



Running from MR. Blue

A NOVEL BY

Hank Johnson

BAKODA PAK & COMPANY MYSTERIES #6

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By Hank Johnson

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Running from Mr. Blue

Dedication: To MaryAnn, the object of my quest .

Credo/One true friend among the many pretenders is worth risking everything for when they need someone to salve their pain.

Prologue/

There was a voice mail waiting from Dr. Watt the day I got back from an assignment. The date stamp indicated that he had called over a week before. It was cryptic. He simply said, “Bakoda, please call me. I have a problem and I need your help. Your friend, Dr. Watt.”

I was tired, and a little beat up literally and really needed to chill out and just crash for a week or so and nurse my wounds which thankfully were simply bruises, some stretched tendons and maybe a cracked rib or two and it was possible that they had popped out of the sternum as well. Most of my therapy would consist of sleep, relaxation and minimal upper body movement and maybe some aspirin. I’d been here before and time does indeed heal most if not all wounds of a similar nature. Years later I would probably pay the long-term price with arthritis, but for now recuperation would be a relatively short proposition.

Dr. Watt had no idea if I had left Phoenix or when I would return. I hadn’t shared libation and conversation with him at The North Mountain Brewery for over a month nor sought his professional counseling. It would be easy to simply ignore his request for several days while I laid low and waited to recuperate and I did consider it, but as cold as my profession requires me to be, when it comes to friends, true friends, I do have a conscience. Dr. Watt had helped me through a difficult period, one that brought me as low as I felt a human being could have gone, being responsible for the deaths of two innocents in a most brutal manner. The least I could do was to overcome my petty discomfort, after all an occupational hazard, and return his call.

I did, and the next afternoon I was sitting in his office.

Chapter 1/

“Bakoda, you look quite uncomfortable. Are you all right?” the doctor asked.

“Just a little sore. Not a big deal,” I replied as I shifted a bit on his couch into a more comfortable position.

“You know if you are in pain, I can write you a script. Nothing addictive in limited use, just muscle relaxers and they would have a mild sedative effect.”

“Thanks, doctor, but I’m all right.” I smiled and added, “It only hurts when I move.”

“Well,” he said making his usual vain attempt at humor, “suit yourself ‘tough guy’ out there playing Bruce Willis in those old ‘Die’ whatever movies.”

“Yeah.” I shifted a bit more up against the bolster of the couch and finally found a halfway comfortable position.

The doctor continued in a more serious vein which was truer to his nature considering that he would never have a career in standup. “I almost feel bad about you coming over here in the shape that you are in, but I really need to resolve an issue, so I sincerely appreciate your effort and inconvenience. It is one like the reason that you sought me out for some time ago. I believe,” he paused, adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose, then continued, “well, I know that my negligence got someone killed, killed in a most brutal manner.”

Dr. Watt, a renowned psychiatrist, the living visage of Sigmund Freud, made that statement so matter of factly that I wasn’t quite sure what to say. Finally, I just nodded and said, “Please, doctor, tell me about it and how I can help.” I realized as I was saying it that I sounded just like him.

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“Well,” he began, “it happened a few weeks ago, while you were out of town. I know when I call and leave a message if you don’t call back you are gone for a while and that you don’t check your personal calls while you are gone working, so I just waited.”

“Yes, I appreciate that. You know me well and I appreciate that also, but what happened?”

“Well,” he began again, “I went back to New York for a national conference. Lots of lectures by some of the best psychiatrists and

psychologists in all fields, my field included. Very stimulating. We're making a lot of progress in terms of altering mental illness through other means than simply medicating patients which results in often creating other problems. Fascinating, some time I will explain some of the concepts to you."

I was being patient as I shifted on the couch again and managed to suppress another wince. "I'd be interested, doctor, but for now why don't we discuss what happened with the person that you said was killed?"

"Oh yes," he replied as he sat in his chair in the corner of the room with a table between him and I with a lamp on it and a box of tissues. The couch that I sat on was on the adjacent wall. Dr. Watt usually had a pad and pen in hand as he interviewed patients or clients but today he simply sat there his hands folded on his lap, almost pensive.

I waited, and finally, "Well, Bakoda, you know that I love to watch people."

"Yes," I replied.

"Fascinating people and what they do or don't do and why; that is the core motivation of my profession."

"And you were watching people, in New York, while you were at a conference," I said trying to nudge him along.

"Well, actually it was while I was sitting in my seat after being boarded at Newark Liberty International for the flight back to Phoenix. I was watching the rest of the passengers file in.

"It might be selfish but on this trip I decided to move up to a First Class ticket and was satisfied to settle in, look over my shoulder once in a while and watch the last minute boarders try to crush their carry-ons into already overfilled overhead compartments, push by each other in crowded aisles, and step over aisle seated passengers toward assigned middle and window seats. However, I was comfortable, had arranged my three magazines in the pocket on the back of the seat in front of me in precise order of my reading, and was scanning the first few pages of *Psychology Today*, a rather light periodical professionally speaking but somewhat interesting.

"I had managed to get my favorite seating assignment. I had an aisle. The window seat next to me was still vacant, but I knew it would be filled eventually since the flight had obviously been overbooked.

"I looked at my watch. The flight was scheduled for a 10:25 departure and it was almost 10:20 and the chaos of final boarding was in full fury, still the seat next to me had not been filled. A booking mishap? Not probable, I

thought, I couldn't be that lucky. Someone had to have purchased a first-class ticket or an elite frequent flyer would certainly be bumped up.

"I was in row 3 and had a clear view of the door. It appeared that an attendant was just about ready to move toward it, preparing to close it for departure when a final passenger came on board.

"She was tall, had a good figure and pretty face, was dressed well, and was black; could have been a model, I surmised. I watched her as she approached and could see something I couldn't quite put my finger on about her; maybe I just sensed it more than saw it, Bakoda. She seemed confused as she looked at the aisle numbers beneath the overhead compartments searching for her row and seat. She wasn't just confused, as someone who was rushed trying to orient themselves. It went deeper than that. I could see, or perhaps sense, some form of frantic feeling there, repressed, below the surface, but just barely.

"Then there were her eyes, they moved nervously from passenger to passenger as she continued up the aisle as if she were looking for someone. Yet from what I could sense was happening within her mind behind them, she was terrified of finding 'that someone'.

"She looked into my eyes as she realized the vacant seat next to me was assigned to her. I thought she had the look of a doe captured in the headlights on a country road as a car rounded a bend too quickly on a dark night. She looked as if she might bolt and run at any moment, or perhaps might be too afraid to move as disaster bore down on her.

"Ten minutes into the flight she was still tense, more than tense. I observed her as subtly as I could as I read my magazine. It certainly wasn't unusual for someone to be tense when they got on an airplane moments before the door closed and then through the take off. That could be explained by a mild fear or even a very strong fear of flying, but I got the feeling that this wasn't the case. There were her eyes."

"'Pretty smooth take off,' I ventured, turning my head slightly in her direction as I spoke.

"'I've, I've had a lot worse,' she spoke clearly but slowly, hesitantly, almost at the threshold of slow motion. Her speech in direct contrast to the near panic that I had seen when she stared directly at me from the aisle.

"'Fly much?' I asked.

"'You could say that,' the voice had a dreamy quality, somewhat down. 'I was an attendant on Continental for a few years, back before United.'

"So much for fear of flying. 'Based out of Newark?'

“She slowly nodded, then swallowed before she answered. ‘Newark, Houston, Cleveland sometimes . . .’ her voice trailed. She seemed to squirm a bit, and then turned toward me. ‘I hate to bother you, but they’re leveling off and I need to use the rest room.’

” ‘No problem.’ I stood up and laid my magazine on my seat and stood aside as the woman stood with the purse that she had been holding, more like clutching, I had noticed, and moved into the aisle. Then she worked her way toward the back of the plane. I sat down.”

Chapter 2/

“She returned a few minutes later, sighed audibly a few moments after she sat down, her hands clutching the purse in her lap once more. I noticed something different about the woman when she turned toward me after several minutes. Her eyes had a foggy quality now, bordering on drowsy; it went with the voice. Drugs? I wondered.

” ‘I could sure use a drink; I missed the early first class boarding round, and the beverage service doesn’t start until after they level off at cruising altitude.’ She said it aloud as if to no one.

” ‘You seem a little tense,’ I said. ‘Are you all right?’

” ‘It shows?’ She glanced at me quickly, the look of fear returned. The dreamy quality of her voice replaced by a nervous edge.

” ‘I can tell something is wrong,’ I replied. ‘You used to fly for a living; does it bother you now?’

” ‘No, I’m,’ she paused as if considering, then continued, ‘I’m just having some problems. That’s all.’

“I said, ‘I know; it’s none of my business, so forgive me if I seem to pry, but is there anything? What I mean to say is that I can be a pretty good listener. It’s kind of what I do.’

” ‘Did everyone who got on the plane seem all right?’ Her speech was slowing down again, the edge going away. The dreamy quality was returning. ‘You didn’t see anyone unusual?’

‘I don’t know what kind of unusual you mean. People in airports and planes, you see a lot of unusual.’

” ‘Stupid question, but you wanted to help,’ she put her hand on my arm, releasing her death grip on the purse. She squeezed a bit and brought her face around closely to mine and looked softly through brown eyes at me, now deep, the edge of panic gone from them. I knew that this woman understood men and seduction. I wondered what she wanted from me.

Then I realized that this was close to melodrama and wondered for a moment why I was playing this part in this scene, and yet knew something was wrong with this woman. In some way I really wanted to help.

"She continued, 'You seem like someone a person with problems can trust. Someone who is observant. You noticed that I was unusual, that's what you seem to be saying.' She seemed to be slipping away a bit as she said it. I wasn't sure how much of this was really her or how much was influenced by what she apparently took in the bathroom.

" 'I've helped people with problems before,' I answered. 'I'll listen; I can't guarantee any more though. Are you running from something?'

"Her grip suddenly tightened around my arm, and the look of fear returned to her eyes.

" 'How do you know?'

" 'Just a good guess,' I said. I tried not to reinforce what seemed to be genuine alarm.

"She pulled my arm toward her and leaned toward me and whispered urgently. 'I'm not sure where I'm going. I just know I have to get away, but everywhere I go I know Mr. Blue will follow. He's going to kill me one of these days.'

" 'Blue?' I asked.

" 'Yes, dark and evil. Mr. Blue seduces you, then drags you down. It's scary because inside you know.'

" 'What do you know?' I pursued.

" 'That, that . . .' she began to sob quietly and buried her face in my shoulder.

"I finished her sentence, 'That no matter where you go, you'll never be rid of the feeling, never be rid of the fear, Mr. Blue.'

"She nodded as she sobbed, her head still on my shoulder.

"I decided to ask, 'Did you take something in the lavatory?'

"She looked at me. I noticed that her hand, still on my arm, was trembling. The look of fear returned, along with one of distrust. 'You some kind of cop? It's all prescription.' Then she turned again toward me. 'You follow me on here or something?'

" 'No,' I said calmly, trying to settle her down. 'Remember, I was sitting here when you got here.'

" 'You could have found out what flight I was on. Made sure you sat next to me . . .'

"I tried to reassure her by saying, 'That would be pretty difficult to do, even if I wanted to.' I looked at her. Her tension was evident, even through the sedative effect of whatever she had taken.

" 'I do prescription drugs; it's to contend with Mr. Blue. There are times I don't think I can take another day of it, but there's no way to get rid of him. You can't take enough pills to put him out of your life, to force him away,' tears were welling again now, 'and deep down inside, you know he'll catch up with you if you try to run. Catch up no matter where you go. Mr. Blue will kill me sure as hell now, no matter where I go.'

" 'So, you're running to Phoenix?' I asked her as I moved my hand over and put it on top of hers in a comforting gesture.

" 'I wasn't sure where I was going. I just got on the first flight I could get squeezed on that was going the farthest away. I was in Newark since 5:30 this morning. Got bumped on three standbys before I paid a premium fare for this ticket.'

" 'And this is going to help?' I asked.

" 'Yesterday I thought if I could just get out of Harlem, out of Manhattan, I stood a chance. Then the fear started, and I knew by the time I got on this plane it would only be a matter of time until Mr. Blue caught up with me. There's no way just leaving the city, changing where I live can make it all go away. It's too late. I'm a dead woman, it's only a matter of time.'

" 'I can tell you're afraid,' I said.

" 'You have no idea what it's like. I need somewhere to be safe. Somewhere to get some time to work this out, get Mr. Blue off my back, out of my life. Just some time to put some distance, distance and time, between me and Mr. Blue,' she said.

" 'Look, I can help you,' I said. I withdrew my hand with some effort from between hers. I put my hand into my coat and pulled out a card case. I handed her my card. 'I can arrange for you to go somewhere for a few months to relax and get completely away. It's near Phoenix, but no one will know who you are if that is how you want it. If money is a problem, that can be worked out. I work with these people and I've had people with problems like yours stay there before.'

" 'It's not money, she explained. I just know there's no getting away. I've tried before.'

" 'Look, I'll work with you on this. You can be completely free of any outside involvement. As far as anyone in New York will know, you fell off the planet until you want it otherwise.'

" 'I could never go back. It would start all over again, if I wasn't dead before, I would be then.'

" 'Let me see what you were taking back there. If a bit more won't hurt you, I'd like to see you sleep the rest of the way to Phoenix, then I can show you the place. I think it's time that you try to trust someone.'

" 'I'm afraid if I do, one day Mr. Blue will sneak up on me, maybe even use them . . .' She paused, looked down at my card, then slowly retrieved two prescription vials from her purse and handed them to me.

"I asked her for her name.

" 'Jewel, they call me Jewel.' "

Chapter 3/

Dr. Watt continued with his story. "She was sleeping within half an hour. I wrote in my notebook . . .

Client indicates her name is Jewel, but I believe that it is an alias.

Client shows definite signs of anxiety and some indications of paranoid ideations centered on the fear of losing control of her emotions and falling into a deep, perhaps suicidal bout with depression. I suspect that this condition has developed and intensified over an extended period of increased use of prescription antidepressants and antianxiety drugs, two of which she is currently taking. The contra-action of these medications only exaggerates what appears to be a natural manic-depressive behavior pattern. She is clearly drug dependant.

Client also demonstrates incapability of addressing her depressive fears directly, and as a psychological defense, refers to the state in terms of a person, a "Mr. Blue." This is not unusual, to personify a fear, as it seems in the subject's mind to make what is intangible and uncontrollable, more tangible and controllable.

As noted, client relies rather heavily on prescription drugs as a coping mechanism, although the result is apparently a yo-yo type of effect. The one prescription drug that she has taken within the last hour is a heavy depressant. It assuaged the anxiety she clearly showed, allowing her to sleep, but will probably reinforce the depression that she fears as she regains consciousness. She also is taking anti-depressant medication. The long-term prospects for her should this form of drug use continue are quite negative.

Have persuaded the client that some time in a Phoenix facility would help to begin coping skills and alleviate the fear of and create a method of

dealing with, through psychiatric therapy and appropriate drug therapy, her depression, or in her terms, Mr. Blue. Will contact retreat by telephone upon arrival in Phoenix and arrange for her admission.

She was concerned that she might have been sought in the airport before she boarded the plane, even that she might have been followed on. As a precaution, will check with New York and area sanitariums to determine if she might have possibly left without leave, hence her concerns that she was being pursued. I do not think this is the case. If it were so, I do not feel she would have as easily consented to join the patient group at the Phoenix facility but will check with New York area treatment facilities in any case. Paranoia in her state, enhanced by anxiety and drugs seem to be a more reasonable explanation for her concerns.

Dr. Watt

"She was a bit dazed and hazy as we stood at the baggage carousel in Phoenix. I waited for my bag. Finally, it came.

" 'Look, I explained to her, 'I need to make a call and arrange for your room at that quiet, secluded place I talked to you about. I'll stay here with you, and they'll send a car and pick us both up. We can go out there together and I'll make sure that you are comfortable.'

" 'That's fine,' she said, 'but I have to use the restroom.'

" 'You sure you are all right?' I asked.

" 'A little groggy,' she answered, 'but I'm good enough to take care of that. You'll be here?'

" 'Until you come out. Just be on my cell. After the call, I'll come over by the entrance to the ladies' room and wait for you if you aren't out yet.' "

Dr. Watt paused, adjusted his glasses, pulled a tissue from the dispenser on the table between us and daubed his eyes.

I waited a moment, then asked, "What happened?"

He blotted his eyes once again under his glasses, then said, "She never came out. They found her in a bloody heap in one of the stalls in the bathroom. Her throat had been slit."

I sat quietly, feeling somewhat uneasy as if our roles had changed. This wise man who had patiently counseled me through rough times that verged on destroying me and ultimately became a trusted friend and confidant now was reaching out to me. I wanted to say something, but all that I could do was to sit quietly, again as he had often done with me.

Finally, he dropped the spent tissue into a waste basket usually reserved for clients and began again, “Bakoda, I feel so bad.” He paused, then, “I mean that I didn’t believe her. I thought she was imagining this Mr. Blue, that he was some kind of psychological representation of the root of her anxieties. I should have never let her out of my sight. It was a major failing on my part when your profession skews your view of individuals. Policemen that I have counseled call it ‘the syndrome.’ After a few years working on the force, especially in high crime environments you begin to believe that everyone is dishonest in one way or another, a criminal. I guess as a psychiatrist I’m guilty of the same thing. I tend to see everything that everyone says and does as evidence of mental pathology of one degree or another. I really thought she was severely unbalanced psychologically.”

“Doc,” I finally offered, “what were you supposed to do, follow her into the bathroom?”

He didn’t hesitate. Obviously, he had thought this out, ruminated over what action he should have taken and didn’t, “No, but I am a doctor. I have the responsibility and authority to request assistance for a patient, or as we are inclined to call them, clients. I could have requested the airport police to cordon off the restroom at the most or in the least have an officer accompany her. That would have been normal procedure even if there wasn’t a Mr. Blue if you even suspected that a client might harm themselves or self-administer drugs. I simply, clinically speaking, fucked up and she got killed as a result.”

I thought silently as we both sat in the corner of his intimate office which seemed smaller than it ever had before. Finally, I said, “I’ll make it right.”

Dr. Watt extended his hand toward me as he leaned forward and patted my hands clasped in front of me, then grasped them and said, “I knew that you would, Bakoda. I never thought that I would ever say this, not in my lifetime, but find Mr. Blue and kill him and everyone involved in this. I will help you in any way that I can.”

I nodded.

The little man released my hands, sat back in his chair, sighed, daubed his eyes once more, and adjusted his glasses again.

Chapter 4/

“Natalie Ann Richmond,” Phoenix PD Detective Lieutenant Mark Grant said, “but her professional name was Jewel. Twenty-eight years old, born in

The Bronx, arrested five times on various charges of solicitation and prostitution. Her first time was when she was seventeen.”

I nodded, and Mark continued, “Not a street walker, hardly. From what I could gather she was strictly high end from the beginning. At least several grand a night, probably a thousand or more for an hour. She worked the premium trade in midtown Manhattan. Arranged clients who were in town on business mostly from in country and international, some well off local followers although she was known to hustle the high-end bars in between. Those were the times that she ended up busted, soliciting vice guys that she didn’t know or John’s who couldn’t afford her and decided if they couldn’t stiff her the way that they wanted to then would stiff her by filing a complaint. Also, the hotels had a reputation to maintain and sometimes they got her busted just to keep her away from working their bars.”

“Seems like they knew a lot about her.”

“She worked for over ten years at the high end and the vice guys get to know the girls in the trade. It’s an alliance of opposites quite often. The girls are vulnerable to all kinds of risk, even on Fifth Avenue and Park and the cops often look out for them. Not facilitating their trade but often saving their asses from kinky clients or their handlers, even mediating difficult situations.”

“Well it didn’t work that way this time,” I said.

“No,” Mark sighed, “if you’re attractive, I mean beyond good looking and fit the right profile where you can fit into the level of clientele that their managers cater to, it can be an easy trade to get into but virtually impossible to get out of except by attrition. If you aren’t dead by thirty from an overdose or misadventure, then you’ll be pushed aside by the younger and fresher commodities coming up.”

“So, if you are smart you’ll save your money.”

“Or marry out of the trade.”

“That happens?” I asked.

“You bet at this level. A lot of the trophy wives advancing toward middle age started out as working women. Hey, they have beauty and all of the sophistication and skills both physically and conversationally to fit into that world and the tastes as well.”

“Interesting,” I commented.

“But obviously that isn’t always the case, as with Jewel. The doc’s taking it hard,” he commented.

I nodded.

“How exactly did she die?” I asked.

“Her throat was slit almost ear to ear with a fine blade, a straight razor. Very deep and an expert cut. She literally watched her murderer as she began to bleed out, fell to the floor and the world finally went to black.”

“How do you know it was a straight razor?”

“Found it right in a trash barrel outside the terminal. No prints of course. Brand new, red handle.”

“So,” I surmised, “someone locally must have delivered it.”

“No doubt,” Mark replied. “There was a drop of the razor and the killer knew where to pick it up in the terminal right after leaving the plane or it was handed off to him.”

“And it was dumped outside, so whoever it was walked out to the curb and was picked up and left.”

“Most probably,” Grant confirmed.

“And,” I continued, “the murder weapon, the straight razor, that was a message as well, a symbol.”

“A weapon of choice I would presume, but a signature. Had to be; could have killed her with a box cutter or a utility knife in a similar fashion, no this was a statement most probably to the killer himself, his method.”

There was silence for a while, then Mark broke it. “You’re thinking about her last moments before she died, aren’t you, Bakoda. Knowing that you’re going to be alive for only seconds and witnessing the look on the face of your executioner.”

I nodded.

“And you’re going on the quest, Bakoda. Going to straighten things out.”

I didn’t say anything.

Mark shook his head slowly, looking down a bit and sighed, then said, “When you get back there look up a cop named Salvador Braddock; he knew her. But,” he cautioned, “we never had this conversation. This is completely off the books. It’s for the doc.”

“Can Braddock give me a line on Mr. Blue?”

“Don’t know, can’t say. I’ve already nosed into this about as far as I can go because beyond giving you the Braddock contact, I can’t vouch for you and I have no idea what will happen once you get involved and frankly don’t want to. You going to straighten things out usually results in a trail of mayhem and I have a badge and pension to protect. Frankly I’m glad that you’ll be New York’s problem. They can clean up the mess after you like whoever you really work for has been doing for years.”

“I get it,” I reassured him. Then asked, “What happened to Jewel’s body?”

“She had no family of record from what we could determine. Probably lost contact years ago. Dr. Watt paid to have her cremated.”

“And her ashes?” I queried.

“I have no idea what he did with them.”

I picked up the check at the North Mountain Brewery where Mark and I had met. Mark was a good friend and sometimes a reluctant ally, but in the end after a certain amount of cribbing he would come through. In this case our mutual friend Dr. Watt was the catalyst that guaranteed Mark’s cooperation and I knew that if I needed him down the road he would be there to help without question, although he would continually remind me of the inconvenience.

Then I remembered: when I met with Dr. Watt, there was a small black sealed container, an urn sitting on his desk that I had never noticed before.

#####

I went home to my little house built in the fifties at the top of Central Avenue on the downslope of North Mountain in a section of the city called Sunnyslope and sat down on my couch in the living room and thought out a game plan. Obviously, it would lead me to New York City. Then I went to my closet and took an inventory.

I decided that before I would leave I had to do a bit of shopping.

Funny, but as I prepared to leave I noticed something. The pain, the discomfort that I had experienced after returning from my last assignment before meeting with Dr. Watt had abated, virtually disappeared. Adrenalin in anticipation, or maybe I was just making a bigger deal out of it than it really was? Who knew; it was gone, that’s all that made any difference.

Forty-eight hours or so later I checked into the Waldorf Astoria Hotel at Fiftieth Street and Park Avenue with a fresh wardrobe complete with three high quality suits even though they were off the rack that I paid a tailor to alter overnight, six dress shirts and ties, two pair of shoes suitable for business attire and all of the accessories along with an expensive piece of roll-on luggage and a garment bag. I was wearing my father’s vintage gold Hamilton watch that I had inherited, quite handsome.

I checked in with my identification and credit card in my name which was somewhat disconcerting. On other trips like this I would be working undercover for The Outfit and provided with an alias and phony everything.

Now I felt naked. The airline ticket had been in my name, as was the rental car that I had let at the airport and now I was checking into the hotel using my own credentials and I had no weapon to boot and no way to acquire one since this was personal business. I didn't like being this vulnerable, but I would have to deal with it.

The woman who checked me in kept saying "My pleasure" when I thanked her for anything or asked for anything which is a signature statement at Hilton properties, especially redundant on the high-end ones. I like to stay at Hiltons but find that personally annoying as with every other phrase that is rote and without sincerity. It was particularly annoying today for some reason, then I realized that my annoyance was simply a reflection of the uneasiness that I was feeling.

I knew that I had to set that aside and concentrate on the business at hand. Distractions of any form, particularly psychological ones lead to mistakes, and mistakes can be terminal at worst, and thwart the attainment of the objective at the least.

Once in my room I called Salvador Braddock and left a voice mail with where I was staying and my cell number, another element of vulnerability.

Chapter 5/

I went down to Sir Harry's bar, a Waldorf mainstay, supposedly where the Rob Roy was first concocted. I considered the fact that I didn't even know what a Rob Roy was and never knew anyone who had drank one, but that was the clubby, paneled enclave's claim to fame.

I sat at the bar and ordered a decent Malbec and proceeded to talk up the bartender. I told him that I was in the city on business, was the CEO of an investment firm in Scottsdale, Kierland Wealth Management, and would be staying for about a week.

It was about four in the afternoon and the bar was quiet, so the bartender spent some time talking with me, listening to a similar story hundreds of times with business men who passed through. He did seem somewhat genuinely interested and thankfully didn't say "My pleasure" once. His name was Doug.

A few gentlemen came and went while I sat there, and Doug served them in between talking with me. Everyone at the bar was staring contemplatively at their drinks and seemed to be paying no attention to our discussion.

I was working on my second glass when I asked him the question. “Doug, as long as I’m in town I’d enjoy some companionship. Any suggestions?”

“Stick around here,” he offered as he polished a glass, then holding it up to the light to inspect it. “After five we get a good crowd, six even better. Business women stopping off before going home and hotel guests here for conferences and the like. You might meet someone interesting.”

“That’s good advice,” I replied as he sat the glass down and picked up another and continued to polish and inspect. “But that’s pretty awkward. I’m a businessman and would prefer to get right down to business with the right party, if you know what I mean. I hate to say that money is no object, but when it is for my personal pleasure, it just about isn’t. I’m only here for a week and want to make the best of it.”

Doug put down the glass, lowered the towel and said, “Sorry, sir, I can’t help you on that score. We have strict rules about any form of solicitation or facilitating a guest in that regard. If you are interested in that you are shopping in the wrong store. My original suggestion is the best I can offer. Stick around, you’ll probably meet someone interesting, and not as expensive. Usually a few drinks and maybe dinner and a promise never to call them when they go home to their husband and family in Omaha, Des Moines, Denver or wherever.”

“Thanks,” I said and finished my drink and paid my tab.

“Have a nice day,” Doug said as I got off my bar stool and turned to leave. I hated that one too.

I walked through the lobby toward the rear entrance to the hotel on Lexington Avenue and passed through the Bull and Bear bar, the other bar on the property and out onto the street. Directly across from the Waldorf was W, a trendy, contemporary hotel that was in direct contrast to the traditional Waldorf. I took a seat at the lobby bar and decided to go into the same “from out of town and willing to pay for some action” routine and pretty much came up with the same result. As I sat there nursing my fourth glass of wine, counting the two at Sir Harry’s, I realized that I could turn into a hard-core alcoholic before I got even remotely to first base.

Then I noticed a fellow come in and take a seat at the bar. He sat down with only one bar stool between us. He nodded in my direction and I nodded back. It wasn’t the first time that I had seen him; he had been sitting not that far down the bar from me while I was at Sir Harry’s.

He was dark complected, full faced, clean shaven though he had a five o’clock shadow that no amount of close shaving could erase and balding

with black curly hair on the fringes and some graying at the temples. I figured him to be in his mid-forties. Maybe five foot ten or eleven and stocky but strong looking. He wore a brown suit obviously selected for comfort as it seemed a bit large for him. It was spring in New York, May, and though very comfortable in general the temperature outside was beginning to get very warm and the suit he was wearing seemed more appropriate for winter and could use a pressing. He smelled like back in the day when men wore cologne; it smelled like English Leather. I didn't even think they made the stuff anymore.

He swirled the ice in the glass of something brown in front of him, Scotch or Bourbon, as if considering something, then he turned to me and asked, "Your name Pak?"

I turned to him and nodded, then said, "Braddock, Salvador?"

"Yeah," he replied and extended his right hairy backed hand over the bar toward me, "but everyone calls me Sallie."

I shook his meaty hand and said, "You made me right away."

"Saw you crossing the lobby. Grant gave me a description. Knew you checked in after checking my voice mail. Was going to ring you up from the lobby, then I saw you, so I decided to go along for the ride."

He paused, then continued, "You playing like you're trying to get hooked up?"

I nodded.

"Ain't gonna happen over there and probably not here."

"I'm figuring that out, any suggestions?"

"Get to that in a minute, but first we need to have a leveling session, that is, if you know what I mean. Let's go over to one of those tables over there where we can talk and get to know each other, and I can tell you the score."

I'm pretty good at accents, especially around the Tri State area, New York, Connecticut and New Jersey. This guy was Staten Island all the way.

"Funny fuckin' name Pak, and the Bakoda thing, funnier than Pak," he said as we sat down. "What are you some kind of an Indian or something?"

"Or something," I replied. "I don't talk about it."

My response seemed to roll off Sallie's back with no trace of recognition. He was hard to take seriously. He looked and talked like he came out of central casting for an old film noir B movie and frankly was somewhat annoying, but I decided if Mark had set me up with him there must be some substance there.

"Grant says you ain't no cop. What are you private?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

“He told me to help you out, that you’re working with him on the murder of Jewel in Phoenix.”

I nodded.

“But he also said,” Braddock continued, “that you were kind of a smart ass sometimes and think that you’re funny, but more serious he said that I should cover my butt, that you flew solo and could leave a lot of, shall we say, clutter behind if you, that is, know what I mean.”

“I’ll try to be tidy,” I said, raised my eyebrow and took another drink from my glass.

“Well, Dakota, Pagoda, or whatever, I’ll give you background all you want, but don’t shit in my nest. I’m closing in on twenty-five years and . . .”

“I have a pension to protect,” I finished his sentence.

He ignored my intrusion, took a drink from his glass and said, “So those are the ground rules. I’ll tell you what I know, maybe give you a little direction, but if you fuck up, especially on my turf, you are strictly on your own. I never heard of you.”

“Got it,” I replied figuring the sooner I got this over with the better I’d feel; besides a little bit of New York attitude goes a long way and this guy had plenty. I was getting to the point where I wanted to plant my fist in the middle of his face and assaulting a cop was not the way to move forward toward a successful outcome so I contained myself.

“You carrying?”

“No.”

“Figured not unless you got a drop since you got here. Don’t look to me to help you on that account either. I got you figured as some kind of cowboy and we don’t need you shooting up our town; we got enough of that without outsiders coming in.” Then he considered and added, “In fact, on a professional basis I’m not sure what the fuck you’re doing here anyway, what you want to accomplish, that is, if you know what I mean.”

“That remains to be seen, Sallie,” I replied seriously, sighed and continued, “I’m here on behalf of a friend of mine and Mark’s who tried to help Jewel and is very upset about her murder.”

“I am too,” Sallie replied, “she was a good kid. A little fucked up like they all are, but a good kid.”

Chapter 6/

All at once his demeanor changed and he said, “All right, the official speech and warning is over, Pak.” He pulled back his sleeve and looked at his

watch. "Shift's over. I'm a civilian now more or less, you know what I mean, and I'll tell you what my take is on this run down in a matter of speaking off the record of course."

I forced a smile, nodded to encourage him and really couldn't think of what else to do except to wait this clown out and then get on with things on my own.

He put his hand in his suit jacket's right pocket and pulled out a little black plastic box-like thing and handed it over to me.

I looked at it, turned it over, and saw that it was one of those self-inking stamps and on the top it was printed what the stamp would inscribe. Under a clear plastic panel, it read in red ink "PAID IN FULL".

"Indelible ink," Braddock said, "even waterproof."

"And what am I supposed to do with it?" I asked, perplexed, turning it over and over in my hand.

"Grant told me about you, I mean what he figures or knows that you do, and there is only one reason why you came here and that's to punch a few tickets. If you do, stamp that on their face or forehead and we'll look the other way, that is, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," I replied as I put the stamp in my pocket.

"Indelible ink so it won't come off even if you dump them in the river."

"You've thought of everything."

"Hey, if you don't manage to get yourself killed, you might straighten out a few kinks in the fucking system around here that all of the rules keep us from working out. You know, rights this and rights that. These fuckers are bullet proof and to be honest I don't care who sells pussy, blow jobs or takes it up the ass, if you know what I mean, but I do care what happens to the girls and I care a lot more about what happened to Jewel. So, when you finally kill that motherfucker, whoever he is, I want you to stamp "PAID IN FULL" on that bastard's forehead and the rest of his fucking crew's. And one more thing."

"What's that?"

"Make it long and slow so he knows he's dying and sees you as the god damned avenging angel who is sending him to hell."

After a moment I asked, "Who is he, this Mr. Blue?"

"Nobody knows," Braddock replied. "He might not even exist, but all the girls are terrified of him."

Now I wanted to ask him some more questions rather than get rid of him, but he looked down at his watch again and said, "Gotta go, been working until at least eight or nine every night and promised the wife, she's

Irish you know, that tonight I'd be home for dinner at seven. I don't want to piss her off and by the time I take the subway, then the fucking ferry, well you know, I gotta go."

"One question before you leave."

"Yeah, Pak, but make it quick," he was already getting up from the table and checking his watch again as he rose.

"Where do I start? Where can I score?"

"The Gotham Cosmopolitan Club four blocks south on Lex. That's a sure thing, start there, Jewel got referrals from there. It'll take some flash to get through the door. Got a blue rope and all but drop a Franklin on the heavy at the entrance and you'll get through and once in, go through your shtick like you did here and across the street."

Then he turned and left.

I put my hand in my pocket and took out the stamp, turned it over and over again. "Incredible," I said to myself aloud.

#####

"I'm in town on business for about a week. Looking for some companionship. A friend of mine told me to look up a black chick named Jewel. Said that she used to hang out here sometimes. Very classy and I hear she has expensive tastes with benefits if you're willing to pick up the tab."

"Don't know what you are talking about, sir. Never heard of a girl named Jewel." He looked up across the bar at the sea of people in the club and on the dance floor and waved his hand in front of him. "Lots of women come in here, white, black, Asian; after a while they all look the same. I'm sure every one of them would like to spend your money."

"But I understand that this one, Jewel, had some special talents that a man could enjoy."

"Hey, buddy," the bartender said with a slight bit of annoyance, "like I said, I don't know her. There are about six million women in this town give or take, and I don't keep track of all of them."

#####

I was walking back to my hotel up Lexington Avenue when I finally made contact. About a block from the hotel I heard footsteps on the sidewalk advancing behind me and then felt a tap on my shoulder.

I turned around and saw a well-dressed man roughly my size and build.

"You need something?" I asked.

"Just to talk, sir," he said with an English accent. "I understand were inquiring about Jewel."

"Yes, she was recommended by a friend."

"You like your women black?" he asked.

"I like women in general, black or whatever."

"Well," he said, "I may be able to help you out. Let's go across the street, that place over there," he pointed to a bar on the other side of Lex, "and we can discuss fulfilling your needs for companionship over a drink."

#####

"My name's Teddy Saxon, what's yours?"

"Bakoda Pak."

"Unusual name," he replied, "no offense intended."

"None taken," I said, "I get it a lot."

"Americans," he commented, "they all have their quirks like us Brits."

"That we do," I agreed, then, "but what about setting me up with Jewel?"

Teddy took a few moments to answer, but finally said, "Well, I'm her manager and she's not available right now, indisposed, on a sabbatical you might say."

I considered what he said for a moment as if I believed it and shook my head from side to side slowly and finally commented, "Well that is a great disappointment, Teddy; she came highly recommended."

"Yes," he agreed, "she is an excellent companion. I've never had a complaint and much like you as a potential client, her business is by referral or on retainer for gentlemen like yourself who come here regularly on business."

"Well, if she isn't a consideration at this point, I guess we have nothing to discuss. I'll just take care of business and fly back to Phoenix in a week."

"Not to worry," Teddy replied. "I work with a lady who is as attractive and talented in all respects as Jewel. Her name is Jasmin. Beautiful eyes, teeth and complexion. A smile that lights up a room, and a body and mind that fascinate. You would not be reluctant to go anywhere in this city with her on your arm and certainly not disappointed in all other respects."

I considered, or acted as if I were, for several moments, then said, "I don't know. I had my heart set on Jewel. How much will companionship

with this woman, Jasmin you say, cost me for the next five days and nights?”

“A companion of her quality for that period would cost fifteen thousand, three thousand a day, and I must add that there is no negotiation on price, in fact, that is two thousand a day off her normal rate for a single day, five thousand. Considering you would want her for a business week, five days, we can discount the price. She is in quite high demand and if you are not interested, there are other clients who will be.”

I leaned forward and rubbed my chin with my left hand in consideration.

“I’d like to meet her first. Any chance that I could take her out for dinner, perhaps go back to my hotel for a few hours? I’m staying at the Waldorf.”

“That could be arranged, say four hours for a thousand cash with limited services.”

“That’s fair, but I’m a businessman and I don’t pay full price up front for merchandise I haven’t inspected. I’ll pay your thousand but in two installments. Five hundred cash on meeting her assuming she’s everything you described and five hundred in cash when she leaves my hotel room after four hours including time for dinner.”

“I’m not sure I can agree to that. Our fees are generally all cash and up front.”

“You say ‘our’.”

“Well, yes, I represent an agency, very discreet, that caters to clients like yourself. I am a manager, there are a few layers of management above me, you see. But our business structure should be of no interest to you; you are simply interested in value for your investment.”

“So, my offer is on the table, half and half.”

“I would have to think about it, perhaps get it cleared. You say that you are staying at the Waldorf.”

I pulled out a phony business card that I had printed before I left Phoenix and handed it to him.

“Here’s my card with my cell. Let me know if you accept my terms by tomorrow noon. If I don’t hear from you, I’ll know that it’s a no go and go about my business solo.”

I laid my card on the bar in front of him, nodded my head and got up and left.

Chapter 7/

At nine the next morning I called Braddock.

“Sallie, how was dinner with the wife?” I asked.

“Great,” he replied. “We had my daughter over with her boyfriend. She goes to Pace you know; the little drama queen growing up is now a drama major. The boyfriend, he’s too good looking to be straight, but who knows, he might swing both ways. He does some modeling and is majoring in design of something. I think he takes it up the ass once in a while, but who am I to judge? Other than being a little queer, he seems to be a nice enough guy. And I figure they’re platonic or whatever the word is. Anyway, I probably don’t have to worry about her making me a grandfather too soon. Besides, my wife, Irish Catholic, she’s more Catholic than the Pope, would have a stroke if a kid popped out of the basket outside of wedlock, that is, if you know what I mean.”

“I do,” I agreed. “Sounds like a nice family evening. Any chance that we can talk. I think I made contact.”

“Got a damned meeting in an hour. Will last with the same old bullshit for an hour or so. Could meet you for lunch, but you gotta buy; cop’s salary and all, and I know you came here with a wad.”

“Fair trade for information and background. Your pick.”

“The Second Avenue Diner at noon,” he replied. “Down in the twenties not far from Bellevue on Second. They have a great pastrami sandwich.”

“See you there,” I replied.

“And,” he added, “I wish to apologize about what I said about you being a smart ass. That’s just what Mark told me, but, well, I figured with what you came back here to do and all you would be a little more serious and so far you seem to be.”

“No offense taken.”

“Okay, Shamus,” Braddock replied, “see you at noon.”

After I hung up I reflected on what he had said. I had failed to tell him that I had acted serious trying to endure him until I could get rid of him when we originally met, but Mark was right, quite often things sarcastic and acerbic come out of my mouth at the most inappropriate times.

I had thought about it before, after having my nose broken twice and a rib cracked because I made a wisecrack when I should have kept my mouth shut, especially when confronted by guys who were hell bent on killing me. Dr. Watt picked up on it during one of our discussions and commented that it was my way of dealing with a stressful situation. I placate inner tension

by resorting to absurd or biting humor. I listened to his analysis and figured whatever the reason, I simply enjoyed being a smartass at the most inappropriate times, throwing people off balance, but often pissing them off more than they originally were. Other than enduring some physical discomfort, I saw no reason to change. Underneath it all I am a very serious guy, or I wouldn't be doing what I do.

#####

Sallie was right, the pastrami sandwich was very good and the horseradish I like to top mine with was hot. I put The Second Avenue Diner on my premier list of dining establishments when visiting the city.

We nursed a mug of coffee each as we settled down to business. I looked over the table between us in the booth at Sallie as rumpled and ill fitted as he had appeared the day before with a Macy's shopping bag sitting next to him on the upholstered bench. Probably had picked up a little something for the wife before our meeting. Macy's was on the way down more or less from midtown.

Just then my cell phone rang.

"Sallie, I need to take this," I told him raising my left index finger to interject and bringing my phone to my ear with my right hand.

He nodded.

"Yes, cash, eight o'clock at the Red Rooster in Harlem. I know the place. Reservations made under Jasmin. I'll be there."

I put down my phone on the table between us after I finished the call.

"Jasmin, huh?" Braddock said. "Guess you got hooked up."

"You know her?"

"Yeah, good kid but a lot like Jewel. Good but fucked up a little like they all are. Not hooked on drugs anymore as far as I know but some are really good at hiding it, and she might be. Been doing this long enough to know the score but smart enough to know that in the long run it's a no sum game. But, she's still premium merchandise and there's almost no way she can get out now."

"How does that work?" I asked.

"We'll start at the middle ground, and that's pretty low."

"Yeah," I replied.

"Well your typical alright looking street whore, which Jasmin clearly ain't, street whore I mean, turning tricks at maybe a hundred and fifty a pop for a fuck and blows for maybe a hundred bucks a pop, figuring she's

getting laid or does a hummer a half dozen times a night conservatively will bring in about nine hundred a night or, let me see, that's about maybe a little less than a quarter of a million a year hustling five days a week."

"That's pretty impressive, money-wise I mean."

"Yeah, but by the time it ends up in her pocket, it gets slimmed down. Her pimp takes sixty percent in exchange for pandering for her and protection, so she's left with say about ninety grand earned the hard way. Consider the fact that based on the fuckers who are fucking her she has a better than average chance of contracting STDs even if she's careful and meeting up with some whacko and getting the shit beat out of her or worse, and if she gets out of line, her pimp will wail on her too. Anyway, probably a third of what she makes or more will be spent on drugs, and the rest, well, this ain't a cheap city to live in. And, by the time she shows a little age she's not pulling in that kind of revenue anymore and generally all fucked up on drugs, skanky looking and sucking dicks for twenty-five bucks hung over the driver's side window of some guy's car in an alley. It ain't fuckin' pretty."

"So, the pimp makes all the money," I said stating the obvious, probing just to keep him talking, as if I really needed to. "

"For the most part but out of his sixty percent he also gets shaken down for protection and turf fees. In other words, he pays for the privilege of working in certain neighborhoods, so his takeaway gets whittled down. The only way to really make out is to have a stable of girls, say four or more whores, knowing that at least one or two are going to be out of commission at any given point in time."

"So, what's the difference between a woman like you just described and Jewel or Jasmin in the business?"

Braddock took a drink from his mug of coffee, sat it down on the table, considered and continued, "Well, you know, first you have to meet a certain standard. We're talking beautiful beyond fabulous and classy, I mean really classy with that, like they say in the tabloids, 'certain something' or shit like that. Then on top of that you have to have some form of sophistication to mingle in the same circles as the gentleman that engages your services. These guys, I mean, are all egotistical assholes who think their shit doesn't stink and pay for someone who makes them feel that way and the people they want to impress, like that is, they want to impress everybody. You, the escort I mean, aren't a whore or a hooker or a street walker, you're a paid companion. You aren't some bitch who gets paid maybe a couple of hundred, fucked in a hotel room, and then tossed out in the hall. You're

meant to be able to be on the arm of a successful man or one who thinks he is and be comfortable in any social situation, then go back to his room and go around the world if he wants to or show him some tricks he's never even thought of. Got the picture, Shamus?" He took another draw on his coffee mug and then plumped it down authoritatively and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin he had tucked under his chin since we had ordered. He crumpled it up after he had taken a few swipes to get a few shreds of sauerkraut off his chin and some mustard, then dropped it rather elegantly on his plate.

I considered what he said for a moment. "I noticed that the way you described them, the Jewels and Jasmins, you seemed to have more respect for them than the women you described when we first started talking."

"They are different," Braddock answered. "They are very impressive and smart, and as I said that is a job requirement. They don't work for pimps, they work for managers, same fuckin' difference but it sounds better. But", he considered, "you have to hand it to the managers, they fit into the picture too; they know how to talk with high end potential clients and set up a deal without it seeming dirty. It's the difference of shopping at Tiffany's for basically the same diamond that you can get at WalMart but from Tiffany's it comes in a better and more presentable box, no pun intended about the women."

I ignored his final comment. "But in the long run," I said, "it all boils down to the same thing for the girls."

"Of course, often" Braddock replied, "but these women, if they're smart can have a better exit plan once the youth and luster wears off. If they want to stay in the business, they can create their own portfolio of women and be a madam, or, and it often happens, marry one of their clients."

"So how does a place like The Gotham Cosmopolitan Club fit into the scheme?"

"It's a referral system. They get ten percent off the top first time around."

"So, I set up a deal, only as an example, for a thousand, they get a hundred."

"Yeah, because they attract the type of clientele who can afford top end merchandise."

"And nobody short changes them."

"No, and if anyone tries, like the manager, he gets blackballed. A joint like that, they are probably working with at least a dozen managers representing both women and men. It's also a small network. If someone

fucks over someone else word gets around, and your stable is sucking dicks under an overpass before you know it.”

“So, Braddock, how do the numbers break down in this case?”

He looked up seriously, then said, “Stop with the Braddock shit like you do now and again; we’re compadres, it’s Sallie, you know.”

“Ok, Sallie,” I replied feeling a bit chastised, and not too certain why.

Sallie nodded, then continued, “Say you got a premium piece of ass and she goes for an average of four grand a night and she works for five days a week, that’s . . .”

I interrupted, “Jasmin’s rate is three grand a day for a five-day week.”

“That’s just a teaser, Shamus. They want to hook you and believe me they’ll make sure that you get your money’s worth. First of all, if you become a regular client, next time you come to town they won’t have to pay the ten percent to the club for hooking you up and then for the pleasure of her company you’ll be paying five grand for every day and night that she spends with you.”

I thought about it and concluded that my one grand deal seemed pretty good considering.

I did the quick math in my head, then said, “So, in gross revenue, one of these girls is worth over a million dollars a year.”

“Give or take a little,” he agreed.

“And what does she get out of it?”

“Generally, about fifty percent; she ends up with about half a million tax free while working in a more satisfying and more secure environment with significantly less risk. You can live pretty comfortably on that even here in New York, and her regular clients also cover a lot of her overhead, regular living expenses, apartment, clothing and all.”

“And her manager?”

“He or she usually manages two or three women or whatever of her caliber and after his overhead he can clear, say, maybe seven hundred thousand to a million, again tax free.

“And,” Braddock, or rather Sallie added, “this is a global business. Women come here to work the trade because American clients like European, Russian, Middle Eastern and Asian women, and our women go over there because they want Americans, white Americans though.”

I nodded, then asked, “Same trade in boys and men?”

“Yes, for whatever turns a client’s screws, it’s all the same fuckin’ deal.”

“And above the manager level what do you have?”

“The typical hierarchy. The managers handle the merchandise and are generally not a threat besides getting a little rough to keep one of their stable in line if they get lazy or whiney or to collect from a client who welches on the deal. Then you have the heavies who can be serious. They keep the clients in line who are hard heads and won’t pay. Above them is the executive level of the organization.”

“And I’m guessing that besides prostitution they make money on extortion and blackmail if necessary and selling drugs to clients and the companions.”

He nodded, then, “So you made a deal?”

“Yes, a sampler for a grand. Half down and half at the end of the date.”

“Good deal. I won’t ask if you are going to fuck her, although you could certainly do worse; she is a beautiful broad. ‘No ask, no tell,’ if you know what I mean; my fuckin’ lips are sealed.”

“No, a tumble is not in the plan,” I said, “but I plan to fuck the people she works for.”

Chapter 8/

Sallie nodded at my comment, looked at his watch, then said “I gotta go,” and started to get up from the booth. Then he grabbed the Macy’s bag by the two cord handles looped at the top and handed it over to me.

“A little present from the boys at the precinct. You know us New Yorkers, we like to make an out of townner feel welcome when they visit our city. Think of us as the fuckin’ Welcome Wagon.”

I looked inside the bag and saw a large box of Russel Stover’s candies with a red bow on top.

“Two pounds,” Sallie said. Then straightened his tie at the knot under his chin, adjusting it back and forth, probably more because it was uncomfortable I than to enhance his appearance, turned and left.

I hefted the bag. Two pounds at least.

#####

Back in my room at the Waldorf I opened my box of candy from Sallie and the boys at the precinct.

It contained a Colt Commander M1911 forty-five with all serial numbers ground off and acid etched over the filing marks, and sixteen bullets, enough for two full loads. From what I knew about Colts, this one

probably dated back to the nineteen seventies, a Lightweight Commander with an aluminum alloy frame, and probably had occupied a dusty corner in an evidence warehouse until Sallie or his buddies had liberated it.

I pulled back the slide, held the gun up to the light and looked up the barrel. It had been bored almost smooth. Probably not that accurate for long distances but it would be just fine for close in work.

I loaded the compact but potent gun, cocked it and engaged the safety.

#####

Harlem is not the Harlem portrayed in the movie *American Gangster* that came out some years ago. It has gone through what has been referred to as a renaissance by some and has become more gentrified. For others, long-term residents, the change simply made their old neighborhoods unaffordable at worst and uncomfortable at best.

Harlem, once scary, many thought, if you were of the white persuasion, now is trendy and compared to midtown prices for apartments pretty affordable but rents are climbing. It's still predominantly black but getting more pepper and salt all the time with the emergence of such restaurant chains as Applebee's challenging the traditional soul food establishments which used to be inexpensive and now are trendy and charge premium prices for grits and pork belly.

Red Rooster is a relatively newcomer on Lenox Avenue off One Hundred and Twenty Fifth Street and its menu is a strange fusion of soul food and European dishes reflecting the co-founder's background, Chef Marcus Samuelsson who was born in Ethiopia and raised in Sweden. They brand their cuisine as "Soul Food, French, and American-African" featuring dishes such as Helga's Meatballs, Crispy Bird Sandwich, Sunday Ham Soup and Shrimp and Grits. The restaurant also has a mission to support the artists and creative talents of Harlem where Samuelsson lives. Red Rooster was named after a famous Harlem speakeasy where many jazz greats played, and the patrons included literary figures, musicians and politicians such as James Baldwin, Nat King Cole and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

It's just a short distance from another comfort food establishment named Sylvia's after the owner, the self-proclaimed "Queen of Soul Food."

#####

The fact that I don't remember what I ordered and ate for dinner that evening had nothing to do with the quality of the meal. I just happened to be sitting across the table from the most beautiful creature that had ever graced the earth. Tall, a conservative but perfect figure, a flawless dark caramel complexion and the most beautiful brown eyes over a flawlessly sculpted nose and a perfect smile.

She was graceful and well turned out and made me feel like I was the only man in the busy dining room although it was obvious that every pair of male eyes and as many envious female's eyes were fixed on her.

It was difficult to remind myself that this was all a show for my benefit and there was no substance to her attentiveness beyond an interest in a business transaction.

She never brought up the subject of the money. I simply passed an envelope with the Waldorf Astoria logo in the upper right-hand corner across the table and she elegantly picked it up and put it in her purse with no comment.

The conversation was focused exclusively on me and my interests, my business, my life in general. All a complete fiction that I expounded upon generously and somehow felt privileged to do so.

After we finished dining and an after-dinner drink, I suggested that we might take a walk around the neighborhood which we did, including bustling One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street. We were in front of the Apollo Theatre when she turned to me, reached up, straightened my tie, smiled and said, "If you want, I would enjoy seeing your room at the Waldorf before our night is over."

I didn't reply, simply hailed a taxi and we went south to midtown. She sat quietly and perfectly as we cruised past Central Park, extending her hand out and placing it over mine. It was hard to believe that this wasn't for real.

#####

"We won't be going to bed," I said after room service delivered a bottle of Louis Roederer Cristal and we raised our glasses.

"Whatever you wish. I enjoy talking with you. We can simply spend the next hour or so enjoying the champagne and conversation."

"Well, that's not exactly what I had in mind."

"Oh," she replied, bringing her glass to her lips and raising an eyebrow.

"No, I want to offer you an alternate business proposition to the one that I agreed to for this evening."

“And what would that be?” she asked, subtly expressing the only element of actual surprise that I had seen since we had met at Red Rooster.

“I will give you the five hundred dollars that I agreed to as the second payment for your companionship this evening plus another five hundred dollars cash if you just do one thing for me.”

“And what would that be?”

“Tell your manager that I refused to pay the second payment and if he has a problem with that to call me.”

Her perfect poise skipped a beat as I reached into my right-side coat pocket and handed her my card with my number on it. She looked a little bewildered as she took the card from my hand.

“He obviously has my number, but just in case he lost it,” I said as she took the card and nodded after my explanation.

I reached into my suit coat’s breast pocket and pulled out an envelope exactly like the one I had given her earlier that evening except that it contained ten one-hundred-dollar bills.

“All right,” she said as she took the envelope from my hand.

“You can leave now,” I said.

“I’d rather stay a while. You are indeed a fascinating person.”

“As are you, Jasmin, as are you,” I replied.

After an hour or so Jasmin left. I was quite sure she would carry out my request since at heart, her so called “golden heart” of lore, she was a businesswoman and her interest, no matter how “fascinating” I might be, was mostly in my wallet; the potential of future bonuses that would not have to be shared with her manager was indeed a prime motivator regardless of what I had ask her to do to cut him out of part of his commission for her services. I reflected upon the fact that a hard-learned lesson in life was that, save a few, the most satisfying relationships that I had experienced were those based on business. Unfortunately, ones based upon emotion often ended in disappointment that outweighed the benefits that one anticipated when they began.

Chapter 9/

“Mr. Pak, I’m somewhat confused,” Teddy Saxon said when I received his call early the following morning. “I have never had a complaint regarding Jasmin.”

“It’s not Jasmin that’s the problem. I need to talk with you about another issue; then I’ll give you what you’re due.”

“This is highly unusual, sir, and I’m not sure what your issue is but I will be happy to meet with you as an accommodation if it will assist in the resolution of whatever you are concerned about.”

“I’m sure that it will.”

“Where and when?”

“Tonight will do. I’ll be at the bar at The Gotham Cosmopolitan Club at ten. Meet me there.”

He agreed.

#####

I had dressed casually throughout the day, taking in a few of the myriad of museums and sights in central Manhattan and a satisfying lunch and dinner just killing time enjoyably until my meeting with Teddy Saxon that night.

I dressed for the occasion donning one of my new suits, shirts and a tie along with some great looking Italian shoes with toes that came to a stylish point. A little tight on the toes but they showed well.

I chose to drive down to The Gotham Cosmopolitan Club rather than walk as I had the first time. I had noticed a self-park garage a half block from the club on my first visit. Self-parks are a bit of an oddity in the city as most garages have valets that take your vehicle and park it in the structure. Those space rental fees are high, and you’re expected to tip well for an act that literally takes the valet a few minutes at most to perform. Those considerations and the fact that a growing number of people don’t like turning their vehicle and its contents over to someone else, especially considering the statement on the ticket that “We are not responsible for . . .” has led to the growing number of self-park facilities.

I drove into the garage at about a quarter until ten and drove around and up past the cars parked side by side on the first and second level to the third where the concentration wasn’t quite as dense, then on to the fourth which was empty except for my rental when I parked it in a space near the wall next to the elevator shaft about ten feet away. I got out and zapped the locks with the button on the key, walked the several feet to the elevator and took it down to street level, then walked a half block or so to the club.

The place was as crowded and noisy as ever as I entered after laying a Franklin on the guy at the rope who acknowledged me, remembering the similar bribe from my first visit. I made my way to the bar. It was a few minutes before ten.

At precisely ten, Teddy Saxon took a seat next to me, turned and shook my hand. After a few minutes of exchanging pleasantries and ordering him a drink he broached the subject. "I want to discuss whatever concerns that you have, Mr. Pak. My organization prides itself on offering superior service to our clients and if you were disappointed, we will do our utmost to allay those concerns in the interest of future positive outcomes."

"Well said, Teddy," I acknowledged. "Meeting here might not have been a great idea," I said cupping my ear. In a raised voice, I continued, "I had forgotten how loud this place is. Why don't we finish our drinks and go outside where it's quieter?"

"Whatever you wish, Mr. Pak," he replied and we both sat for the next ten minutes or so observing the club scene around us until our drinks were finished. I paid the tab and left a tip in cash, then we both got up from our seats at the bar and left through the front entrance.

On the sidewalk I turned to him and said, "I've been all over this city all day doing the tourist thing and I hadn't realized how tired I was until I sat down and had that drink. After we conclude our business I'm going back to my hotel and hit the hay."

"Interesting American phrase, 'hit the hay.' Possibly spending the evening in your room with Jasmin last night contributed to your fatigue," Teddy offered, smiled and winked.

I nodded with a smile in return and pointed down the block toward the garage.

"I'm parked over there. Walk with me to my car. We can discuss my concerns and like a dummy from out of town, I have my computer bag in the trunk with some of my cash."

"Not a wise move in New York," Teddy cautioned.

"Not as big of a concern in Phoenix," I replied.

"Bad habit in either place these days," he offered. "It's difficult to know who to trust."

I agreed, and in a few minutes we were at the elevator in the self-park. We got in and I pushed the button for the fourth level.

"I'm curious what your problem is, Mr. Pak."

"It won't take a moment to explain, then I'll settle up with you and I'm going back and catch up on my sleep."

"Whatever it takes to satisfy a client," he replied as the elevator came to a halt and the doors began to part.

"My car is right around the corner," I said gesturing to my right.

Teddy nodded, stepped out of the elevator and turned right in front of me as I said, “Teddy, the problem I have is that someone in your organization is responsible for the murder of Jewel in Phoenix.”

He stopped with a start, but before he could turn around I clubbed him at the base of his skull above the nape of his neck with the Colt Commander’s butt, a solid, forceful blow with a solid weapon, not enough to kill him but to stun him. He fell first to his knees, moaned and fell from that position face forward to the concrete floor banging his forehead in the process.

I put the Colt back in my belt, bent over and turned him to his back, then dragged him to the space between my car and the wall, where I proceeded to kick the crap out of him with those pointed-toe Italian shoes. After I was sure that I had at least cracked a few ribs and possibly broken one or two, I pulled out the forty-five, straddled Teddy’s torso and plopped down on his chest, put the muzzle of the Colt to his forehead and waited for him to come around.

It took a few minutes and a few slaps in the face, but when he finally became somewhat painfully lucid, I leveled with him, the gun firmly against his forehead. “Teddy, I’m an assassin. I’ve come to your town to take out everyone in your organization all the way to the top, including this Mr. Blue character. Anyone who represents the interests that murdered Jewel. Understand?”

In obvious pain, he looked up at me with glassy eyes and finally nodded.

“I would pop you right now, but I need you to be the messenger, so you get a temporary pass, but if I ever see you again, I will end you. Is that clear?” I asked, borrowing a line from the old movie *Good Will Hunting*.

He shook his head slowly again groggily in recognition and grimaced in pain.

“My advice to you is to tell the fuckers that you work for that they’re all going to be dead men before I leave and then if you are smart you’ll get the hell out of this city before I find you and make you dead.” I paused. “And, Teddy, this is not a threat; a threat is something that might happen—this is something that *will* happen.”

With that I retracted the barrel of the gun from his forehead, raised myself from my sitting position on his chest as I heard him moan, stepped over his body and tucked the pistol in the waistband of my suit pants. I kicked him in the ribs hard once more, turned and walked over to my rental, zapped the door locks, got in and drove away, leaving Teddy rolling from side to side in pain on the garage floor.

Chapter 10/

Usually when I work an assignment for The Outfit I am in and out as if I had never been there except for the damage left behind: the retribution of justice that had been thwarted. This time was different. I had exposed myself and had invited all comers to take me on or take me out before I did them. Now, the hard part, waiting until they did; then again, I could get proactive and peel off another layer of the onion to move things along. I gave it a day, and just about the time that I was going to give him a call, I got a call from Braddock.

“Pak, Sallie here. We gotta talk.”

“On or off the record?”

“Off,” he replied. “Seems some cowboy came into town and shook things up a bit.”

“Things like that happen when people mess with the wrong people.”

“Oh,” Sallie added, “and you sound very much alive Pak.”

“Still breathing,” I replied.

“Good, ‘cause word’s out that you’re a dead man.”

#####

I told Sallie I would meet him the following day at The Second Avenue Diner and added that by the time that I met him things might be shaken up a bit more.

The average person would wonder why the authorities had not closed the operation at The Gotham Cosmopolitan Club, but in a pragmatic sense it was more reasonable to allow it to operate as usual. It was simply a conduit for the illicit trade and from the standpoint of attempting to determine the larger organization it provided a view of the commerce. It’s like during Prohibition many speakeasies were allowed to operate because they were the small fish in the system; the ultimate objective was to determine who was supplying them with illicit booze. In this case, Sallie and his fellow cops had obviously done some infiltration into The Gotham Cosmopolitan Club and if they were any good had figured out at least a few elements of the hierarchy of the escort services and more specifically the ladder of players that ultimately consummated with the character known as Mr. Blue. All of whom I was determined to kill including him.

If you want to stir up the bees, the best way is to poke a stick in the nest. My philosophy regarding moving things along has always been to do the

least expected and the most outlandish thing and that was what I planned to do that evening: go back and march right into The Gotham Cosmopolitan Club two evenings after I kicked the shit out of one of the pimps who operated out of there.

#####

I sat down at the bar and watched the bartender attempt to contain his surprise, but his eyes gave him away when he saw me. Now I waited for him to make the phone call, which he did, attempting to be discreet, about ten minutes after he served me and moving down to the other end of the long bar.

After I saw him make the call, I excused myself and told him that I was going to the men's room. He nodded. I got up from my stool and walked rather rapidly to the end of the bar and into a hall that led to the restrooms.

The men's room was large by New York standards with three urinals along one wall and three toilet stalls. As with most similar rooms the wide door swung in for entrance and there was a long counter with two wash basins and a mirror that extended the length of it. The room was wide and liberal in scale.

I took it all in, turned and opened the door and returned to the bar trying to appear somewhat relieved. The place was as noisy as ever, the band had heated up and the dance floor was crowded.

Right on cue, about twenty minutes later two guys came in and took a seat on either side of me. They were large and right out of central casting. They had come here to fuck me up at least on the scale that I had fucked up Teddy Saxon and probably worse.

Let's roll! I thought.

After a few minutes I said to the bartender, "Man, this is my second stop tonight and evidently my dinner isn't agreeing with me. Why don't you give me some club soda. If that doesn't work, I'll have to hit the can again."

"Sorry about that," the bartender answered. "What did you have that might have set you off?"

"Raw oysters at the Oyster Bar at Grand Central. Never had a problem before but I feel like I have a brick in my stomach and cramps farther down. Been to the can once. Probably more than you want to know, but if I have to get up from the bar in a rush, I'll be back to take care of my tab no matter what happens."

"Well, let me know how you are doing, and I'll get that glass of soda for you straight up."

"Thanks," I said as he turned to get my club soda.

I managed to burp, tap my fist on my chest, grimace a bit and then put my palm over my lower abdomen. The big guy on my left got up and walked down the bar toward the men's.

I gave him a few minutes and then said to the bartender while I winced, "Gotta go, but I'll be back."

He nodded and gave me an ironic smile as I got up from my bar stool, turned and walked rather urgently toward the hall to the bathrooms. As I entered the hall I saw the guy who had been sitting next to me standing next to the bathroom door.

"Heard you talking at the bar." He pointed to the door and said, "Cleared it out for you. Thought you would want a little privacy."

"Thanks," I replied, pushed open the door and rushed through.

A few minutes later the door to the bathroom flung open and the second guy came in and stopped dead, looking from side to side for me.

I was behind the door when it swung in.

"I'm here, buddy," I said, and when he turned around I shot him with my Colt Commander dead center in the chest and through the heart. The noise was deafening in the tile-lined room and I had no illusions that even the noise in the club could muffle the report from the forty-five.

I pulled the stamp that Sallie had given me from my pocket with my left hand, walked a few steps over to the dead guy and stamped "Paid in Full" on his forehead. Just as the other guy rushed in through the door, I turned, a gun drawn and shot him before he could even focus coming from the dark hallway and into the bright light bouncing off the white tile walls and floor. I stamped his forehead as well.

I put the stamp back in my pocket and took forty bucks, two twenties from my left pocket that I had put there before I came into the club along with the stamp, held the Commander in my right and walked out into the hall and down to the bar. The music had stopped; you could hear the proverbial pin drop in the place. I walked back to where I had been sitting, laid the two twenties on the bar, pointed the Colt at the bartender and said, "This should cover my tab; those two just took it for Jewel and you're next if I ever see you again."

He just stood there his hands in the air shaking and his head moving frantically from side to side, his eyes wide, and I was sure that he had crapped in his pants.

Then I walked out through the entire room with the gun in plain view, tucked the pistol back in my waistband once I was outside, strolled up Lexington Avenue for a block, then cut over to Park and continued up toward the Waldorf as I heard the wail of sirens in the background.

Chapter 11/

“Sallie, you said you wanted to talk to me.”

He stirred his coffee to cool it down a bit before he took his first drink from the heavy white crockery mug in front of him that was steaming. He paused from the stirring and looked up at me across the table in our booth at the diner as the waitress delivered our sandwiches and fries. The service in this place was fast, giving it another bonus point for future patronage.

The waitress placed our food and bustled on to another table.

Sallie picked up his sandwich with one hand, took a big bite and said while he chewed a mouthful, “Just wanted to bring you up to speed on local events. It’s all part of our outreach to folks coming into the city like yourself, you know.”

“I appreciate that.” I stirred my coffee as well and picked up a pickle off my plate, figuring I’d enjoy my sandwich and fries after our conversation. I took a bite of the pickle and watched Sallie.

“Anyway, you know that cowboy who I told you stomped Teddy Saxon and put him in the hospital? Well, his company, Teddy’s that is, spread the word around their organization that anyone who brought the guy in for a little special treatment by the higher ups would get a bonus.”

“Sounds like the guy stirred things up a bit.”

“Yeah,” he replied, “and you must have ESP or something like that.”

“How so?”

“Well, when I called you about meeting you said that when we got together, like right now, things might get stirred up even more.”

“Sallie, sometimes I just get a feeling.” I nodded coyly and took another bite of the pickle.

“Well, your feeling was right. Seems that cowboy blew away two heavies in The Gotham Cosmopolitan Club last night bigger than life, right in the fucking men’s room. Then he stuck a gun in the face of the bartender and threatened to kill him as well. Can you believe that?”

“Must have shaken the bartender up,” I replied, nodding, cocking my head, raising an eyebrow feigning mild interest. I finished the pickle, wiped the pickle juice from my fingers with a paper napkin, then swiped my lips.

“Hell, yes it did. He said he was leaving his job until this crazy guy was taken off the streets.”

“Probably a good decision considering having somebody like that running around loose,” I commented.

“Yeah, the bartender said that the guy was really big, way over six foot two or taller and mean looking especially when he put that gun in his face. How tall are you? No offense but you are kind of a runt but in good shape.”

“Oh, I measure up to about five nine on a tall day if I stretch but more like five eight really,” I answered earnestly.

“Yeah, so this guy is maybe a half foot taller than you.”

“He’d scare the hell out of me based on your description, that’s for sure. You said that he did this in front of everyone at the club. You must have interviewed lots of people there who saw the guy.”

“Yeah,” Sallie answered, “and of course everyone came up with a different description. Most said he was medium height, even on the short side, but we’re going with the tall guy description that the bartender gave us. You know only a tall guy would have the balls to pull that kind of a stunt,” he paused, took a drink from his mug, sat it down, took a couple of fries, dipped them in a puddle of ketchup on his plate, stuffed them in his mouth, and continued as he chewed, “and we figure that he’s some kind of a bill collector or something.”

“No shit, how so?”

“Well, both of the guys that he plugged had their foreheads stamped in red with “Paid in Full.” Pretty strange, huh?”

I nodded, saying, “Fuckin’ strange.”

“So, we’re looking for a very tall and menacing psychopathic debt collector who has a forty-five with the rifling bored smooth so it’s hard to identify the slugs and match them to a particular gun.”

“Oh, you’ve already got a ballistics report on the bullets that killed those two guys?”

“No, not yet, but that’s just a hunch.” He tapped his temple with his right index finger a few times to indicate the validity of his deduction. A bit of ketchup remained there on his temple when he took down his hand.

“That’s why you’re such a good detective,” I observed. “Good hunches that always pan out, like with guns that have the rifling bored out.”

Sallie smiled, stirred his coffee a bit more, took a drink and wiped ketchup from around his mouth with his napkin, wadded it up and kind of tossed it short range onto his empty plate. “Yeah sure, like you have ESP.”

#####

After we finished passing the bull back and forth, I asked Braddock, “If this debt collector wanted to pursue his collection efforts who would be the next individuals in the organization that he should be calling on?”

“A dude named August Stires. Teddy works for him sort of, and the two guys who got whacked directly. He isn’t actively involved in the escort end of things—he provides protection. The whole thing is very complex. Stires offers a service, exclusive territorial rights, keeps any free agents from horning in.”

“Is he at the top?” I questioned.

“On the way up, but midrange. Beyond him it gets a little murky. We got ideas, but these guys, Stires and others, are good at staying below the radar. They don’t think of themselves as gangsters, no, businessmen with homes out in the country, Jersey. They’re slick as cat shit.”

“How would the debt collector get in touch with Stires?”

“The trick will be to get him out in the open. My advice would be that the bill collector wouldn’t kill the next guy to take a run at him, at least until that guy told him how to get to Stires who is well insulated, and with a bounty on his head, the cowboy that is, someone definitely will try to bring him in for the bonus.”

“Any idea how much this cowboy bill collector is worth if someone catches him and delivers him for special treatment?”

“Word is about a hundred grand, and they want him pristine. More to mess up that way.”

“I figured a guy that bad would be worth a lot more,” I said, my ego showing.

Sallie smirked, chuckled and shook his head from side to side at the black self-indulgent statement. “Well, I can guarantee you that no matter what they pay, his life won’t be worth a nickel if they catch him, and he’ll end up being chum for the sharks a few miles off shore within twenty-four hours.”

#####

Sallie left. I stayed for a while and finally enjoyed my sandwich and fries. Sallie had scarfed all his down while we talked. An amazing feat but it was fascinating to watch his mouth moving and his hands, one on the sandwich and the other on the fries, alternating between his mouth and his plate

feverishly as he talked while simultaneously chewing and refueling. Sallie was indeed a man of many talents. As usual, I was left with the tab.

It was after one in the afternoon when I stepped out of the diner onto Second Avenue to hail a cab and a white commercial van came to a stop on the street in front of me as I stepped off the curb.

Simultaneously, I felt a nudge in my ribs from behind. It was an unmistakable feeling, the barrel of a gun.

“Stand still, buddy, or you get it here and now,” the voice from behind me said.

“No problem,” I said, “I hope you passed the firearms safety class before they gave you the concealed carry permit.”

“Shut the fuck up,” he snarled.

While I was being a smartass the driver of the van got out, walked around and slid open the side door and made an equally smartass gesture bowing a bit, smiling in my direction and waving his right arm in a sweeping gesture toward the opening, inviting me to enter.

“Get your ass in there,” the voice from behind said and nudged the barrel a little more authoritatively into my ribs.

I offered no resistance, after all I had intentionally made myself a target, and if there was a bounty for my capture intact, I had some time since these two would want me nice and pretty so someone else could mess me up but good.

I moved toward the door of the van, ducked my head and raised my foot to enter. The next thing I remember was that I woke up in a dark, dank basement with a major headache, probably very similar to the one I gave Teddy a few evenings earlier.

Chapter 12/

I couldn't tell what time it was. The basement windows had been all blacked out with paint. The only thing I immediately noticed was that it smelled old and musty and the concrete floor I had been laying on was damp, cold and gritty.

I slowly raised myself first on my elbows, then on my hands and then to a sitting position and massaged the sizeable goose egg on the back of my head. All I could think about at the moment was the NFL's veiled revelations of late about trauma to the brain and its long-term implications. Funny, the thoughts that obsess you in dire situations.

Considering that long term for me, if my captors delivered me to secure their bonus, would be rather short, I set aside any cranial concerns that were farther out than a day or two and set about surveying my immediate surroundings.

It was pretty dark, but as my eyes adjusted I began to take note of the scale of the room, about twenty feet square with laid up concrete block walls, a furnace in one corner obviously for winter use to keep the structure above warm and a staircase leading up to a door that was undoubtedly locked but that I could see bright light bleeding through around the margins and under.

My captors had not tied or gagged me, so they had limited concerns about the potential for my escape or anyone hearing me if I tried to beckon assistance. The two blacked out windows upon inspection each had a piece of strap iron about three inches wide fastened across them and anchored in the wall that would preclude anyone from opening them and escaping through the narrow openings or entering from the outside.

I moved from the windows to the staircase and even though I was sure that the door above was locked I climbed up the steps to check it out. The entire affair was ancient and unstable. The steps creaked and shifted under my weight and when I finally got to the top step and tested the door subtly, it was indeed locked.

I came back down the stairs which shifted a bit from side to side as I proceeded. There were railings on either side that were equally rickety and if anyone fell against them or even leaned, they would give way.

I had been carrying the Colt Commander under my coat, but they had relieved me of that of course and as I surveyed my surroundings there was nothing in the basement that I could use as a weapon, no tools, pieces of pipe, nothing but the concrete floor, the block walls and the floor joists above.

I walked over to the staircase and ducked under it. I inspected it with my hands; the wood was ancient and dried out. Then I pressed firmly up on one of the steps above me. I heard the creak and squeak of long rusted nails that secured it to the dry rotted and cracked stringers on either side, then I pressed some more.

#####

“Hey sunshine, time to wake up. We’re going to take you for a ride.”

I was lying in a fetal position in the same place where I had been when I came to about an hour before. I did not respond to the call from the man with a cheery voice at the top of the stairs who had opened the door and who I saw through virtually closed eyes haloed by the bright light behind him, not electric in origin but late afternoon or evening sun, a gun in his hand. He was the guy who had been the van driver who had smiled and had gestured me to enter before I got hit from behind.

I did not move, I did not respond.

“Come on, ‘possum, we didn’t hit you that hard. Rise and shine.”

Nothing.

“All right,” he finally said in frustration, “I’m coming down, but it ain’t gonna be pretty if you don’t cooperate, and I’d rather be nice than nasty.”

I didn’t move but watched through slitted lids as he stepped forward through the door and fell through the three steps and risers I had removed from the top of the staircase seven feet to the concrete floor below, yelling in surprise as he fell, then in pain as he hit, his gun skittering across the floor as he landed.

As he hit, I sprung to my feet and quickly retrieved his pistol, a Glock, and immediately heard a voice from above call out urgently, “Harry, what in the hell happened?” Then rapid footsteps on the floorboards above.

In a moment a second figure emerged at the door bathed in light from behind as had been the first guy. He peered down into the basement, moving his head from side to side trying to see, a gun in his right hand. I shot him three times, one, two, three with his partner’s Glock. He fell backwards after he threw his hands up in a final gesture to the heavens, his gun still gripped in his hand as he tumbled backward and thunked on the floor.

Chapter 13/

I scrambled around to the side of the staircase to see the first guy who had fallen sitting upright with his back against the block wall, his legs splayed out in front of him. He was still somewhat stunned as the entire sequence of events since his first misstep had happened in a matter of a minute at the most.

I grabbed his right bicep with my left hand, the Glock pointed at him with my right and dragged him out from under the staircase.

“All right,” I said as he was in kind of a heap on the floor and I had stood up and stepped back, “get up, back up and sit down against the wall

like you were under the staircase with your legs outstretched in front of you.”

“I think I hurt my back,” he replied. “I don’t think I can.”

“That’s the least of your worries now, my friend. Just do as I tell you no matter how much it hurts.”

“What are you, some kind of sadist, man? I’m in pain, major pain.”

“Join the club. I’ve got a knot on the back of my head the size of a golf ball thanks to you and your dead pal up there.” I nodded toward the open door above. “And you know that whoever you were going to deliver me to planned to butcher me after several hours of torture and finally granting me what they would consider a merciful death. If I were you, candy ass, I’d be more concerned about figuring out how you’re going to get out of here alive than your damned back.”

“All right, anyway I’m seriously fucked,” he said as he winced in pain, tentatively attempted to get up, faltered, then fell back. Finally, after squirming in near agony on the floor, that pained me to watch even more than my head, pushing his body with his hands he managed to reposition himself again against the wall with his butt on the concrete and his legs straight out in front of him. He looked entirely spent.

“Good,” I said, “now sit on your hands.”

“All right,” he said again, thoroughly annoyed as he complied with my command. “What are you worried about? I can’t even stand up.”

“I don’t take chances, that’s why I’m up here and you’re down there.”

“You certainly took chances strutting around Manhattan like the cock of the walk, stomping and shooting people.”

“That was a calculated chance and as far as I’m concerned it worked out. That’s why we’re both here.”

He nodded; he got the point.

“Satisfied now?” he said as he managed rather painfully, grimacing to wedge his palms under the cheeks of his ass.

“You don’t seem to be a man who understands the gravity of your situation.”

“Hey, fucker,” he replied, “you are gonna do what you are gonna do. As far as Ed up there goes,” he winced again as he nodded up and actually smiled, “I never thought too much of him anyway; he’s got no sense of humor.”

“So, laughing boy, you want out of this with your hide intact?”

“We can talk, but at this point if the word gets out that we caught you and then fucked up and you got away, I’ll be the one who’ll be tortured and butchered, so I know where this is going.”

“Wouldn’t you rather get a head start at least?”

“I suppose, but I’m not sure how far I can run with a busted up back or whatever. When I got into this racket somehow I knew it would come to this but like a dumb fuck I stayed in, so let’s cut to the chase; what do you want to know? I have nothing to lose.”

“Just a few simple things.”

“Shoot,” he paused, winced, groaned and tried to reposition himself for some degree of comfort, then added with an ironic smile, “in a figurative sense at this point.”

“All right,” I replied, “first question, where am I?”

“Meyersville, New Jersey.”

“Good,” I replied. “Where were you taking me?”

“To Peapack, just half an hour away, to a horse farm called Anderson’s Stables on Peapack Road, next to the old place that Jackie Onassis had. There’s a sign out in front of the place.”

“Got an address just in case I get lost?”

He gave it to me. I committed it to memory and continued.

“You work for August Stires?”

“No, August and his outfit work with my boss or, rather, I think *for* him?”

“Would that be Mr. Blue?”

He hesitated before answering. “No, my boss is Jack Alexander and he’s a diversified business man. The escort services in New York are just a part of his portfolio. This Mr. Blue that you mention controls that business and Jack is kind of a partner.”

“Tell me about Mr. Blue.”

“Never saw the guy. He stays pretty low. In the city, probably Harlem based, maybe more toward Midtown, Central Park area. I gathered from Jack that he is black, tall, kinky, sadistic and has a tat.”

“A tat?”

“Yeah, on his neck. A tiny rose tattoo.”

“A Tennessee Williams fan?”

“Stella,” he muttered, then winced as an obvious shot of pain blasted up from his back or possibly his hips.

“What else can you tell me about him?”

“Just that his women are terrified of him, and he has a reputation for carving up the ones who get out of line.” Then he winced, groaned and tears came to his eyes. Beads of sweat had accumulated on his forehead as we talked. His face, contorted, he said, “Look, I’m hurt pretty bad, think I broke my hip or maybe something in my lower back. My legs are losing feeling. What else do you want to know? Let’s get this over with.”

I nodded, and said, “We’re almost there. Will Stires be at the little party that you were going to deliver me to in Peapack tonight?”

“Probably,” he replied painfully.

“And finally, where is my gun and the things I had in my pockets?”

“Upstairs on a card table in the living room along with the van keys. This house was condemned by the government maybe twenty-five or more years ago and has been abandoned. Sits on some land contaminated by chemicals. We just use it as a transit sight. None of the locals pay attention to it. There’s no electricity. Once the sun goes down like it is now it’s pitch black in here except for a few lanterns that we brought.”

He winced again and his head was now glistening with sweat. “Let’s get this over with. I can’t move or get out of here and even if I could I’ll be a dead man when they catch up with me, and I’m in no shape to run. If you leave me alive down here I’ll starve to death sitting in my own shit and piss, that is if the rats don’t get me first. I told you everything I can, so go ahead a take care of business, then get the fuck out of here.”

I looked at him and shook my head slowly, “Was it worth it for the fifty grand after you split the bounty with your buddy up there?”

“Dumb question,” he answered. “Like I said, I always knew that it would come to this. But it is what it is. Pop me and get it over with for Christ’s sake.”

“No, I can’t, you’ve helped me out; regardless of the knot on my head. I’m sorry that it worked out this way for you. We’re both just soldiers in our own way.” I placed the Glock about a foot from his arm’s reach on the floor. I got up, turned and negotiated the rickety stairs, managed to span the missing steps and risers to the floor above and around the body that lay there. I took the gun from Ed’s hand, made my way in the failing light to the living room and retrieved my Colt Commander, my other possessions including the stamp, my phone, and their van keys. I had just opened the front door to leave when I heard the shot from the basement.

I knew based on what he had told me that nobody would find the bodies in the condemned building for months.

Chapter 14/

I knew the area. I had been here some years before in an attempt to determine who had murdered another woman who didn't deserve to die. The parallels to that situation did not escape me as I drove the van toward Peapack and Anderson's Stables, my head pounding as I began to think of the NFL again.

But there was a bonus for me as it turned out. When I reached under the seat to move it up a few notches I felt something, something plastic and metal. When I pulled it out, I had an old KG9 converted to a fully automatic sub machine pistol in my hand with a full clip of thirty-two rounds. Originally manufactured in Sweden as a semi-automatic its sale had been banned in the United States by the ATF about thirty years ago because it could be too easily converted to full auto or in other words a machine gun. This old baby had been.

#####

"Hey, man, we could use a little help out here. This guy is a handful."

I had pulled up in front of the barn at Anderson's Stables in Peapack. When I reached about fifty feet or so from the big open barn doors I stopped, climbed into the cargo area, slid open the side door and called out.

It was dark, almost ten o'clock, and through the open doors I could see a harshly lit interior and several men milling around. I counted, from what I could see, at least six.

Two black Mercedes sedans were parked on the side of the barn about forty feet from the building, illuminated by a light on the side of the barn, probably above another entrance, a regular door.

"What the fuck is the problem?" a guy called out from inside the barn. I saw his figure advancing toward the open doors.

"This guy, we got him all bound up with duct tape, but he keeps squirming around, bucking, you know. We'll need a couple of extra guys to carry him in. He's been fighting us all the way."

There was silence for a moment, then from inside I heard an authoritative voice say, "Al, Eddie, go out and help them. Let's get him in here and get started."

Two guys, one the guy who had come to the barn door and responded to my request, walked resolutely toward the van schlumping a little as they progressed. Obviously not in anticipation of enjoying the task.

They were about five feet from the open van door when I heard one say, "Hey, where in the fuck is he?"

"Right here," I replied as I moved sideways in front of the open sliding door and shot both of them with the forty-five Commander. They fell.

I dropped the Colt and grabbed the KG9 and launched out of the van and ran toward the open barn doors. I was within twenty feet when two other guys came running out to see what was going on. On full auto it took only one swipe to take both out.

Then I turned and sprayed both Mercedes sedans blowing out their tires on the barn side. The cars slowly slumped sideways as the tires deflated just as two well-dressed men bolted out the side door of the barn toward the cars.

I glanced inside the barn through the big open doors and saw no one, then turned my attention to the two guys who were trying to make it to the cars illuminated by the side light on the barn.

"Stop where you are! One more step and you are dead."

They stopped, threw their hands in the air, turned and faced me. "Who the hell are you?" one asked indignantly.

"I'm the guy who you intended to turn into shark bait tonight."

"We can deal," the second guy said, confidently.

I ignored him and asked, "You Stires and Alexander?"

They both nodded, their arms still raised.

"Only one way out of this. Tell me how to get to Mr. Blue."

"Why do you care?" asked the smartass one who had challenged me in the first place.

"Because he killed one of his hookers, slit her throat and caused a friend of mine no small amount of mental anguish and guilt."

"So, who are you, Dudley Do Right?"

I ignored the question, and repeated, "How do I find him?"

"Harlem," the other guy answered. "Marcus Garvey Park on the drum line on Sundays. That's how we contact him when he wants to meet."

"How would I know him?"

"Tall, ebony, plays a conga, has a rose inked on his neck and goes by the name Douvan. Gold earring, left side, piercing eyes, a weird looking guy."

"You aren't shitting me?"

"Hell no. You're the guy with the gun so why would I put you on? This whole thing was set up years ago and this guy is a chameleon. We do business with him because he makes us serious money and he has a stable of premium product, but we can't tell you who he really is or how to make

contact. He calls us when he wants to do business, and it's always in the park. Sometimes he shows and sometimes he doesn't."

"What do you give him?" I asked.

"Protection and muscle. We make sure that he has an exclusive wherever he wants to ply his trade. For that we get a fee and we split it. I cover the east side of Central Park and midtown, and he," nodding toward his cohort with the smart mouth, "covers the west."

"All right, I get it," I replied.

"All right," the more amiable of the two replied, "now let's talk about making a deal."

"I've considered that, but first I'd like to answer your colleague's question."

"What?"

I paused for a few seconds as if considering, then said, "Well, no, I'm not Dudley Do Right. I'd rather that both of you think of me as the avenging angel."

With that I sprayed them both with nine-millimeter bullets. Then I quickly went about stamping every forehead of every dead guy and checked out the barn to be sure no one was left. I knew I couldn't wait too long to leave because the ruckus would have the cops here in no time, even in, maybe especially in little old Peapack.

I found a guy in a white apron huddled in the corner of a horse stall gripping a butcher's knife and a honing steel.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm just a local butcher. They called me out here to do a job," he replied his voice quaking and his entire body shaking.

I looked over my shoulder at the block and tackle suspended from a rafter high above the open area under the harsh white light of the barn. It had a hook on it, a hook meant for me.

"Oh, give me a break," I said. Those were the last words the butcher heard.

#####

I was driving south on Peapack Road toward the junction with the 202 when I was passed in the oncoming lane by a police car, lights flashing and siren blaring. I could hear another farther off behind me coming toward the stables. I drove on.

I pulled out my cell and called Braddock and told him that I had stamped seven guys in New Jersey. I didn't mention the two in the abandoned house. It would be months before they surfaced.

Chapter 15/

I ditched the KG9 in a dumpster somewhere near Patterson off Route 80 going toward the George Washington Bridge and the city. I hung on to the Glock I'd taken off Ed and the Commander. The Glock was a nineteen and had a full magazine of fifteen nine-millimeter rounds. The Commander was half empty but I had the remaining bullets that Braddock had given me back in my hotel room, so I could load it up. Considering I came here with no ordinance I was very well armed now for close-in work. The KG9 would have been nice to hang on to but a little too big to carry covertly, especially into a place like the Waldorf, and leaving it in the van in the parking garage would be asking for trouble if someone found it like I had under the seat; the garage at the Waldorf was valet only and so were all of the garages around it in that part of town.

I was a mess by the time I got to the hotel, but I tucked my pistols into my belt under my filthy and rumpled suit jacket, turned the van over to the valet and went up to my room. Now I had two guns and two vehicles, both parked in the Waldorf's garage.

When I got to my room all I wanted to do was crash. I hung out the Do Not Disturb sign, secured the chain lock on the door, put the guns in the bottom dresser drawer under a spare folded blanket and emptied my pockets, putting the contents on the top of the dresser. Being knocked out isn't really sleeping and the adrenaline rush of the last several hours had worn off but my headache hadn't. I was exhausted and fell across the bed without even taking off my clothes except for kicking off my shoes. I probably was asleep literally before I hit the mattress.

I didn't hear my cell phone ring at three A.M.

#####

I slept until noon the next day, Saturday. I awoke on top of a rumpled bed in my rumpled clothes. My headache was gone, and the goose egg had gone down substantially but was very sensitive to the touch.

I knew why the bed was such a wreck; even though I didn't remember, I was probably having one of my pursuit dreams and I had been running in

place as I lay asleep, an occurrence that had been very disconcerting to any number of girlfriends during the last two decades or so since I was recruited into the business, The Outfit's business.

I shifted around, put my legs over the edge of the bed and sat up.

I touched the back of my scalp again, I'm not sure why. It still hurt, it hadn't gone away. I yawned and stretched my arms and looked around the room. I saw my cell phone on the dresser blinking.

I decided to shave, shower and dress before moving on to the day's business. I looked into the mirror in the bathroom and was face to face with a guy who looked like he had been knocked unconscious the day before and dumped on the filthy floor of a condemned building. I rubbed my chin massaging the stubble and contemplating my jowls. Vanity, oh vanity.

About an hour later after plenty of degrabbing and personal maintenance I emerged a new man, albeit with a very sore spot on the back of his head. I decided to check my phone for the message.

It was Jasmin. Her voice was urgent, she wanted to meet with me.

"Mr. Pak, I can't really talk for long now; I'm in Miami. I flew down early this morning."

"Business?" I asked.

"Last minute, long-term client, off the books."

"Why did you call me at three in the morning? You sounded upset."

"I've made a decision and I need to talk with you."

"Can't talk now?" I surmised.

"No, and I need to take care of this client. I'm building a war chest and he pays well."

"For what?"

"What he pays for is personal, but I assume that what you mean is what is the war chest for. It's a getaway fund."

"When will you be back?"

"Monday." She paused. "Monday early afternoon I'll be back in town."

"We'll meet?" I asked.

"Sure," she replied, "I want to do this while I still have the courage."

"Where, where do you want to meet?"

"Your hotel room, about two o'clock. I'll call you about ten minutes before I come up."

"All right," I replied. Then asked, "You ever hear of a drummer on the drum line at Marcus Garvey Park named Douvan, a big, ebony, tall fellow with a rose tattoo on his neck?"

She said nothing, but I could hear her breathing; it gave her away.

“Douvan,” I pressed, “ever heard of him?”

She caught her breath and then quickly said, “Douvan, no, never heard of him. There can be twenty, thirty or more men on that drum line. I have to go.”

She hung up.

Chapter 16/

I was famished. I realized that I hadn’t eaten for about twenty-four hours since my lunch with Braddock the day before. Before getting kidnapped and the incidents in New Jersey.

I went downstairs to The Bull and Bear and decided to order lunch from the bar menu.

By some reviewers, most prominently *The New York Times*, the Bull and Bear is considered one of the three best in bars world. I have no idea which the other two are. It is indeed impressive with a bronze statue of a bull and a bear that goes back about a hundred years as a centerpiece, hence the association with the stock market and investing. The room is traditional, well molded in dark wood with a huge four-sided bar in the center of the ample space. The bar staff is world class as well.

They only serve lunch on weekends but breakfast every day, for what reason I can’t comprehend. Anyway, it was Saturday and I persuaded the barman to serve me at the bar.

As I waited for my meal I thought about Dr. Watt and my reason for coming here. I had been directly responsible for the deaths of nine men the day before and yet I felt nothing. There was no remorse, no satisfaction. I only thought about vengeance, not angry vengeance, but calculated, methodical termination. It all began with Dr. Watt’s personal pain over what he perceived as a professional failing. I loved the man, he helped me carry and almost resolve the burden of similar guilt, and none of the men that I had killed in the process of avenging the death of Dr. Watt’s new patient Jewel bothered me in the least. I had to admit that the man in the basement was problematic because in most circumstances I kill quickly and efficiently and then I’m away. He was different, almost a reflection of myself in a similar situation. As I told him before I left, we were both soldiers of a fashion and I had to wonder if his fate would be mine one day. He showed virtually no emotion as he realized that his life would end either by my hand or his own and I had to wonder once more if that indeed might be my fate. We all knew the risks of our professions and the potential

outcomes but sublimated the worst of them for what reason none of us really knew but carried on toward our preprogrammed destinies.

I set the thoughts aside as my lunch was delivered. It did no good to ruminate; my life was what it was and would be. I would simply enjoy the moment and other than a tender bruise on my head I felt pretty good.

“Central Jersey is in an uproar,” the voice next to me declared when I was halfway through my steak sandwich and heard a now familiar voice and rumpled body scuff up on the bar chair next to me and settle into place.

“Crime wave and a rash of stomach disorders this morning; local clinics are packed” he said again as I continued to chew and finally turned to see Braddock.

I swallowed and said, “Really,” then turned back to my sandwich.

“Yeah, seems they had their own version of the Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre out there in a little village called Peapack last night. Two high profile suspected crime kingpins, four of their soldiers, and a local butcher long suspected of passing off horse meat for beef, now under consideration for providing more, shall we say more ‘exotic’ meats from time to time, all waxed at some horse barn by an assailant unknown. They figure it was some kind of gang war thing.”

“They are probably right,” I said and took another bite of my lunch.

“We don’t usually pay much attention to what goes on out in Jersey, but since the two big guys operated in Manhattan I felt compelled to counsel the locals out there.”

“As a professional courtesy,” I commented.

“Always, we help out our fellow crime fighters whenever we can.”

“Good policy,” I said between chews, then added after another, “makes me feel safer knowing that our constabularies maintain contact and share information.”

“Yeah, the boys out there aren’t digging too deep into the situation seeing as it, as they saw it, was just a bunch of guys who deserved what they got anyway. Seems the biggest issue is that everyone in Peapack and around the next village Gladstone are grossed out about the prospects of the source of the beef that they’ve been eating courtesy of the local butcher for years. Guess he specialized besides the regular beef, pork and chicken in unusual meats, things you don’t get at your usual grocery, like bison, ostrich, wild boar, grizzly bear and the like.”

“I guess that they’ll never know the answer to that question, about the meat, that is.”

“No, but the public, you know, especially in a small town, word spreads fast, always speculating about the worst, and then their tummies get upset even if they’ve never used that butcher, maybe figuring that the restaurant they ate at last night did. It’s a pretty toney area, everyone eats out.”

“Psychological,” I replied, then added, “the power of suggestion.”

“Yeah, heard that they’re having a regular shit and barf fest out there.”

“Thanks for the update, Sallie, but more than I really wanted to know, especially at lunch,” I said as I wiped my mouth with my napkin, placed it on my plate and pushed it over the bar to be bussed.

“How come you can always find me?” I asked, as if I didn’t know.

“Oh, you caught on,” he replied. “Just like tracking a stray dog; no offense.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “You imbedded a chip in the gun.”

“Bingo, and you got it on you right now.”

“Thought so.”

“Well, seeing as it is city property, we have to account for it.”

“That’s only prudent, always thinking of the taxpayers,” I replied. “So why did you take the trouble of tracking me down today? You didn’t seem to be concerned when I was wandering around out in New Jersey.”

“Figured you could take care of yourself out in the burbs, but today different story. Just a suggestion, don’t check your rental car out of the garage here if you have the inclination in the next hour or so.”

“Why?”

“Because word is out that it’s rigged with a bomb. Supposed to go off when you got up to fifty miles an hour.”

“How do you know this?”

“You know, like that guy Shakespeare said, there’s no honor among them thieves. Pass around a little regular cash and these guys puke their guts out information-wise that is, especially if we kind of hint that the mad cowboy who’s in town may be gunning for them next. He’s probably just an urban myth, though, you know. Stamping foreheads in red and all, who would believe that? But these guys, well, you know, they let their imaginations run wild.”

I basically ignored Sallie’s observation and asked, “So, I didn’t have any plans to take a Saturday drive but what if I want to use it later?”

“Got some bomb guys on their way down. If it is rigged like we were told they’ll discretely take care of it like it never happened.”

“How will I know?”

“Green sticker on the windshield on the lower left side, but I’m sure that your ass will pucker anyway when you hit fifty.”

“Braddock, you are a marvel of illustrative description.”

“It’s Sallie like I told you, but the whatever you called it, the description, a talent that I was born with,” he replied, “my wife says that I can make someone believe a fart smells like a rose once I start talking.”

As it turned out I didn’t have plans to use the car that day or the van; I planned to soak up a little culture and walked to the Museum of Modern Art or as it is known MOMA. Even a cretin like me can use a little cultural buffing up around the edges now and again.

Chapter 17/

Marcus Garvey Park is located in Harlem on Madison Avenue between 120th and 124th Streets. It has been a city park since the early nineteenth century but was renamed in the twentieth century for Marcus Garvey, a publisher, journalist and activist responsible for being a proponent of Black Nationalism and the Pan-Africanism movement in the nineteen twenties.

The park occupies 20.17 acres and is the location of the highest natural point on Manhattan that has a cast iron fire tower at its top that was built in the nineteenth century and still occupies the space today. It has many public facilities including an amphitheater, a baseball field and a swimming pool, but within recent years in the spring and into the fall it has become known for its drum line.

The drum line seems to start spontaneously about mid-day on the weekends. There is no formal organization to the event that emerges on the east side of the park, the Madison Avenue side. First one or two drummers will bring their drums, some professionally crafted, some homemade towed on carts and even in little red wagons, some carried, and they begin to play, and then they are joined by others who bring drums, then brothers and sisters who dance and gyrate to the rhythms. This goes on all afternoon until it finally breaks up at dusk.

It was a beautiful May afternoon, sunny and warm but not yet uncomfortably humid as it probably could be in a month and certainly two. There was a slight breeze and as I crossed Madison from my parking spot on a side street, I could hear the drummers. Even if I wasn’t trying to locate a killer it is truly one of the most entertaining events that one can watch in New York City.

I walked up and down the line looking for him, August Stires' description out in Jersey ringing in my head, "Tall, ebony, plays a conga, has a rose inked on his neck and goes by the name Douvan. Gold earring, left side, piercing vacant eyes, a weird looking fellow."

No one fit the description among the thirty or so, probably more drummers. The drumming goes on virtually nonstop so there is little opportunity to interrupt a player to ask a question and besides that when they're playing, they are totally wrapped up in the beat and the rhythm.

There were drummers coming to join and leaving over the course of time, so I took the opportunity to ask a few if they had heard of a drummer named Douvan.

Mostly I got negative shakes of the head or a "No, man, don't know the dude." Finally, one drummer who was leaving towing two steel drums on a makeshift cart said with a Caribbean lilt, "Yeah, I know who you are talking about, mahn. Tall black dude, weird eyes, talks smooth but not Islands, plays a big conga he carries on a strap over his shoulder. Pats the skin nice though, long fingers, feels his shit and fits in the line. Good vibes in the music but a strange mother fucker, maintains space, almost never says anything, definitely a dark dude, makes you think of who might catch you in a bad dream."

I nodded as he spoke then asked, "Think he'll be here today?"

"No way to know, mahn. We all come and go, there's no registration. This ain't no union gig. That's the beauty of it."

"You play professionally?" I asked.

"Yeah, at clubs around farther down town, but I pay here for soul. Got a Gretsch kit to make a living but like my steels for the feeling, an' they add a nice ring to the line; besides, the ladies like them."

"One of the best reasons to do anything."

"That's what life's all about man, music and honey," he concluded and offered me an open palm, some skin. "Got to leave early, mahn, got some honey waiting and some b'ball to watch, the playoffs coming up."

I nodded, patted his palm, then watched him as he moved on pulling his cart toward the east entrance to the park, then across Madison. He pulled out his phone and dialed as he crossed the street.

I decided to hang around; besides the music was good and it was a beautiful afternoon.

#####

“There’s that motherfucker,” he said in a smooth almost hypnotic bass baritone voice as he watched with binoculars from the third-floor apartment on the other side of Madison Avenue. “He’s got big balls coming after me just because I trimmed some cracked up street whore who I made into premium pussy, a bitch who got uppity, who caused me nothing but trouble, caused fucking dissention among my other women and then went on the run. What business is it of his anyway?”

As he spoke Douvan was stroking the small gris gris bag that hung around his neck that’s supposed to ward off bad fortune for the wearer.

“I don’t think that makes any difference. He wants to kill you pure and simple and he’s declared that. He’s already managed to make quite a mess of our affiliates and he struts around like he doesn’t give a damn. Somehow, he managed to avoid the bomb thing. My advice is to just wait him out, lay low, get out of town and I think that you have to, but don’t under any circumstances take him on.”

“Now he’s in my territory, my neighborhood, my park. I can’t even go down there and enjoy a Sunday afternoon,” he protested in his dreamy voice almost as if he had heard nothing, was just commentating.

The counselor said nothing, he had already offered his opinion.

“You think he’s crazy? I mean the fucker goes around stamping the dudes he aces on the forehead in red ink. That’s crazy.”

His advisor shook his head slowly from side to side as he looked down through the window toward the park, but at nothing in particular. “I don’t know what he is, but he is good. Probably a professional and has almost a sixth sense; he’s way ahead of everyone and manages to make them all play into his hand and, I’m afraid, maybe even you.”

“Someone hired him,” Douvan concluded as if he hadn’t listened to the assessment, “someone who wants to take a run at me.”

“Like I said, at this point it doesn’t make any difference. Look,” he counseled, raising his eyes to meet those of his client, those vacant eyes that seemed to be burned right through his skull, “focus on the fact that if he finds you, you’ll be in big trouble and none of my legal advice can help you. He won’t hesitate.”

Douvan continued to stroke the little bag hanging around his neck

“Well, none of your legal advice has anything to do with the fact that I need to take him out before he gets to me, neutralize his magic, his sixth sense or whatever the fuck he has. Get out of town, shit no, that motherfucker is messing with my business, and he sits down there at the god damned fucking Waldorf like a fucking prince. He hires one of my

premium pieces, refuses to pay, then seriously fucks up her manager and now she's going private on me taking it up the ass down in Miami with some Cuban perverted drug dealer like she doesn't give a shit. This has to stop. I'm getting no respect from one of my prime bitches and word's spreading. I'm going to lay a curse on that motherfucker down there like he's never had before he has a chance to lay hands on me or screws up my business even worse and I'll do it in his own crib."

"Look, you might scare the crap out of a bunch," he paused, "not a bunch," he corrected himself, "but out of all of your women, but this guy is different. He doesn't feel anything from what I can tell and he's not afraid of you or whatever you can conjure up. Use your head, he's counting on you to take him on or to surface for whatever reason; that's why he's pestering, getting under your skin, down in your park, then he'll have you."

"I don't care. I'm going to mark that crazy meddling white mother, put on the curse."

"Whatever you say," was all his counselor offered as he sighed and once again realized that common sense advice was going nowhere. Within his head he thought, *He's not crazy, you are*, and considered the fact that he might, just possibly, be looking for another client in the near future who could pay his rather considerable retainer but not to direct his ill-gotten income through channels to make it legitimate but only to protect his legitimate legal interests. One who would listen to reason and wasn't hung up on some dark bullshit to fend off someone who had a single purpose, to take him out. A new client, somebody who didn't think that drinking fresh chicken blood or some such would ward off evil and that a rose tattoo on his neck had some spiritual significance, let alone that little bag full of god knows what that hung on a leather thong around his neck. Yes, the time was indeed coming, something that he had waited for literally for years.

As he looked down through the window toward the park and the man who obsessed Douvan, he noticed something that one usually would simply look past and not pay attention to—the pigeon shit on the sill. He considered how the next clean, hard, beating rain would clean it off as if it were never there in the first place.

Chapter 18/

The trip to Marcus Garvey produced no immediate result; it had confirmed that Douvan did occasion there but as with each other encounter even his

business associates had conveyed he remained somewhat of a mystery, emerging so to speak from the underworld, then retreating back into it.

I had no idea if my visit to Harlem was noted by him, but I did my best to be as visible as possible spending almost four hours in the park and the surrounding neighborhood, asking anyone who would stop and listen to my query if they knew of Douvan.

Save the one steel drummer, no one had answered in the affirmative, but body language is an interesting thing and so is intuitive observation. I had to be careful not to read too much into it, not to create a conclusion that simply fit into my predetermined perception, but I had the feeling that the mere mention of Douvan's name or his description unnerved not a few of the many people that I queried. But then again, it might just have been a reaction to a pesky white guy who was asking too many questions. Harlem is not the same milieu as portrayed in *American Gangster*, but then again I was clearly not part of that community and an alien probably not to be trusted or at the least to be ignored.

Still, I felt that Douvan had a presence there beyond the observations offered by a single drummer. And the drummer's words resounded in my consciousness, "makes you think of who might catch you in a bad dream."

And of course, he apparently had caught Jewel in the ladies' room at Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix under the guise of Mr. Blue.

#####

Jasmin called me on Monday morning. "Mr. Pak, I'm waiting for my plane. I will be back in New York in a few hours. Can I still meet with you?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Where?"

"Can you come to my room at the Waldorf? Same time as we discussed, two o'clock, and call first as we agreed."

"I can," she replied.

"See you at two then."

#####

It was precisely two when I heard a knock at my door after receiving a call from the lobby. I got up from the chair at the desk and went to the door, opened it to the extent of the chain security lock, looked out and saw Jasmin facing me through the three-inch breach.

“Jasmin,” I said.

She didn’t say anything. I couldn’t help but note that she appeared extremely nervous even from my limited perspective.

I unchained the door and opened it.

That was the moment when I saw Jasmin pushed aside and literally microseconds later, I saw a flash of red and felt the blade slash across my throat. It was sharp, well-honed and I felt no immediate pain but instinctively my head snapped back as I stepped back, and my left hand flashed to my throat.

I was cut all right, but not deeply. There was no gush of blood and my windpipe had not been compromised. It was a near miss, and I returned my head back to its original position, my hand clasp my throat.

They were both gone.

It all had happened in an instant, but I couldn’t help but come to grips with what I saw the moment before I felt the blade. A tall, thin, ebony black man with the most piercing eyes that I had ever seen just before I saw the flash of the straight razor.

Now I could feel the blood. I walked to the bathroom and grabbed a towel. I put it to my throat and turned on the hot water faucet and wetted a wash cloth.

I wiped my throat with the hot cloth and looked in the mirror.

I had been cut all right, but the wound had not even penetrated the multiple layers of skin.

I returned the towel to my neck, walked through my room and closed the door. Then I called down stairs and requested a first aid kit saying that I had cut myself shaving and needed some bandages.

Then I remembered mistakes, mistakes that I had begun to make in my profession, especially over the last several years. This had been yet another one. I had completely let my guard down in an extremely dangerous environment that I had gone out of my way to create. I could have been killed. What was perplexing was that I had not been, and I was sure not by accident. The swipe of the razor was not a near miss: it was a precise and intentional surgical move, almost impossible given the vulnerability of the skin on one’s neck and the physical reaction of being assaulted.

It was a message or something else. I knew not which.

Presently the first aid kit was delivered by a somewhat concerned hotel representative when I tentatively opened the door and greeted him with a blood spotted towel still applied to my neck.

I assured him that it appeared more serious than it was.

“I’m basically a bleeder,” I assured him. “Thin blood. Happens all the time. I’ll leave the kit out for the maid to pick up tomorrow.”

I fished in my wallet for a ten with my free right hand, gave it to him and thanked him while I escorted him to the door.

I bandaged the cut. The bleeding had stopped, and it would heal quickly. The cut was clean and superficial, but there was greater damage done, psychological damage.

I sat down on the bed and began to shake. I felt hot and my forehead broke into a sweat. This had been too close. I had been just plain stupid. And I knew that someday if this continued, I would reap the consequences. I sat on the bed for at least ten minutes with my palms flat on its surface next to me on either side pressing down trying to quell the trembling. Eventually it subsided.

Some experts have theorized that those individuals involved in an occupation such as mine harbor a death wish. I found that completely irrelevant to myself. I love life and wanted to live to the full extent of my physical capacity and longevity, but I had to come to grips with the fact that given that, why did I continue doing what I do, in the profession that I am in and now making choices that expose me in an increasing amount to danger, and why was I becoming more reckless the longer I did this?

I couldn’t help but relive the moments before the slash, the look of my assailant. Now I completely understood why the man instilled such fear: he was indeed the vestige of something very dark, possibly even hell itself if you believe there is indeed such a place, and I was beginning to reassess my reservations about its existence along with everything else relative to my life.

I closed the first aid kit after taking out a few extra bandages for future application and returned the towel to the bathroom. I sat down at the desk and made a telephone call. It was to Dr. Watt in Phoenix.

Chapter 19/

Watt was in his clinical mode, hardly the man who had emotionally implored me to go to New York and track down and eliminate the man who had murdered Jewel along with any of his knowing associates. Playing amateur shrink, I felt that retreating into that analytical world was far safer for him than exhibiting emotion; I’m no psychologist, but figured I was right anyway.

Other than his concern regarding what this was costing me “The Waldorf Astoria . . . “ and my assurance that I could afford it (after all I had bought my little cottage for cash back when the area was dirt cheap, owed nothing and had a substantial reserve), he seemed somewhat placated but said that I could seek his professional counsel gratis for the rest of my life.

“That’s fine, doc, as long as we do therapy at The North Mountain Brewery,” was my condition to which he agreed. Then I told him that I needed his insight into a more pressing matter and filled him in about the events since I had come to New York the man who could have slit my throat less than an hour before.

After several questions and some pauses as he considered his response, Dr. Watt finally said, “Bakoda, in my opinion you are dealing with a very superstitious individual. What he did to you was similar to what the Plains Indians called counting coux. He faced his enemy, humiliated him and then went away unscathed. He believes, I think, and mind you it is only a cursory opinion, that by that action he has taken your power away, the power that you have or that he believes you have over him and seek to take permanently.”

“And if I don’t back off?”

“I believe that you should. Take advantage of his newly established probable feeling of self-confidence. You see, part of the reason he has been so allusive is that he feared your power. I believe that he probably fears men in general, exerting his power over women, even to the extreme that he did with Jewel.”

He paused, then continued.

“And the rose tattoo—that might have significance as well. It might be a kind of amulet that he has with him at all times, like a Catholic might wear a Saint Christopher medal. Beyond it being traditionally a symbol of love and beauty, archaically it can symbolize magic, strength and death and is also associated with numerology. The Egyptian goddess Isis and other Egyptian goddesses, we are told, believed it saved one from bewitchment and in Roman lore the phrase ‘sub rosa’ literally meant ‘under the rose’ or where all the secrets are contained. The Romans even affixed roses above the doors of secret compartments. Whatever the meaning is of the rose to this Mr. Blue, it is not worn as a decorative illustration; it has mystical meaning, probably protective. What color was it?”

“I don’t know, it happened so quickly, and his skin is so black.”

“Again, I am only generalizing but a black rose is sometimes a symbol of death and mourning, or to ward off death. If the tattoo representation has

thorns that could be significant as well. The thorns protect the sanctity of the flower and its purpose. I would guess that beyond the tattoo he probably wears some form of amulet or perhaps a bag of charms so to speak that serve a similar purpose as the tattoo.”

“And if I don’t back off?” I asked again.

“He will fear your power even more and might not confront you directly but will probably concentrate his frustration, fear and ultimately rage on women, especially women who he believes are betraying him.”

“Do you think that’s what happened to Jewel?”

“It would be hard to deny that. I believe his insecurity in dealing with the strengths of men only fuels his exploitation of women. Any form of betrayal of him by a woman, such as Jewel running away in the extreme, emasculates him and he has to lash out to maintain his sense of masculinity and control over the women who seemingly have lost their fear of him. I believe this individual is extremely conflicted about his sexuality and somewhere in his background, perhaps ethnically or religiously, fears and feels guilt over his true sexual nature and continually feels the need to compensate for those feelings and mask his true compulsion toward self-identity.”

“So, my choice is to back off and hope that his feeling about security will make him come out and be more vulnerable, or I can press him and he might become even more violent and abusive to the women he controls.”

“That would be my take, but I personally couldn’t feel comfortable if I were you to subject someone who is already exploited to more exploitation by virtue of my aggressive acts, even up to and including he or she being killed.”

“I suppose it’s like all choices, one has to weigh the risk against the probable positive outcome.”

“Upon further consideration,” Watt replied, paused, and in my mind’s eye I could see him massaging his chin, “I asked you to take care of this for me and personally as I feel responsible for Jewel’s death I would feel responsible for anything that would happen to you or anyone else in the process but I want her murderer, this Mr. Blue, to pay the ultimate price. That’s not a clinical analysis Bakoda but coming from my gut, so do what you have to do.”

“I know, doc, and I feel the same way.”

“And one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t take unwarranted chances; you know that you do, and he has already demonstrated that he can touch you quite literally if he wants to. Again, my opinion is only that. If pressed, he might concentrate his rage directly on you.”

“Actually, I would prefer that; rage is a negative in this game. It leads to irrational actions, mistakes and vulnerability,” I concluded.

“And we’ve discussed mistakes on your part, my friend,” Watt replied. “Please take care.”

“I’ll try, doc,” was all I could reply in all honesty.

“Of course, there is another scenario,”

“What’s that?”

There was a pause before he answered, “Well, if indeed he is disfunctionally superstitious under continued stress, given more provocation he could turn that rage inward, toward himself, but . . .”

“But what?”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t bet my life on it.”

I didn’t respond.

After a brief silence Dr. Watt hung up.

Chapter 20/

“Kinda warm for a turtleneck shirt, Pak, isn’t it?”

I ignored him. “Sallie, why haven’t you taken this guy off the streets? I know you have a good idea who he is, what he does, what he has probably done.”

“Stupid question, Pak. You’re bright enough to know the answer. This guy is well insulated. He has the best protection legally and financially that money can buy, and he has an organization that even though he exerts direct control over he maintains a barrier between himself and direct accountability. And most importantly, his women are terrified of him. He keeps them in a velvet-lined prison so to speak. They make a lot of money for what they do, and he gives them a lot of latitude like taking private jobs on the side from regular clients, but they know what the consequences will be if they betray him. Jewel was a case of demonstrating what could happen if you strayed from the boundaries, and I’m sure there was a substantial amount of anger there as well, but his main point was to make a point, to maintain control. I also believe he’s convinced them that he does have some mystical powers and that no matter how far they might run he’ll find them, again case in point, Jewel.”

I listened to the streetwise and street-talking to the point of vulgarity Braddock articulate succinctly his evaluation of Douvan. All the crap he liked to lay on me and anyone else who would listen was just a ruse along with his rumpled and stained wardrobe. The guy had a civilized and articulate side, even though he generally took great pains to cover it up. But, of course, his transformation wasn't to last.

"You're right," I replied, "it was a stupid question."

"Yeah," he agreed, "even a dumb fuck like you wouldn't have a problem figuring that out and besides the only reason that we're putting up with your shenanigans is that we know that unless he manages to kill you, you'll kill him, and the problem will be solved."

I just nodded. I was meeting with Braddock, Tuesday morning, the day after I got slashed.

"And a couple of other things for your information, Shamus—and I do use the nickname loosely because you ain't no private dick, you're just a fucking killer but I like the word 'shamus' and you're an interesting guy no matter what Grant says, but I wouldn't want to take up a long term friendship with you 'cause based on what I know happened to you in the last week since I met you, buddy, you ain't long for this world. Frankly, I'm surprised you lasted this long, if you know what I mean."

"And the couple of things were?" I pressed to get back on target.

"Oh yeah, this Douvan evidently figures that his voodoo shit worked on you because he's coming out. He reserved a private table for nine on the elevated area above the dance floor at The Gotham Cosmopolitan Club for ten o'clock tonight for him and his stable. He evidently has to show his bitches that he has no fucking fear so he's having a little party."

"Really," I said.

"And, Jasmin contacted me, off the record of course. She said she was forced into setting you up yesterday. She wants to talk with you. I think she might want to run."

"Thought so, that she was forced, that is," I replied. I thought for a few moments before saying, "You have some people who will work with you in the club, right?"

"Yeah, like I said, Shamus, spreading a little money around goes a long ways."

"Any chance you can get me one of their server's outfits, you know the white tux shirt, the bow tie and the cummerbund? I have a pair of black slacks."

"When?"

“By this evening.”

“You ain’t asking for much, are you?”

“Can you?”

“I’ll give it a shot. Anything else?”

“Yeah, what is the finest cutlery shop in Midtown?”

Braddock didn’t skip a beat, “That’s an easy one, my brother-in-law, my wife’s sister’s husband who’s a snooty chef who talks like a man with a stick up his ass, says that he does all of his quote ‘professional shopping’ at JB Prince on Thirty-first Street. He might be able to make all those fancy-free fucking range dishes for the faggots down in the village, but he can’t cook a burger on the grill for shit. Me, I’ll take him on any day with a pound of ground beef, twenty percent fat from Acme, chopped green onions with my classic Ninja knife I ordered twenty years ago off TV, seasoning salt and my Grill Master in my back yard on any sunny afternoon. That son of a bitch wouldn’t have a chance.”

“Good to know, Braddock,” I replied and sighed. He was clearly right back in character.

“Sallie, asshole, call me Sallie!” He shook his head slowly from side to side in disgust, then got up and left.

#####

JB Prince was indeed an emporium of literally everything a professional chef or a serious novice would want. Their cutlery department carried every major brand available in every style and configuration available. Henckels was my choice, in their Zwilling Pro line. At \$99.99 for a single seven-inch filleting knife with its long, strong, sharp as a razor and narrow blade, the average person might consider it a bit of an extravagance, but then when you want to make a statement for a special occasion, well sometimes the price is of minimal importance. The knife came with a thick cardboard sleeve over the blade so that purchasers would not cut themselves.

A stop by a midtown office supply chain store completed my shopping for the afternoon.

I returned to The Waldorf and at seven o’clock received a call that a package from a Mr. Sallie had been left at the concierge’s desk. I asked them to send it up.

With the bandages across my throat under the turtle neck shirt as a reminder, I took caution verifying and finally opening the door for the bellman who delivered the package.

I gave him ten bucks for his trouble and he said as usual “My pleasure.” I was sure he was more pleased with the ten than with just delivering the package.

On top of the clothing that I had requested was a note that said, “Employee entrance, street side, you are temp help. Ask for Mickey.”

I went downstairs to The Bull and Bear for dinner, then returned to my room. It was about nine. I would dress and leave in an hour.

#####

“You’re the guy who shot the fucking place up last week. He didn’t tell me that was part of the deal.”

“Here,” I handed Mickey two Franklins, “maybe these will settle your nerves and erase your memory for about half an hour.”

He didn’t say anything, just took the bills and stuffed them in his pocket, then said, “Please don’t kill anybody. They shut the club down for two days while the cops poured over the place.”

“I’m not carrying a gun,” I replied as I raised my arms with only my server’s shirt, tie, and cummerbund above my waist to show no visible bulges that could conceal a gun in my torso.

Mickey looked me up and down, then nodded though obviously still uneasy and replied, his voice quavering a bit, “Good, killing people here is bad for business and we all live on tips.”

“Nobody’s going to die tonight, but I need just one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“One of those check folios that you give customers when they settle their bill.”

Chapter 21/

I opened the door from the kitchen and stepped aside into the club so that I wouldn’t interrupt the comings and goings of staff. I looked over toward the dance floor and then up to an area about five foot above it, a gallery of sorts with several dining tables and hightops with a view of the band and the dancers below.

With a good view of the entire floor and band I saw the long table with Douvan and eight of his women, all beautiful, all trophy quality, all well turned out, all obviously expensive, all telegraphing a certain uneasiness as if they were fulfilling a mandatory obligation attending rather than enjoying

an occasion with a generous host. His stable was a virtual United Nations of beauty.

He sat at the head, obviously holding court. Bottles of champagne were in ice buckets on pedestals among the ladies up and down the table and one bucket sat next to his seat at the head on his right side. He had a broad confident smile and sat tall in his chair. Other than the moment that he slashed me, I had never seen him before or had the opportunity to take him all in.

He must stand at least six foot five inches I estimated and was extremely lean with long arms resting on his elbows that extended across the table in front of him, his hands with long fingers resting flat, both of his palms down on the white tablecloth.

The music was loud, and he swayed with the beat, all the time with that glistening white smile. The smile caught your attention because of the contrast to his ebony skin but even across the room it was his eyes that were riveting. There is no way to describe them, it was as if they were vacant, penetrating, almost zombie like.

I figured that it was now or never. I adjusted my tie, raised my collar a bit to obscure the bandages that were still on my neck from the slashing, adjusted my cummerbund, and with the check folio in hand crossed the room to the elevated area and marched toward the long table with Douvan at the far head.

Jasmin was seated among the ladies and I could tell by her eyes that she noticed me as I approached, but other than a flinch of recognition she did nothing to betray my presence.

I walked past the ladies toward Douvan who sat still with both hands forward spread on the table cloth, his head turned toward the music.

When I finally reached him, he didn't look up, focused on the music and the beat as he swayed.

I stood on his left side, remembering that he was right handed from the way that he had wielded the blade, and lay the check folio down next to his left hand on the table.

He paid no attention, so I leaned over next to his ear and said, "Your bill, sir."

He glanced down at the folio and said in a melodic baritone, "Hey, man, we're not done."

I replied, "Oh yes, you almost are."

He still didn't look up but flipped open the folio and glanced down at the contents.

Inside was a guest check that I had purchased in a pad from the office supply that afternoon. Written on it was in bold black felt tip was “Balance Due, Mr. Blue, Your Life.” Stamped below it was “Over Due” in red.

“What?” was all he said as he looked up at me just as I pulled the Henckels fileting knife with its long thin razor-sharp blade from its cardboard sheath under my cummerbund.

He recognized me, those weird eyes wide, just as I raised my right arm, then slammed the knife down and through his left hand as it rested on the tablecloth next to the open folio, pinning his hand to the table.

“Oh my god!” one of his women shouted and then screamed.

Douvan howled over the sound of the band, as all heads suddenly turned and were focused on the man at the head of the table on the elevated platform who reflexively shot up out of his chair and lunged at me. I stepped back as his progress was stopped abruptly by his hand that was pinned to the table, the knife tearing his flesh and stopped only by bone. He looked down, turned, leaned over and gritted his bright white teeth as he pulled on the knife with his right hand trying to extract it. I had buried it deep into the table and it wasn’t coming free easily as he continued to tug and pull, the white table cloth turning crimson with his blood beneath his outstretched palm.

I pulled my phone out from my pants pocket and while he tugged and tried to pull the knife loose with his right hand said, “Smile,” and took his picture.

I watched for just one more moment with some satisfaction and when he looked up at me as he struggled with the knife, those eyes burning through me I simply smiled, turned and noticed that everyone at the table and around it was aghast except for one of his women, Jasmin, who had a smile on her face and quickly raised her hands to mask it.

As the entire club watched Douvan struggle trying to free the knife, I walked back directly across the room to the kitchen, through and out of the door pushing a few servers aside who had clustered at the door to see what was going on, to the back door and to the side street. A few minutes later I was in my van and on my way back to The Waldorf.

I hadn’t driven my rental since Braddock’s guys had removed the bomb, so I never found out if a certain part of my anatomy really would pucker when the car hit fifty miles per hour.

I could have killed Douvan then and there but remembered my promise to Dr. Watt and had known from our last conversation what the only fitting way was to finally take out Mr. Blue, and things were falling into place. It

couldn't have been planned better even if a certain amount of it was due to good fortune.

#####

My phone rang in my room the next day; it was Jasmin.

"I need to see you," she said.

"All right," I replied, "but don't be offended because I'll have a gun on you from the time, I open the door to my room until the moment it closes behind you when you leave."

"I can't blame you, but I had no choice."

"Braddock told me, but I can't take any chances. He thinks you want to run."

"Yes," Jasmin replied, "but I've got baggage."

"Ship it, we'll be traveling light."

"I can't."

"How come?"

"'Cause it's my kid."

#####

Jasmin agreed to come by that evening at eleven under the guise of seeing a private client. Teddy Saxon was finally out of the hospital but not actively pimping for her at the club or anywhere else beyond the confines of his apartment. "I'm not coming out until that bloody bastard is put down," he had told her referring to me.

"He's holed up in his apartment, scared to death of you; almost as much as he is scared of Mr. Blue or rather Douvan."

"I told him I would kill him the next time I saw him."

"He believes you," she replied.

"He should—I will."

"Anyway, I give him a cut of my private client business and I'm giving him a thousand out of my stash, so he doesn't get overly curious about me not being available tonight since I am meeting with you."

"Be here at eleven. Call from the lobby before you come up. And one more thing."

"What's that?"

“Complete honesty. If you don’t answer one of my questions truthfully or try to evade being straight with me, I’ll drop you like a hot potato or worse.”

“I know that. I’ll be straight; you are my only hope.”

As she hung up, I could hear her voice saying the words at the end of that sentence that she had failed to say, “to get my kid back.”

Chapter 22/

“You have a child?”

“A boy, eight years old. Jamal.”

“Jamal?”

“Yes, I named him after Ahmad Jamal, the jazz pianist.”

“Father?”

“Long gone.”

“And he isn’t, Jamal that is, with you.”

“No, Douvan took control over him four years ago.”

“You let that happen?”

“I had no choice. You don’t know Douvan. One day Jamal was mine, the next he was gone.”

“You seem awfully calm for a mother who lost her child.”

“He’s well taken care of. You see, I talk to him at least once a week, and see him every few weeks at Bryant Park.”

“I don’t get it,” I replied.

“That’s because you don’t really understand Douvan. He can be brutal and sadistic, but he can also give the impression of being kind, benevolent, caring and expansive as long as you play by his rules, that is, remain within his control. He lets us, his escorts, deal directly with our own clientele, regulars, once they have been established, knowing that for that latitude he will get his cut of the action through our managers, like in my case, Teddy. He took my son to maintain control over me so that I wouldn’t leave. Jamal isn’t living in squalor, actually he’s enrolled in a private school, but . . .”

“But what?” I asked after she paused.

“I know Douvan he would kill Jamal in a heartbeat if I crossed him; I have no doubt.”

“So, you want to run, managed to accumulate enough to start a new life and yet are reluctant for the sake of your child.”

“Exactly.”

“Who has your son?”

“Douvan’s attorney, C. Jason Wright, and his wife.”

“It seems that if you have telephone conversations and visiting privileges with your son, and you aren’t concerned about his immediate welfare or that this attorney, well . . .”

I was a perplexed. “Jasmin, what do you want me to do? It seems that no matter how much money you have or how much you want to get out of the life and move on to whatever, Douvan has the ultimate control over you because of your son.”

“I would like you to kidnap him, get Jamal to safety,”

“That’s not what I came here to do, Jasmin,” I explained, although it had to be obvious to her.

“I know, but in return, I’ll help you set up Mr. Blue for the kill.”

“I could have killed him a couple of nights ago.”

“And you didn’t, and I know why. Look, when it comes down to it, I’m just a high-end whore, but a good one, and part of that is understanding men and their motivations. With you, simply killing Douvan is not the objective, not based on why you came here, and what you told Teddy when you beat him up, stomped him within an inch of his life. You want retribution and you want Douvan to experience the same terror and sense of finality that Jewel did when he caught up with her. You want his last moments of life to reflect the last moments of hers and the price that he has to pay and the fact the bill has come due and there’s no way of escaping payment in full.”

This woman was impressive, articulate, and right. “And how can you help me with that?”

“You get my kid out of the equation and to safety, and I’ll be your Judas Goat. But if Douvan believes that I will run before you do that, I’ll lose my son, he’ll kill him. It’s as simple as that, no matter how charming and how much latitude he gives those who he controls, the man has no soul; he is a true sociopath, and my kid is simply a device to control me. Once Douvan believes he’s lost that control, he’ll have no further use for Jamal, except that by murdering him it will cause me pain. So, you need to kidnap Jamal first.”

I thought about it for a bit, nodding as the whole thing came together. Finally, I said, “I won’t approach it that way, ‘the nap’ that is; I’ll take another route. Most attorneys are pragmatists, they understand logic, and I intend to present him with a logical reason to work with us.”

“To paraphrase an old novel and movie, you plan to make him an offer that he can’t refuse.”

“Precisely,” I replied.

I laid the pistol down on the table next to the chair where I was sitting. It was no longer trained on Jasmin. There was no further need for it.

#####

Over the next hour I got to know Jasmin better than I could have imagined as she answered every question I asked about her past which was rather privileged and had involved a certain degree of higher education, her profession, her son, her association with Douvan and why she wanted out. She was smart and sophisticated and wanted to move beyond the silk-lined prison of her profession.

I also got the impression that her calm demeanor was facilitated by supplements, maybe simply prescription tranquilizers but something.

Jasmin continued taking about her son Jamal, "I know I won't be able to keep it from him forever, but when he grows up and someday understands that his mother was a whore, I would hope that he would respect me for moving beyond that to make a better life for him, and for me, for the both of us."

"What will you do?"

"I have enough money for us to live comfortably for several years while I complete an education that will move me toward a legitimate career."

"No shortcut?"

"By that I assume that you mean marrying one of my high-end clients?"

"Well?"

"No, I see it as just a more respectable extension of the profession I'm in now, but it still boils down to the same thing. No, I want to leave this as far behind as possible. A lesson learned."

"Drugs?"

"Once back when, but no more."

"So, you're willing to give it all up, the high-end life?"

"My aspiration after getting settled and an education is a reasonable job, a decent condo which I can buy for cash now out west, a good school for Jamal, and maybe meeting a down and decent Mr. Right. And if that doesn't come along, Mr. Right that is, so be it. That would just be icing on the cake.

After we finished talking, we started to plan. It began with Jasmin setting up a meeting at Bryant Park. I was still skeptical about her claim regarding current drug use, but time would tell.

Chapter 23/

The next morning I made several phone calls.

One was to Darla Cummings, the woman in my life and the Yin to my Yang. We are so different and yet so much alike and compatible, and besides that she is the founder very successful corporate intelligence detective agency that specializes in detecting theft of trade secrets, embezzlement and such.

The next call was to Dr. Watt, then one to Mark Grant.

Finally, I called Braddock.

“The boys and me, we’ve been worried.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, ‘cause it’s been a couple of days and you haven’t murdered or maimed anyone lately. Are you fallin’ off your stride, feelin’ peakid or something?”

“You know what they say about past performance.”

“Yeah, every once in a while, when there ain’t no sports I watch that CNBC cable channel to check up on my 401K investments which aren’t doing for shit, so I know the end of the thing you said, that is, you know that past performance doesn’t mean jack shit to predict what might happen in the future.”

“Sallie, not true in my case; you can count on the fact that past performance will guarantee future results.”

He grunted in response and said, “That’s fucking assuring, Shamus; I’ll spread the word.”

Then I asked him to get me all the information that he could on C. Jason Wright, Douvan’s attorney.

#####

Bryant Park is located in midtown Manhattan directly behind the Main Branch of the New York Public Library and is technically part of it as the park occupies space over the subterranean structure that stores the library’s stacks. It occupies, with the library, a little less than ten acres of well-manicured trees, shrubs and gardens as well as the accoutrements to afford relaxation and recreation to the citizens who frequent it.

That wasn’t always the case however. Back in the sixties and seventies of the last century Bryant Park became known as “Needle Park,” a haven for drug dealers, junkies and prostitutes, but thanks to civic and private efforts

the park was ultimately restored to its former beauty and beneficial public function.

It was a beautiful spring morning just a few days after I had talked with Jasmin as I approached the well dressed, tall, distinguished gentleman of perhaps fifty sitting on a park bench watching Jasmin and her son as they played some distance off. I took a seat next to him on the bench.

"I wondered how long it would take before you sat down next to me," the counselor said, still looking forward, not turning toward me.

"Was it the money? How did you ever get hung up with a scum bag like Douvan? I know your background. Corporate attorney, once with a great firm, Harvard Law, then you dropped out to represent a psycho. He must be paying you a fortune in exchange for your soul."

"Not exactly, well I take that back; he does pay me a generous retainer, but it isn't as simple as that."

"It never is; it's trite, but that's what they all say."

"You see that little boy over there with Jasmin. Well, right now I'm doing it to save him, that is, my wife and I are. Douvan told Jasmin when he took him that he was going to be sure that Jamal was taken care of by a good family, but he had planned to have the child live with one of his street walkers up in The Bronx, a cracked up hooker living in squalor who would probably forget to feed him or even inadvertently lock him out of her apartment when she was high."

"That's very noble, you taking him in," I replied somewhat sarcastically, "but that doesn't explain how you got into this in the first place. It had to be something less noble than protecting someone, after all, Jamal came along later, and you've worked for this guy for seven years."

He sighed, then continued, "When you stabbed Douvan the other night at the club you obviously noticed that he was seated with his most beautiful escorts."

"Yes, his stable."

"The premium and highest paid."

"They certainly looked the part."

"I'm sure you didn't notice as you were focusing on what you came there to do, but did you see an absolutely stunning white woman of about twenty-five among those seated at the table?"

"I can't say that I did," I replied, "but what does that have to do with my question?"

"Well, you asked me why I got into this in the first place, and it was kind of why I'm protecting that kid over there. You see, I was protecting

that beautiful young woman who was at that table who got hooked on drugs when she was sixteen or seventeen and was recruited by Douvan who fed her habit and still does and used it to coerce me into becoming his attorney and to remain so to this day. That beautiful young woman who he would kill in a heartbeat as he has others is my wife's and my daughter."

"I see," I replied. "You know I will kill him."

"Yes, sir," the counselor replied, "and I welcome that for my daughter's sake and the sake of that little boy with his mother over there and to finally release my wife and I from the hell of the last seven years."

I came to realize that I didn't have to present him with an offer that he couldn't refuse, literally to exchange Jamal for his life and that of his wife. No, what he had offered me was permission and his implicit cooperation as long as the lives of his daughter and Jamal were not in jeopardy.

What was fascinating about this all was that Douvan had been able to give everyone involved with him everything that many feel would make them satisfied—money, opulence, a generous amount of latitude, drugs for those who wanted them—and yet they all felt hopelessly trapped.

Douvan was indeed a genius in terms of the way he had set up his business, but his hubris was his Achilles heel, that and his compulsion for control, the very thing that had maintained the stability of his world as well as his superstitions which were paramount and would ultimately be his downfall. At least that was what I hoped, and Dr. Watt agreed with that assessment.

"Remember the primary role of psychological conflict, Bakoda: take his power away, offer him no way of restoring it and he will self-destruct."

Chapter 24/

"Sallie, it's payback time."

"For what?"

"Tidying up your mess, cleaning house."

"It ain't all cleaned up yet, Shamus."

"No, but I need you to help to finish the job."

"Cleaning house, at least when my old lady gets me to help, usually means you have to get your hands dirty, especially doing the jobs she asks me to take on, like unplugging the fuckin' toilet."

"Good analogy," I replied. "Well, I can't guarantee that your hands won't get dirty; in fact, if things work out the way that I want them to, they definitely will."

“Well, like my wife says, you have to bust a few eggs to scramble them and sometimes if you don’t crack them right your hands get sticky.”

“Well said, Sallie. Just one more question.”

“What’s that?”

“Does Douvan know who you are by sight?”

“Hell no, we didn’t even know for sure who he was until you got the slimy fucker out from under his rock. If he ever made me, I wouldn’t know but don’t know when he would’ve, that is, if you know what I mean?”

“Jewel or Jasmin never told you who he was or pointed him out.”

“Hell no, they were scared shitless of him. Everyone was. All I ever heard about was Mr. Blue, but never had any idea who they were really talking about. Other than what you told me I wouldn’t recognize him if he was in this room, and I never hung out at the club, just knew what went on there ‘cause we had plants cruising the place, so I doubt that he made me.”

“That’s what I thought,” I replied. “Here, take this.” I slid a copy of the over the table of the picture of Douvan I had taken after I had stabbed him.

Braddock picked it up, looked at it, turned it sideways a bit, squinted as he studied it, then commented, “Weird looking motherfucker.”

“Hang on to it,” I said, then gave him an envelope and filled him in.

#####

“You were friends with Jewel,” I said to Jasmin.

“Her best,” Jasmin replied, “the best.”

“Well,” I said, “I guess I don’t get it. She was brutally murdered just weeks ago, and you seem to demonstrate little or no emotion about it.”

She considered for a while, then replied, “I know, I guess that when you’re into this, deeply into this, especially with someone like Mr. Blue, you come to expect it to the point that you become numb to it. Do you know where the name Mr. Blue came from?”

“No.”

“From black and blue. Before he went upscale he used to beat his street whores to within an inch of their lives, some say just because he liked to. Many of them simply disappeared, and because they were street walkers nobody paid any attention. He still runs that trade farther uptown besides his midtown business.”

“Knowing that, why would any of you, especially you who seem to have a brain, ever get involved with this guy?”

“The same old thing: drugs and money and a naïve belief that I could walk away anytime, that somehow I was different.”

“Not so?”

“Not so, and Douvan is very seductive in his recruiting, or rather his initial recruiting through his managers like Teddy who first draw you in if you have the look and the poise and aren’t already all totally fucked up on drugs. No matter how much self-confidence you think you have, they can sense vulnerability and how to feed it. Just a little bit of candy when you want it, fun and big money, then you’re in. What’s to lose? You can walk away whenever you want if you meet Daddy Big Bucks.

“Only if you’re all worn out, not premium meat anymore and one of your regular customers becomes obsessed with you and wants you as a permanent, legitimate companion, maybe a wife or if you’re still marketable and a regular pays a fortune to buy you out of the stable. It’s happened.”

“And if you bail out before that?”

“Then you end up like Jewel. She ran and paid the price. Plenty of street whores did but nobody cared.”

“And you are willing to run?”

“If my kid is safe.”

“Will you trust me on that?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No, you have to take my word for it. Others can be hurt if any of this comes out, other than what I want you to talk about. You know He’ll follow you like he did Jewel. I believe that he has to, and you know that he will too.”

“Yes, and I know that you’re counting on that, so what do you want me to do?”

I handed her an envelope, saying, “There’s a voucher for an airline ticket inside, first class to Phoenix for three days from now. Someone will be sitting next to you; you’ll know him, and he will protect you until you get off the plane. Don’t acknowledge him other than casually like you might to any passenger you meet on a plane, maybe a bit of conversation, but don’t indicate that you know him. In the meantime, I want you to do exactly what Jewel did, and tell everyone that she told that you know of regarding the fact that you’ll be on the run and where you’re going to start a new life like Jewel tried to do and escape from Mr. Blue.”

“What if I’m asked about Jamal?”

“Tell them you feel that he’s well taken care of and safe and that you don’t believe anyone would hurt the kid, and tell everyone, especially Teddy, and most importantly which flight you’ll be leaving on and when.”

She nodded taking it all in.

“Then,” I continued, “I want you to come back here to this room and stay until you leave. And once you walk through that door,” I pointed to the door of my suite, “don’t contact anyone or tell them where you are; don’t open the door except for room service, and then be careful until you leave for your flight unless I give you instructions that say otherwise. Got it?”

“Where will you be?”

“Gone,” I replied.

“When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow after you move in.”

“What if he comes here to get me?”

“He won’t for two reasons: first, he’ll think I am still here and he hasn’t been able to control my magic so he fears another confrontation with me; second, he’ll feel compelled to follow you like he did Jewel and act out her murder again to validate himself and to reinforce the message that no one can run away without similar consequences.”

“I can do this but it’s getting pretty scary. You’re sure, right, that Jamal is safe and that this can be pulled off?”

I glanced down at my watch and said, “Jamal isn’t even in the city now. He is quite safe. In terms of Douvan and the plan, I’m as sure as I can be with the help of an expert who understands Douvan’s obsessions and compulsions. You’ll meet him in Phoenix; he’s the man who wanted to help Jewel and he’s willing to help you get situated and adjust to a new life.”

“All right,” she replied, nodding her head, remaining calm but understandably with concerns.

“Just one more thing—you are clean, right? You told me you have been for a long while.”

“Nothing but sleeping pills for the past two years, and I get the feeling that I’ll need to be taking a few to get some sleep to get through all of this though.”

“All right, but I need you to be sharp when you get on and finally off that plane and then go directly to baggage. The rest of your instructions are in the envelope. Got it?”

She considered for almost a minute. “Yes, I understand, and I’ll do everything we discussed and whatever is in the envelope,” she replied and put the envelope in her purse.

I noticed her hands were shaking but given the circumstances mine would be too.

Chapter 25/

Jasmin was asleep, having fallen off in the bed in Bakoda's suite. He was gone as he had told her that he would be.

Her dreams were murky, of Jamal and the park, of life in "the life" and of some good moments with her best clients and strangely enough of seducing this strange and violent man who had come to Manhattan from the west, Bakoda Pak. She wavered between pleasant slumber and semi wakefulness until she heard a rap on the door of the suite and heard a voice, "Room service."

She had not remembered ordering a breakfast, but the sleeping pills and a few others that she had taken, along with several glasses of wine to settle down often had the effect of erasing short-term memory, or perhaps she had ordered it the night before to be delivered this morning. She wasn't sure. Then there was a second rap on the door, "Room service."

She rose, and put on a robe, a deep pile white terry that had the Waldorf logo on it, shook her head, patted her hair, then walked out of the bedroom through the living room toward the door.

She opened it cautiously as she had been advised and saw the man with a cart who said, "Good Morning, ma'am," as she opened the door wider and he began to push the cart in situating it in the middle of the room and putting a chair from the desk before it, then poured her a cup of coffee.

"Shall I?" he asked as he put his finger through the hole in the warmer lid over the main plate.

"No," Jasmin said, "let it stay warm."

He handed her the check which she signed after adding a tip and handed it back to him saying, "Thank you."

He said, "My pleasure."

He left, and she turned, picked up the cup of coffee, put it to her lips and with her left hand raised the cover from the plate.

A small black hand, severed at the wrist, Jamal's hand lay on the white china plate with the Waldorf crest on the lip and gold gilding around the rim.

She screamed and dropped the cup of coffee, the china smashing on the edge of the cart as it fell.

Then she awoke in bed and sat up screaming.

#####

I shot up from the couch when I heard the scream and ran into the bedroom to find Jasmin sitting up in the bed bawling, her shoulders shaking as she sobbed.

“My purse, my purse, get my god damned purse,” she demanded between sobs.

I looked around the room and saw her purse on the dresser. I got it and carried it back to the bed. She opened it frantically.

“Water, get me water.”

I walked back into the living room of the suite to the bar, grabbed a bottle of water and twisted the cap off as I walked back into the bedroom. She sat on the bed, several pills in one hand and the other outstretched to take the bottle.

She tossed the pills into her mouth and downed almost half the bottle of water.

As she did, I looked down at the open purse next to her on the bed. It contained more vials than the prescription counter at a Walgreens.

After she had composed herself somewhat, I said, “You told me you were clean.” She was still shaking from the effect of the terrifying nightmare, shivering with her arms crossed over her breasts and her hands gripping her shoulders.

She ignored me and asked desperately, “Are you absolutely sure, I mean absolutely sure that Jamal is all right.”

“He’s fine, I told you that he was.” I grabbed the open purse and said angrily, “But what the fuck is all of this?”

“They aren’t any big deal, they’re prescription. I don’t do shit off the street anymore. I told you that.”

I put my hand in the purse, pulled out a vial and looked at the label.

“Vicodin. How much of this do you take?”

She didn’t answer, she just kept wiping her eyes with the back of her hand shaking her head from side to side, then took a tissue from the bedside table and blew her nose.

I picked up another vial and read it, “Oxycontin. Who in the hell are you kidding, lady? These are opiates and addictive.”

I looked down into the purse and saw more vials, picked them up and read them; Valium 10 milligrams, Nuvigil.

“Nuvigil, this stuff is to help you wake up and stay awake, so you are taking sleeping pills to sleep, wake up pills to stay awake, tranquilizers to settle you down again and a couple of opiates, pain medications which are addictive and can have the same withdrawal symptoms as morphine, methadone, even heroin. Quite a cocktail, and you say you aren’t all fucked up.”

“I need them to get through rough dates, losing my kid, dealing with my fucking life. You have no idea what it’s like.” She was pleading now, her head bowed and still shivering.

I tossed the vials on the bed in disgust, turned and walked out of the bedroom slamming the door behind me just as I heard the half-filled water bottle that Jasmin had been drinking from hit it a moment later.

I waited until morning and called Dr. Watt in Phoenix.

“I think we have a junkie on our hands,” I said.

“I’m not surprised.”

Chapter 26/

“Where’s the kid?”

“Don’t know, can’t get in touch with Wright. The bloody motherfucker’s recording says he’s on vacation and his office isn’t answering.”

”Vacation, my fuckin’ black ass. When I pay a white man what I pay him, there are no fuckin’ vacations unless I say so.”

“No kid, no leverage over Jasmin. Want me to track him down?”

“Teddy, you couldn’t find your ass if you were naked in an empty room. No matter, I’ll deal with that shyster later. The whore is on the run and doesn’t give a shit about the kid. Right now I want you to take your ass out to Phoenix, first class if you want, stay at one of those resorts, pick up one of those little boys that I’m sure that you like and buy me a razor, a premium piece just like the last time with a red handle. The red handle is important, and, find out where I can find that white motherfucking asshole who stabbed me. He lives there and when I’m through with the bitch I’m going to pay him a visit.”

“I know where he lives, I looked him up on the internet by his name, but as far as Jasmin goes, look, you can’t keep taking out your prime merchandise.”

“Don’t try and tell me what to do, you fuckin’ overpaid faggot. Hey, when the cunts run . . .”

“You chase them down,” Teddy replied completing his sentence. Looking at the floor, slowly shaking his head from side to side in resignation, he said quietly in his defense, “I’m not gay, I’m not into boys or men, for that matter.”

“Don’t give me that shit, white boy. I can tell a queer just by their vibes and I’ve seen you checking out my package ever since the first time I met you. You’d like nothing better than to have it stuffed up your ass. Besides, why would I have you manage my women if I figured you gave a shit about pussy?”

“And as far as the merchandise, that bitch Jasmin, the cheap ones and the premium ones. More there where she came from or any of them: younger, taller, slinkier, smarter and greedier. They’re attracted to me, it’s magic, downright funky, stinky magic.”

Teddy glanced from the floor to Douvan’s bandaged left hand.

Douvan followed his eyes, then said, “I know what you’re thinking, motherfucker, that a man with magic wouldn’t let some asshole with a kitchen knife stick him. Well, he didn’t do no serious damage, missed most everything important, that’s fuckin’ magic, almost impossible; it just hurt like hell when he did it and I jumped up and tried to pull it loose. I can even move it now and the fingers, but I’m more concerned about something else.”

“What’s that?”

“The fuckin’ picture he took of me. That white man tried to steal my soul. He runs me out of my park on my day of rest, then he puts a blade through my hand, then he takes my picture stuck to that fuckin’ table in front of my bitches. He’s trying to steal my soul and for that I’ll slash him and burn his fucking house down with him in it bleeding once I take care of business with that runnin’ cunt Jasmin.”

Teddy thought it but couldn’t summon the courage to say to Douvan, *He couldn’t steal your soul—you haven’t got one.*

Douvan pulled his gris gris packet out from under his shirt and started stroking it.

#####

I opened the bedroom door. Jasmin was out cold in bed, her open purse and vials still where I tossed them on the bed. The water bottle lay on the carpet with some remnants of water that had not spurted out when it had hit the door behind me six hours before.

I closed the door and called Darla. Then I went back into the bedroom, took a shower, dressed in comfortable clothes and left.

Jasmin was still asleep, if you could call it that, when I left. I didn't take the clothes or the luggage I had bought for the trip. They were just props to establish me as a well-to-do businessman looking for a paid companion in the big city. I wouldn't need them back in Sunnyslope when I got home, although Darla would have probably appreciated seeing me getting really spiffed up the next time that we went out to dinner. Not that I dress like a bum, but usually at the high end in "Arizona formal" which is comfortable jeans, a pullover polo style shirt open at the collar, a sport coat and comfortable mocs or loafers without socks. Generally, though, we're talking a sweatshirt, jeans, athletic socks and running shoes.

At the airport I called Braddock and got him up to date.

"So, the bitch will probably be shitfaced, is that what you're sayin'?"

"Maybe, Sallie, maybe not, but whatever happens she needs to get to Phoenix on that flight. Keep an eye on her, maybe a little polite conversation like you would with a stranger but let her do what she likes. She's probably popping more to cope with the stress. Start keeping an eye on her when she gets through security."

"You trust her to get to the airport?"

"I've made arrangements," I replied and considered the two thousand dollars it had cost me to be sure that she checked out, got to the airport and boarded the plane or at least got through security and handed off to Braddock. The two thousand was just for the service, then there was the last minute ticket, hotel in Phoenix and of course a liberal allowance for meals and "expenses" that was always the part of the deal with Erica—a former model who had told me over and over again that "models never have to pay,"—who would be coming along for the ride to Phoenix as well, except in coach which she wasn't that crazy about, but then she would be back there keeping an eye out for Mr. Blue if he was indeed following Jasmin on the plane as he apparently had followed Jewel.

Erica, a petite former gymnast and a catalog model in New York City with a major attitude who once told me that she would kill me to get my job with The Outfit and meant it, agreed to escort Jasmin, then hand her off to Sallie once past security or kill her if she didn't comply. I believed Erica would do it; after all, I had helped her kill her father back a while ago in an act of revenge and retribution; she blew just about all his head off with a shotgun, which in both our minds was justified, so I knew that she could do anything.

I told her to call me, somewhat in gest, if she had to kill Jasmin before they got to the airport. She said that she would. I figured it wouldn't go that far, but then again . . .

I had left Jasmin a note and told her to open the door for Erica, her escort to the airport and through security, and not to give her any shit or she'd never see Jamal again. Somehow, I felt bad making that threat, the same leverage that Douvan or Mr. Blue had used over her, but it had to be done given what I now knew about her reliance upon drugs under stress which can often mute a sense of commitment or urgency and simply make it seem logical to drop out. I knew my threat would only add to the stress but at this point it was a necessary evil hopefully to accomplish a positive outcome since the whole scheme depended on her.

My last bit of business was calling the rental agency and tell them to pick up their car at The Waldorf, ditching the gun that Braddock had provided for me, and driving the van to the airport where I left it in long-term parking until it eventually would get towed and put into an impound lot forever. After all of that I caught my flight and was on my way west.

Chapter 27/

I was back in Phoenix at my mid-century cottage (aka, a little old cinder block no frills house of about fourteen hundred square feet built in the nineteen-fifties with a car port converted into a closed garage by some former owner) at the top of Central Avenue at the base of North Mountain in the Sunnyslope area the next day in the afternoon when I heard a knock at the front door. My blinds were all closed as I was exhausted from the New York trip and knew there was more to come so I had retreated to my dark cave for a day of rest and quiet.

I ignored the knock the first time, then it happened again only more urgently. I figured *All right, I'll answer it; I just hope it isn't the Jehovah Witnesses again or the Mormons who want to pray with me.*

Even though I was resigned to opening it, I pulled the mini blinds on the living room window open a bit to check out who was rapping. In my profession you never just open a door as a courtesy to Bible thumpers unless you peek first; you never know.

It wasn't either, the Witnesses or the Mormons—it was Teddy Saxon who probably was interested in saving his worthless soul more than mine.

"So," I said once Teddy settled down on my couch with a beer. I had a glass of wine; I don't drink beer with the exception of one occasional very

cold one on a hot Phoenix summer afternoon, “why shouldn’t I just kill you right now? Besides the mess in my house and that it would be hard to get you out of here discretely and if I were caught it would be bad for the reputation of the neighborhood which is already emerging from marginal without another murder, you’re safe for the time being.”

The irony of my statement obviously went over his head and he just blurted out, “I can deliver him to you, Douvan or as he’s called, Mr. Blue.”

“I know he’ll probably be flying out here tomorrow, Teddy, chasing Jasmin just like he did Jewel, so what do I need you for?”

“Because I can set him up. I’m supposed to hand off a straight razor to him when he is off the plane. I can recognize him. He is quite good at disguise.” Teddy had no minor amount of desperation in his voice, his eyes darting from side to side and his hand shook as he raised his bottle of beer to his lips trying to play cool, but his body language was giving him away.

“The same way you did when he killed Jewel?” I said.

Teddy paused for a while as he sat on the couch and I reclined in an Eames chair, an extravagant purchase but worth every penny that I paid for it and watched him across my living room.

Teddy’s nervous pause turned into a non-response.

“Well, Teddy, did you?” I pressed.

Teddy squirmed a bit, settled, took another shaky drink of beer and finally said, “Yes, but I had no idea what he was planning to do with it. I just figured that he wanted it for protection in Phoenix and didn’t want to chance getting it through airport security.”

I didn’t reply for a while just so Teddy would feel confident that he made his point, basically playing with him.

“Oh, come on, Teddy, give me a break.” I flicked my head to the side and sighed, took a drink. “Why would he have flown you out here when he could have simply mailed a razor to himself that he would get when he checked in at his hotel or even a pistol with a full clip?”

Teddy thought for a few moments, then offered somewhat resigned, “Hey, when that man asks me to do something, I just do it. I didn’t try to ask anything logically; he has his own way of doing things and common sense and logic don’t always have anything to do with it, but it seems to work for him.”

“The fallacy of positive instances, Teddy. He believes it because he has deluded himself into believing that whatever he does will turn out right because he discounts and rationalizes the things that don’t. In short he believes that he has some kind of power over random events that make them

come out in his favor because he ignores the times that they don't; he simply believes that for some reason he is lucky."

Teddy considered, then looked up and snapped his fingers in recognition. "You are right, but maybe not so much since you got involved."

"And he's superstitious, I will wager. He probably believes that certain routines and activities will enhance or even guarantee his good fortune. I'll bet that if he sent you to get a blade for him he told you exactly what it should be like."

"He said a red handle was important."

"Probably because the one that you got for him the other time had a red handle."

"It did," Teddy agreed.

"So, this time I want you to buy him a razor, but with a blue or brown or black handle and pass it off to him in the airport. Also, I want you to buy a second razor with a red handle and give it to me."

"What will I get for doing this?"

I rubbed my chin in consideration as I played for a little time and emphasis, then said, "I made a vow to a close friend to personally kill everyone who had anything to do with Jewel's death, but I will promise I will not kill you. Isn't that why you came here in the first place?"

Teddy leaned forward on the couch wringing his hands, slowly shook his head from side to side and finally raised his eyes to meet mine and said, "Yes," he hesitated, then continued, "yes, it is."

"Then that is how it will be," I replied.

After Teddy left I pulled out the floor plan of the baggage area of the terminal at the airport and studied them, more specifically, the configuration of the bath rooms. Somehow, they had been left on my doorstep in a mailer tube when I got home, perhaps by a certain police detective that I know, but that of course was only speculation.

My last task after reviewing the plans was to call Sallie and brief him on the plan for the next morning.

Chapter 28/

It all came together at Sky Harbor airport the next morning about eleven o'clock.

I was standing next to Mark Grant as we waited for the flight to deboard, in the luggage area in front of the carousel assigned to the flight. Next to me on the floor was a gym bag.

“Not sure what you’re doing but there won’t be a cop in this area for the next half hour, and the restrooms are all set up to be cleared in a few minutes.”

“Cameras?”

“Cameras, none in the restrooms and I’ve heard that most of them in this complex are old analog units and half of them or more don’t work.”

“The taxpayers know that?”

“I only said that’s what I’ve heard; I can’t say on the record that it’s true. The airport cops spread a lot of shit around.”

“Thanks, Mark, so as usual you know nothing.”

“Yeah, a regular Sargent Shultz,” he replied. “I watch antenna TV and can play stupid. I’m not admitting to anything, even if I know that it’s true.”

“Yeah, you have a pension to protect, so get the hell out of here; besides, I need you to keep your badge, so I can use it when I need it.”

“With all due respect to a citizen from a public servant, fuck you,” Mark replied. “This one is for the doc, not for you.”

“Beat it,” I said, “I see your friend Braddock coming.” I nodded toward the crowd approaching the baggage carousels from the flight that had just arrived.

Mark left, and as Braddock approached I could see the look on his face accentuated by the more than normal slouch in his posture as he came forward wearing a wrinkled and rumpled rain coat.

“What’s up, Sallie?” I asked Braddock when he joined me, both of us staring at the carousel as it went hypnotically around and around.

“She’s stoned and won’t get off,” he said.

“She has to, they’ll make her,” I replied.

“Not before Erica does,” he replied.

“Ah yes, Erica, she can be very persuasive,” I said.

“That little bitch scares the hell out of me, that’s for sure,” he replied.

I nodded. “Any sign of Douvan?” I asked as I leaned down and picked up the gym bag and handed it to Sallie.

“Didn’t spot him. Walked the aisles several times and no tall, lean jungle bunny with a tat on his neck. This may be a blow out.” He unzipped the gym bag, looked inside, then zipped it up again.

“We’ll see,” I said as I saw Teddy Saxon come through the front door and approach the carousel.

Braddock said, “Gotta go an’ get ready for the next act.”

I nodded as he turned and walked away with the gym bag.

I fell back into role looking down at the carousel like a passenger waiting for his luggage to emerge from that black hole in the wall that only god knows what is behind.

Saxon saw me, walked to the carousel and stood next to me on my right.

“This is for you,” Teddy said as he handed me a wrapped candy bar with his right hand, an Almond Joy based on the wrapper.

I took it and put it into my coat pocket. It was noticeably heavier than a candy bar.

“I have this for our friend,” he said and nodded down toward a bouquet of flowers in a cellophane wrapper that he held in his left hand.

“You sure he’s on this flight?”

“He is, and like I said, without me, you would never spot him.”

“He’s pretty distinctive,” I replied.

“He’s a chameleon, mate; you won’t believe what you will see.”

“Where do I look?”

“Right over there,” Saxon said and pointed to the other side of the carousel, “where I’m going to wait for him right now. I’ll do the handoff and then I’m leaving.”

I nodded. Saxon walked around the carousel toward the area where the passengers from the flight were walking into the baggage area, the only way in, so Mr. Blue would have to come through that area.

Finally, I saw them, Jasmin wobbling a bit as she walked escorted by a determined looking Erica all in black like a little Ninja with a death grip on Jasmin’s left bicep.

They came to the carousel and took their position on the side opposite where I stood.

A few moments later I noticed a janitorial cart being pushed up and stopped in front of the ladies’ restroom. The attendant took out two cones and placed them in front of the entrance. The yellow cones said, “Temporarily Closed for Maintenance.” The attendant went to the entrance and waited until the room cleared, then went inside, the cart and pylons blocking the entrance. A few minutes later I saw him leave from the adjacent men’s room. According to the plans that I had, the restrooms had a common room between them for janitorial use.

The passengers who had hoarded the baggage area now began to slow down to a trickle and finally no more were coming into the area. Sallie might have been right, this could be a bust, but I just stood there watching Saxon who pulled a cardboard sign out from beneath his sport coat that apparently had been tucked into the waist band of his trousers. It had a red

heart on it and said, "Welcome Great Grandma, Your Family Loves You." He held it in front of him with his left hand as would a driver waiting for an airport pickup of a reserved ride, the bouquet of flowers in his left.

Finally, an airport aide came into the area pushing a wheelchair. In the chair was this old, not elderly but seriously old woman dressed all in black sprawled in the chair reminiscent of Stephen Hawking before he passed. She looked as if she were on her last legs, maybe on a final visit to the family. She appeared to be black, but her skin was so wrinkled, parched and dried it was hard to tell. Her hair was blue-gray and permed. A cane was crosswise on her lap with an open old lady's purse that she steadied with one wizened hand, so it wouldn't fall. In her other hand was a wadded tissue that she daubed her mouth with to blot the saliva that accumulated at the corners of her lips.

The attendant pushed her forward toward the carousel and then I saw Teddy advance forward sign in front of him toward the old woman. He stopped in front of the woman, the wheelchair and the aide. The woman slowly looked up in recognition and Teddy extended his hand with the flowers toward her. I saw her nod slowly, release her grip on the strap of her purse and slowly reach forward with a shaky hand to accept the bouquet.

Over the general hustle and bustle I heard Saxon announce quite loudly to the aide, "Thank you, sir, I'll take over for the lady from here. I work for her family." Then I saw him hand the aide a twenty-dollar bill that the aide deposited in his pocket while he nodded and smiled, then walked away.

With that Teddy Saxon patted the old woman on the shoulder in a comforting manner, set the brake on the wheelchair and walked to the carousel ostensibly to pick up her luggage.

So that was it, I thought. The little old shriveled up old lady. I continued to look having seen Douvan, having been close enough to stab his hand, and even at that I found it hard to believe the transformation: a tall slim man transformed into a contorted and compressed old woman. Unconsciously I simply shook my head slowly from side to side.

Now, I had to just wait, and if Erica did her job, what Dr. Watt had predicted might come down.

I left my station and went into the men's room that was adjacent to the ladies with entries about ten feet apart. I opened the janitor's closet from the men's side, the door wasn't locked, walked in and crossed the length of the room and stood by the door that opened to the women's side and just waited. Waited for a series of taps that would come from the door opposite that opened into the ladies' side. I took the object wrapped in a candy

wrapper from my pocket and opened it. Took out the razor with the blade folded into a red handle, held it in my right hand and waited.

It seemed like an eternity.

Chapter 29/

Finally, it came, one tap.

Jasmin had entered the bathroom with special permission from the attendant who was standing outside of the entrance because she was getting sick and told him she was going to throw up. She would have entered guided by the attendant and supposedly gone to a stall, then the attendant, a man would return to the entrance to be sure that she had privacy and that no one else gained entry as technically the restroom was closed.

In reality when the tap came, I opened the door and pulled Jasmin inside the closet, then moved her behind me. She was shaking like a leaf and sank to the floor under unsteady legs and sat with her back against the wall, hugging her knees in the dark between buckets and mops and began to sob.

I shushed her, and she quieted down a bit, then I turned back to the door to wait for the next signal.

A few moments later there were two taps on the door.

The old woman about to gain entrance as well, up from her wheelchair which Teddy had pushed forward to the entrance and walking unsteadily with him guiding her bent over with the bouquet of flowers in her hand to the door and the attendant. Teddy told the attendant that the old woman urgently needed to use the facility.

The attendant said he would check with the woman who was sick in the back stall to see if she would mind if someone came in. The attendant, Sallie transformed, told the old woman that if it was all right to come in he would not come out and tell her but would leave by the connecting closet to the men's room to work there and to come in if he did not come out in a minute or so to indicate that the sick woman had an objection.

Teddy nodded and said that they would wait for a minute or two before she entered.

After a minute, the old woman with Teddy's assistance stood up shakily and walked forward into the restroom. After she entered, Teddy pushed the wheelchair aside and left the terminal.

I counted off ninety seconds in my head, then opened the door from the janitor's closet and advanced down the long corridor of stalls toward the "old woman"—transformed into Mr. Blue—who now stood completely

erect in front of the closed door of the last stall where he thought Jasmin would be, the cellophane wrapped bouquet of flowers on the floor and with an open straight razor in his right hand.

“That mother fuckin’ Teddy,” I heard him curse as I advanced, and he looked down at the blade, “he got me one with a black handle. My mojo is seriously fucked.”

“Seriously fucked,” I said as I walked up behind him and opened the razor with the red handle and held it up in front of me at eye level, blade out. “Seriously fucked,” I repeated. “I got the red one.” The stall door swung open and Sallie grabbed Douvan, Mr. Blue, from behind, put his huge hand over his forehead and pulled back exposing his long neck with one hand and grabbing his other hand with the razor in it and pulling it down to Douvan’s side.

“Hey man, I’ll drop the blade, and I’ll take it, just one thing,” he gasped strained by Sallie’s restraint.

I nodded to Sallie and he released enough pressure on Douvan’s forehead to let him speak with less effort, “Man, just pull out my gris gris and tear it off before you do it. I ain’t got no mojo no more. Nothing works. Since I killed that bitch and you came into my life, I knew this had to happen and I’m ready. I just can’t wear that fucking bag to ward off evil when evil has caught up with me and I’m staring it in the face. You are the devil’s disciple; your magic is blacker and stronger than mine. I’ve tried every curse, every potion and you just kept on coming. I’m sure the next time we meet it will be in hell and you’ll sit at the side of Lucifer himself.”

I heard the blade hit the tile floor as Douvan dropped it.

I unbuttoned the top two buttons of his old lady’s blouse and reached in while Braddock held him. I pulled out a bag attached to a greasy leather thong wrapped around Douvan’s neck, cut it with my razor and dropped it to the floor.

“Now,” Douvan said.

“Douvan,” I said, “I’m not the face of evil; you’re just seeing a reflection of yourself. This is for Jewel and I am sure others,” I said, but then he interrupted me.

“Let me do it, at least give me that, mahn.”

I thought for a few moments, nodded to Sallie to release Douvan and handed him the razor with the red handle. Sallie stepped aside.

Douvan took the razor in his hand, stepped back into the empty stall, looked directly at us and expertly slit his throat with a gash as long and deep as one could imagine. We saw the gush of blood and heard the wheeze and

saw his eyes dim as his knees buckled and he collapsed on the stall's tile floor. I pulled the stamp from my pocket and stamped him "Paid in Full" twice and closed the door.

We went to the adjoining janitor's closet, picked Jasmin up from her fetal position and left through the men's side as Sallie shouted, "Keep your eyes and dicks forward men, there's a problem in the ladies john and we have a lady coming through."

The two pylons and the janitor's cart were still in place in front of the woman's side to ensure that no one would be entering immediately and make the grisly discovery of the corpse of Mr. Blue in the last stall.

We walked out of the terminal and seconds later Teddy picked us up along with Erica in a rented SUV and we were off. On my instructions nobody had checked any luggage, just what was on their person or purses. Phoenix has these things called stores and whatever was needed before they returned, those who were returning, would be purchased that afternoon.

Chapter 30/

It had been amazingly easy, and Watt had been right. Once Mr. Blue's power had been taken away he would simply give up everything, including his life, such is the power of superstition. I'm not, superstitious that is, maybe that's why I've survived so long, and I doubt that I will sit in hell at the side of Lucifer, but I had to admit that it was an intriguing thought.

Erica, Sallie and Teddy Saxon stayed at The Pointe Tapatio about two miles from my place that night. I told Sallie and Saxon that they would be leaving out the next day, that I had taken care of arrangements and that Erica would be driving them to the airport. She was planning to stay for a few more days, probably, I confided in them, to shake me down for more money.

#####

The next morning Erica picked up Teddy and Sallie at The Point after she and I had gotten a rental, an SUV. She was not alone—Dr. Watt was driving.

Dr. Watt smiled as the two new passengers entered the car, introduced himself and explained that he had some business after they stopped at the airport and decided to ride along to "kill two birds with one stone," so to speak and resumed his reassuring smile.

Erica was sitting in the back seat. Braddock got in the front passenger seat and Teddy took a seat on the left rear seat across from Jasmin. Then they were off.

Twenty minutes later they took the exit for the airport off the freeway and Dr. Watt pulled up in front of the terminal, the same one where Mr. Blue had chosen to slit his own throat the day before.

Erica reached in her purse and pulled out a paper ticket. She said, "Here, Sallie," and passed it over the seat to Braddock.

Teddy Saxon sat for a few moments and stared at her purse. Finally, he asked, "Where's mine?"

"You'll be leaving," she said, "but not on a plane," as she pulled a stainless Walther PPK, a non-traceable that I had given her, out of her purse and turned it toward him.

"Wait a minute," Saxon objected, as Sallie opened his door, stepped out of the SUV and said, "Goodbye all, especially you, Teddy; see you in the next life, or maybe not depending on where a pile of shit like you ends up for eternity." He smiled, tipped the brim of an imaginary snap brim hat, nodded at everyone in the SUV, shut the door, and walked toward the terminal entrance.

"Wait," he continued to protest, "Bakoda promised that he wouldn't kill me."

"But I didn't," Erica said coldly.

"And neither did I," said Dr. Watt as he turned, looked over the seat at Teddy Saxon and smiled. Then he turned and drove off.

#####

"We found that hole out there near the reservation. Erica shot him, and I stamped him. The last one," Dr. Watt, explained to me late that afternoon at my house.

"She wiped down the gun and threw it in and I did the same thing with the stamp. You dug a deep hole; I don't think the coyotes will even be able to dig him up. Your shovels are in the back of the SUV."

Watt was amazingly composed, but I knew he was relieved that it was finally over. Now he could return to his practice as the mild mannered and assuring little man whose sole mission in life was to help people in psychic pain. Nobody would ever conceive that he had abetted murder.

#####

A few days later Jasmin and I sat on the couch in Dr. Watt's office. Watt had told me to be prepared for the inevitable retreat; Jasmin wanted to go back to New York.

"I don't see why I can't leave. Blue is gone, I can probably get my son back and I can see no future out here in the middle of the desert. Besides I got enough stash to provide a good home for Jamal."

"My dear," Watt explained patiently, "you are still an addict. You're still taking the substances that you brought with you and if you go back you'll be back in the business again and just as hooked."

"But Mr. Blue is gone. I don't have to be afraid anymore."

"There will be another Mr. Blue. Maybe not a murderer or as sadistic but there will be another one, and I'm just telling you what you already know; eventually you won't command premium prices and then you'll be on the streets or cruising the bars, that is, if you don't o.d. before then. And your son, by then I would wager he will be a ward of the state or worse."

"Hey, that's my town and I know the rules. I've survived and done well so far."

"Have you?" Watt replied, "Look at yourself now. Your hands are shaking even as we speak. Even if you have money you still have a monkey on your back."

"And you want me to dry out in some dumb ass clinic out here. Then what? I'll still be back at zero with no kid and no job, and I ain't exactly college material, not at my age."

Watt pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and patiently answered, "You are right, but you will have solved one problem that has driven you to make bad and self-destructive choices, the drugs. Jasmin, I don't care if you want to continue to be an escort. I have no moral dilemma with that. I would just want you to be clear headed if that is the career you choose to continue. As for your son, I can guarantee at least that you will get him back."

Jasmin gave Watt a haughty look and shook her head, "And how will you do that, Mr. Doctor."

Just then I got up from the couch, walked over to the door leading to the reception area and opened it.

Darla Cummings walked in with C. Jason White holding Jamal's hand.

Chapter 31/

Jasmin opened her arms and her son ran the short distance across Watt's office into them. She began sobbing and shaking as she clung to the boy.

When Jasmin finally gained her composure while we quietly watched, she asked, "So what's next?"

"Simple as this. You go into detox and rehab. Jamal will stay here with Ms. Cummings until you have a clean bill of health. She has a home and has agreed to have a caregiver during the day to be a companion to your son while she's at work and during your rehabilitation. You can see him at any time, that is, with the permission of your therapists, and when you are capable of resuming the role of a mother drug free, you will be reunited."

"And who is going to pay for all of this?" she asked. "If I burn through most of my stash I won't have enough to get back on my feet again after it's over."

"Mister White has agreed to cover the expenses of your rehabilitation and your son's stay with Ms. Cummings until your course of treatment is completed if you choose to do so at the time."

"And if you succeed in getting straight," C. Jason Wright interjected, "I can offer you a position in my office. It will only pay the going rate for a legal clerk, but I can offer it as a start. Jasmin, you are a pretty sharp woman, and maybe we can make it work into something better given some time."

I watched as Jasmin considered, still hugging her son.

"This is really twisted," Jasmin finally offered, somewhat in jest and to a degree sarcastically. "First Douvan holds my kid so that he has complete control over me and now it looks like you all are playing the same game."

Watt didn't try to justify the situation; he simply said, "Take it or leave it."

Epilogue/

Four months later Jasmin completed rehab successfully.

Six months later, reunited with Jamal, she returned to New York City.

She worked for C. Jason Wright for about nine months but finally returned to the trade.

Less than two years after that a frantic little boy called 911 and said that he had come home from school and found his mother dead.

The last time I visited Dr. Watt's office he still had the black urn with Jewel's ashes on his desk.