucho, amigo."

Bobby left the rag dripping in Jesús's hand. "What about Tanya?"

"Nada problema." Jesús looked at Bobby like he knew nothing. "She ride with me, a pequenito Mexican girl sleeping beside her papa. Border guards don't worry that. I have her papers amigo." He shook his head, "You a sleepy guy tonight Bobby." He winked. "They too busy worrying for bad guys like you."

Bobby hesitated, nodded and walked around to the driver's side. "Sweety. Wake up."

Her drowsy eyes barely opened. "Are we home, daddy?"

"Soon, my little lady. Soon." He stroked her hair as he talked gently to her about playing a little game, fooling everybody, doing exactly what his friend said, pretending she was asleep the whole time.

"I am asleep, daddy."

Bobby smiled and kissed her softly. "That's my girl. Soon we'll be home." He pulled the In-

dian blanket over her and silently asked God to keep her safe.

Bobby returned to Jesús with the wrappers of cash and handed him the remaining fifteen hundred dollars. "For your trouble, amigo. You get us across and we're even. Something happens and you bring my girl back to the sister."

"Gracias Bobby." Jesús took the money while he talked. "Si Bobby, I take her home for you no worry. Gracias. But I think maybe I stick around a little, si? The two of them stood in that deserted street eyes on each other, saying nothing; and saying everything.

"The gun, amigo." Jesús eyeballed Bobby all over again. "Maybe we hit a bump and you blow your balls off. Maybe it drop out at the customs."

Bobby looked under the cab a second time and silently acknowledged the possibility. He pulled the revolver out of the top of his pants and handed it to the Mexican.

"You a smart hombre, Mister America. I like you mucho. You always have the balls, amigo." He pointed the gun at Bobby as he joked. "And now you keep them maybe, eh?"

The two of them laughed softly as Bobby's face disappeared behind the cloth he fitted over his mouth and nose. He tied it tight, pushing bits of crumpled napkins into his ears as he crouched. He looked back at Jesús, nodded his head, and proceeded to slide wedge-like under the cab. Once under, his back hung no more than three feet from the road. He already imagined the tandem axle doing three or four thousand rpm's a few inches

from the middle of his spine.

“No move, hombre.” Jesús swung the cab step back into place. “You are here one hour.”

The noise of the manifold pounded through the crumpled ear wadding and into his head as Jesús cranked the engine to life. The exhaust raced into his lungs despite the bandanna. It was going to be a hard hour. He lay rigid, squeezing the two welded handgrips as if he was doing a horizontal extension forever. He closed his eyes to fight the sting from the exhaust. He focused on his agenda. He’d been through too much to end up being an axle snack.

Twenty minutes of twisting and turning with the truck’s motion found them at the border. He could tell from the slow crawl of the truck and the spotlights flashing off the asphalt. ‘Bambino’ comments filtered through the English-Spanish conversation during the walk around inspection. A tedious string of amigo jokes came from Jesús, none of which Bobby could hear clearly through the residual buzz in his ears. There was a bright side to everything. The whole time he fought back the gagging cough that struggled to erupt from his lungs. When the truck finally pulled forward Bobby figured it was the jokes that made them want to get rid of him – just another idiot Mexican. The noise and exhaust fumes built again. Bobby closed his eyes, coughed a lot, and breathed as little as possible.

Another twenty minutes and the truck whined to a stop. The step-up slid away and Jesús gleefully pulled Bobby, feet first, from his entomb-

ment. Bobby moved Tanya gently as he climbed into the cab, thinking she'd slept through the whole ordeal.

They were in Brownsville and Bobby ran off directions to South Padre Island like he'd been born there. He knew where Howie lived. It seemed like a long time ago.

It wasn't long before Bobby was directing Jesús to kill the lights and pull up short of the trailer. The washed-out roads hadn't hindered their progress much — the beach route was the only one Bobby had ever travelled with Howie. With his gun cupped in his hand he had the door open before he spoke. "Remember, if anything happens to me, you get this one back to Ciudad Victoria." He stared hard into Jesús's eyes as the Mexican nodded his head almost imperceptibly.

"No worry Bobby. Everything good here. No worry."

He was steps away when he heard her voice.

"Daddy?" Little people have a way of sleeping with their ears on. "Where are you going?" She reached her arm out for him, "Daddy?"

Bobby put his fingers to his lips. "Ssh, honey. Don't worry. I'll be right back." He kissed her on the cheek and tucked her under Jesús' arm. "You stay with Jesús, and do exactly as he tells you."

"Daddy?" He heard her little voice filtering after him as he disappeared into the moonlit shadows.

Bobby'd taken his time with the approach, not knowing what awaited him at the trailer. He saw no lights and thought he might end up waiting for

Howie to arrive. Either way it didn't matter to him. He moved quietly around the corner of the trailer.

Inside, the approaching truck noise had roused Rachel. She hadn't expected Howie back so soon. Maybe he'd forgotten something. Maybe he'd decided to kill her. Whatever the agenda, she struggled desperately to loosen the cord around her wrists as she wriggled across the floor to her pants. Unable to free herself, she did manage to get the gun and pull herself into a partial sitting position. Awkwardly, she turned herself sideways and pulled her arms as far around her as possible. The pain from the cord blended unnoticed into her other hurts. She was happy to have the pain because it made the gun face the door now.

Bobby was right inside the trailer when she fired off two shots in quick succession.

Apart from Bobby's moans everything went silent in the darkness. Rachel knew he wasn't dead, she could hear him struggling. She estimated where he lay and pulled herself around to finish him.

"Daddy!" The voice kept repeated itself and grew louder as it neared, Daddy!"

Rachel froze as Tanya's silhouette crashed through the open trailer door and threw herself, hysterical, onto the man who sprawled across the floor.

It was only the child's voice that had kept Rachel from shooting her too. She might have

mistakenly done it anyway had she not been focusing on finishing Bobby.

“Drop the gun, *Senorita*.” The Mexican spoke the words almost simultaneously with the gun barrel shattering the glass in the small window at the end of the trailer. “Drop the gun or I will kill you, dead.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Hertzel Markovitz's House
Brownsville, Texas
Late Friday Night*

It was late and Howie enjoyed wheeling the cruiser through Brownsville like he was the chief. He was cruising his jurisdiction, thinking about what a good job his men were doing out here on the quiet, safe streets of Brownsville. He flashed back on his own desires to be a cop when he was very young — up until he got his first felony conviction. After that he didn't think cops were that great. Still, he knew he would've been a great one.

His mind wandered to the bitch he left at the trailer. He thought he shouldn't have been so hard on her. He knew she'd fallen for him, he could tell by the way she came on to him. His whole, perverted, macho self knew it. It was obvious. But he wanted it his way, appreciated his skills at forced sex, and knew women secretly liked a man's violence and the dominance that went with it. He was doing her a favor; he knew she'd thank him for it. Eventually she'd love him more for it. It was what they all really liked, and this broad was no different. Maybe she'd be better than most, once he'd taught her how to like it

his way. She could be the right woman at last, and good-looking to boot. He turned her on, he knew that for sure. That was how it was — if it wasn't he'd kill her. Maybe he would anyway.

Howie was in and out of himself like never before — the taste of blood in an animal's mouth.

Through it all he worked his way to the far side of Brownsville and out into the sparse suburbs. He said little aloud, beyond laughing or scowling whenever his paranoia warranted it. He reacted only to things happening inside him.

He knew Hertzell well. He knew about his wall safe; knew the money belonged to him. If it belonged to Hertzell, it belonged to him. He was going to let the weasel bastard die slow. He knew how much Hertzell disliked pain. He couldn't get on the right side of it like Howie — the validity of pain, the enjoyment, and the need for it.

He focused as he killed the lights and pulled the cruiser part way up the drive. "Welcome to Hertzell's." He said it out loud, like a tour bus operator on Hollywood Boulevard. "Gotta collect some money, pay some debts."

He strode calmly up the middle of the driveway, impressed with the isolation of the surroundings. He pulled the phone lines at the side of the house before ringing the bell, standing there as if he was important and expected.

The door opened. Howie slapped the sleepy-eyed giant, Charley, full in the face with one of the pearl handled George Patton forty-fives he'd decided to bring along. It was one of his favourite guns — used only for invasions and outright war-

fare. Blood, teeth, and a bit of jaw spurted dramatically as Howie drove him backwards, pistol whipping him about the head with each lunging pursuit. The pummelling continued even after Charley had slumped to the floor. Howie never did like the fat man. He gave him a few extra belts for old times' sake.

"What's going on out there?" Hertzelt got a full view of Charley's bloodied face as he opened the study door. "Howie!"

Howie smiled back at the horrified look on Hertzelt's face, bent down and put two bullets through Charley's groin. He straightened up, laughed, and spit on him. He bent over again and jammed the gun into his mouth, about to finish him right then, but didn't — the pain and terror racing across Charley's face gave him too much pleasure. Besides, he needed to make it to Hertzelt before the panicking prize got away.

By the time Howie walked through the study doors, Hertzelt had retrieved a pistol from his desk and stood there petrified, the gun shaking in his hand.

"Hertzelt, Hertzelt, Hertzelt." Howie smiled. "I ain't gonna hurt you. Just came for the money." Smiling, he shook his head as he moved slowly forward. "You ain't gonna shoot me, are you?" He said the words simultaneously with the gunshot that ripped into Hertzelt's arm. "See. You ain't gonna shoot me."

Hertzelt couldn't stop moaning, holding his arm and looking faint as he lunged towards the panelled glass doors to the garden. He was still

fumbling with the lock when Howie grabbed him by the back of the neck, squeezing him immobile. "I know I said I wasn't gonna hurt you Hertzelt." He smashed his head through one of the panes, jerked him back and hissed the words into his face. "But I lied." He smashed his head through another pane, spun him around and jammed him against the doors, laughing maniacally while he talked. "You like it? Like to play with Howie?" He licked blood from Hertzelt's forehead, his lips and teeth turning red while he beamed a smile. "Bet you're surprised to see me, eh?"

Hertzelt just kept whimpering for his life.

Howie dragged him back to his desk, leaned him over backwards and fired a bullet through his kneecap. Howie let go of him and Markovitz slumped to the floor clutching his knee, dragging himself towards a door, whining and pleading.

Howie walked after him slowly, and put his weight on the shattered kneecap. "Wrong way."

Hertzelt's eyes started to roll back into his head. Howie eased up, didn't want the man to pass out — not yet. He knelt beside him, his voice full of concern and consideration. "Relax. We're just gonna open the safe." He helped him caringly to his feet. "But it's over here, remember?"

Howie pushed Hertzelt across the room, behind the desk. He propped him against the wall and hurled the picture from the front of the safe. "Just one chance here, Hertzelt. I don't have a lot of time." Howie sympathetically straightened the twisted glasses. "You open it up for me and I won't hurt you no more. Promise." He caringly

wiped the blood away from his eyes before turning him to face the safe. Hertzelt turned the numbers without hesitation. "I didn't mean to hurt you in the first place, guess I just lost my temper." Hertzelt nodded agreement as Howie watched each spin of the dial.

"Time's up." He stood Hertzelt aside, held him by the throat with one hand as he turned the handle, and pulled. He stared a long moment at the sizable pile of bills. "Thanks, Hertzelt." He smiled again, as if it was genuine appreciation. "You can sit down now." He put a bullet through the other kneecap. He laughed as if everybody should get their kicks this way. "Your papers?" There was a business-like tone in his voice as he dumped the contents of Hertzelt's briefcase over him, and emptied the safe in seconds.

"You stupid gringo shit."

Howie spun and watched the smoke of Enrico's gun as the bullet hit him. He felt the warm, sticky blood oozing from his side. Screaming with rage and firing without direction, he saw a hole appear in the forehead of Markovitz's wife as she cowered on the lower part of the stairs. Still screaming and firing, he flailed his way towards Enrico's second shot — the one that put him down.

Howie's eyes were still open, his body twitching to the sound of Hertzelt's moans. He watched Enrico's legs moving towards him, all business, two-handing his revolver like a television cop. He foot-slid the forty-five and the briefcase from Howie's reach. Enrico stood over him now, laughing for a second before the vicious kick to the face

blackened whatever remained of Howie's senses.

Howie didn't appear to feel the second kick, kind of an afterthought on Enrico's part. "Fucking scumbag!" Enrico walked the short distance to the slumped Hertzal.

"Help me." Hertzal pleaded through his pain. "Get me a doctor, Enrico."

"Okay, amigo. Just a minute. You aren't hurt so fucking bad. I seen worse."

Hertzal kept whining, grabbed Enrico's leg, blood rubbing onto the expensive fabric.

"My pants gringo, my fucking pants!" He kicked him roughly, looking like he was ready to kill him for soiling the suit. "Don't touch me." Enrico kept talking, but in Spanish, mumbling under his breathe as he turned to the desk and picked up the phone.

"Nine one one!" Hertzal yelled. "Just dial nine one one!"

"Oh, that's very good, amigo." Enrico's sarcasm wasn't hidden by his accent; he kept dialing while he talked. "We could have lots of help then. Ambulances. Doctors. Cops. Lots of help." He looked down at Hertzal with disgust. "Maybe you should ask how your wife is. Eh, puta?"

Hertzal glanced across at his wife's body sprawled awkwardly on the stairs.

"It's Enrico. I must speak to Luis, now."

"You're phoning Houston!" Hertzal was irate. "I'm bleeding to death and you're phoning Houston, you fucking Chicano bastard!"

"Just a moment." Enrico turned and kicked Hertzal hard in the side of the head.

Hertzelp yelped and crumpled as Enrico leaned over slightly, his voice soft. "Please be quiet, gringo. Can't you see I'm on the phone?" He turned back to the receiver. "Sorry, someone needed attention. I know it's late." His voice took on a tone. "Wake him, now."

As Enrico waited by the phone, some fifteen minutes away in Howie's isolated trailer, bodies had been sorted, wounds tended and players identified.

"I didn't kill your brother. Is that why you shot me?" Bobby queried as Jesús bandaged the leg with strips of semi-clean sheeting.

Rachel felt foolish. "No. I thought you were Howie Morgan. I think he's coming back here." He looked directly at Bobby. "But if you had murdered my brother then yes, I would have killed you. With pleasure."

"Howie murdered your brother. I was there, but not when it happened. You've come a long way to get bad news." Bobby silently noted her bruises as he motioned for Jesús to get her something to put on. "And it looks like you've suffered a little, too."

"I want that pig dead. I want him to get what he deserves."

"Me too." Bobby said it matter-of-fact, but there was a lot more in it than words.

Rachel pointed to Bobby's leg as she dressed. "Sorry about that."

Bobby just smiled dryly. "I've had worse. I

guess you owe me a drink.”

Rachel seemed to move with some pain as she slid a little closer to Tanya. “You just take care of our business here.” Her eyes told him that more words were unnecessary. “Get me to an airport and I’ll get us all out of here — and the drinks *are* on me. She managed a smile at the tearful little girl who sat sobbing quietly beside her bleeding father. “Come here honey. I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was your daddy. I’m sorry.”

Tanya looked over at her father. He nodded for her to go to Rachel. She slid herself across the floor and into Rachel’s arms.

“Do you know where he went?” Bobby tested the leg as he spoke. It hurt, but not so much he would lose his agenda.

“He muttered something about getting his money from the junk dealer. Making him pay up. Markovitz, Hertzell Markovitz. I met him this morning. A fast-talking shyster scumbag.”

“How long has he been gone?”

“Can’t be more than a half hour. You missed him by minutes.”

Bobby looked at Jesús. “I guess I’ve got to go over there to collect as well.”

Jesús nodded. “I tell you long time ago I don’t like these gringos, amigo. We go together now, I think.”

Bobby looked back at Rachel, noticing for the first time the beauty under her bruises. “You okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“Will my girl be okay here with you for a little

while. I think we better catch up to him before he gets back here.”

Rachel squeezed Tanya like a mother, smiling down into her face. “We’ll be okay, won’t we honey.”

“You come back soon, daddy.” She was worried, but a lot of her fear seemed to be absorbed by the warmth of Rachel’s grasp.

“Daddy will be back real soon. Then we’ll all leave, and never come back here, honey. Never.”

Tanya nodded despite her battle against more tears.

They were at the door when Rachel spoke. “I’ve got a friend out there from New Orleans. I’m not sure where he is, but knowing him, I’ve got a feeling he’s close by and looking for me.” She looked hard at Bobby. “He’s driving a limo. Don’t mistake him for someone else.”

It took only ten minutes with Jesús behind the wheel, including the stop at the phone booth for Markovitz’s address, before his flatbed sat quietly behind the cruiser. By this time the house sat in complete silence, giving no indication of trouble, past or present — except of course for Howie’s borrowed cruiser.

“It’s appointment time, amigo.” Said Jesús.

Bobby watched Jesús’ still outline sitting across from him. “Give me ten minutes.” Opening the cab door, he winced with the dull throb of his leg wound, hurting enough to make him wonder about his ambitious intentions. He pushed the thought away, finding relief in the fact the bleeding had stopped. Thank God for small caliber

handguns, he thought.

“Amigo, what if you no back in ten minutes?” Jesús’ face carried a smile that belied the seriousness of his question. “You want I should come looking?” The smile broadened. “Cost you more for search service.”

Bobby paused. He hadn’t wanted to think of the possibility. “If I’m not back in ten minutes, leave.” He paused again. “Take Tanya back to the Sister Maria like we agreed, and get the woman to an airport.”

“You a strange hombre amigo.” Jesús shook his head. “You think I leave you here. I owe you too much for too many times you take care of me in the old days.” He shook his head. “Honor amigo. I cannot live without my honor.”

Bobby smiled at the his companero. “Honor man. Honor among thieves.” Both of them chuckled as he limped off into the darkness.

Bobby got around behind the house to the double doors leading into the study. The carnage was obvious. Bobby’d never seen the man on the phone. Howie was lying very still on the floor and Hertzell was whining for help — Bobby knew them too well. He decided it wasn’t a good idea to enter through the study doors and headed further along the back of the house. The warm wetness on his leg told him he’d started leaking some blood again. Howie’s painkillers didn’t let him notice too much else.

Once inside he followed the dull sound of voices, passing the body of a dead woman on the stairs as he stepped over Charley’s unconscious

form. He knew the whine belonged to Hertzelt and the Mexican-American accent to the stranger on the phone, but he wasn't close enough to see them yet.

"I understand Mister Estaphan."

Bobby was very close to the study door now, getting himself an unobstructed view.

"Everything will be taken care of."

Bobby wondered who was on the other end of the phone.

"I will be in Houston tomorrow morning."

The man put the phone down and turned to Hertzelt. "Don't worry my friend." He sounded callous. "Mister Estaphan knows our situation." He smiled coldly. "He's concerned about all the questions the police will ask." The smile disappeared and his face took on no discernible expression.

"You don't have to worry about me, Enrico. I'll tell them anything you want me to, just get me some help."

"Don't worry Hertzelt." The snake-like smile returned. "Mister Estaphan knows you. Told me I should make you my biggest concern." He bent over, his head nodding as he extended his hand to help Hertzelt to his feet. "He told me to take very good care of you, my friend, do something about your pain." Enrico grabbed the top of Hertzelt's head with his extended hand, jammed the gun through the terrified man's teeth and fired two shots that exited the back of the his skull. Hertzelt didn't even twitch.

"Si, amigo, I'm sure that takes care of your

pain." Enrico stepped back, grinning with his words. "No loose ends." He broke into a sick laugh as he leaned over and wiped the barrel of his gun on Hertzels tie.

Bobby was debating his move when a hard slash across his wrist knocked the gun from his hand. Another vicious hit and Bobby careened across the floor, almost to Enrico's feet. "This prick was spyin' on ya." Charley staggered into the room, bleeding from the groin and in obvious pain. "What the fuck happened here?" He saw Hertzels slumped against the wall. "Hertzels?" He looked at Enrico. "Is he dead?"

"That fuck Howie killed him." Enrico motioned to the study doors. "It's okay I took care of him." He reached down and pulled Bobby up by the throat. "And you, who the fuck are you? You come looking for money, too? The only thing anybody finds here today is bullets." He raised the gun to Bobby's mouth just as Bobby caught a shadow by the window. "And I will give you all you can eat, mi amigo."

Bobby winced suddenly, thinking the gunshot was coming into his face. Instead, Charley was the recipient, jerking awkwardly backward before spinning around and firing blindly behind him. Jesús fired three more shots into the giant's chest as he kicked his way into the room. Charley stopped suddenly, swaying with an aimless motion before falling heavy and awkward to the floor.

Enrico pulled Bobby up close to him like it was a slow dance. "Put the gun down, or I'll kill this fuck!" In the moment of hesitation Bobby grabbed

his gun hand, clutched a letter opener from the desk and jammed it deep into Enrico's ribs, driving it up towards the heart with all his strength. The two of them danced a macabre promenade as Enrico fought for breath and the strength to turn his gun back on Bobby. Bobby's leg gave out and the two of them crashed to the floor, Enrico on top, eyes bugging.

Enrico's dead weight pinned Bobby motionless, their faces pressed close together. Bobby didn't have the strength to roll him off, the man's weight on his bulleted leg hurting through the painkillers. A long second passed before Jesús' roughly pulled the hood's head up by the hair and twisted the body away.

"You okay, amigo?"

Bobby nodded weakly.

"I think maybe this hombre love you very much." Jesús' smile broadened as he helped Bobby to a sitting position. "The way he try to kiss you like that." He shook his head. "Amigo, people will talk."

Bobby smiled back without much enthusiasm. "It'll be our secret, okay?" The respite lasted seconds before the sound of an engine roaring to life threw Bobby's eyes to the spot Howie had quietly vacated. Bobby wiped Enrico's blood from his face.

Like Lazarus from the dead, Howie had risen and gone — him and the briefcase.

CHAPTER TWENTY

*Howie Morgan's Trailer
South Padre Island, Texas
Late Friday Night*

Bobby and Jesús had been gone for less than an hour. Bobby's little Tanya had fallen asleep on the couch, her head on Rachel's lap as Rachel gently stroked her soft hair.

Rachel hadn't gotten the full story before they left, but did get enough from Bobby about the ship, the murder, his own involvement and the background to Tanya's presence to realize there had been a lot more going on than just her brother's death. Not that her brother's death didn't grieve her, it did, but she'd known in her heart for some time that he was dead — had been working on acceptance for a couple of days now.

Of all the mayhem, it was the little girl asleep on her lap that most affected her. Although her childhood hadn't been identical to this one's, there were certainly some parallels. Maybe the only real reason for all of it was to give her an opportunity to change something for this one — something she wished someone had done for her and her brother long ago. She still had the beach house and she knew for a certainty these two were

running out of places to hide. Maybe just set them up there until they sort something out. She'd never had children, but this little thing, falling faster asleep with every moment, certainly felt like she belonged on her lap. Life was strange, she thought.

What if they didn't come back, she wondered. She'd have to get out of there, on her own. She needed to get out of there before anyone found any bodies. That would mean tonight, in the dark, with Tanya. Her mind went to Sunny. She wondered where he was right now, didn't think he'd let too much time pass before he started looking for her — she thought they had developed that kind of relationship. She decided she'd wait two hours, then start walking. If she could get the two of them to the hotel, Sunny would get them out of Brownsville, and out of Texas.

With that thought in mind, she gently lifted Tanya's head and slid out from under her, covering her with a tattered comforter. Time to get herself looked at and cleaned up.

In the tiny washroom at the back of the trailer she cringed when she saw herself in the mirror. The bruise on the side of her face had turned a dark purple. She splashed some water on her face and straightened her torn clothing as best she could, even tried to fix her hair a little. She laughed silently at herself, here she was with bodies piled somewhere outside, a little girl in trouble in the next room, a couple of strangers taking care of them and a maniac, or more, out there somewhere — and she's fixing her hair.

She was at the end of that thought when her hand slid down to the gun in her pocket. It wasn't as if she'd actually heard anything. It was more of a feeling, between her and the little thing asleep nearby whom she'd gotten so close to so quickly.

She turned quietly, gun drawn, extinguishing the light as she stepped out of washroom and into the subdued light of the trailer.

"Drop it or I'll kill the little bitch." Howie had Tanya wrapped under his arm, his hand across her mouth. He was gripping her so tight her feet weren't in contact with the ground, his knife so close to her throat she could die accidentally.

"Not a chance, you piece of garbage. If you hurt one hair on her head, you're a dead man." Her voice portrayed a calm she did not feel. Her mind raced past the thoughts of how much he already looked like a dead man — face ashen, breathing heavily, blood covering his clothes as though he'd gone swimming in it. "You let her go and I let you go, no other deal."

She was trying to figure why he even returned to the trailer; whatever he needed it wasn't there. Maybe he'd thought he could hide out, no one would connect him. Maybe he figured she would help him, patch him up, drive him and his money out of there — maybe he wanted to believe she liked *a real man*. Maybe nothing more than a wounded animal's instinct, returning to its lair to heal or die. Rachel didn't really know why, and she cared less.

"I'm goin'. And I'm takin' the kid." He edged

towards the door. "Insurance. Once I'm in Mexico I'll let her go." He pulled Tanya up tight against him. Fear screaming from her eyes. "You tell 'em that. Tell 'em they don't come after me and don't tell nobody. I let her go in Mexico." Howie was out the door as he said it. "Otherwise I'll kill the little slut before I die."

Rachel followed him out the door step for step as he backed his way to the cruiser, her gun held steady, two-handed. She told herself she couldn't let it happen, and wanted to take the chance with a shot, but couldn't. Howie continued to shield himself with the girl while he slid behind the wheel. He started it up and slipped her to the seat beside him, arm and knife menacingly wrapped around her, her eyes full of tears, as Rachel looked right into them. The headlights blinded her, sand spewing as Howie wrenched the vehicle around for his getaway to nowhere.

Tears running down her face, she screamed for him to stop as she stumbled after them through the sand. She didn't slow until she saw the headlights coming towards her from the darkness. The two cars passed two hundred yards from her, as she stood transfixed in the glare of the approaching lights. It passed her, sand flying indiscriminately as the vehicle spun one hundred and eighty degrees before heading back towards her.

"Need a ride, ma'am?" Sunny swung the passenger door open.

"Sunny!" Rachel jumped in. "Follow him!"

Sand flew from the wheels, the rear end swinging erratically as they accelerated. "Don't

worry Ms Rachel, I got him in my sights.” He stepped hard on the gas. “You relax now, Sunny’s on the job.”

“The guy ahead of us is crazy, and he’s got a little girl with him. Thank God you showed up.” And that’s when it dawned on her, his showing up in the middle of nowhere. “How’d you find me?”

“I told you I wouldn’t be far away. He noticed her battered face as he continued. “I found real anonymous people lots of times. This Morgan, he’s one famous guy. No problem. Besides, you didn’t check in like you said you would.” He smiled through the darkness. “And I ain’t gonna face Jimmy as a failure, not yet anyway.” More headlights flash on the other side of the fleeing police cruiser. “Looks like we got more company.”

Rachel peered ahead, praying it was Bobby. She hoped he knew, somehow, that it was Howie coming towards him.

Bobby didn’t get the chance to figure it out as Howie suddenly veered off the beach and up onto a dune. The cruiser flew across the top out of control, slamming sideways into a second dune as it rolled onto its side.

Jesús jammed his foot on the brake. Bobby was out the door before the truck stopped sliding.

“Take the other side!” He pointed in a direction a little further down the beach as he shouted the words back at Jesús.

Bobby paid little attention to the flames starting their slow circle around the cruiser, concentrating on ignoring his pain as he circled to the back of the dune where Howie had disappeared.

He knew Howie wouldn't get far, and hoped his own strength held up better than he felt at the moment. He was barely able to make the top of the dune before he heard the groans and curses from the other side. He rose silently over the top and put his gun into the back of Howie's neck. "Hi, Howie." The nonchalant calm in his voice belied his breathless lack of strength.

"Bobby?"

With the mention of his name Bobby slapped his gun across Howie's face, both the knife and the briefcase staying tight in his grasp as he rolled a few feet down the dune.

"Amigo." Howie sounded offended as he brought a smile to his pain. "I got our money. I need a little help to get out of here." He pulled himself a little upright, coughing blood as he spoke. "You and me Bobby, what do you say? Get me into one of them vehicles. Get me a doctor. Fifty-fifty." He held up the briefcase. "You and me. What do you say?"

"You're not going to make it to a doctor, Howie." There was cold calm in Bobby's voice. "I think I'm just going to kill you Howie, save time, and do everybody a big favour." He added the afterthought. "Including you." He walked to within a foot of him. "What do you say?"

Howie didn't get to answer. The explosion and flames that shot up over the back of the dune had them both cowering in the sand. And when the noise subsided there was just Howie's sick laugh in its place.

"What's funny, Howie?"

“That your kid back at the trailer?” Howie spoke between his laughter and gurgling blood. “Well I took her in the car with me, and I think I might have left the pretty little thing back there.” A cruel look crossed his face. As Bobby instinctively turned towards the flaming wreck Howie jammed the knife into Bobby’s bad leg and used the briefcase to knock the gun and Bobby to the sand. “And I’ll bet she ain’t so pretty any — “

The bullet in Howie’s stomach stopped him in mid-sentence. His eyes bugged out but his legs still held him while the sick smile faded from his face. He turned towards Rachel just as she fired the second bullet. This one took Howie to his knees.

She stepped between Bobby’s prone figure and the kneeling Howie. “You look like you’re praying, Howie.” She put the gun an inch from his face and fired until the chamber clicked empty several times. “Don’t frighten little girls.”

She slipped the gun back into her pocket and bent over Bobby. “Get up!” She pulled him by the arm. “We’ve got to get out of here. Now!”

“Tanya?”

“She’s okay.”

“Wait.” Bobby was on one knee, his arm around her shoulder as he reached across and took the briefcase out of Howie’s hand. “Is he dead?”

“Oh, I think so.” She replied casually as the two of them stumbled across the top of the dune.

He almost lost consciousness as he fell face first into Sunny and Jesús’ arms, the sound of

gunfire having brought them back from their search.

“We leave pronto, amigo.” Jesús got his weight under Bobby’s arm. “Muy pronto.” Sunny got on the other side as the two of them half carried and half dragged him to the limo.

Jesús slid him onto the back seat while Sunny got behind the wheel. The cab roared to life, Jesús’ words partially lost in the noise. “We made it, amigo.” He tore his shirt and wrapped it around the knife wound as he spoke. “It was a very good Friday night, my gringo amigo.” Jesús smiled and slapped Bobby on the covered wound. “Good as new.”

The limo fishtailed away as Jesús, laughing his Friday night laugh, made the same kind of haste towards his flatbed.

While the car accelerated, a tiny figure pulled herself free of Rachel and her blanket wrap, squirming up and reaching over the front seat of the cab. “Daddy?”

Bobby opened his eyes enough to see her silhouette.

“Can we please go home now?”

Bobby smiled, and knew there was a God.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Senator's Home
Austin, Texas
Saturday Morning

The senator was bitching at the maid about his coffee as he rushed his way past the children, placing his usual indifferent kiss on his wife's fat cheek.

He was in his car and onto the freeway without a moment's notice. His watch said ten forty-five. He'd get there with minutes to spare. If there was one thing he didn't want to be absent for it was his eleven o'clock call to Estaphan. It was something important, he'd said, something that would 'brighten up his day'. The senator fondled the words with a certain unknown excitement as he exited the freeway and pulled into the complex of office buildings.

He pulled into his reserved parking. It was Saturday and the lot was empty anyway. He headed for the elevator, speculating how nice it'd be to have no traffic all week.

Once in his office, the senator settled behind his desk as he glanced at his watch. Ten fifty-seven. He was going to wait the three minutes. He wanted to be right on time to show Estaphan

how precisely he could listen to orders.

It was something big, he thought. Maybe Enrico'd cleared up that thing with Howie and Hertz. He wondered how it went down. He really didn't give a shit so long as he was clear. With those two out of the way, maybe the old man wanted to move ahead with the political issues. Estaphan had insisted on him calling this morning — from the office, alone with no one else to listen in. Must be something big, he thought.

For Lorraine the morning routine had been just like all the others, tedious and humiliating. The only difference this morning was Estaphan's state of mind. He was unusually cheerful, much too pleasant for his nature, and that, in itself, unnerved her.

To heighten the mystery, he'd ordered her to bring a phone and a newspaper to his bedside, both requests very out of character. She knew well how much the ringing startled him, not to mention his irrational fear that it might disrupt his pacemaker. But she knew better than to question him, never did.

Antonio arrived abruptly, paper in hand and impending trauma all over his face.

"What is it?" Her beeper went off.

"Does he know about this?" Antonio said. "Brownsville. It's all over the newspapers." The beeper squealed again, several times, sounding angrier at each repetition. "Enrico. They're calling it a massacre."

She answered his anxious stare with a shrug. "What massacre?" She silenced the beeper as she turned quickly for the stairs. "I've got to go!" Her words drifted back over her shoulder. "The master calls."

"What time is it?" Luis Estaphan asked the question the moment Lorraine entered the bedroom, his eyes glowing just a little brighter than usual, like a child about to open a new toy at Christmas.

"Almost eleven."

"What time is it exactly?"

"She picked up the tone, and rechecked her watch. "One minute to eleven." The words weren't out of her mouth before the phone rang. He smiled, and waited for it to ring a second time.

"Hello Senator." Estaphan's voice sounded like an excited little boy. "Right on time, thank you for being prompt. I like that."

Lorraine opened the drawer he pointed to, saw the solitary revolver and what looked like a television remote. She'd never seen the little black box before. Funny she thought, there was no television in the room — he hated *them* too.

"Well, I think I've pretty well taken care of all our problems." His face showed a tiny smile as he pointed to the remote. "All but one, and that's why I wanted to talk to you."

The senator hung expectantly on the other end of the phone. "Whatever I can do for you. You name it, Mister Estaphan."

"Are you listening, Senator?" Luis held the remote to the receiver and pressed it. "This is the

most important message I ever gave you.”

There was a high-pitched beep, and then an explosion. Lorraine could hear it through the phone.

“Well, I bet that really blew our friend away.” He looked at Lorraine, his smile turning into a wide grin.

Lorraine stood there, the paper still tucked under her arm, thinking something she couldn’t believe possible, watching him enjoy it to the last chuckle.

“Well, I’ve got myself an appetite this morning. Give me the paper and bring me something light. I think I’ll lounge in bed for a while.”

Lorraine was no sooner downstairs transferring an order to the kitchen help than the beeper started up again. This time it was the emergency code, the unbroken, high-pitched one that got shriller the longer it ran unanswered. Cursing under her breath she double-timed through the house, grabbing the oxygen on her way.

From the top of the stairs she could see right in through the open double doors to the room. Estaphan was squirming like he was in the grip of a python, the newspaper distorted and shredding in his hands. She ran through the doors only to be grabbed by Antonio. He looked at her hard, his head shaking slowly as he took the oxygen pack out of her hands and closed the doors.

Estaphan’s eyes got wide. “Help me!” He squeezed the words out between gasps for air. His shrivelled face twisted as he attempted to get himself up far enough to reach the drawer. Antonio

left Lorraine's side and walked calmly to the bed. Oxygen pack in hand, he opened the drawer and picked the handgun out of reach.

"I'll kill you." Estaphan gurgled the words as his face turned blue. "You little son of a bitch." The sentence died in his throat as he pulled the covers and the newspaper with him to the floor.

Lorraine moved across the room slowly, her eyes never leaving the still body, expecting it to twitch back to life like it did on more mornings than she wanted to remember. Antonio wiped the gun, replaced it in the drawer and checked for a pulse. Getting none, he picked the front page of the newspaper from the floor and handed it to Lorraine as he punched the pre-coded emergency line.

She read the headline and didn't need the accompanying pictures to understand.

"This is the Estaphan residence. We need an ambulance immediately. My uncle has had a heart attack. Hurry."

Antonio hung the phone up as calmly as though he'd ordered pizza. He looked at the crumpled body of Luis Estaphan for a second, tossed the oxygen pack on the bed and turned to Lorraine. "I guess it was bad news, baby."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*San Diego International Airport
San Diego, California
Late Saturday Afternoon*

Bobby watched Rachel exit the arrivals gate a few hundred feet ahead of him. Tanya walking alongside her hand in hand. It seemed to him that his daughter held on to her like Rachel was mom. It'd been a long time since he'd seen her hold on to someone beside himself.

He favored his bad leg, putting his weight on a cane they'd bought in an emergency clinic somewhere in the middle of Texas. It was a clean wound; the bullet had passed through without tearing up any bone, just a little muscle. In fact, he'd come out of it in better shape than Rachel — her arms and part of her neck slightly burned when she'd pulled Tanya out of the car the night before. Bobby supposed that kind of thing could get the two of them a little closer.

He didn't have too much trouble spotting Jimmy, the biggest, meanest looking man at the arrivals gate. He watched the bodyguard wade through the crowd to Rachel and Tanya, and saw the smile break out on him as he got to them. It took Bobby a few seconds to catch up to them.

“No questions. Okay?”

Bobby was just close enough to catch the words.

“Okay, boss. No questions.”

“Jimmy, I’d like you to meet my brother.”

Jimmy turned and held out his hand as Bobby got to them.

“Nice to meet you Robert.”

Bobby took his hand and pressed it, smiling like he’d been called Robert since the day he was born.

“Nice to meet you too, Jimmy.”

“There’s someone else I’d like you to meet.”

Rachel said as she pulled Tanya back to give everyone a view of her. “My niece, Tanya.”

Jimmy looked at Rachel and Bobby simultaneously. “Didn’t know you had a little one, Robert.”

Bobby watched Rachel and Jimmy exchange looks. “No questions, boss.” Jimmy said it like he was repeating a mantra.

With that said the three of them followed Jimmy’s lead to the car.

“Your friend Sunny’s quite an impressive fellow. I owe him a lot, Jimmy.” She said it while Jimmy was doing the door for her. “You don’t know.”

“Oh yes, I do, Ms Rachel. I talked to him.” He smiled that big smile as he closed her door. “Said he had a lot of fun.”

Bobby sat in the front passenger seat of the Mercedes. Little Tanya sat in the back, holding Rachel’s hand as they watched the Pacific ocean

roll by on the coast highway.

“This is a big water, Rachel. Can I swim in it?”

“Sure Sweetie. We’ll get you the prettiest bathing suit you ever saw.”

Bobby heard the small talk between the two of them as he watched the water move by him. So much had happened in the past week. One minute he was looking for a little work, then he’s fighting for his life, and a few minutes later he’s riding a Mercedes beside a different ocean some thousands of miles away. At least in retrospect it all seemed like minutes to him — like a pebble making ripples that take on a life of their own, he thought.

The sun was just getting ready to settle into the ocean when they pulled onto the driveway of the beach house. Tanya had fallen asleep on Rachel’s lap. Jimmy picked her up gently and headed for the house while Bobby struggled a little getting out of the car with his bad leg.

“I’ll tuck this one into bed and then Jimmy and I have to get back to the city. Everything you need is here. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Rachel looked at Bobby for a few seconds. Something in her eyes said she liked them, both of them — something said it was time they got a break and she intended to see to that. She put her hand behind Bobby’s neck, pulled him down and kissed him softly on the cheek. “Okay, brother of mine. It’s nice to have my family home.” She smiled their secret at him as she turned to follow Jimmy into the house.

Bobby didn't even hear them leave. He'd taken himself out to the deck and gotten immersed in the quiet roll of the waves as the sun slid imperceptibly out of sight. He sat there for some time, watching and remembering everything as it played back on some giant dark screen in the sky. It was a lot to process. He remembered Gomez and *The Lady* more than anything else. He thought he could see the Mexican smiling at him from the stern of *The Lady* as she sailed off into a distant heaven.

There was another Mexican he owed a visa to and he would see to that. Rachel had told him she would take care of it.

He took the minute for one silent prayer to whoever was listening before he stood up and headed off to check his little girl, asleep in their new home.

He stood at the foot of her bed for a long moment. It was a nice fit, he thought — you never know what God intends.

Maybe good guys don't always finish last.