

# THE VARICOSE VIGILANTES

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This book is dedicated to Anne and Jan.  
Thank you for your belief in me.

And to Dianne.  
Your boundless enthusiasm is an inspiration.

## Author's Note

This book could never have been written without the love and support of my family, particularly my wife, Deb. Thanks for putting up with me for all these years.

I must thank all of those who read this book before publication. Your comments, suggestions and encouragement were enormously helpful.

Thanks to Jenni Wheeler for her help with this book's cover.

I also want to thank all of the men and women who have traded their lives for my freedom, and all of those who still stand in harm's way.

As harsh as it sounds, freedom is often paid for with bullets and blood. Our Revolutionary soldiers risked everything to create a free America. Today, brave men and women fight daily battles abroad, doing what our elected leaders tell them is just. While we may not agree with every choice that is made, this is the course that our leaders feel is necessary to preserve our way of life. There is no finer nation or form of government. And I thank all those who gave me my freedom and those who help keep it for me every day.

At home, our police and fire departments, along with many other branches of our government, dedicate their lives to keeping us safe. You, too, have my thanks.

While some of my fictional characters fall short of perfection, and fall prey to the temptations of money and power, this should not be mistaken for a lack of gratitude or respect on my part. We all face temptation. We all make mistakes. Doing the right thing is never easy. My work always explores the conflict between right and wrong, good and evil—and the razor's edge that can often separate the two.

This book celebrates a wondrous gift we can never lose. We can always change. If we have grown old, we can feel young again, at least in mind. If we have hurt ourselves or others, it is never too late to change our course, to see the world in a different light, to be reborn in spirit.

This book is about hope. It is about redemption. It is about possibilities. Rejoice and enjoy!

“Men of age object too much, consult too long,  
adventure too little, repent too soon.”

“A man must make his opportunity, as oft as find it.”

“Fortitude is the marshal of thought,  
the armor of the will, and the fort of reason.”

Sir Francis Bacon

# PROLOGUE



## **TODAY: 4:30 A.M.**

When Michael McBride's phone began to ring he felt an eerie tightness form in his throat. He fought to breathe, but it was like a flash of fire had sucked the air from his lungs. *Don't answer it.*

McBride stuffed his face into a pillow and groaned. Then he arched an eye toward the clock beside his bed. Four thirty a.m. *This isn't good. Don't answer the phone.*

The fire fought its way down his throat and settled into the cradle of his stomach, burning hot and heavy, like a devil's child.

The Deputy Chief of Police rolled over and let the phone ring. But he listened, as his wife's cheerful voice apologized to the caller and said to please leave a message.

This was part of his job, early morning crisis. Not an unusual occurrence at all. He was always on call. Crime never slept. But today, something was different. Something told him that his life was about to unravel, like a ball of yarn on a kitten's paw. Some deep, inner voice told him that this day would set things in motion that would turn his life inside out and rip it to ragged, unrecognizable shreds.

*Don't answer it.*

"Pick up the phone, asshole." The voice on the answering machine was synthesized, but he knew who it was.

McBride looked across the bed to his wife. Her eyes were closed and she appeared to be asleep. McBride drew back the covers and walked slowly across the room. He tossed a silk bathrobe over his naked body and continued into the other room. He lifted a phone off its receiver and whispered, "This better be good."

"There's an issue on South Beach. Deal with it." *Click.*

**5:15 A.M.**

McBride aimed his brown Hummer across the South Beach sand and parked it twenty yards from the water. An ambulance with balloon tires was already resting on the hard pack. Two police cars had angled to a stop on Reef Road. Their headlights cast a hazy, ethereal glow over the beach. Their top lights were flashing and their squawk boxes were chattering like angry crows.

McBride stepped out of his car and looked down the beach. He could see the outlines of people standing around the ambulance. They looked like stick figures in the murky night, just jerky shadows under the flashes of light. Two people wearing white were kneeling beside a body. Two others wearing khaki brown uniforms crouched beside them. Four of his own men were standing off to the side talking with a young couple with colorful towels wrapped around their bathing suits. McBride approached his men and said, "What have we got here?"

One of the officers motioned for McBride to step to the side. He leaned against the chief's ear and said, "These two discovered the body around five. Called it in from a cell phone and waited 'til we arrived."

"Any ID?"

"It's a dump."

"Shit."

"Doesn't look good, sir. She was beaten, possibly raped."

"Any idea how she got here?"

"Nah. The scene got pretty contaminated when the ambulance arrived. Guys stepping all around the body like she was some freak show."

McBride looked toward the people moving around the dead woman. "Lucky for us." He pointed in their direction. "Someone here from CSIB?"

"Yeah. Two of them. Kidd and Cooper."

"That was fast."

"Too fast. The ones in white are the EMTs." The officer looked quickly around and whispered, "Can you keep a lid on this?"

McBride stiffened and stretched his arms skyward. He yawned loudly, and then patted the officer on the shoulder. "Don't I always?" Then he began to walk toward the dead body, fighting the deep ache in his throat.

Tony Trance counted six men running ahead of him in the dawning light. He'd been behind them for nearly two miles. They'd begun as dark blurs on the damp, South Beach sand. Now he could see their outlines clearly, as the sun began to stretch across the water with impending daylight.

Tony glanced at his sports watch and pressed the illumination button. The runners were setting a good pace, but he was faster, despite his sixty-eight years of

age. In another half mile they would probably turn, and run back toward him. Trance vowed to catch them.

By the time the men turned, Tony had closed the gap to three hundred yards. As they approached, Tony could see their muscled frames rippling underneath their sweat-soaked *Miami Hurricanes* T-shirts. He also noticed the men pick up their pace as he drew close. "Morning, old man," said one of them as they passed.

"Old man, my ass," muttered Tony. He gritted his teeth and ran faster.

Tony reset his watch at the turn so he could keep accurate time splits. He worked his arms to increase his speed, relaxed his cheeks, and then let his mind wander toward nothingness. Less than six minutes later, he pulled beside the pack.

"Great day for a run, wouldn't you say?" he said. The student athletes looked at him but said nothing.

"Football? Track team?" he asked. "Lacrosse? Baseball?" No sound.

Tony shrugged and began to pull away. The pack fell in with his stride and they ran together for a mile, with no one saying a word. Then one of the runners pointed toward the beach ahead. "You'll blow out your heart and end up like *that*, old man. Running at this pace."

Tony followed the runner's arm and saw all the shadows beside the ambulance. They looked like giant bugs out of some Kafka novel, slowly swarming around their prey.

"No," he said. "I'm just trying to stay young."

Tony watched two people stand and carry something toward the ambulance. He knew what it was, a stretcher holding a sheet-covered body. Score one for the scum bags.

"Second time this month," he said softly. "Goddamn drug dealers."

Tony felt anger pump through him like hot oil. It was a driving, unfocused flare, and he could feel it press to ignite. He looked over to the young men beside him and said, "Age is only what you make it." Tony picked up the pace and never looked back.

## CHAPTER 1



### ONE WEEK AGO

Tony Trance paced outside the entrance to the recreation hall of the Final Rest retirement community. He looked like a hungry cat waiting to be fed, walking back and forth, back and forth in front of the opening.

Inside, the hall swirled with a random assortment of bodies and hummed with excited voices and the scraping of furniture. This was the weekly *Big Bang*, where the residents' ordered world fell into chaos. Thursday.

Large cardboard letters, painted in sparkling gold, hung from the doorway. They knocked against Tony's head as he walked into the hall. *WELCOME JAIME*, they said. Tony swatted at the letters. "Sophie," he mumbled.

Tony walked to a jagged line of residents. Three people were in wheelchairs; two were on rolling beds. Others were easing themselves along with various walking instruments—a cane, a walker, and supporting shoulders.

A man wearing a white nurse's uniform pushed a wheelchair to the entrance and parked it beside Tony.

Tony waved with his clipboard. "Put Mrs. Taylor over there, Richard."

Richard Crump pushed the wheelchair and its occupant to the spot pointed out by Tony. He adjusted the oxygen tank behind Mrs. Taylor's chair and checked the tube that ran from the tank to the facemask on the sleeping woman. Assured that all was well, Crump turned to Tony.

"Don't let her dance," he said. "I don't care if she was with the Rockettes. She's ninety years old and sucking oxygen. Don't let her dance."

Tony's eyes softened and he put a hand on Crump's shoulder.

"I mean it," said Crump. "She's still recovering from last week."

Tony smiled, like a patronizing professor. Then his eyes sharpened. He said, softly, "It's the music, Richard. It makes us young. Don't ever forget that. Someday, it will matter to you, far too soon."



At four o'clock, Jaime Crandall ducked under the swinging gold letters and stopped just inside the entrance. A murmur spread through the room. Then it began to ripple with the clapping of hands, shouts and whistles.

Jaime waved. Then she bounced forward through a narrow aisle between the rows of folding chairs. As she made her way toward the stage at the front of the room, the residents reached out and touched her, like they would a rock star or the Pope. Jaime walked slowly down the aisle, acknowledging every resident by name. She stopped to give kisses and compliments to many of the residents. "Oh, don't you look fine today, Martha...Is that a new walker, Mr. Cummins? You're really moving well...That blouse looks outstanding, Sarah..."

Jaime carried an old guitar case with her right hand. It was held together by weathered strips of silver duct tape, and swung like a pendulum as she walked. Her left hand gripped a bouquet of spring flowers. Jaime moved past the three hundred residents, pressed shoulder to shoulder, all waiting to hear her sing. When she reached the third row from the front, she handed the flowers to a robust woman seated along the aisle.

"Hello, Gram," she said. She gave her grandmother a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Jaime wore a pair of pink running shoes with no socks. Her legs were lean and muscular, brown and smooth. She had on a loose pair of faded Levi cutoffs, topped by a pale yellow, short-sleeved silk blouse. Shaggy blond hair fell to her shoulders, like layered down feathers. Now and then stray strands fluttered into her face and she blew them away with unconscious puffs.

Jaime's face was darkly tanned, in contrast to a bleach-white smile. Her eyes were green, and highlighted by tiny black speckles, giving her a uniquely, exotic look.

Jaime climbed onto the stage and set down her guitar. She grabbed the microphone from its stand and blew into it. "Testing one, two, three...Testing one...got it."

Jaime smiled. "Great to be back!" She reached for her guitar.

"We love you, Jaime!" yelled someone in the crowd.

Guitar in hand, Jaime leaned against the microphone. "And I love you, too."

Jaime slung a shoulder strap over her head and quickly tuned the guitar strings. She adjusted one final string and nodded to herself. She bent down and grabbed the silver end of a black cable and plugged it into the body of her guitar. She strummed the strings and the sound reverberated through the silent, expectant hall.

"That's a little too loud," she said. Someone in the back adjusted the volume. Jaime strummed again and smiled. "Got it."

Jaime pulled a stool behind the microphone and sat down. "Ready to rock?"

The residents cheered and clapped. Some of them got out of their seats and stood in the aisles, ready to dance at Jaime's first notes. Mrs. Taylor's eyes opened, as if she'd been kicked in the knee. She bolted upright, ripped the oxygen mask off her face and yelled, "You go girl!"

Jaime played for over an hour. She played songs that made the old men sigh, as they remembered their halcyon days when they could sweep a girl off her feet, soft melodies drifting through the room like the fragrance of flowers, enveloping them gently, touching them everywhere. She sang of happiness. She twisted hearts with ballads of love, and sent them into silent reveries through the past, where they were young again and danced with the lightest of steps. She plucked out memories and emotions long-since forgotten, and floated them through the air and into their minds. She brought thoughts of the loved-ones they had lost along the way. She brought them dreams, for the young, that would live well beyond their years. She sang of hope. She said it all. The time passed like a moment.

"One more song before I go," she said.

"Tell them the news!" someone yelled.

Jaime hesitated.

"Yeah, tell them," said another.

Jaime smiled shyly. "Well, I've signed a recording contract with Hopewell Records."

The audience applauded loudly, and began to chant, "Jaime...Jaime...Jaime..."

Jaime waited until the noise died before she continued. "I'll be going on tour for a while. And I will have to spend more time in Nashville." She blinked to stop a spring of tears. The crowd began to bend and twist through her water-distorted her eyes. "I'll be leaving after next week's concert." Jaime's voice cracked, and she sounded like a lonely bird calling for its mate. "It will be my last visit for a while. But I *will* be back."

The room fell silent until someone yelled, "Send us a DVD, or a Blu-ray."

"We'll watch for you on MTV."

"We always knew you would make it."

Jaime dabbed at her eyes. "I promised myself I wouldn't cry." She looked out into the crowd. "I'm...I'm going to miss you...my family. And wherever I am, I'll keep you in my heart."

Jaime gazed at her friends, packed shoulder to shoulder, some sitting two to a chair. She smiled at the residents in the wheelchair section, and to the *old souls* on beds, clinging to what little life was left. For some, she was all they had.

"This song's for you. For the love and support you have given me these last two years, ever since...my dad died."

Jim "Hutch" Hutchins rose from his seat. "Just a minute," he said. "Before you play your song, we've got a little something for you."

“Pop,” Jaime tried to protest.

Jaime’s grandfather held up his arms. He turned and motioned toward the back of the room. Jaime’s grandmother, Muffy, stood by the door balancing a large package on the floor. Tony Trance waited beside her.

Hutch waved, and Tony and Muffy walked forward.

“Wednesday is your twentieth birthday, Jaime,” said Hutch. “And the folks here thought we’d get you a little something, to thank you for all you’ve given us.”

“You really didn’t have to. Just being here is enough.”

Hutch shook his head and reached for the package. Jaime looked to the eager faces in the crowd. She sensed their anticipation and wondered what they had for her. All eyes turned toward the brightly colored gift box as Tony hauled it onto the stage.

“Such dear, sweet people you are,” said Jaime. She took the package, at first with tentative hands, and then with the unrestrained exuberance of a four year old at Christmas. Underneath the paper she found a plain cardboard box. She hesitated.

“Open it!” she heard from the crowd.

Hutch motioned for her to continue. “Hurry up. We don’t have all day.”

Jaime opened the box and gasped. It was a guitar. “A Martin!”

“Not just any Martin,” said Hutch. “It’s a classic. It was once owned by Bob Dylan, but he gave it away. Said the sound was too pure for his voice. Tony got it from Hopewell Records and had it fixed with your name, spelled in pearl inlays.”

“This is special, honey,” said Muffy. “Just like you.”

Hutch pulled the guitar out of its box by the neck and held it above his head. The residents began to whistle and clap once more.

This time, Jaime felt something inside her snap, like the twang of a guitar string breaking, making everything else seem out of key. She looked out to the expectant faces and she thought about life. Then she thought about death, the death of her own two parents, taken from her in their prime, and the death that would, all-too-soon take so many in the audience. “This is too much.”

Jaime took the guitar from her grandfather and cradled it like a newborn child, then she looked to her battered guitar case on the floor.

“Maybe I should get a new case.” Jaime looked into the crowd. Nearly all of the residents were awake. Some were smiling. Many were crying. They all knew the score.

“You do us proud in Nashville, honey,” said Muffy.

“I’ll have to say thank you in the best way I know.”

Jaime tuned the new guitar and started picking. Soon her haunting voice joined in. The handkerchiefs and tissues came out as her song unfolded. Jaime closed her eyes. She would miss these friends, though she never imagined that this might be her final song.

As I look,  
Outside,  
I see snow falling down.  
I see frost upon the window  
As I slowly gaze around.  
I put down,  
My pen,  
Bring my hands up to my eyes,  
Then I slowly shake my head,  
As I finally realize,  
That another season in my life  
Has bid me its farewell.  
The night's candle  
Just won't burn as bright,  
And what's left I cannot tell.  
But I know that every hour is one,  
That I'll never see again.  
So I know that I must live my life  
As fully as I can...

When Jaime finished singing, she packed up her new guitar, grabbed the old one by the neck and descended into the arms of her grandparents.

"Will you come visit us on Wednesday, for your birthday, dearie?" said Muffy.

"Just in the morning, Gram. Tania and I are going shopping and to the beach. Then we're meeting a friend for dinner."

"Don't stay out late. You'll want to be fresh for your last concert, and your big trip."

Jaime laughed. "You know what a homebody I am. I'll be in bed by nine, reading a good novel." Jaime looked toward the ground, feeling a guilty mix of sadness and excitement.

Muffy turned and cradled Jaime's face in her hands. "Don't you feel blue, child. This is what you have always wanted, what you have studied for, and it's what we have wanted for you. You go fly with a clear conscience. Like an eagle. We couldn't be happier. We're all rooting for you. All of us."

Jaime nodded. "Thanks, Gram. I'll see you next week."

## CHAPTER 2



### LATER THAT NIGHT

Scattered groups of residents were gathered in the recreation hall. Hutch and Muffy Hutchins, Tony Trance, and five others sat at a round table, alternating teams in a game of four-player Pinochle.

“Ah, if I were fifty years younger,” said Tony. Although Tony was sixty-eight, he had the physique of a man less than half his age. An eighth degree black belt in Aikido, he still practiced a strict daily training regimen. He was half Japanese, with subtle Asian features, and a shock of thick, black hair. Tony spoke in a mild, respectful manner from behind gold-rimmed spectacles.

“So much like her mother,” said Hutch. He sighed and took a sip of tea. “So beautiful—like a flower. And in some ways just as fragile. I don’t like her going to live alone. And I don’t like the idea of her going away. Who’s bid?”

“Cancer took her mother?” asked Tony.

“When she was six,” said Muffy. “She was raised by her father.” Muffy paused, and seemed to look inward. “She moved in with us when his reserve unit was called to the Middle East, for the first time. She was thirteen then.” Muffy coughed into her hand and fell silent, unable to continue.

Hutch carried on with the story. “One day, during his second tour, they sent our son home in a flag-covered box.” Hutch closed his eyes, then steadied himself. “We buried him, and...” Hutch sniffed deeply and fell silent, looking at his cards.

Muffy regained her will. “We lost it after that. Just couldn’t seem to function anymore. We moved in here and Jaime went to live with her aunt. She’s been there ever since.” She paused. “Her mother was the best. And our son, Tim, he was a good, good man. She had too little time to know them.” Muffy looked to her left. “I dealt, Murray. It’s your bid.”

“Oy. Pass.” Murray Stein was from Brooklyn and classically Jewish. Early re-

tirement had taken him to Miami, but he had never lost his thick, New York accent. Murray was short and bony, built like a candlestick. He wore elegant wool suits left over from his days as a prosperous, Wall Street CPA. But he was far thinner now, the years having eroded his bulk like heavy storms on a beach. And he looked like a child wearing the clothes of his father, with his enormous suits flopping about his body. This, combined with thick black glasses and the loose, wobbly skin hanging under his chin, made him look cartoon comical.

"I'd marry her. If she was Jewish," he said.

Tony shot him a quick, knowing glance. Both he and Murray had been unwilling victims of parental expectations.

"I knew a girl like her once," said Wendell Holms. "Gertrude." Wendell was seated beside Murray. Wendell was a quiet man who cringed when he spoke, as if waiting to be slapped. "She was my high school sweetheart. Even kissed her once. I loved her so much. And I think she loved me. But she married this Italian guy, son of a butcher. He had a future."

"Cutting meat ain't a future, Wendell," said Muffy. She looked at him and narrowed her eyes. "Where is she now?"

"I hear she's a widow."

"Then call her."

"Oh, I could never do that."

Wendell's lips twisted into an ironic smile. "I never married. Not after Gertrude. Got a small house and a pension from forty years of investigating insurance fraud. That's my life. Boredom in a nutshell." He paused. "I still think of Gertrude, though. Every day. I bid a hundred." He paused, to search the cobwebs of his memory. Then he shrugged. "But I couldn't compete with a meat cutter. Not then. Not ever."

To Wendell's left, Mortimer "Gumbo" Winkelman snorted. "Trouble with you, Wendell, is that all you've ever done is think. Call her. Ya gotta *do* things, man." Winkelman had outlived three wives and had produced six daughters. He'd run the family mortuary business in Chicago, well into his sixties. He would have stayed longer had it not been for his teeth.

"At least I can chew," said Wendell.

Winkelman stuck his tongue through his glistening gums. He had caught a rare, but virulent mouth disease in Hong Kong and lost his teeth. After that, his family had issued the ultimatum. *Get new teeth, or lose your job.* Winkelman had stood firm, and found himself in Florida three months later.

"Don't make fun of me because I stuck to my gums. If God had wanted me to have teeth, he wouldn't have taken them away. I bid one ten."

"Gumbo, I think you look sexy," said Millie Andrews, seated to Winkelman's left. Millie wanted to be Winkelman's girlfriend. She was petite, with frost-white hair.

She had the body and vigor of a teenager. She had worked for forty years as a high school gym teacher, and she was still light on her feet and quick of mind. She patted Gumbo's arm affectionately. "I think he's hot. One twenty."

"I think he's sexy, too," said Sophie. Sophie overlapped her chair. She was built like a bowling ball, standing five foot one inches tall, and rolled the scale beyond two hundred pounds. She, too, had been a high school teacher. But she had taught English, and had spent most of her life absorbed in worlds far different than her own.

"Sophie, you'd think a flounder was sexy," said Murray. "Particularly if it was on your plate."

"I bid one thirty," said Sophie, her eyes glaring back at Murray.

"I've always thought true beauty to be on the inside," interrupted Tony. He looked demandingly at Murray, willing him to apologize.

Murray sank into his chair. "You know I love you, Sophie. I'd love you even if you weighed three hundred pounds."

"Give her time and she might," said Wendell, cringing. He tried to laugh, but no one joined him.

They played out the hand and Tony made them break for the night.

## CHAPTER 3



### YESTERDAY: JAIME'S BIRTHDAY

Jaime Crandall shuddered, as a loud voice cut over the cries of laughter, then slipped away like an echo. She stared through a pair of enormously thick, sliding glass doors, to a swarm of teenaged boys and girls playing volleyball in the indoor pool. Beyond the pool, others sat in a crescent of Jacuzzis, drinking from plastic cups served by tuxedoed waiters wearing white gloves, top hats, and pistols under their coats.

Jaime looked beyond the pool, to the Hatteras 70 Motor Yacht bobbing gently in the soft breeze winding its way along Biscayne Bay. *That boat could build two-dozen houses for the elderly*, she thought. The boat seemed to laugh. A razor shaft of light sparked off its polished brass and chrome. Its bow heaved upward and it groaned, as if with sexual pleasure, as it rubbed down against the dock.

Jaime looked to the late afternoon sun, then to her cut-off jeans and T-shirt top. She exhaled softly. "I don't belong here, Carlos."

"You're wrong. You were meant for this." Carlos's six-foot-five inch frame loomed beside her. He brushed the hair from her face and moved to kiss her forehead.

Jaime snapped her head back, and then smiled shyly. "I'm sorry. I wasn't meant for this, Carlos. I really must go." Jaime lowered her head and tried to step past him.

Carlos's hand slashed forward and his fingers pressed into the flesh of her shoulders. "You can't go," he said calmly. He motioned to his guests. "You think I invited these people here for my health?"

Jaime lifted her head. As she met Carlo's glare she knew she was in trouble. She could not fight him. He was like black coffee spilled on a white blouse, something that would never go away on its own. He was something that would linger, unless she could somehow bleach him away. Carlos's eyes were sly and lustful. He looked like an Internet voyeur sneaking peeks at something he shouldn't see, like someone who knew what was right and wrong, but couldn't control his urges.

Jaime looked at him quizzically. "But I don't even know them."



“So what?” Carlos relaxed his grip and seemed to deflate. He began to whine, “They’re here because of you. The least you could do is have a good time.” Carlos ran a hand through his coarse, dark hair. A black curl dropped from his fingers and lay down across his high forehead. He glanced toward the pool, then back to Jaime. His eyes softened, and they looked almost kind.

“A good time, Carlos? You said a relaxing afternoon together by the pool, then a quiet dinner. Not a birthday bash with some party animals you rounded up at the beaches and bars. Not this. And where is my friend, Tania? Where did she go?”

“Tania made some new friends. She’s fine.”

Jaime shook her head. “Let’s go find Tania. It’s time we left.” Jaime’s blond bangs arched above her brow and then draped across her eyes. She looked through them like a Sheepdog puppy.

“But I thought we had something,” said Carlos.

“I’ll admit, I’ve noticed you running along the beach. So, when you offered to buy me a Diet Coke, I accepted. I told you about my birthday because I was feeling sad and alone. My parents are dead, my grandparents are just marking time, and I’m moving away. I couldn’t bear to be with them, not today. You don’t know me, and I don’t belong here.” Jaime challenged him with her speckled green eyes. They flashed briefly, a quick, colorful bright burst that vanished as quickly as it came. *And I seriously misjudged you*, she thought. *Time to go.*

“But it’s your birthday,” said Carlos, pleading like a spoiled child.

“And I needed to spend it with someone close to my own age, someone I didn’t know too well.” She hesitated. “Someone I wouldn’t miss.”

Carlos frowned and his face grew pale and pathetic. He jammed his hands into his pockets and hung his head like a scolded dog.

“I don’t mean it that way, Carlos. It’s just that I have so many close friends. Dear friends. But, because of my career, I have to leave them... I had to be alone, or with someone new. Can’t we go somewhere? Can’t we just talk?”

Carlos closed his eyes and licked his lips. He felt like a jackal sensing a kill. “My uncle’s study?”

“Is it quiet?”

Carlos nodded. The sides of his mouth twitched. “Very.” *But you’re much better off by the pool. Don’t make me do this. I don’t want to hurt you. That’s why I wanted people around.*

Carlos walked past Jaime, motioning with his head toward the hallway. Jaime followed with tentative steps, her feet feeling awkward upon the slick marble floors. She fought the urge to gawk at the art upon the walls, the seventeenth century furniture lining the hallway, and the gaudy crystal chandeliers hanging in a long row above her.

Carlos stopped beside a heavy, carved wooden door. He grasped its silver knob, held his breath, and sighed as the door swung open. “This way,” he said.

Jaime walked through the door and froze. Even the overstated opulence of the

rest of the home hadn't prepared her for this. The head of a golden dragon glowered from above, its eyes giant rubies glinting blood red, its tongue spitting fiery light along its jewel-encrusted length. The dragon's body disappeared into the wooden ceiling, then reappeared further inside the room.

The office was scattered with golden figures. They were perched on shelves along the walls. They rested on top of thick wooden beams that ran lengthwise above their heads, like rafters in a barn. They stood on pedestals placed strategically throughout the room.

Jaime's eyes grew wide. Part of her wanted to scream, while another part felt awed by the strange beauty of the room. "Your uncle has interesting tastes," she said after a long pause. She meandered about the office and stopped beneath the dragon. "Hindu?"

"Very good," said Carlos. "India. Seventeen sixty-five." He motioned toward other objects in the room. "This from Thailand, Peru, Mexico, Columbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria."

"I thought your uncle was a lawyer?"

Carlos stretched out his arms, arched his chest toward the ceiling and laughed. "My uncle is a collector." His smile faded and his eyes grew solemn. His voice became soft, his words coming slowly, contemplatively. "He collects things." He paused. "Like he collected me, after my parents were murdered."

Murdered? thought Jaime. Carlos's parents were murdered? She avoided the issue. "He sent you to Harvard."

"*Forced* me to Harvard."

Carlos walked to a massive, twelve-legged writing desk that commanded the back of the study. "A collector is what he is." Carlos ran a finger along the desk-top. "This desk, for instance. It's Russian. Only two of them known in the world. The other was owned by the Tsar, Nicholas. My uncle paid six million for it at a Sotheby's auction, if you can believe it." Carlos gave a long sigh. "And, like this desk, years ago I had no choice in my owner." He smiled, paused and shrugged, as if he had just lost a debate. "Such is life."

Carlos reached beneath the desk and pressed an unseen button. The door behind Jaime closed quietly and snapped shut. She heard clicking, as several dead bolts within the door sealed it like a vault.

"There," said Carlos. "No one will bother us now."

Jaime glanced behind her and felt her skin prickle. She looked back to Carlos, and followed his eyes to her shorts. It was early January, but the weather in Miami had been unusually warm. Expecting to be by the pool, Jaime had worn little over her bathing suit. Suddenly she felt cold and naked.

"Maybe we should go back out by the pool?"

"I think not."

Carlos reached to a smooth, ebony box on top of his uncle's desk and lifted its

top. Inside, Jaime could see what looked like bleached flour or sugar or worse. “You know what this is?” he asked.

“Carlos, no.”

“No? I thought you wanted to be alone?” Carlos opened a discreet drawer built into the box and removed a tiny spoon. “You should try this,” he said. “It’ll loosen you up.” He dipped the spoon into the fine white powder and walked toward Jaime. She backed away but he followed her. Her shoulders thumped against the heavy carved, wooden door and her arms spread out against it.

“Please, no.”

“C’mon. A big star like you has got to be loose.”

“I’m not a star, Carlos. And I—”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never?” Realization flickered in Carlos’s eyes, and an amused expression spread across his face. “Well, I’ll be...” He moved the spoon toward Jaime’s nose. “Then I shall open your eyes.”

“Please.” Jaime shook her head, like a horse trying to spit its bit. “I...said...no.”

Carlos laughed. It was a deep, throaty laugh. “Why don’t you try screaming?” He lifted the spoon and snorted. “No one will hear you.” He closed his eyes. “Ahhh. That’s better.”

Jaime’s voice became a hoarse, pleading whisper. “Please don’t make me do this, Carlos.”

“I’m afraid I can’t let you out of here until you do.”

Carlos returned to the desk, refilled the spoon, and snorted again. He dipped it back into the cocaine. “You see, I have this compulsion. It’s a family thing. Call it a family curse.” He walked toward Jaime, the spoon outstretched. “Sometimes I just have to have my way.”

Jaime crouched and huddled against the door, sniffing as she fought not to cry. Carlos kept coming, until he loomed above her like a robin on a worm.

“Please,” she begged.

Carlos pressed the spoon against her cheek. “Take it,” he said. “It’ll be less painful if I don’t force you, maybe even fun.”

Jaime turned as if to comply. Then she blew the powder into Carlos’s face. He fell back, clutching at his eyes.

“You little shit.”

Carlos fought the sting for several moments, then stood to his full height. He moved his mass toward Jaime. She shrank to the floor and pressed her face into the Persian carpet, as if trying to bury herself like an ostrich. Tears slipped out from under her tightly closed eyelids and dripped into the rug. Carlos grabbed her by the hair and the skin of her neck, and pulled her off the ground with one hand, as he might a small cat. He peered into her eyes.

“I would have thought you’d love this stuff.”

Carlos set Jaime down, but held on to the top of her hair. “Guess we were

wrong about each other.” He paused. “You do that again, I’ll break your neck.”

Jaime screamed. She tore at Carlos with her fists and fingernails. She managed to rip several gouges out of his cheeks and she bloodied his nose. Carlos hit back with an open fist and Jaime drifted to the floor in a woozy, half-faint.

Carlos cradled his face in his hands, then gazed at the blood dripping onto his fingers from his nose. He looked back to Jaime and watched her stand back up. She took a wide stance and readied herself, like a tennis pro waiting for the next serve. Blood drooled from her lip and dribbled down her chin, but she didn’t seem to notice. Her eyes were narrow slits and her teeth were bared.

Carlos’s right eye began to twitch. He just stood there, twitching. Then his shoulders slumped. He took a step backward and said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” He stood to his full height and walked back to the desk, his eyes remaining warily on Jaime as he moved.

“Will you try this now?” he said.

Jaime threw up on the carpet.

Carlos’s lips formed a thin, pink line. He reached into the desk, pulled out a coil of nylon rope and a piece of surgical tubing. He held them in the air. “I must have my way, you know.” He tossed the rope onto the desk. “Who knows? This could even be your thing.”

Carlos reached back into the desk and produced a syringe. He held it up in the air so Jaime could see it clearly. “I’ll use this if I have to. It’s your choice. This or the spoon.”

Carlos shut the drawer and laid the syringe beside the rope and the tubing on top of the desk. “Now,” he said. “What will it be?”

Jaime’s head began to rattle, almost like she was having an epileptic seizure. She threw up again. Then all the will seemed to drain from her body, and she slumped into the floor. She brought her knees to her chest and curled as tightly as she could. “Please don’t do this to me, Carlos.”

“That’s your choice, then?”

“I want to go home.”

“Not until we’ve had a proper party.”

“Please.”

Carlos seemed to hesitate. He looked at Jaime, at the spoon in his hand, and finally at the syringe. Then, inexplicably, tears began to form in his eyes.

“All right,” he said. “I like you, Jaime. And I don’t want to hurt you.” Carlos opened the desk drawer and pressed a button.

“I just thought we could have a little fun.” Jaime heard the door bolts slide. She exhaled expectantly as Carlos walked toward the open doorway, watching him like a sparrow following a hawk in flight. “I think you can find your way home,” he said, and strode out of the study without looking back.

## CHAPTER 4



### **TODAY: 6 A.M.**

Faint fingers of light were beginning to stretch over the horizon as Dr. Edward McDonough swung his Ford Thunderbird into an assigned parking space at the Dade County Morgue. McDonough wasn't due at work for another two hours, but Wednesday had been deathly. He had two bodies to complete before he could start today's first autopsy.

McDonough peered into his car's rearview mirror and pinched a pimple on an otherwise clear forehead. He cursed the stubborn remnants of his youth. McDonough was a good-looking man, the kind of man a girl likes to bring home to her mother, with red wavy hair, lively walnut eyes, a quick smile, and a firm, angular chin. He was six feet tall, trim, and lifted weights three times a week.

"Thirty-one and still squeezing zits," he muttered.

McDonough grabbed his brown leather briefcase from the passenger seat of his car and slammed the door. As he walked up the steps, he noticed the lights on inside the building, shining like lonely beacons into the darkness of the city. Death punches its own time clock, he thought ruefully. And it was a constant, twenty-four hour job.

McDonough stepped into the building and made his way toward his office. He stopped outside the door of Dr. Joseph Stafford, the Medical Examiner, smoothed his hair and stuck his head inside to greet the big boss.

"Already in, huh?" he said.

Stafford lifted his head. His eyes were bloodshot and his silver hair was greased and matted against his scalp. "I hate this town," he said.

On the desk sat two stacks of paper, one far larger than the other. Stafford moved a single sheet of paper from the tall stack to the shorter one.

"So, what else is new?" McDonough said.

Stafford nodded and returned to his reading.

McDonough accepted the sign telling him to leave. But, as he began walking down the hall, he called back loudly, "I'm here first. I got dibs on the hotties."

"You asked for it," shouted Stafford.

McDonough stopped and retraced his steps. "What was that?" He poked his head back through Stafford's door.

"There's a rare one on its way."

Stafford looked back to his papers and said nothing more.

"Let me know," said McDonough. His stomach churned uneasily. He wasn't sure why.

McDonough dropped his briefcase on his desk and made a desperate dash for the coffee station. Inside the small kitchen, McDonough reached into the community cupboard and pulled out a mug. *DEAD MEN STAY STIFF LONGER*, it read.

"Sick," he said, smiling, Morgue humor. His favorite cup. He filled it to the top.

McDonough carried the coffee to his empty autopsy station, set the mug on an unoccupied gurney, and tossed on a clean smock. He began to whistle. He liked his job. He was a body detective, one of the most challenging professions in the world. It was like speaking a long lost language, one of blood, skin, bugs, chemicals and dirt.

McDonough opened the door to the walk-in cooler and retrieved one of his two subjects from the day before. He took several thin slices from the body organs and made slides. He took tissue samples to be sent upstairs to toxicology. Then he put the body's organs into separate plastic bags and sewed them back inside the body.

When this was done he brought the woman back to the cooler and retrieved the other corpse. He was wheeling it out of the cooler, just as a new body was wheeled in. *That's mine*, he thought. He glanced at his watch. Six fifty-four.

At eight forty-five, McDonough put the finishing touches on his second body and locked it into place. He gulped the remains of his cold coffee and walked to the kitchen to get a fresh cup. Several young doctors were seated around a square, white Formica table munching on bagels and studying the last swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*.

"Now this..." said one of the doctors, holding up the magazine. "...is an athlete."

"Hi, Eddy," said another, looking up as McDonough entered the room.

"Hey guys." McDonough leaned over the magazine and gave it a careful examination. "God, I love sports."

McDonough drained the dregs from the coffee pot into his mug. Fearing a riot, he threw a fresh filter into the pot, filled it with new coffee grounds and started the next round of go-go juice. Then he joined his friends. He held his palm an inch above the cover of the magazine. "Gives off more heat than my last girlfriend."

"You've got to stop dating stiffs," said one of his friends.

“Ha, ha. Funny,” said McDonough.

The intercom buzzed and one of the doctors hit the speaker button on the Polycom sound station.

“Yeah?”

“McDonough there?”

“Sure. He was just feeling up my girlfriend.”

“Send him down.”

The doctors looked at McDonough. “What gives?” one said.

McDonough stretched and looked at his watch. “Stafford’s got a hot one for me.”

“Why you?” the men cried in unison.

McDonough smoothed his hair and adjusted his tie. “Good looking women like to be examined by good looking men. None of you quacks qualify.”

He began to whistle and walked briskly out of the room.

When he reached the Medical Examiner’s office he said brightly, “Dr. Edward McDonough reporting for duty, sir!”

Stafford’s face was pinched into a sour stare. “Why are you always so dammed happy?”

“It’s this work. It’s not a job, it’s an adventure.” McDonough snapped off his best military salute.

Stafford chuckled, but shook his head wearily. “Well, I’ve got an adventure for you. A Jane Doe, and a pretty one. Stunning, in fact. Just as I promised.”

“They wheeled her in before seven,” said McDonough. “How come I only get her now?”

“You don’t miss anything, do you?” Stafford’s eyelids were drooping, but his eyes were alert.

“That’s my job, Joe.”

“Yeah.” Stafford reached to a small pewter sculpture of a golfer on his desk. He pulled back the golfer’s head and let it go. This swung a golf club back and forth in a rapid rhythm. *That’s my life*, he thought. Back and forth. Back and forth.

“She an O.D.?” asked McDonough.

“Hell, I don’t know. You’re the pathologist. I’m a simple M.D. I book ‘em and hook ‘em so you can look ‘em.”

McDonough grew serious. “Let’s go see her, sir.” He began walking away from the door.

“Not so fast,” said the Examiner.

McDonough turned. “What gives?”

Stafford clasped his hands together and made a steeple with his index fingers. He blew against the steeple and toppled his fingers. “You’ll have company on this one.”

McDonough gave Stafford a questioning look.

“McBride is on his way,” said Stafford.

“Deputy Chief McBride? Our city’s finest?”

“The man himself.”

McDonough gave a long, low whistle.

At that moment, Chief Michael McBride appeared in the doorway, smiling. “Somebody whistle for me?”

Stafford remained seated. He frowned, thinking back to his conversation with McBride earlier that morning.

“Sorry to call you at home, Dr. Stafford,” McBride had said. “We’ll need your special services today.”

Stafford had arched an eye at the digital clock by his bed. “It’s five a.m., Chief.”

“Earn your money, Stafford. We need you there. Now.”

That had been four hours ago. Now McBride was here, making sure he did his job, as ordered.

McBride hopped lightly onto the corner of Stafford’s desk, leaned back on his arms and bounced his feet rhythmically. “Thanks for helping me out on this one, Joe,” he said.

“I was just telling Doctor McDonough that the police are taking a personal interest in this case.”

“Thanks, Joe. We need all the help we can get.” McBride turned to McDonough. “It’s part of our ongoing crackdown on drugs in this town.” His eyes studied the room with a deliberate nonchalance. After several moments, he looked back at McDonough. “Kids these days.” He shook his head, paused, and stared at the ceiling. After a long silence, McBride spoke again. “Word came in that we had another overdose. I’m checking as many as I can, personally, to see which ones might lead us up the chain. This seemed like one I shouldn’t miss.”

McBride and Stafford exchanged accusatory stares. The visual battle was not lost on McDonough. Stafford reached into his desk and pulled out a bottle of Visine. He let several drops fall into each eye and dabbed them dry with a handkerchief.

Stafford grunted. “I think what the good chief is saying, Eddy, is that we’ve either got an open or a quickly shut case. Isn’t that about right, Chief?”

McBride smiled, and then gave a long, resigned sigh. “That’s about it, Joe. We’re so damned backed up that we’ve got to pick and choose our battles, carefully.”

The Examiner rose from his chair. He stretched his arms toward the ceiling and his shirt popped out from under his belt. He pulled the fabric down over his ample belly, then absentmindedly tucked his shirt tails back into his pants. He missed half a tail in the rear and it hung down over his butt. No one told him as he left his office. “Let’s not keep the Chief waiting all day, Eddy.”



Stafford shuffled down the white corridor and pushed open the double doors to the morgue examination room. He walked into the cooler, followed closely by McDonough and McBride. The Examiner walked directly to a gurney and pulled it away from the wall. Without touching the sheet cover, Stafford rolled the table into the brightly lit autopsy room. There he stopped the gurney at McDonough's private corner and locked the wheels into place.

"This one definitely has your name on it, Eddy," said Stafford. He pulled back the sheet. "No purse. No ID."

McDonough was used to dead bodies, but he caught his breath with this one. The left side of the woman's face was bruised and swollen. Her lips were split and parted. One of her front teeth was gone. The others were stained with blood. The woman's green eyes were open and she seemed almost alive. She had yet to take on the grotesque qualities of death. McDonough could feel her pain. He could see her beauty. And he could sense her innocence.

"Bastards," he said. He slipped on a pair of latex gloves.

"Yeah," said Stafford.

McDonough lifted the woman's right arm and studied it. "Ligature marks. Bruises, rope burns. Found her on the beach, didn't you?"

"How'd you know?" said McBride.

"Trade secret."

McDonough looked more closely at her hands. There were specks of sand between her fingers, and tiny curls of shredded skin underneath her nails. He shook his head and lifted the sheet. He studied the rest of the woman's body, her cut-off jeans, and the delicate blouse over smooth, well cared for skin.

"I wonder if she was raped," said McDonough.

"You tell us," said McBride.

"We'll know after I've completed the examination."

"Tell me now," said McBride.

"I've got a procedure to follow—"

"McDonough," interrupted Stafford. "Do what the chief says."

McDonough shrugged. He checked the body quickly, careful not to disturb what might become evidence in a murder trial.

"No sign of semen." He pressed a finger inside her and frowned. "Wow. I think she's a virgin."

McDonough drew a full, measured breath and let the air out between his teeth. "Poor thing." He looked into the woman's eyes, then to her nose and mouth. "Ten to one we'll find cocaine. Eight to one it was forced into her." He scratched his head with a pencil from his shirt pocket. "Yep, if I were a betting man, I'd place my money on rage and murder."

"We're not here to gamble," said McBride. His voice was toneless.

Stafford turned his palms upward, set his eyes on McDonough, and said, "You talk this over with McBride. Then report to me."

As the Medical Examiner began to walk away, he could feel a lump grow in his throat, like a marble that wouldn't go away, no matter how hard he swallowed. His job was a balancing act, tipping between good and evil, serving the warring masters of truth, justice, politics and city economics. Sometimes certain forces grew too strong, tipping the scales of justice too far in the wrong direction, deep into evil's domain.

"Yeah," said McDonough. "I will."

When Stafford reached the door he stopped and turned. He leaned against the wall, and stuck his hands into his pockets. "Call me at the house Eddy. I'm going home for breakfast and a shower. I really need a shower."

McBride watched Stafford's shirttail disappear out the door. Then the police chief turned toward McDonough. "Continue your investigation, doctor," he said softly.

### THREE HOURS LATER

Edward McDonough walked stiffly into his office and called his boss at home.

"That asshole called us off the case."

"Already?"

"Not officially. Doesn't take a genius to know what's happening, though."

"The department has a lot of cases to follow, Eddy."

"But this one's murder. No signs of self-abuse. No tracks. Nose wasn't wasted. Shit, I can tell from her teeth that she didn't even drink coffee." McDonough paused. "I'm sending her fluids to the lab, for what good it'll do."

"Could she be a crack addict?"

"C'mon, Doc," said McDonough. "Give me some respect."

"What about her bruises?"

"Nylon fibers, buried in her skin."

"Was she tied long?"

"She wasn't tied for an hour of kinky sex, I'll tell you that. She fought long and hard."

There was a pause on the phone. Then McDonough said, "McBride's people think she might have been a singer by the name of Jaime Crandall. They had an anonymous call on her this morning. The body's got what look to be guitar calluses on the ends of her left fingers. So, they're probably right."

"You call the family?"

"The police said her parents are dead."

"Next of kin?"

“Grandparents. They’re being contacted.”

“That was quick.” Stafford paused. “I guess that’s it, then.” He started to hang up the phone.

McDonough interrupted. “Boss, there’s something else.”

“What, Eddy?”

“You know Chet, one of the med school kids I’ve been training?”

“Yeah.”

“I brought him in to see the body after McBride left. And you’ll never believe what he told me.”

“I’m listening, Eddy.” *Although I really don’t want to.*

“Chester and a few of his friends from school were pulled off the beach to this high digs party yesterday afternoon. And you’ll never guess who the guest of honor was.”

“Jaime Crandall?”

“Bingo. They say she’s a hot, up-and-coming singer. Weakens the knees.”

“I hate to ask whose house.”

“That’s what intrigues me.” McDonough paused for effect. “Ramon Cesar.”

“He’s a respected attorney and businessman.”

“He was the hired legal gun for Sanchez, until he murdered the old man. Now he’s one of the biggest dealers in the country. Don’t shit me, Doc. You *know* what he is.” McDonough felt a warm, clammy heat begin to flush from his skin, and the room seemed to close around him. He pulled off his coat. “You’ve got to keep this case open, sir.”

“It’s out of my hands, Eddie.”

The phone fell silent for several moments. Finally, Stafford broke in. “Eddy,” he said softly. “You’ll do the right thing, won’t you?”

McDonough wasn’t sure if his boss was warning him off or pressing him on.

“I’ll do my job,” he said quietly. “What else can I do?”

“Sometimes I really hate this town.” Stafford hung up the phone.

## CHAPTER 5



### **TODAY: 11 A.M.**

The residents were squeezed more tightly than ever into the Final Rest community hall. Grandchildren and great grandchildren were there to enjoy Jaime's final concert. Young boys and girls chased each other through the hallways, laughing, screaming, and ignoring Tony Trance as he tried to direct families to their seats.

Mrs. Taylor was wide awake and in soaring spirits. Richard Crump pushed her wheelchair forward with a deep sense of foreboding. He leaned toward her good ear and said, "Promise me you won't dance today."

Mrs. Taylor took a breath from her oxygen and rasped, "I was born to boogie, Ritchie." She batted her eyes. "Loosen up and dance with me. Sweep me onto my feet."

"I don't dance," said Crump flatly. But there was an amused scowl upon his face, like a father disciplining a child for something he secretly thought was funny.

Tony Trance stepped beside Mrs. Taylor's chair and put a gentle hand on Crump's shoulder. "Having fun, Richard?"

Crump growled, and then pointed an accusing finger at Tony. "You stay out of this."

Tony grabbed the handles to Mrs. Taylor's chair. He nudged Richard away with his shoulder and smiled. "Don't worry, Rich. We'll limit her to slow dances only."

"She's not supposed to be dancing. How many times must I tell you... Don't let her lead."

At eleven thirty, Jaime had yet to appear. Hutch and Muffy were missing as well. Gumbo Winkelman shuffled from his front row seat, past the many rows of anxious residents, past the unruly children skittering about like water-bugs, past the four beds that had been wheeled into the back of the room. He stopped beside Tony, who stood rigidly, like a British Beefeater, at the entrance.

“Where d’ya think they are?”

“Probably stuck in traffic.”

At noon the phone call came. Richard Crump walked back into the still-packed hall and motioned for Tony. “It’s Hutch on the phone, for you.”

Tony gave Richard a worried glance and followed him down a cream colored corridor, to the administrative offices. The administrator stood by her desk, staring out the window toward the parking lot. The phone was unhooked and lying on the desk.

The administrator locked eyes with Tony as he entered the office. Then she motioned toward the phone and turned to stare out of the window again, as if not wanting to watch.

“Hutch?” said Tony.

“Hi.” Hutch sounded like a choking, stuttering frog, his croak so soft Tony could barely hear it.

“Are you all right?”

“Tony?” Hutch hesitated. “Could you come be with us?”

Tony cupped the phone and turned to the administrator. “Did he tell you what happened?”

The woman turned toward Tony. There were tears in her eyes and her lips were trembling. She said nothing, she just turned her gaze back to the window.

“It’s not Jaime, is it?” said Tony.

The administrator nodded, and softly whispered, “Yes.”

“Hutch, where are you?”

Tony heard no answer, just a shuffling on the other end of the phone. Then a new voice came on, louder, and more assured.

“Tony, it’s Muff. They think Jaime’s dead.” She paused. “We have to...view...her.”

“Where are you?”

“At the Medical Examiner’s office. You know where it is?”

Tony remained silent. *Muffy, we all know where it is. It’s the last place we want to go, and the last place too many of us do go.*

“They say we have to look at the body. Once it’s ready. And I can’t get Hutch to go inside. Can you come? Hutch needs you. We both need you.”

“What can I bring?”

“Nothing, Tony. Just be here.”

Tony heard the phone clank against the floor on the other end of the line. He could hear Hutch sobbing quietly. Then he heard Muffy’s voice as she tried to console him. He closed his eyes, and he could hear Jaime’s voice begin to echo against the sound of Muffy, as she joined her husband in muted cries.

“It will be all right. Somehow, it will be all right,” whispered Tony.

Tony let the phone fall into its cradle. He looked to the administrator, then at Richard.

“What will I tell them?” he said. “The residents?”

For some of the residents Jaime was *all* they lived for. He had to tell them the truth. They deserved no less.

Tony walked to the recreation hall door and stopped. He leaned against the wall, looking out over the crowd. *What can I tell them? So many of them waiting here to die, and now this?*

Tony thought of the Final Rest, this diverse community where people lived before dying. No one under the age of sixty-two, and most of them well beyond that. Boasting nearly one thousand private and independently owned residences, ranging from detached houses, to condos, to single, rest-home-style rooms. There was a fully staffed nursing facility, a small hospital, a funeral parlor, a recreation center and community cafeteria—all interconnected.

*One moves from one to the next as inevitably as the sunrise*, thought Tony. Each of the residents was in a different stage of life and death. But, for two years the entire community had become invigorated and united, by Jaime Crandall. Now she was dead.

*How will I tell them?* He wondered. How *could* he tell them?

Tony walked across the stage, pulled the microphone from its perch, and blew into it softly. “Hi,” he said.

Tony looked out to the expectant faces.

“We come into this world naked and screaming.” He paused. “And we spend the rest of our lives covering ourselves, as we try to silence our cries.” Tony’s voice cracked and he coughed softly. He tried to wet his tongue, but it felt like a dry sponge. “Today we will bare our emotions and we will cry.”

He gazed at the puzzled stares of the residents.

“Jaime Crandall is missing, and she may be dead.”

There was a collective gasp and the room fell into muffled silence, like the inside of a coffin. Seconds later it erupted, emotions uncorked and bubbling like errant champagne. It looked like the approach of Armageddon.

*Life, death and renewal* thought Tony. The beauty and senselessness of it all.

“I’m sorry,” he said hoarsely. “That’s all I know.”

Tony hung his head and stepped from the stage. He heard the groans and the gasps, the questions and denials, and he ignored it all.

## CHAPTER 6



The receptionist at the Miami-Dade County Morgue greeted Tony with a practiced, plastic smile. “Good afternoon, Mr. Trance.”

The woman took several steps to her left. She stopped before a set of swinging doors and stepped back deftly, just as they burst open. A pair of young doctors, clad in white and laughing uproariously, walked across the room. They waved at the receptionist without breaking stride and disappeared through a second set of swinging doors.

The woman pointed. “Through those doors, the ones they came from. You’ll find your friends inside.” She smiled once more. This time her eyes crinkled and the smile looked genuine. As the woman returned to her desk, Tony wondered if she was paid by the hour or by the smile.

Tony followed the woman’s directions and found himself in a large, open waiting area. Hutch and Muffy were seated in a corner on hard plastic chairs. Before them stood a chrome coffee table littered with back issues of *National Geographic* and *Time Magazine*, all with the mailing labels torn off. There was also a box of Kleenex. Beside the table was a wicker wastebasket half filled with crumpled yellow tissues.

Muffy was blowing her nose as Tony popped through the doors. She looked at him wordlessly and pointed with a tissue toward an empty chair beside Hutch. Her eyes looked tired and droopy, like a wilting flower. Tony grasped her hands and she brightened.

“Tony. Thank you for coming,” she said.

Tony nodded. He looked at Hutch. His friend seemed frozen in death, his back rigid, his eyes blank, staring unseeingly forward.

“Hey, buddy,” said Tony. He sat beside Hutch and touched his knee. “I’m so sorry.”

Hutch’s face twitched and his eyes seemed to soften. But otherwise, he didn’t acknowledge Tony’s presence.

“He blames himself,” said Muffy.

“I’ve seen it before,” said Tony.

At that moment, a man dressed in khaki pants, a blue shirt, and a loosened yellow tie entered the room. His clothes were partially covered by an open white lab coat, which had several stubborn stains down the front.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Dr. Edward McDonough.”

McDonough’s face had a healthy, boyish glow, and was surrounded by a shock of curly red hair.

“Call me Ed, Mac, Doc or Doctor, whatever you like.” He stuck out his hand and they all shook, with silence weighing heavily in the air, like a breath of plague.

McDonough motioned for them to follow. “This way,” he said, turning sideways, walking half backwards, while still facing them. “Any trouble finding the place?” He walked on. “Many people don’t know we even exist until—” His voice trailed off and he shrugged, embarrassed.

McDonough stopped and motioned for his guests to enter a small office. There were two chairs facing a green and chrome industrial metal desk. Tony pulled one chair back for Muffy and Hutch took the other.

“Can I get you a chair?” asked McDonough, looking at Tony.

Tony shook his head. “We won’t be long, will we?”

“Ah, no. They’re just...” McDonough hesitated. “...making the body viewable.”

McDonough sat down behind his desk and began fumbling with a cigarette lighter. “It was I who examined, who we believe to be, Jaime Crandall. Early this morning. She came in off South Beach.”

Tony looked stunned. “At five thirty?” Tony remembered the body he had seen while running. Had that been Jaime? He felt his tongue shrivel to a flat, dry pancake. His stomach tightened and he felt acid begin to rise in his throat.

McDonough nodded. “She got *in here* around seven.” McDonough flicked his lighter several times, watching the small flame dance before he killed it. “One of you will need to identify her.”

No one moved. Hutch and Muffy sat closed-mouthed, staring at their feet. Tony seemed to be looking inward, his face blank of expression. After several moments McDonough continued, nervously. “Should I tell you about the process, then?” He looked to the three silent mourners, and felt the silence close around him. He felt odd, like he was being stalked by a hunting lion. His mouth ran away. “There are two ways to handle a body—the Coroner’s system and the Medical Examiner’s system. The Coroner’s system stems from the old English word *Crowner*. The Medical Examiner’s system is what we use here.”

McDonough glanced at his watch. Ten minutes, minimum, before he could bring them to see her. He couldn’t stand anguished faces, and he did his best to avoid the eyes of Muffy and Hutch. Instead, he centered his attention on the im-



passive face of Tony Trance. *What is he thinking?* he wondered. This was the part of the job he hated—sharing, day after day, the most painful moment in someone’s life. He felt the urge to stare out the window, to pore into a book, or grab another cup of coffee. Anything but sit silently with these people in their grief. They deserved more.

“Can I offer you something? Coffee? Tea?” Silence.

*Silence is the worst*, he thought. So he droned on. “The Coroner’s system is used in areas with smaller populations, using elected officials with no forensic knowledge or training. They could be barbers or housewives, it doesn’t matter. The only thing they really need to become Coroner is *votes*.”

“When a body shows up, a Coroner will hire a local pathologist, and act in an administrative capacity, making sure no skullduggery is involved in the fatality, and ultimately sign off on the death certificate. In England, however, a Coroner must be a pathologist, with or without forensic training.”

McDonough craved a Milky Way bar. He searched through his drawer but found it bare of chocolate. Chocolate always helped. He’d have to endure without it.

“The Medical Examiner’s office is very American. In many states, such as Connecticut, Maryland, and Massachusetts, there is one office that handles the entire state. For larger population centers, such as Miami and New York City, there may be a county M.E. The big jurisdictions have CSI teams, something like what you might see on TV. Although, we sure would love their budgets. What never varies is that all offices have one Chief Examiner, and a staff of supporting examiners, like me, who are under his control. This place was built big enough to handle all the bodies off a 747. Would you like me to stop talking?”

Muffy sniffed quietly into a tissue, while Hutch and Tony stared at him blankly.

“When can we see her?” asked Tony.

“Soon,” said McDonough. “But not yet.” McDonough looked at his watch. *Call, damn you!*

“Was Jaime murdered, Doctor?” asked Tony.

McDonough drew a deep breath and swallowed. “It’s not my position to say.”

Tony stepped forward and put his hands on McDonough’s desk. “I thought you examined her?”

“There’s much more to it than that.”

“Bull crap.”

McDonough fidgeted with his lighter. “You’ll have to speak with the police. Specifically, Deputy Chief Michael McBride. Number two man in the whole P.D. Head of Patrol, Specialized Operations and the Criminal Investigations divisions. He’s the one you want. Good luck reaching him.”

Tony leaned over, snatched McDonough’s lighter, and tossed it onto the desk. “Why don’t you tell us what you found, *Ed?*”

McDonough licked a line of sweat off his upper lip, but new beads erupted across it within moments. The blood drained from his face, and he looked like one of his subjects, ready for the first cut.

“What are you not telling us, son?” continued Tony.

“She died of heart failure.” McDonough hesitated. “Most likely due to cocaine or heroin, or both.”

“Jaime would never take drugs,” said Muffy.

McDonough glanced furtively toward his half-opened door. Tony saw him look and shut it without asking.

“There were signs of struggle,” said McDonough softly. “But you’ll have to get the rest from the police. I can’t really—”

“Why don’t you just tell us what you know!”

Tony’s voice sliced loudly through the air, and McDonough’s face seemed to shrink, like a basketball suddenly punctured by an ice pick.

McDonough blinked, and buckled to the challenge. “Because I was ordered not to.” He hesitated. “Sir.” Why did he feel the urge to call this man ‘sir’?

Tony stared. He aimed his gaze like a sniper’s rifle, refusing to accept McDonough’s answer. The young man stood and put his hands around the sides of his head. He stared at the ceiling, waiting for Tony’s stare to slacken. He tapped his right foot upon the floor. From the corner of his eye he could see Tony, still staring. Finally, he snapped his head around and looked at his accuser. His expression hardened.

“She was bound and gagged. She fought her assailant, as the skin tissue under her fingernails, the bruises on her wrists, and...” He hesitated. “...other things prove. I’ve got pictures, and samples. Just in case.” McDonough seemed to lose his nerve and looked to his desk.

“Just in case, doctor?”

McDonough hesitated. He puffed out his cheeks and let the air out in a long, resigned sigh. He looked to the closed door and grabbed his car keys off the desk. He fiddled with them for several seconds before tossing them back. “Do you mind if I smoke?” he asked.

Hutch frowned, while Muffy searched Tony’s eyes for answers.

Tony gave a flick of his hand. “You want to kill yourself, be my guest.”

McDonough looked relieved. “Nasty habit, I know. It’s just that—” He snapped his lighter on, lit a cigarette and drew in deeply. He didn’t bother to exhale before speaking again. “Now and then this job gets to you. You know?” He took three quick drags from the cigarette, snubbed it out on the edge of his coffee mug and let the butt drop in.

“That’s better,” he said, looking up. “I...” He glanced at the bottom of his door, searching for shadows. “...I’m not supposed to tell you this. But there are two

needle marks in the back of her neck, where I think the fatal dose was given. She has lacerations around the nose and mouth, as if someone tried to force her.” McDonough ran a hand through his hair. “She was not a willing participant.”

“You can be sure that we’ll do all we can to help you in your investigation,” said Tony.

McDonough grabbed his cigarettes and squeezed the pack, tapping the bottom of it against his desk. He fought off the urge to pull one out, along with the desire to run out of the room.

“Deputy Chief McBride has ordered the case closed.”

“Closed? You just about told us that a girl was murdered.” Tony laughed at the irony. He knew the strategy.

“Officially, the cause of death will, most likely, prove to be an overdose. I can only report my findings to the police and—”

Tony interrupted and continued the sentence. “You have found insufficient evidence to warrant further investigation. I get the drill.”

McDonough rocked back and forth in his chair then nodded in agreement. “Murder is bad for tourism, you know. Can’t have the world thinking this isn’t a safe place to vacation.”

Tony closed his eyes and held his breath. He felt the urge to break McDonough’s desk, perhaps strangle the doctor himself. Years of suppressed anger fought to escape in one single burst, and it took all of Tony’s will to remain calm. After half a minute he opened his eyes, and looked at McDonough.

“Tell us all you’ve done and what you’ve found.”

McDonough bit the nail off one of his thin, reddened fingers. He was being forced to choose between his job and what was right. What was that oath he took when he became a doctor? *Shit*.

“It’s not unusual, you know, the police closing a case like this. This isn’t television. The Miami CSIB doesn’t always get the killer. They don’t have teams of five working on every case.” McDonough paused. “Half the murders go unsolved. Hundreds of deaths are referred to the office every year—homicides, suicides, cremations. Anyone with anything unusual or unidentifiable must come through here. That includes the well preserved and easily recognized.” He took a breath. “Or someone who is just bones. We check them all for evidence of foul play. And we find more questions than answers.” He shrugged. “We just report our findings to the police. Then they have their own set of rules.”

“Don’t you have investigators?”

“Yes, but we’re not equipped, or empowered, to do anything but report our findings to the proper authorities. *We* can’t prosecute.”

“And all of you, of course, are overworked and underpaid?” asked Tony.

“We can’t investigate everything. We simply don’t have the staff.”

“Someone’s running scared,” said Tony.

McDonough met his eyes this time. “There’s always that possibility.”

*Why are you telling him all this?* thought McDonough. *You’re supposed to be an examiner, not a detective.* He took a large gulp of coffee and nearly choked. He grimaced, as the cigarette butt swirled in his mouth. He spit it back into the mug and set it on the desk.

Tony looked down to the mug and read across the side. “Dead men stay stiffer longer,” he said. “You have a strange sense of humor, Doctor.”

McDonough smiled grimly. “It’s not always easy around here. Over ten thousand total cases, and a thousand plus autopsies a year. The bodies come in and get divvied up among us. Then we get to share our wonderful news with people like you.”

McDonough looked to his watch. *Call, damn you.*

“Jaime will get a full autopsy,” said Tony.

McDonough nodded slowly. “That, I will assure you.”

McDonough looked to Jaime’s grandparents and imagined himself in their place. He closed his eyes.

“We’ll take specimens upstairs to toxicology. We’ll take fibers from the fingers and other body parts, skin and hair from under her nails.”

“Will you have them analyzed, genetically?”

McDonough shook his head. “Not at this time. Costs money. But we will take X-rays for bullets or broken bones, and take full blood profiles. We’ll sample eye fluid, test for alcohol and dehydration.”

Tony slammed his hand on McDonough’s desk. The desk shuddered and its steel top seemed to bend for a brief moment, before springing back.

McDonough mouthed, *Wow.*

“Enough of this bullshit. Tell us what you’ve found.”

Muffy hunched over and began to cry. Hutch softly stroked her hair, but his eyes looked vacant, like a condemned or dying man just going through life’s motions.

“Who are the police protecting?” continued Tony.

McDonough shook his head. “They just have too many cases.”

“Cut the crap, Mac. What’s going on?”

McDonough thought of the girl’s body and imagined what she might have been like. He’d been trained to think of them as corpses, numbers, bodies, not people.

“You’re sure she’s never done drugs?”

“Absolutely. Not if it is Jaime.”

“Then why was she seen yesterday afternoon at the home of a man who is reported to be one of Miami’s biggest dealers?”

Tony looked at Muffy and Hutch. Their eyes were blank. “Haven’t the slightest,”

said Muffy.

McDonough felt a rush of adrenaline, as fear shuddered through him with tremor-like waves. He was wading into deep, shark-infested waters and he was about to bleed. He changed the subject.

“I think she was a virgin, you know.”

“Of course she was a virgin,” said Muffy. “She was only nineteen...twenty yesterday.” Muffy buried her face in Hutch’s shoulder. A muffled whine, like a far off fire siren, escaped from the folds of Hutch’s shirt. “Killed on her birthday,” she whispered.

McDonough couldn’t help but smile to himself. A Miami virgin at twenty, a true rarity, birthday or not. He pressed his lips together and puffed out his cheeks. He glanced at his degree hanging on the wall, and shook his head slowly. *I shouldn’t do this*, he thought. *But what the hell.*

“Between you and me, she was murdered.” His words seemed to hang in the air. Then the phone rang. *Saved by the bell*, thought McDonough. He grabbed the receiver, said, “Uh, huh,” and looked up. “It’s time.”

McDonough walked to the door before anyone could speak. With his hand on the doorknob, he inhaled deeply, like he’d just been relieved. “If there’s anything I can do...” His eyes fell to the floor. “Follow me.”

McDonough led them through a room of white walls and stainless steel, where his guests were assaulted with the smell of preservatives and decaying flesh. The doctor strode purposefully to a cooler, pulled out a gurney and wheeled it into place. With a practiced motion he adjusted the lights.

“She should be viewable now.”

Tony looked at McDonough, wondering what would happen if she wasn’t what he called, *viewable*. Did that mean that Jaime’s body parts were scattered across the table? Or that her facial skin had been harvested for some burn victim? He felt his blood pounding in his head and his knees began to weaken.

McDonough drew back the sheet and beckoned the three of them forward. Only Tony responded, as Hutch and Muffy melted into the sitting chairs against the wall.

Tony stared for several moments, with silence hanging in the air like smoke. Finally, in a choking voice, Tony said, “That isn’t her.”

Muffy and Hutch looked up with stunned faces. Who was *this*, then? And where was *Jaime*? Neither of them knew what to do, so they sat watching Tony, hoping he would guide them. “This is Tania Bellows, a good friend of Jaime’s. They play...used to play music together. They were almost inseparable. Until now. She was with Jaime, yesterday.”

Tony closed his eyes and stretched his hands out over the body, as if feeling for direction, some sign from the Creator.

After several heavy moments, Tony spoke in a cold measured voice. "And the police are protecting her killer." He drew the sheet back over Tania's head, and whispered, "May you find peace, my child."

McDonough moved to push the gurney, but Tony grasped his arms and pulled him to his face. "Tell me, Doctor Edward McDonough, how can you let a crime like this go unpunished? Why will you not fight?"

McDonough licked his lips. Sweat erupted across his forehead and began dripping toward his eyes. Then his hands began to tremble.

"I need my job." McDonough looked around furtively, and then continued in a conspiratorial whisper. "I'll deny telling you this. But a friend of mine saw her yesterday afternoon at the home of a man named Ramon Cesar. Seems his nephew threw an impromptu birthday party for her. For Jaime."

"Cesar?" whispered Tony.

"A high society lawyer, Mr.?"

"Tony."

"Cesar is a pillar of Miami society, Mr. Tony. Got his start as the hired legal gun for a big underworld boss named Sanchez. Some say he took over where the old man left off, and then built something far larger." McDonough tried to pull his hands away from Tony, but he couldn't. "That's where I would start. Of course, I'm a simple pathologist, not a detective."

Tony let McDonough go and patted him on the cheek. "You're not a bad kid, Eddy. Thanks for the tip." He turned and walked out, with Hutch and Muffy following behind like baby ducks

"We'll be in touch," he said, as they passed out through the door.

## CHAPTER 7



Jaime Crandall pulled against the rope that bound her hands behind her back. Jaime's shoulders ached with each fruitless yank, but she kept trying. There were deep blood-blisters along her wrists, and it wouldn't be long before they opened raw to the world. Jaime had to escape, she must escape. If she didn't, her life was over, that much was clear.

Her world was dark, with a black, cloth hood covering her head. She didn't know where she was, or how long it had been since she was taken. She had awakened from a drug-induced stupor, her mouth dry, her body weak. All she felt was one burning need—escape.

A voice interrupted her struggle. "How are you today?"

The voice was soft, almost kind.

"Why do you have me here?" said Jaime. "Why are you doing this?"

The room fell silent, and Jaime waited.

After a long pause the voice said, "I have big plans for you."

*Oh, no*, thought Jaime. *Why is this happening?* Jaime felt her stomach lurch. Why had she befriended Carlos? She had heard the rumors, about his family, about his uncle. Had she been attracted to the danger? Was that what it was? Had she wanted to flirt with the danger?

"I would like to go home, now," she said. "There are a lot of people who are counting on me. You've got to know that. Please let me go. I don't know who you are and I really don't care. Why don't we just pretend this didn't happen? Okay?"

The man laughed. It was a smug, self-satisfied chuckle, like the warning of a rattlesnake. "You are worth millions of dollars to me, Jaime Crandall."

*What?* thought Jaime. *A price on my head?* "What do you mean?"

"There are many rich people, Jaime, who desire women like you. Soft, beautiful, *innocent*. Oh, yes, you are very valuable to a great many men...and women. A girl with your looks and your talent. A virgin and naturally blonde? You are every depot's wet dream, and you will fetch a fine price."

“You’re going to sell me?” Jaime fought at the ropes pinching her wrists but they were cinched tight. She tried to rub the hood off her head by sliding her cheeks against her shoulder, but the covering was tied around her neck and all she did was choke.

The man laughed again softly. It was a comfortable, verbal smirk, from a man in confident control. “Oh, Jaime, how naïve you are. I’m not going to *sell* you like the others. No, you’re worth far more to me than that. I am going to use you as a *bargaining chip*, to expand my interests. Like a tossed-in freebie. Who knows, with the right buyer, you might even live a long, useful life.”

“I’d rather die first,” said Jaime.

The snake’s rattle grew louder, as the man said, “That, my dear, is a very real possibility.”



## CHAPTER 8



Tony Trance leaned against the wall outside the entrance to the Final Rest community center. He listened to the idle chatter of the residents as they played cards and checkers, to the incessant drone of Good Morning America, and to Jaime's voice, singing to him through his memories. He smiled ironically, as Jaime's imagined song mingled with the tune to a Ford commercial.

Life could never be the same, he thought. Not without Jaime. He peered inside the community center and looked at the residents. In a way, they were all dying. All just passing time, waiting for the inevitable. Sadly, some had just lost the *one* thing that kept them alive.

Several of Tony's friends, including Hutch and Muffy Hutchins, were seated at a round table, engrossed in their cards, bantering away as if nothing had changed. He entered the room and walked along the wall in the opposite direction from the table.

Tony avoided their eyes. *They're not like me*, he thought. *They are simply American. I'm caught between cultures. Yes, I had an American father, but I was raised in Japan. I was schooled in the Samurai tradition of my mother's family. I learned Zen, became Zen. None of my friends understand these teachings. I was trained in the martial arts like a religion. I live the I Ching, the old Chinese Way. I was taught discipline. I understand that there are greater powers controlling our Universe. I also know that each of us can alter that course.*

*They have no clue. My friends feel powerless. They are powerless. So they block it out—they pretend it never happened.*

Tony was different physically, too. His height was an average, five foot nine and one half inches. But he was powerfully built, for a man of any age. His hands were lined with calluses from his daily martial arts exercises, and they could crumble bricks without effort. His forearms and chest still bulged with muscle. And he'd grown more agile with age, not frailer, quicker rather than slower over the years.

Tony's hair was as black as the day he was born, except for two uneven slashes of gray on the sides. The gray looked like errant brush strokes from a drunken

painter. Tony's face had grown more Oriental over the years. As a young man, one would have hardly noticed his Japanese ancestry. Now his front teeth seemed just slightly too large for his face. His eyes pinched at the edges beneath round, gold-rimmed spectacles. Laughter lines creased his brow and his forehead crinkled when he smiled.

Tony's manners were different, too. He bowed reflexively when he spoke, a throwback to his youth and his training. Deferential, except for his eyes, which were dark liquid brown, almost black holes, which could peer mercilessly when challenged.

Tony took a seat well away from the others and pulled the morning paper from under his armpit. He settled into a thick chair, rested his feet upon the windowsill, and began to read. It wasn't long before he made his presence felt.

"Look at this," he cried. "Another goddamn overdose." Tony held the paper in the air for all to see. There were several dozen residents scattered throughout the room but only a couple of them glanced in his direction. His close friends ignored him.

"Never seen him like this," whispered Hutch. He looked furtively toward Tony from behind his cards.

"He'll be all right," said Muffy.

"And look at this. Goddamnit!" screamed Tony. "Another bank robbed." He read more of the article. "They caught this guy, and he had severe withdrawal symptoms in the police car that brought him in. Bit one of the officers. Suspected heroin and Oxycodone abuser. His fifth time caught. So, what else is new?"

"Maybe he won't be all right," said Sophie. As she turned in Tony's direction, her chin wobbled like a turkey's wattle.

The room grew silent and Tony went back to his reading. Several minutes later he said, "And look at this. A federal judge in Chicago convicted of accepting bribes to go easy on the pushers, the pimps, and the whores. Last week I read about a mayor doing the same. There was that Louisiana governor, and that Boston FBI agent, Zip Connolly. You think that doesn't happen here? The whole damn paper is filled with crimes over drugs, corruption, and greed. The world is going to hell, and we can't be far behind."

This sentence drew attention. No one had ever heard Tony speak this way.

Hutch excused himself from the card game and walked cautiously to where Tony was sitting. "Come join us," he said.

Tony stared at him briefly, before giving a slight nod. "Yeah," he said. He walked over and took a seat on Hutch's left.

Hutch touched him on the arm. "We can't bring her back, you know. The police are doing all they can. We can only wait."

"Don't make excuses, wimp," said Tony.

All eyes in the room swept toward Tony and Hutch.

Hutch looked at Tony, his mouth agape, blinking—as if to say, *what can I do?*

“Jaime has been kidnapped, or killed, and you do nothing about it,” continued Tony.

“There’s nothing more we *can* do, Tony. She’ll be on the milk cartons soon. The police are doing everything they can.” Hutch looked to his wife for support. “It isn’t fair. But we—”

“And what in life is fair?” interrupted Murray Stein. His strong New York accent grated the air like a fourth grader’s violin. Murray shrugged his shoulders and drew another card. “Nothing in the world is fair. If we Jews had taken what many others thought was fair?” Murray shook his head. “Oy veh. We’d have nothing.”

“But this is different,” said Wendell, sheepishly. He blinked several times and fidgeted with his cards. This was a big step for Wendell, voicing an opinion.

Wendell began to stammer. “I mean—”

Gumbo Winkelman interrupted him. “I would show them a thing or two, if I were younger. Yeah, if I were younger, I’d be out on the streets, and I’d shake everyone down until I found her.” Gumbo flexed his thin right bicep. Then he thumped his bony chest and gritted his gums. His toothless mouth glistened in the fluorescent lights.

“You’d gum them to death, I suppose?” said Muffy. She shook her head and mumbled, “Gumbo, you couldn’t even control your own daughters. They kicked you out of your own mortuary and you never lifted a hand.”

Gumbo remembered how his six girls had forced him to Miami, and silently acknowledged that Muffy was right.

“And how *would* you stop them, Gumbo? Formaldehyde?” said Sophie, her chin wiggling again, like pulled taffy.

“Quiet,” said Tony, his voice snapping in the air like a ringmaster’s whip. He had their attention. “I’m serious about this, and you carry on as if nothing has happened.”

“And what do you propose we do?” asked Sophie.

“I say we find Jaime and make her kidnappers pay.”

“Make who pay, dearie?” asked Muffy.

Tony stood and looked from face to face. “The men who took her, that’s who. And every stinking dope dealer in this town.”

“You must be joking,” said Wendell.

“You’d have to indict half of the police and politicians in Miami,” said Murray. “To say nothing of the Columbians, the Russians, Asians, Italians, Cubans, Mexicans, Jamaicans—”

Murray discarded an ace.

“An ace!” The cry from the table was unanimous and spontaneous. It was the

third ace in the pile, of a long game of Chicago Rummy.

“Screw the aces,” said Tony. He stood from the table and began pacing the room. The others buried their faces in their cards and furtively watched.

“He’s gone over the edge,” said Sophie, from behind her cards.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was serious,” said Gumbo.

Murray tossed his cards to the table. “Tony,” he said. “What can a bunch of old farts do that the police can’t do?”

“We can fight the persecution.”

“Persecution? That’s a good one. My people have been fighting persecution for two thousand years. And look how far we’ve got. We hold a little strip of stinking, worthless desert. My people face daily fighting in the streets, terrorist attacks and high inflation, combined with worldwide accusations that we don’t understand the Palestinian plight.” Murray reclaimed his cards and shuffled them aimlessly. “You can’t stop the drugs, Tony. You can’t stop human nature.”

Tony halted in mid stride and faced the table. “You’re missing the point, Murray. Somebody has Jaime and we’re doing nothing about it.”

“There’s nothing we *can* do, but wait,” said Hutch. His voice cracked. “Jaime is probably dead and buried. Case closed. We all know it.”

Tony shook his head. “Jaime was seen at the home of a Miami drug lord on the day she vanished. That doesn’t mean she’s dead.”

“And the police have investigated,” said Hutch. “Jaime left that party soon after she arrived.”

“Did she?” said Tony. “I think not. She just wasn’t seen any more.”

“You really believe that Ramon Cesar could—”

“I believe he knows what happened to Jaime,” interrupted Tony. He leaned across the table and lowered his voice to a whisper. “And I aim to have him tell us.”

Tony sat back down in his chair. “Once we know who took her, we’ll send them off to jail, or the gallows. Then we are going to go after every damn drug dealer in this town, until we’ve cleaned the streets of scum and they’re safe for everyone.”

“They’ll call us the toothless tigers,” said Wendell, shrinking into his seat as he spoke.

“How about the aged angels?” said Muffy.

“No,” said Sophie. “We’ll be vigilantes.”

“With bony knees and varicose veins popping everywhere,” said Gumbo. “Yeah. That’s sure to strike fear into the hearts and minds of men.”

The group fell silent, pondering the absurd image of aged vigilantes taking on crime.

“Yes,” said Tony, his voice slow and soft. A thin smile crept across his face. “I think that’s what we’ll be. The Varicose Vigilantes. What do you think?”

“You mean like Neighborhood Watch for the bedridden?” said Sophie.

“Vigilantes are bad,” said Wendell. “Aren’t they? I always thought a vigilante was a bad guy.”

Murray laughed. “I hear mob bashing is quite a sport. Especially for the infirm and bedridden. We’ll be vigilantes all right. Real bad asses.”

Tony said, “This isn’t a joke, Murray. This is life. Real life. No one can tell us what we can and cannot achieve. Would you rather sit around playing cards all day, waiting to die?”

“There are worse ways to go,” muttered Gumbo. “At least we’re alive.”

“Alive?” barked Tony. “Alive? You’re half dead.” Tony lowered his head and began to shake it slowly. “And Jaime? What can you say about her? And all the other ones like her? You had your chance at life. What about hers?”

“Easy, Tony,” said Hutch. “You’re hitting raw nerves.” He patted Muffy’s shoulder.

“It wasn’t your fault this happened. It wasn’t Jaime’s fault,” said Tony. “But that doesn’t change the fact that Jaime is missing and nobody is doing a damn thing about it.”

“The police are doing all they can.”

“That’s bull and you know it. She’s become a statistic—along with too many others that are kidnapped and killed every day. The pushers give drugs to kids like candy, thrusting it in their faces. They’ll give it for free, until they’re hooked. Free, until the kids will beg, steal, or kill for it. Until there’s no way to go but down.

“The young and innocent die every day. Or they get kidnapped and sold into slavery, shipped to some godforsaken hellhole, used and abused until they die in body or spirit, or both. Then tossed upon the scrap heap of humanity, never to be seen or heard from again.”

“And you can change that?” asked Muffy.

“I just know that Jaime’s missing. Someone has her.”

“Or she’s dead,” began Murray.

“She—is—not—dead!” shouted Tony. *She can’t be dead.* Tony lowered his voice. “I do know that others will die, day after day, until someone stops it.”

“This isn’t Japan, Tony,” said Sophie. “This is America. You can’t stop things in America anymore.”

“I can’t believe you said that,” said Wendell. He stood at attention, his back military straight. “In America anything is possible.” He paused. “At least that’s what we were taught. Remember the Pledge of Allegiance?” His face turned red, embarrassed, like he’d farted in church, and he looked at his shoes.

“And when we get a little long in the tooth we seem to forget that, don’t we?” said Tony. “Perhaps it’s time we returned to the days of old. And who better to show that it can be done than the last generation to believe that everything and

anything was possible?”

“Hot damn! I like the way you talk,” said Sophie. “But weren’t you the one who let your kids kick you out of your own house?”

Tony smiled at the irony. He remembered the day when his son had put an arm around him and said, “We’re going to buy your house, dad. So you can go live with people more like you.” *They gave me a smidgeon of what my home was worth, then took the money, “For your grandkids,” they said. Then they sent me on a plane to Miami. Now all I get is a phone call on my birthday and Christmas presents through the mail.*

“Touché,” said Tony. “I’m tired of people telling me I’m old, and that I can’t do what I want to do anymore. I’m tired of watching my nation live a lie, as it pretends to fight our drug-impregnated society, letting dealers infiltrate grammar schools, routinely setting convicted drug dealers and rapists free, and standing by as entire nations profit by the production and exportation of death.” Tony looked to his friends, one by one. “It just keeps on growing, and now it’s out of control. Somewhere, it has to stop. And I’m going to do something about it, even if I die trying.” He cleared his throat. “Now, you can sit here and complain that the world isn’t all it used to be. Yeah, you can sit and gripe. Hell, there’s no end to the things we can gripe about—high taxes, government deficits, out-of-control terrorists, deficiencies in our Medicare coverage. But that’s all we ever seem to do these days.” Tony stood, challenging his companions. “Well, I’m going to quit complaining and do something about it.”

“You’re nuts,” said Gumbo. “We’re too old. And we can’t change things.”

“You really think so?” said Tony.

Tony began to walk around the table. “So, let’s talk about something you can change, Gumbo. When was the last time you had sex?”

Gumbo scratched his head and looked at the ceiling. “Oh, that’s a tough one.” He counted the years on his fingers. “I think Bill Clinton was President, maybe one of the Georges. I really can’t remember. My penis has Alzheimer’s.”

“How the decades roll by.” Tony stopped beside Murray. “How about you?”

“That not a fair question, Tony,” said Murray. “And what does sex have to do with Jaime?”

“You’ll see.” Tony stood firm. “How long?”

Murray shrugged. “I can’t remember.”

“I thought so. And you, Hutch?”

Hutch glanced sideways at his wife, while she sat with her eyes locked firmly on her cards. She began to shuffle through the cards nervously.

“It’s been years,” she answered, before Hutch could speak. “Can’t get him to try Cialis...or Levitra...”

“I’ve tried ‘em,” said Gumbo. “Viagra, too. Whenever I use that stuff it makes my tongue get hard. You ever had a tongue boner, Tony? Hurts like a mother...”

“You had a priapism in your tongue?” said Murray.

“A pria...what? No, I had a tongue boner, Murray. B-O-N—”

“Forget it, Gumbo,” said Murray.

“It ain’t that easy to forget.”

“Why would we want to do without something as intimate and as pleasurable as sex?” interrupted Tony. He started walking again. “I’ll tell you why. Attitude. It’s all in the attitude. We’ve accepted the limits that our world has thrust upon us. They tell us we’re old and we believe them. They say we can’t do the things we used to.” Tony stopped pacing and tapped his fingers against the table. “They call us ‘senior citizens’ living in ‘old folks’ homes, where we get our exercise yelling ‘bingo.’ They don’t call us ‘sages’ or ‘wizened ones,’ do they? They shunt us off to where they don’t have to look at us and wipe spittle from our mouths.”

Tony sighed, like a weary man curling up into bed for the night. “The next thing that happens is we begin to *feel* old, as old as they tell us we are. Well, I don’t feel old. And I’m tired of people telling me I can’t do all I used to do.”

Now, Tony had their attention.

“You’re telling me that, with the right attitude, this dead pecker of mine can come back to life?” said Gumbo. “Even a double dose of Viagra can’t make this old soldier budge.”

“Yes, be realistic, Tony,” said Sophie. She winked at Gumbo playfully. “Gumbo’s a lost cause.”

“It’ll take more than attitude to awaken that dinosaur,” said Murray.

“Sure it will,” cried Tony. “But it *can* be done. It’ll take the proper diet, exercise, attitude...”

“And divine intervention,” added Hutch.

Gumbo smiled, remembering the last time he did have sex. She had been a sweet young thing, barely sixty. They’d spent the night in each other’s arms, way past eight o’clock. And they had made love twice, during that lovely week.

“Look at what they feed you here,” said Tony.

“We’re free to cook for ourselves,” said Muffy.

“And who does anymore?”

Silence.

“What’s wrong with that stuff?” asked Wendell. “They used to call me the Spaghetti Kid. Ate it every night, right out of the can. This is a heck of a lot better than Chef Boyardee.”

“What they feed us here is slop,” said Tony. “It’s all fat and hormones. When was the last time any of you had a piece of lean fish?”

“We had fish last week,” said Muffy.

“Battered, deep-fried, and served with French fries,” said Tony. He paused, and his voice softened. “Look, I’m not saying that we eat any worse here than most

Americans. In fact, we probably eat a good sight better. We do have lean options on the menu. They just taste like crap.” He drew a long breath, like an actor preparing for a challenging soliloquy. “Is it any wonder that in this country we die of heart attacks and cancer more readily than the *starving peasants* of third-world countries? And that we sit around complaining about how bad we feel?”

“I walk every day,” said Sophie.

“And you’re a blob, too,” said Gumbo, with a broad, toothless grin, happy to have someone else be the object of criticism.

“I have a thyroid condition,” Sophie retorted.

“My ass,” said Murray. “The only thyroid condition you have is that you feed it too much.”

“Let’s be nice,” said Muffy. “Sophie is sensitive.”

“Through all that fat?” said Wendell. His voice was nearly a shout. They all faced him, and he knew that he had overstepped their unwritten boundaries. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“But you were right,” said Tony. “Sophie uses her weight to hide from the world, just as we all do. We all have our little excuses for not doing what we used to do—what we should be doing.”

Years of suppressed frustration seemed to fuse their tongues. The group fell silent and they all pretended to study their cards. Murray scratched his crotch. Gumbo cleaned the food from between his two molars. Sophie’s lips trembled.

“Sophie, dear,” said Tony. “If I could prove that you could lose your weight, enjoy doing it, and stay slim and trim would you want to do it?”

“Maybe,” she said. Her eyes clouded. *I’d give my right arm to have the figure I had when I was young.*

“Of course she would,” said Muffy. She put her hand on Sophie’s shoulder. “Then you wouldn’t have to huff and puff when we take our morning walks. And I wouldn’t have to wait for you.”

Sophie blinked. “You wait for me?”

“Yes, dearie, I do.”

They fell silent again, until Gumbo said, “Could you get me a hard-on? I don’t want no tongue boner, Tony. I want a real one. Right here.” Gumbo pointed to his pants.

The tension cracked, like springtime ice, and began to slowly thaw. They started to laugh.

“The proper word is *erection*,” said Sophie.

“I believe you have Gumbo intrigued by your theories,” said Hutch.

Tony looked at Gumbo. “It might take some work. But I think it is possible. Almost anything is possible.”

“Then I’m in,” said Gumbo.



“Me, too,” said Sophie.

“Me, three,” said Wendell. They all looked at Wendell and he turned red. “I want a hard-on, too.”

“I wouldn’t mind having one between my legs,” said Muffy. She nudged her husband.

Hutch wheezed deeply. “Guess I’m in, too.”

They turned toward Murray. He fiddled with his cards, puffed his cheeks and let out a long gasp. He sighed again and began to tap his fingers on the table.

“Don’t look at me!” he said. They continued staring. Finally, Murray gave in. “I won’t eat pork.”

“I’ll eat his,” said Sophie. “Just kidding,” she added sheepishly. Red blotches covered her face like a heat rash, and she looked to her hands.

“What will we do when we start feeling like teenagers again?” asked Murray.

Tony stared at each of them before speaking. “We’re going to find Jaime—alive. Then we’re going to bring down her kidnappers.”

“You’ve got to let that go,” said Hutch.

Tony ignored him. “Then we’re going to show what we ‘seasoned citizens’ can do if we try. We are going to show the nation what *it* can do if it tries.”

“Oy veh,” said Murray.

“It’s a hell of a lot more exciting than knitting,” said Sophie.

“I’ll do anything to screw again,” said Gumbo.

“I’ll do it for Jaime,” said Muffy.

“I do what she does,” said Hutch.

“You can count on me,” said Wendell from halfway underneath the table.

Again, they all looked at Murray. He rolled his eyes to the sky. “I’m no schmuck, so I guess I’m in. What would my late wife, Doris, say?”

“We start tomorrow,” said Tony.

“What’s your plan?” asked Murray.

“I’m not really sure.”

“Good, Tony. That’s just great.”

## CHAPTER 9



Tony felt like he was walking into a steam room when he stepped out his kitchen door into the Miami morning. It was barely dawn, and already the air was heavy and moist, like hot breath, and filled with the dour odor of wind-starved smog.

Tony's shirt began to cling to his sides, but he walked purposefully toward the Vigilante's predetermined meeting place. Tony didn't mind the heat. He was too excited, too curious, and too impatient to begin the day. But he was afraid, walking toward the unknown, venturing into a world that others would say he didn't belong.

Today was the beginning, and he knew their lives might never be the same.

Tony was dressed in a red silk robe that stopped at his thighs. It was held together by a faded black belt adorned with eight gold symbols at the ends. Below the robe he wore a pair of white cotton pants cut off at the knees. His feet were supported by a pair of dilapidated leather sandals.

He glanced at his watch. Five minutes late, just as he had planned. He slowed his pace when he came to the intersection of his own small street and Main Street, known among the residents as "Final Way." The crossroads, he mused. Quickening his pace, Tony turned to the left and walked toward the small, man-made lake in the center of the complex. To his surprise, his friends had already gathered.

"You're late," said Muffy. "We were worried you might not show."

Tony stifled a smile. "I've been up since three."

"So, let's get on with this. We haven't got all day," said Muffy.

Tony looked at Muffy. She was dressed in a black leotard and Nike running shoes. He looked to her husband, who sported a pair of faded Bermuda shorts, a T-shirt and a straw hat.

Behind Hutch, Gumbo stood wearing a pair of thick green corduroys and a clashing, blue flannel shirt.

"Aren't you hot?" he said to Gumbo.

"Hot?" replied Gumbo. "Hell no, Tony. I'm cool. I'm always cool."

Tony passed muster upon the rest of his army, his vigilantes. Murray Stein wore a baggy blue pin stripe suit, without the vest. His white shirt was freshly pressed. A red silk tie was assembled with a full Windsor knot and was tethered to his shirt with a diamond tie tack. His black wing tips were spit polished, and his gold cufflinks glinted in the early morning sun.

“I see you’ve dressed for the occasion, Murray.”

Murray stepped forward like a peacock and presented himself to the others.

“Take off the jacket, tie, and the shoes.”

Tony looked at Sophie. Poor Sophie. She was covered by a pink tent dress that was big enough for the Ringling circus. Wendell wasn’t any better. He hid behind Sophie, wearing khaki shorts, knee-length black socks, brown dress shoes and a purple Polo golf shirt.

“Oh, God,” whispered Tony. “What have I done?”

Millie came jogging around the corner. She was dressed in a pair of bright red running shorts, a sleeveless shirt that said La Jolla Half Marathon and a pair of distance training shoes.

“Hi, guys,” she said, breathing heavily as she stopped her run. “Had to finish my workout.”

“Glad you could make it, Millie” said Tony. “Looking good.”

Tony took several steps away from the group and then turned back toward them. “You...” he began. “...are the core of an army that will bring justice to the criminals that stole Jaime Crandall from us.” Tony let the words sink in before he continued. “And you, are the beginning of a force that will bring this country’s drug dealers to their knees.”

“I urge you not to say such things in public,” responded Murray, after Tony drew silent. “They might send you away.”

“It’s not us they’ll be sending away,” said Tony. “Anyway, I’m glad to see no one got cold feet.”

“I can’t feel anything in my feet,” said Gumbo.

“And your second toes are too long,” said Sophie. “It’s a throwback to the apes you know.”

“All right, all right,” interrupted Tony. “This is serious business.” He paused, and waited for everyone to look his way. “Today we’ll walk in the park. But first we’ll have fifteen minutes of stretching.”

“Fifteen minutes,” cried Murray. “Good God, I’ll die.”

“What if something snaps?” asked Hutch.

Tony ignored them.

“Then we’ll have a two mile walk.”

“I’m tired *thinking* of a two mile walk,” said Murray. “You’ll have to excuse me, I better rest.” Murray sat upon the ground.

“You ain’t done nothin’ yet,” said Sophie.

“If you can’t walk two miles then you can build up to it,” said Tony. “Once you can do that comfortably, you can begin to jog. Then we’ll increase the distance and the speed.” He looked from face to face. “After our walk we’ll have breakfast.”

“Steak and eggs?” said Hutch.

“Doughnuts and coffee?” said Sophie. “French pastries?”

“Cold rice and fish,” said Tony. “Followed by two hours of—”

“Napping?” asked Murray.

“Training,” continued Tony. “You will learn how to breathe, to think, and to fight like Samurai warriors. We’ll increase the time we spend on your training as you become used to the routine.”

“Can we get robes like you?” asked Wendell.

“You’ll have robes tomorrow.”

“Better get two for Sophie,” said Gumbo.

Tony closed his eyes. “Follow me,” he said. He began walking toward a flattened area of grass, shaking his head, muttering, “Heaven help us from ourselves.”

When they reached the grass, Tony arranged them into a large circle. “Our first exercise is designed to loosen the hamstring and back muscles. Put your feet apart, and slowly touch your toes.”

Tony stood with his feet apart and easily touched his toes. He hung in that position for sixty seconds, with his muscles relaxing in twenty-second intervals, until his palms pressed comfortably against the ground. Muffy did the same. Hutch came close, and was nearly able to reach his feet at the end of a minute.

Gumbo and Wendell struggled to touch their knees. Sophie couldn’t see her knees, or keep her balance. Each time she leaned down to stretch she toppled forward and sprawled on the grass.

Wendell and Gumbo bounced up and down, racing each other to see who could tag a knee first. Sophie fell over backwards. But she grunted and tried once more. Murray stood, red-faced, with his hands on his hips, refusing to try.

“That was good,” said Tony. “Don’t worry. It will get easier.”

“Maybe Sophie can learn not to tumble like Humpty Dumpty,” said Murray, defensively.

“At least I’ve got the guts to try,” said Sophie.

“You’ve certainly got a gut, a huge one,” Murray retorted.

“Far more guts than you.”

“I’ve got a bad back.”

“You better go, then,” said Tony abruptly. “Leave us, Murray.”

Murray looked at Tony, with a shocked look on his face. *Leave? Who would I talk to?*

“But—”

“Really, Murray. You don’t have to join us. We’ll still be friends. But we can’t have everyone deciding which part of the training suits them and which part doesn’t.”

“But I was looking forward to learning how to break bricks.”

Tony stared at Murray, un-amused. Reluctantly, Murray bent over to reach for his knees. As he struggled to touch them, he too, fell over.

Sophie patted him on the rump. “Nice try, Humpty.”

“Murray...Sophie...You must learn not to struggle,” said Tony. “Relax. Everything will grow easy in time.”

“Will I get a hard-on tonight?” asked Gumbo.

“You cannot rush things, Gumbo. If it is to be, it will be. Only then.”

“I’ll try,” said Gumbo earnestly.

Tony smiled. “You do that, Gumbo.”

They finished stretching and took a twenty-minute walk. When the walk was over, Tony withdrew two packages from a large, gray gym bag. One was filled with cooked brown rice and the other a mixture of fish and vegetables. The entire crew slumped to the ground.

“That’s the last time I am doing that,” said Murray.

“Don’t know if sex is worth it,” said Gumbo.

“You seem to have forgotten our mission,” said Muffy. “We are getting in shape to—”

“To take on the mob?” interrupted Murray.

Tony shook his hands in front of their faces, with his palms outstretched. “Whatever our reasons, we must remain united.”

The Vigilantes fell silent for several moments, until Sophie’s breathless voice said, “We need an oath.” Sophie paused. “A blood oath.”

“Oo, that sounds like fun,” said Muffy.

“I already gave blood,” said Murray. “Last year. I’m anemic.”

Tony curled his lower lip and rested his hands on his hips. “I agree with Sophie. We must have a pact, since none of you comprehend the seriousness of our mission. Some of us may die. You may be captured, tortured. Your friends may question you, and you will not be able to tell them about us, without the consent of the entire group.”

“You make it sound like war,” said Wendell.

“This *is* war, on several fronts. And if any of you are not prepared to treat it that way, then I don’t want you. Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry, ol’ boy,” said Hutch. “I’m doing this for Jaime.”

They all nodded. Even Murray.

“Then it’s settled,” said Tony. “Tomorrow we’ll take our oath, a blood oath.”

Gumbo started poking inside Tony’s gym bag, pawing through a large assort-

ment of bottles and pills.

“What’s all this crap?” he asked. He held a clear vial up to the light. A bluish liquid danced and sparkled inside, like morning dew.

“That *crap*, my dear old friend, is the key to your recaptured youth,” said Tony. “Vitamins, protein powder, herbs, Korean Ginseng, flower pollen...and something else that I won’t name. Don’t drop that bottle, Gumbo.”

Gumbo set the glass bottle back into the bag and withdrew a large thermos. He held it up toward Tony. “This?”

Tony smiled and unscrewed the cap. “My magic formula.” He pulled a stack of plastic cups out of the bag and set them on the ground. He filled the cups with a thick, gooey, blue-green slop. He handed one cup to each companion.

“Looks like puke,” said Sophie.

“Tastes like puke,” said Murray.

“Will this do it?” asked Gumbo. “Will this...you know?”

Tony raised the thermos into the air. “This stuff is guaranteed to make every man grow two inches longer. It’ll increase your IQ by twenty points and eliminate cavities. Gumbo, you will be popular with the ladies in no time.”

“Can I have more?” said Wendell.

Gumbo downed his portion in three large gulps. “Tastes great. I’ll have more, too.”

“Maybe your hair will grow back, Murray,” said Muffy.

“Not a chance,” said Sophie. “Nothing will grow on that barren soil.”

Murray looked toward Tony. Tony smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “Who’s to say?” Murray held his nose and took a big swig.

## CHAPTER 10



That night Hutch was bone weary. He felt like he had been working in the desert for a week. His feet were blistered, his mouth was parched, and it took all his strength to lean over to Muffy's side of the bed to kiss her goodnight. But when Muffy kissed him back he felt blood flush to his face. Warmth spread through his body, to the pit of his stomach, and to places long since forgotten. He took Muffy into his arms and kissed again.

"Oh, my," she said.

Hutch slipped his hand underneath Muffy's nightgown and found her body soft, wet and willing. She groaned against him and squeezed him in her arms.

"Do you know how long it's been since you've touched me like that?" she asked.

"Too long," he said.

Hutch kissed her again. She reached down between his legs and found him full and hard.

"Oh, *my*," she cried. "Let's hurry before it's gone."

Sophie stood before her bathroom mirror. She grabbed thick folds of her stomach with her fingers and jiggled it like Jell-O. She did the same with the skin flaps under her arms and the dimpled flesh along her thighs.

"You don't like being fat. Do you?" she said. She forced herself to ponder her bulk, until tears welled in her eyes.

"Then do something about it," she said.

Sophie sniffed and wiped her nose with the sleeve of her nightgown. She walked to her bedroom closet and hunted inside until she found an unopened box. *How long have I had these?* she wondered. *Must be ten years or more.*

Sophie pulled a pair of three-pound weights from inside the box and began to lift them, one after the other. First the right. Then the left. "This isn't so bad," she said. "As long as I keep away from the mirror. No mirrors. Not yet." Mirrors would come later.

Gumbo lay in bed with the lights off. He cupped his hand between his legs and massaged his lifeless member, trying to coax it to life.

“C’mon soldier,” he said. “You can do this. You used to be a lean, mean driving machine. Don’t you remember, dude? You were one big bad ass.”

Gumbo thought of young girls running naked along the beach. He remembered that glorious week where he’d held the body of a goddess. Yes, she’d been a goddess, like Linda Evans in her prime.

“Nothing,” he murmured. Gumbo looked to his wilted penis. “You’re down and out now. But I have faith in you, buddy. I’ll never lose faith. You were my main man, and you will be again.”

Gumbo drifted to sleep, dreaming of younger days, with his hand still cupped around his withered balls.

Murray Stein was sure that every muscle in his body was irreparably damaged. Each movement brought sharp twinges of pain to his frame. He sat alone before his TV, sipping a cold beer and munching on pretzels. A white cat brushed back and forth against his legs.

“Picked a fine time to become a jock, didn’t you?” he said. “Seventy years in the stands and on the sidelines, but never in the game.”

Murray had never been much of an athlete. In fact, he’d been no athlete at all.

“I’m an athlete of the mind,” he’d told his colleagues, when they’d urged him to exercise. Exercise is for Neanderthals, he’d say. Today’s walk was his longest ever, an agonizing, beautiful, never-before-experienced joy. Murray remembered the morning. He remembered how he had gritted his teeth and said, “This is war... This is war...” He was a soldier now, a Vigilante. But he was dog tired.

“Some kind of soldier,” said Murray to the cat. “Took the easy way out my entire life. Sloughed through college and joined dad’s CPA practice. I wanted to be an actor. I wanted people to know my name.” The white cat purred as he stroked its back. “I married the woman my mother chose, Doris. Never really liked her. Dutifully stuck by her, oh yes I did, even though she hated my guts because she was infertile and I wasn’t. Swore at me every chance she got, she did.”

Murray dug deep into the pretzel bag and pulled out the last remaining whole one. He held it in front of his cat and let her lick the salt.

“And what was it for?” he said. “So I could wind up here and wait to die?”

The cat stretched and pulled its claws against the torn-up chair.

“Me, too,” said Murray. “I’m sore as hell. I’ve got a dead wife, no kids, and now I lose my only friends unless I keep up this damned charade of Tony’s.”

Murray took a slug of beer and burped loudly.

“What a screwed up life I’ve had.”

Murray carried the beer to the bathroom, walking gingerly, so as not to tear his aching muscles. He peed into the toilet and gave it a flush. Then he stood straight and looked at his face in the mirror.

“You sorry shit,” he said hoarsely.



Then Murray thought of Jaime. He thought of the energy inside her, and the life that she had shared with them all. He remembered how he had felt when he'd heard her sing. Suddenly he saw the world in a different light, as he had never seen it before.

"Life is what you make it," he said softly. "Life *is* what you make it."

Murray looked at himself in the mirror and narrowed his eyes.

"You can be what you want to be, Murray Stein."

He stared himself down. *And what is that?*

"You can do what you want to do, Murray Stein." *If you could ever figure that out.*

Murray straightened his shoulders. He glared at his face in the mirror and set his teeth. Then he roared, "You're one tough son of a bitch, Murray Stein!" He took several deep breaths and flexed his muscles like Arnold Schwarzenegger. "And you're not going to quit. You're not going to quit. You are a bad-assed Vigilante."

Then he limped off to bed.

Wendell Holmbs anxiously paced at the foot of his bed. He felt like he was about to take an important exam, a life changing exam, but one he hadn't studied for. There had been so many things in his life that he had wanted to try, so many things he had wanted to do. But he had never tried, never took the leap. His father had died shortly before he was born. He was raised by a single mother who had her hands full with life, hardened to a Teflon shell by the cruel winds of fate. Wendell's mother had never allowed him to speak unless he was spoken to. Then, it was only to say, "Yes, ma'am," or "No, ma'am."

He had been afraid to dream, afraid to achieve. Wendell Holmbs had never married; his mother wouldn't hear of it. He had to live with *her*. He had known women, women he had wanted to sweep off their feet, women he had wanted so much that his insides ached. But he had never found the courage to break away. Then there was his love, his real love. Gertrude. But he had never found the guts to tell her. Now, all he felt was a slow-boiling anger, churning deep within him—an anger masked by shyness and fear.

Wendell made a silent vow to break free of his chains. His mother was gone now, so why shouldn't he? He was a Vigilante and he was going to fly.

Millie brushed her teeth at nine thirty, did fifty push ups and a hundred sit ups, drank half a glass of skim milk, and promptly fell into untroubled sleep.

Tony sat before a small desk made of burl walnut, poring over facts and figures until the early morning hours. He'd been collecting information since the day Jaime had vanished. Before him sat a yellow note pad filled with pages of items he would need and things he must do. This was a war and he was the general in charge. But he was overwhelmed and woefully under funded.

"I've got to call Jack," he said. His nephew would help.

## CHAPTER 11



Jack Trance was kneeling hip deep in snow. He remained motionless for twenty minutes. His eyes were closed, his mind focused, on a life he could only retrieve through memory. A wisp of hair, a flash of smile, a silly giggle and a touch on the cheek. It was all there, bundled inside his head. It was like some precious family heirloom that he would unwrap to look at every day, feeling some odd connection with a past that could no longer be.

A sharp shiver brought Trance back from his mind's travels, and he drew up the collar on his wind shirt to shield his face from the morning cold.

"Hi," he said.

Trance looked through the thin dawn light to two large bronze doors that were sealed shut by the snow. And to the elaborate hand carvings of the wooden shrine that surrounded those doors.

"I miss you," he said. "I hope you like your new home. We were going to build here, remember? You loved this place, said it had the best view on the planet." Trance gazed around him over the wilderness. He was on the top of a Vermont mountain peak, with a 360 degree view of unspoiled nature. "And you were right."

There was a small plaque above the shrine's doors. It read, *IN LOVING MEMORY OF JANICE TRANCE*.

"It's been seven years, my love, and I miss you like it was yesterday. But things happened in Austria. I met someone and she died. Then Lauren was there. And there was this woman, the Black Madonna. She told me things that are hard to comprehend. I don't feel in control anymore, not that I ever really did.

"What I'm trying to say is that I want to try to open my heart again, to Lauren. You remember Lauren. We were childhood sweethearts, but she opted for a career. When I met you, she was your biggest champion. You liked her so much, and she liked you. Fate sort of threw us back together in Austria, and I guess, well, what I am asking for is your blessing. I need you to want this for me."

At that moment a cloud over the eastern horizon drifted north and let the early

morning sun shine, as it yawned over the far mountain peaks. The wind rustled, and a snow-white rabbit hopped out from behind the tomb and stopped in front of Trance. The rabbit looked at Trance, its pink nose wriggling, its eyes blinking calmly.

“Hello,” said Trance. “Are you a sign?”

The rabbit remained in place. Trance reached out and stroked its fur.

“Huh. How odd.”

Trance poked his right index finger through an inch thick crust that covered the snow. Then he reached into his thin coat of wind-block fleece and withdrew a single red rose. He placed the rose carefully into the hole and stood to his feet. The rabbit turned and hopped back behind the shrine.

“I’m going to go now. I’ll be back tomorrow. Goodbye, my love.”

Trance snapped his feet back into a pair of cross-country skis, took a final look at his wife’s resting place, glanced at the rose, and skied away.

## CHAPTER 12



When Trance pulled his Range Rover into his double garage, he could hear the phone ringing inside the house. He glanced at his watch, wondering who it might be at 7:30 a.m. He looked at a computer screen built into his car and ran through a series of security checks on his home. Satisfied, he left the skis inside the car and walked toward the house, without hurrying to answer the phone. He turned off the house alarm, opened the door, climbed the stairs and walked to the kitchen. The phone was still ringing.

“Hello?”

“Jack. This is Tony.”

“Well, for gosh sakes. Great to hear from you, Uncle Tony. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I didn’t wake you, did I?”

Trance laughed. “Just finished a 20K ski and had a cup of coffee at Dot’s.”

Tony frowned. “Let it go, Jackie.”

“The coffee? I like coffee. It’s loaded with anti-oxidants.”

“I *know* where you were. Let her go. Move on with your life.”

Trance closed his eyes. Everyone wanted him to forget.

“How do you forget your wife, Tony? Particularly when you’re the one responsible for her death?”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Trance covered the mouthpiece and counted to ten. When his nerves were settled, he said, “She came to me as a green recruit, Tony.”

“And you fell in love. It’s an old story, son.”

“And, when she got pregnant, I didn’t stay home.”

“You were running an important CIA organization, Jackie. Thousands of people, millions of people depended on you. You can’t overthrow fascist dictators

from your living room. You had a job to do. You had to be there.”

“I should have been with her.”

“You were out of the country, Jack. The CIA asked her to do her job and she did it. It was a milk run. Nobody knew they were killers. Terrorists. If they’d known, they wouldn’t have sent her.”

“You still don’t get it, do you? Terrorists didn’t kill Janice. Our own people did.”

“Because you threatened to quit?” said Tony. “Because Janice *did* quit? I’ve heard the theories, Jackie, but I don’t believe them. It wasn’t Miller, or his superiors at the CIA. It was someone else.”

*But would I have quit?* wondered Trance. *Would I have quit T Force?*

Trance pulled off the fleece pullover and his sweaty Under Armor. He threw on a clean football jersey with the name *Tillman* written across the shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Tony. It’s a raw wound that won’t go away easily.” Trance grabbed a Poland Springs water bottle out of the refrigerator and took a long gulp. “I know you didn’t call to lecture me. So what’s up?”

Tony avoided him. “Tell me about Lauren. How is she?”

Trance smiled, thinking how all his friends thought Lauren was the key to his enduring happiness.

“She’s fine, Tony, ‘though I haven’t seen her much lately. She’s been in Europe for the past few months, working on that big merger.” Trance reached back into the refrigerator and pulled out a container of orange juice. “Not too much longer and she’ll be CEO.”

“You should make her a mother.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Trance paused. “Actually, I’ve thinking about it, since the damned woman won’t let go of me. But I need to resolve a few issues first... So, how come the call? You okay?”

“I’m great. You remember your father’s funeral?”

“How could I forget? His legacy nearly cost me my life, not to say what it did to the planet.”

“You did well, Jack.”

“I do what I have to, Tony.” Trance remembered the global struggle unleashed by his father’s death, when the world had nearly become a casualty of delusional men and desperate governments. He ran his fingers along a couple of fresh bullet scars. The wounds heal, he thought. But the scars remain.

“I need a couple hundred thousand dollars,” said Tony.

Trance frowned. His uncle shouldn’t be poor. The Greenwich house alone must have fetched five million plus. He should be calling his kids. But he wasn’t. The hairs prickled along Trance’s neck.

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“No explanation?”

“Nope. I told you at your father’s funeral I had things to do. This is it.”

“You sure there’s nothing else I can do?”

“The money will be sufficient. You need not be involved.”

“And you won’t tell me what the money’s for?”

“You suppose correctly.”

“You’re not over your head are you, Tony?”

Tony laughed. “Listen, son, I don’t need some smart-assed country lawyer telling me what I can and cannot do.”

Trance smiled. “Of course not, Tony. Even if you are begging for money. How soon you need it?”

“Today would be nice.”

Trance felt a playful tug on his brain. “Actually, I’m a little cash poor at the moment.”

“Sure, you are.”

Trance’s deceased parents had left Jack an estate worth billions, most of which he had turned over to a charitable foundation he had formed, primarily for education. Then he had come into a far larger estate. Jack had kept this money, for reasons known only to him, a woman called the Black Madonna, and a few close friends.

“Don’t tease me, Jackie. This is important.”

“I could write you a check. Where should I send it?”

“I prefer a wire.”

“My money is set aside for worthy causes, Tony. Is yours a worthy cause?”

“I’m not going to tell you what it is. But yes, it is a worthy cause.”

“Give me your routing and account numbers,” said Trance.

As Tony was giving his banking numbers, Trance pushed the speed dial on a second, encrypted phone. This phone dialed a number in Zurich, Switzerland.

“Hold for a minute, Tony. Will you?”

Trance placed his uncle on hold and put the other phone to his ear.

“Guten tag.” There was no name given.

“Herr Koenig?” said Trance. His German was flawless. “This is Jack Trance.”

“Herr Trance,” said his personal banker. “You honor me by using your name.”

“I think we’re on a first name basis now, Franz. I have a simple matter.” Trance paused, reflecting on the help that Koenig had given him recently. And one his little thank-you gifts. “How’s the car?”

“The Rolls is excellent, Jack. What can I say?”

Koenig looked out his office window to the city below and felt his pride swell. “I’ve been made a partner at the bank. The youngest in three hundred years.”

“Excellent. You deserve it.”

“Because of one demanding and important friend.” Koenig paused. “How is Lauren?”

“Well, thank you.”

“A fine woman, she is—”

“I need you to transfer half a million dollars into an account in Florida for me,” interrupted Trance. He didn’t need someone else singing praises about Lauren. Not now.

“Of course, but we must go through proper procedures.”

“Of course.”

Trance gave Koenig their prearranged passwords, as well as the account number to one of his smaller accounts. He logged into a secure website and entered another series of codes and passwords. He pressed his palm against a biometric reader. Then he bid a polite goodbye and returned to Tony.

“Your money should make the early Fed transfer. I threw in a little extra, just in case you need it. You sure there’s nothing else I can do?”

“Kiss Lauren for me.”

“I can do that.”

“And buy her a ring. I’ll give you the cash.”

Trance closed his eyes. “I don’t want to lose her, Tony. If I married her she’d die, like the others.”

“No, Jack. That’s the past. You won’t lose her. That part of your life is over. You are destined for other things. We all know that.”

Trance frowned. Could he risk Lauren’s life like that? “When are you going to visit?” he said. “I’ll send a jet. Just name the day.”

“Soon, Jackie, soon. Got to go now. Thanks.”

“How about if I come see you? I’ll invite Lauren.”

“Sorry. I’m very busy.”

The phone *clicked*. Trance stood without moving, wondering what his uncle had going on. Whatever it was, he would think through it carefully. Tony was more like a turtle than a rabbit. He set his sights on long-term goals, and then methodically achieved them, always focused on the ultimate destination. But Tony was getting older, with less time left to correct any mistakes. Two hundred thousand dollars? Trance shook his head, smiled, and replaced the phone.

“I just hope he’s having fun.”

Trance walked into his gym for his usual intense morning workout. But if he could have foreseen the events he had just helped set into motion, he would have thought long and hard about sending the money. There are some things a man should never have to endure. Trance already knew that. Unfortunately, he was about to learn it again.

## CHAPTER 13



A cold front had swept across Florida, and frost now covered the grass like powdered sugar. The Vigilantes were gathered for their second day of training. They were hopping up and down, rubbing their hands together to fight off the cold, and looking like a group of stripped-down, winter runners preparing to race. Plumes of white vapor streamed from their mouths in the dark, early morning air.

Tony called them into a circle around him. “Everybody good and sore?” he asked.

“Sore isn’t the word, Bubba,” said Sophie.

“I feel like Rocky Balboa,” said Murray. “But I may not go the distance. Or any distance, for that matter.”

“I took a great dump,” said Gumbo. “But no hard-on.” Gumbo turned to Sophie. “No erection either.”

“Takes a lot to resurrect the dead,” Sophie replied. Then she punched Gumbo playfully in the shoulder.

Muffy said, “Have faith, Gumbo. Hutch came back to life.” She pinched her husband on the bottom. “So there’s hope for you yet.”

Gumbo’s eyes lit up. “No way!”

Hutch nodded sheepishly. “Way.”

Gumbo rushed toward Hutch with his right arm held up in the air. “Give me five, brother.”

Hutch hit him with a high five.

“You think it was that blue-green shit we drank yesterday?” said Gumbo.

Sophie grabbed Muffy and Millie by their shirtsleeves and pulled them off to the side. “You’ll have to tell us all about it,” she said with a conspiratorial whisper.

“Hard as a rock...” began Muffy. The women giggled inside their tight huddle.

After letting them chatter, Tony herded them into a Chevy van and drove to a nearby park.

When they reached the park, Tony pulled a polished wooden case and a large



canvas bag out of the van. He carried the items toward a tall, solitary pine tree at the edge of the park. There was a soft bed of pine needles beneath the tree, and Tony laid the case and the bag on the spongy ground.

“As decided, today we take a blood oath, to the cause.”

Tony looked purposefully from face to face as he continued. “Today we become more than brothers. Today we bond ourselves forever. A brotherhood, a sisterhood, a marriage toward common goals.” He drew a slow measured breath. “First, to find Jaime Crandall and bring her kidnappers to justice. Second, to work toward the abolishment of drugs across the United States.”

“You don’t ask much, do you?” muttered Murray.

Tony brought a finger to his lips and motioned for silence. Only the cold air whispered above his head. He reached into the canvas bag and removed a white cotton robe, a pair of white pants, and a white belt. He motioned to Hutch, who stepped solemnly forward.

“She was...is...your granddaughter,” he said. “So you shall be first.”

Tony bowed and then placed the clothes into Hutch’s outstretched hands. He turned to Muffy and repeated the presentation. Then he continued the ceremony with the others. After they all had received their uniforms Tony made them stand side by side. Then he looked around to check for bystanders. Seeing none, he said, “Strip.”

The Vigilantes converged into a jumbled scum, throwing their clothes onto a haphazard pile. Within moments, they were transformed from an assortment of odd-looking misfits into one single cohesive unit.

“The transformation has begun,” said Tony.

Tony held out the wooden case. “In here,” he said. “I have a contract...” He opened the top to the case and pulled out a long roll of sturdy parchment. The upper half of the document contained a series of Japanese symbols, while the bottom contained thirty inches of blank space. “...outlining our agreement.”

Tony held the parchment aloft with in his right hand. With his left he reached back into the box. “In here, I have your individual chops. When inked, each chop will make its own unique mark, like a formal signature.”

Tony withdrew a fistful of expertly carved ivory figures from the box and held them high, so they all could see. Every chop was unique, with an elaborate symbol on its end. He approached the Vigilantes and pressed a chop into each outstretched palm.

“When you press your chops onto this contract you will seal our fates forever. Think of your chop, not as a signature, but as an identity. With it you will pledge your life. Look at your chops and memorize the symbols.”

Tony reached into the box and withdrew what appeared to be a piece of clear plastic. He snapped the plastic apart to reveal the tip of a small needle inside it.

“I have one of these for each of you.” With a quick thrust he pricked himself, and then squeezed a rounded drop of blood onto the end of his finger. “Cover your chop with blood and affix your bond.”

Tony pressed his chop into the blood and then onto the parchment.

“I pledge my body and soul to the sacred bond between us, as witnessed by this chop.”

When Tony finished, Muffy stepped forward, stuck a needle into her finger and squeezed a red bubble onto its tip. Muffy pressed her chop below Tony’s. “I pledge my body and soul to the sacred bond between us, as witnessed by this chop.”

The others followed. Soon the parchment held all their chops in a thin, vertical row. Tony blew upon the contract until it was dry, then he rolled it back up and tied it with a band of yellow silk.

“Now we are one,” said Tony. “The Varicose Vigilantes.”

Tony placed the document into the box and turned back toward his army.

“Welcome to the Final Rest dojo.” Tony bowed and they bowed back.

“Soon we’ll have a new place to meet,” he continued. “I’m going to rent us a little house where we’ll have some room and privacy.”

“Won’t that be expensive?” said Murray. “Your kids took your money. They pay your bills, but that’s all. You don’t think they’re going to give it back, do you?” Murray knew precisely how many dollars Tony had in his checking account, and what modest pension income he received, down to the penny.

“I borrowed money from my nephew.”

“You’re not moving away from the Final Rest, are you?” asked Sophie.

“Yes and no. If we’re going to get Cesar to break, we’ll have to play his game. I’ll need a profile.”

“You’ve got a great profile, dearie,” said Muffy.

Tony looked flustered. “Yes, well, ah.” He stood stiffly and straightened his back. “This is all under the assumption that Cesar either knows what happened, or can help us find Jaime and her kidnapers. If he knows, we must trick him, or force him, into fingering those who are guilty.”

“He won’t do it willingly,” said Murray. “That I can tell you. I’ve worked with the man.”

Tony tilted his head and looked at Murray. “What did you just say?”

“He won’t help willingly.”

“You’ve worked with Cesar?”

“Sure. Used to audit the books for his old boss, Sanchez. Back in the early days.”

Tony scratched his chin. “We need to talk, Murray. Privately. Later.”

“Sure,” said Murray. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re not planning to become something like a Godfather, are you?” asked Wendell.

“More like the Grandfather,” said Sophie.

Wendell touched Sophie’s arm, and leaned toward Tony. “You’re not going to play *his* game, are you?”

“Something like that, Wendell. Hopefully, when we’re done, Cesar will play into *our* hand. For now, let’s get to work. The first thing we need to do is stretch our muscles.”

Tony bent over and touched his toes. Even he felt a little stiff, so he knew the agony that the others must feel. Still, no one complained.

## CHAPTER 14



Later that day, Murray Stein followed Tony into his apartment. “So, what’s all this cloak and dagger stuff?”

“I need the home phone number of a police chief,” said Tony.

“Which one? Which district?”

“I need Deputy Chief McBride’s number.”

“Oh, dear.”

Murray waited for Tony to say more, but he didn’t.

“Did you check information? Switchboard.com? Or Anywho?”

“Unlisted.”

“Did you Google him?”

“No.”

“Let’s try that first.” Murray turned on Tony’s desktop computer and waited while it loaded. “What do you intend to do, Tony?”

“Scare him into helping us.”

An amused smirk settled across Murray’s face. “That should be easy. I mean, it’s not like he’s in any kind of power position or anything.”

“Just get me the number.”

Murray’s fingers skated across Tony’s keys, and within moments he said, “There you go. Nothing’s private anymore.” Murray frowned. “Check out the address, Tony. Looks like our police chief does quite well for himself.”

Tony looked at the number and wrote it down. “Thanks.”

“If you want to stay anonymous, use a TRACFONE. Pay for it with cash, and use it from another city.”

“I plan to.”

### **3 A.M.**

When his phone rang, Michael McBride rolled over in bed and let the answering machine do its thing. After the beep, a man’s soft voice sounded.

“Hello, Deputy Chief McBride. You don’t know me, but we need to meet. I am interested in locating a woman by the name of Jaime Crandall. Her friend, Tania Bellows, was recently murdered and dumped onto South Beach. Jaime is missing. Yet, your department is doing nothing about it. There are a lot of people upset about this, particularly her friends in the retirement communities. Her disappearance may not seem like much to you, but to them, it’s momentous.

“I am a quiet, peaceful man, Mr. McBride. But I am also a man who believes in right and wrong. I am well aware of your long-term illegal dealings with Ramon Cesar, and I have the documentation to prove it.

“I have no desire to ruin your career, but I plan to find Jaime. Then I’m going to bring her abductors to justice. If that means tearing your life and career into small pieces and lighting them on fire, so be it.

“I will be coming by your office tomorrow for a little chat. I suggest you see me, and help me. Otherwise, I will have to take this up with your successor.”

Tony pressed the *off* button on his throw-away TRACFONE and dropped it into the passenger seat of his car. He turned his car back on, and made his way from Ft. Lauderdale toward Miami. “That ought to get his attention.”

## CHAPTER 15



Deputy Chief Michael McBride stood by his office window watching the rain fall. He'd been running his divisions for twelve years now, twelve years marked by cold, no-nonsense efficiency. He'd had his detractors in the early years. But they'd been silenced long ago—some out of respect, and others out of fear. Most everyone had something to hide. McBride had the keys to their secrets, and the resources to find out anything. McBride could create scandals across the whole Eastern Seaboard, if he needed to. He could take down congressmen, senators and mayors on his whim. So they left him alone. And favors? Earned by helping people, or by looking the other way? He had banked enough favors to last two lifetimes.

McBride began to pace from one side of his office to the other. This wasn't the first time he'd had a crank call at three in the morning on his private home number. But it was the first time he'd been told something that made his insides turn to jelly.

"He's bluffing," he muttered. McBride chewed on a loosened fingernail until it tore from the skin. Blood began to bubble onto his finger, but he ignored it. He quickened his pace.

"Thirty years on the force. Thirty years of dedicated service to the fine people of Miami. And now this? Some guy calls and says he's going to expose me for the disappearance of some cheap, no-name girl?"

McBride's hand brushed against the light brown silk of his custom tailored suit, and left a reddish-brown streak on his pants.

"Aw, shit."

McBride sucked the blood from his finger. "I will not let my whole career go out the goddamned window because some stupid assed geriatrics got bored with Pinochle and shuffleboard and started sticking their noses where they don't belong."

McBride stopped in front of his glory wall. Before him lay thirty years of trib-

ute. There were citations for bravery, above and beyond the call of duty, and pictures with four governors, seven senators and three presidents. Charity banquets, celebrity roasts, the key to the city. Claude Pepper shaking his hand, big as life in living color. Bob Graham, Jeb Bush, and Charlie Crist standing with their arms draped around the Chief, all of them smiling like they were old friends.

His eyes swept the rest of his office, to the stylish chrome and glass furniture, the modern art along the walls and the large tinted windows that looked out to the city streets. He looked to his office desk, its surface empty except for a dozen pictures of his family, golfing, boating and skiing. With big, bright smiles in every shot.

McBride straightened the cuffs of his expensive suit pants and polished his Gucci loafers against the backs of his calves. He dabbed at the blood on his pants with a wet tissue, smearing the stain even further. "Screw it," he said.

*I brought efficiency and order to this department, he thought. Slowed down the growth rate of crime, then I reduced it. Pushed half the drug smugglers west to Texas and California, and back north to New York where they belong. The ones left, we regulate. I regulate. So what if I make a little money along the way? I have to. It's the only way it can be done. I have to look and act the part to get the inside information.*

"This city loves me. It needs me," he said to the walls. *And only two more years to retirement.* "I'll destroy them myself, before I'll let them take all this away."

Outside McBride's door, a square of blue, movable partitions carved an administrative office area for Sarah, his secretary. She had a four-foot opening through which she greeted the chief's visitors. Otherwise, her office was private, though not soundproof. McBride's Senior Executive Assistant had an office down the hall, but McBride dealt with him as little as possible.

Sarah was sitting stiffly at the computer, typing expertly onto her keyboard. She had earphones strapped across her faded red hair, and she was transcribing from an old tape machine, which she controlled with a foot pedal. Her boss refused to talk into a computer or use a dictation service, like Copytalk. Never mind, in two years, they would both be gone.

Behind Sarah sat a large desk, piled high with brown manila folders to be filed, and five more cassette tapes awaiting transcription. It was not yet eight o'clock and Sarah had already been at work for two hours, just as she had been for every day of her thirty-eight years with the force.

A man materialized out of nowhere and appeared before her.

"Good morning. I was hoping to see Deputy Chief McBride."

Sarah jerked her head toward the man, but reacted with measured professionalism. She turned back to her work, studying the man out of the corner of her eye. After typing three more sentences she saved her file with a flick of the wrist.

"Do you have an appointment?" she said. *An Oriental, she thought. Not entirely*

*so, but somewhere along the line.* She rubbed her temples as she waited for the man's response.

"He should be expecting me."

*He's polite, thought Sarah. A habit, I'm sure. And his eyes are wise, perhaps even friendly. He's older than me. Younger looking, but older, I'm sure of it.*

"The chief sees no one without an appointment. How'd you get by the guards?"

Tony smiled, leaned forward, and looked kindly through his gold-rimmed spectacles. He whispered, "I believe he may want to see me. We spoke on the phone, earlier this morning."

Sarah arched an eyebrow at the intruder. *He speaks softly, respectfully, but he commands.* Sarah knew this man hadn't called the office, not while she was there. And the chief had made no outgoing calls since he had arrived at six seventeen a.m. She shivered involuntarily, because danger hovered around this man like a dark cloud.

"May I tell him your name?"

"Please tell him what I told you. That should suffice."

Sarah considered his words, then punched her phone.

"Yeah," said McBride.

Sarah's voice was steady. "There's a gentleman here to see you. He says that he spoke with you earlier this morning."

The phone fell silent. Sarah waited for McBride's reply, but she heard only a low groan.

"Are you all right, sir?"

McBride swallowed. "Give me a minute, and then send him in."

Exactly sixty seconds later, Sarah opened the door to McBride's office. The chief was sitting behind his large desk with his feet propped across the right hand corner, while he worked on his fingernails with a thin, silver file. He smiled as Sarah poked her face around the door.

"Coffee?" she said to McBride.

"No. Leave us alone, please."

Sarah motioned the visitor into the office and shut the door. The moment she was gone the smile fell from McBride's face. It was replaced by a cold stare. The visitor didn't move. He just stood there, watching, looking amused.

McBride slipped the nail file into the pocket of his coat and opened the center drawer of his desk.

"You say you have irrefutable evidence that I am involved with illegal activities in this town, and that I have been for many years? I say you're full of crap."

Tony tilted his head. "This is not about you, Deputy Chief. It's about a girl."

McBride lifted a Beretta 92-F from his desk and pointed it toward Tony. "You are not a wise man, sir," he said. "Not a wise man at all."

Tony laughed. "You want to shoot me? Go ahead. Then you can shoot the one



after me, and the one after that. But sooner or later you'll have no choice. We are vigilantes and we are formidable."

"You're a goddamned geriatric."

"Chief, you should have more sense."

"More sense? For what?"

Tony shrugged. "I told you that this morning. I want Jaime Crandall found and her kidnapers brought to justice. Or I'll see you in jail. It's that simple."

McBride slid his legs off the desk and walked warily toward his intruder.

"Who are you?" he said. "And where do you get the balls to threaten me?"

"I only seek justice."

"Justice? I'll show you justice. I'll send you to the pens so fast that your head'll spin. They'll turn your *he* into a *she*, despite your age. I'll see to it." McBride clenched and unclenched his fists several times. He studied the tassels on his expensive loafers, and then looked up. "I did nothing to you."

"A crime by omission is a crime nonetheless." Tony remained standing, looking relaxed, like he was having a conversation with an old friend.

McBride sucked on the jagged nail of his left index finger, his eyes never leaving Tony's face. His eyes widened as Tony took a step forward. He lifted his pistol and aimed it between Tony's eyes.

"Stop."

Tony kept moving. He stepped forward until he stood before McBride. He leaned toward him and pressed his forehead against the cold barrel of McBride's gun.

"You see," he said softly. "I have no fear. We have no fear. It is you who should be afraid." He paused, then added, "If you don't do as we demand." Tony shrugged his shoulders. "You see, I don't care if I die. None of us do. And we've pledged—" Tony stopped in mid sentence, then began again. "Things have gone too far, McBride. Change must begin. And whether it is with my death or yours, it matters not."

McBride rubbed the back of his neck and searched for words. But he found none. "I don't believe this," he muttered.

Tony smiled. "You must."

McBride's eyes grew focused, and they began to look about the room, to all his trophies hanging along the walls. Then they softened, and he smiled.

"All right, gramps. You win. I'll have you a killer by tomorrow." It would be no problem to round up some third striker. In fact, it would kill two birds with one stone.

"I want Cesar."

McBride's cheeks drooped. "You what? You're crazy if you think you can touch Cesar." He laughed, the kind of laugh a man makes when his only other alterna-

tive is to cry. “You think you can bring down Cesar? Jesus, mister. Where’ve you been all your life?”

McBride threw his hands in the air and faced toward the window. “You think Cesar killed this, this—” He waved his right arm as if searching for a name. “What’s her name? That’s bullshit. He’s a businessman.”

“We think Jaime Crandall is alive and Cesar has her.”

“You are absolutely off your rocker. That’s what I think. I think you’ve got a case of advanced dementia, that you’ve escaped from a ward somewhere and that you’re acting out some twisted, reverse boyhood fantasy.”

Tony’s lips spread into a smile. “We are a formidable army.”

McBride shook his head and laughed. “I know. You’re vigilantes, you told me. You better go back to the clinic, pops. You are losing your mind.” McBride walked towards Tony, until they were standing toe-to-toe. He pressed the barrel of the pistol against Tony’s chest.

“We shall see,” said Tony. His hand flashed and he ripped the gun from McBride’s grip. Then he pressed the gun against the police chief’s temple.

“Looks can be deceiving, can’t they?” Tony said. “And circumstances can change quickly, as you now can see. And I’m *not* an old man.”

Tony dropped the gun to the desk. He took several steps away from McBride, letting the chief scramble for his weapon. Tony held out his arms, while McBride slid a bullet into the gun’s chamber with a loud *snap*.

“You’re frigging crazy,” said McBride. “And I’ve half a mind to send you out of here in a body bag.”

“You think I care? I’m sixty-eight years old. My wife is dead. My children kicked me out of my own house and sent me to this Godforsaken city. Then Cesar, or one of his people, steals the brightest part of my life, a young girl named Jaime Crandall, who brought only good to this world.”

Tony’s eyes bore against his adversary. He walked toward McBride again, talking as he stepped. “And you are letting him get away with it. Well, Mr. Lawmaker, I won’t back away. We won’t back away. And we won’t quit.”

McBride kept the gun leveled between Tony’s eyes. He felt an overwhelming urge to pull the trigger, to end this absurd drama, to preserve himself. And yet—

Once more, Tony stepped against the barrel of the gun.

“How did you know?” said McBride.

“That Cesar did the kidnapping?”

McBride nodded slowly.

Tony looked along the barrel, to the confused eyes of the deputy chief. “There are rumors that she was seen at his house. But, I didn’t *know* she was there, not for sure. Not until now.”

“You know nothing, asshole.”

Tony turned and walked toward the door. He held his breath, waiting for McBride to put a bullet in his back. The shot never came. As Tony gripped the handle to the office door, McBride called out.

“What d’ya plan to do?”

Tony eased his body around and faced the police chief.

“From this moment forward, Mr. Lawmaker, I’m going to haunt your dreams. No longer will I be the person of reason who called you politely on the phone, the quiet, gentle man who came to visit you to talk of rightful justice. From this moment forward I’m an avenger, a vigilante, with one purpose and one purpose only, to seek justice in any manner it takes.”

Tony imagined himself as a gunslinger turning to ride off toward the sunset.

“Justice can mean death in this town,” said McBride coldly. He locked eyes with Tony for several long seconds.

“Anything it takes.” Then Tony was gone.

After Tony left, McBride felt his shoulders sag. He returned to his desk, pressed his intercom and called for his assistant.

“Yes, sir?”

“I’ll have that coffee now.”

When Sarah entered McBride’s office, with a steaming cup of Starbucks coffee, McBride was standing by the far wall, gazing into the morning sun.

“Here you are, sir,” she said softly.

McBride didn’t turn. “Sarah, please sit down.”

Sarah set the coffee upon a coaster in the center of McBride’s desk. Then she sat in one of the two guest chairs and watched her boss, waiting, as he continued to gaze outward.

“Sarah, how long have you known me?”

“Twenty-eight years, sir.”

“Would you say that I’m a good cop, Sarah?”

Sarah twisted her lips in contemplation and angled her eyes toward the ceiling. After several moments, she replied, “One of the best ever, sir.” She meant it.

“And a family man? Haven’t I been a good family man?”

“Oh, yes, sir. Very much so.”

“Thank you, dear. That’s all.” *Then how did I screw up?*

As Sarah walked out of the office McBride turned around. His eyes were wet, and his face was unusually haggard. He pulled a bloodstained tissue from his pocket and dabbed at his eyes. Then he mumbled to himself and reached for the phone. After a single ring he heard a familiar voice, the voice of a young man.

“Yes, Chief?”

“Get me Cesar.”

McBride heard a faint *click* as he was put on hold. Latin music filtered through

the receiver. McBride swore under his breath. *How did I ever let myself become involved with a man like Cesar?*

“Deputy Chief McBride,” said Cesar. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“You are holding the Crandall girl, Cesar.”

McBride’s voice sounded nothing like the collegial sycophant that Cesar was used to.

“Excuse me, Chief? Surely you don’t think that I—”

“You assured me—” interrupted McBride, only to be interrupted by Cesar.

“I assured you that your investigation of the Crandall girl and her friend would lead you nowhere. Calm down, Chief. We’re business partners, remember?”

“You’re a scum bag.”

“A scum bag, Chief? You didn’t say that when I helped you earn your promotions, or when our joint investments bought you bigger and bigger homes, or when you purchased your new little yacht, did you? That makes three boats now, doesn’t it? Or is it four?” Cesar laughed, like a patient father chiding a six year old child. “And I don’t recall that it bothered you when you sent your kids to those fancy New England prep schools. What was it, Loomis-Chaffee and Andover?” Cesar lowered his voice and spoke in a more soothing manner. “I think you’re just upset, my friend. Perhaps you need a vacation. Yes, I think a vacation will do you well.”

McBride let the phone drop to his side. He felt his throat tighten, and his mind felt like it was caught in a slow, hollow spin, heading toward the ground and getting ready to crash. Sweat began to bubble on his forehead like morning dew.

*What can I do? he wondered. If I go after Cesar, I’ll wind up dead or disgraced. He’s got more dirt on me than a cow has flies. He’s the only one, the only one I fear.*

“How is your pretty wife, by the way?” asked Cesar.

Cesar’s words drifted by McBride, like he was in some ephemeral dream cloud in a distant land. This couldn’t be happening, not in his world. Then his brain snapped back into focus.

“You leave her out of this.”

“Oh, little Chief. I wouldn’t dream of hurting your perfect little family.”

*It will never end, will it? thought McBride. One mistake, thirty years ago, and I’ve been paying for it ever since.*

“They’re on to you,” McBride said hoarsely.

“Who?”

“I don’t know. Some guy, a retired guy, I think. He came in and said he’s going to get you for Crandall’s kidnapping. Said he’s got an army of vigilantes or something.”

“I told you, I had nothing to do with her.”

“You’ll have to convince him.”

“No. *You* will have to convince him.”

Cesar pondered the problem, saying nothing for a long while. Then he said, “What did he look like?”

“Look like? I don’t know. He was older, I think. Late fifties, early sixties. He said he was sixty-eight, but I don’t believe him. He’s not tall, but he’s strong. Stands real straight. And he’s fast.” McBride didn’t bother to tell Cesar about how Tony had pulled the gun from his hand. “Black hair, small streaks of gray on the side. Part Oriental, I think. Wore gold rimmed glasses.”

“I want a mock up within the hour,” said Cesar. “I want you to find out who he is and where he’s from.” He paused. “Nobody crosses me and lives. You hear that? Nobody.” He hung up the phone.

McBride slumped into a chair and began to massage his aching temples. The sides of his scalp felt like wet leather that was shrinking as it dried, stretching his skin nearly to the point of splitting apart.

“Sarah!”

Sarah scampered into the room.

“Sir?”

“Sarah, please cancel my appointments for the rest of the day. I don’t feel too well, and I’m going home.”

## CHAPTER 16



Tony Trance dropped himself into the cockpit of his classic, cherry red 1965 Ford Mustang convertible. He stepped down on the clutch, pressed the accelerator twice to the floor and lifted it slowly while he turned the ignition. He was rewarded with a loud growl, then a soft purr as the car's engine sparked to life. He checked his rear view mirror, then reached into the glove compartment. He withdrew a pair of never-worn, tan designer driving gloves. He looked at them suspiciously.

*What the hell, he thought. Jack gave me these years ago. Never felt comfortable using them. But now? Might as well look the part.*

Tony pulled the thin gloves onto his hands and spread them with his fingers until they were smooth and tight across his knuckles. He reached back into the glove box and pulled out a pair of mirrored sunglasses, also never used.

"Why not?" He put on the glasses and felt like Paul Newman. He shifted the car into gear and drove it slowly through the streets of North Miami. The Mustang was in showroom condition, and its glossy paint and polished chrome sparkled brilliantly in the sun. Tony drew stares from pedestrians, both young and old, as he drove by.

Tony parked the car in front of DeWitt & Son, a third generation real estate broker specializing in exclusive homes, particularly in the Miami/Ft. Lauderdale area. He briefly checked his face and hair in the mirror. Satisfied, he stepped out of the car and walked up the steps toward the office.

Tony wore ivory slacks made of tropical wool. His shirt was silk, short sleeved and powder blue, with a small but elaborately embroidered sailboat on the front, just above the pocket on the left side of his chest. He wore a sea stained pair of Sperry Topsiders, without socks, revealing tanned, weathered ankles.

Tony entered the small but elegant reception area. It had a teak floor that was rimmed with Italian marble. The furniture was modern, with an overload of crystal upon every flat surface. Original, nineteenth century American art clung to the

walls.

“Hmm,” he said, looking around. It was a bit over-the-top for his liking, but tasteful nonetheless.

Tony glanced to a chrome and glass highboy table, which displayed a row of professional photographs, along with descriptions of several of DeWitt’s exclusive listings. Below each photo sat a personalized brochure dedicated to each of the featured homes, along with a biography of the listing agent. The wall behind them held a flat-panel, high-definition TV that scrolled through these same photographs, and more.

“May I help you?”

Tony was approached by a finely dressed woman wearing a camel colored dress of expensive silk, with a subtle pattern of blue woven into the fabric. The dress wrapped a slender body in a way that was overtly sensuous, but not blatantly sexual—a look that would appeal to the male eye and fall just short of offending most females. She was somewhere close to forty, deeply tanned, with a full head of animated silver-blond hair.

Tony glanced instinctively to the woman’s left hand and saw no ring.

The woman caught his look and smiled to herself. *I still have it*, she thought.

“I am interested in renting a home along the bay. Perhaps something like this,” said Tony. He handed the woman a brochure featuring an estate of bleached white marble, ten thousand square feet, tennis court, and swimming pool. Modest but acceptable. It was priced at \$12.8 million. “I’m new to the area and wish to rent before purchasing permanently.”

The woman looked closely at Tony, trying to guess his age. There was something attractive about him, almost animalistic in the way he moved. She glanced at his hand, saw no ring and smiled inwardly.

“I’m sorry, but we’re not really in the rental business,” she said. “Few people who own homes like these are prepared to lease.”

Has he got the money? she wondered. Normally, she could spot the players from the lookers, but this man was unusually hard to read.

“I understand,” said Tony, his voice soft and polite. “And I am sensitive to the demands of your time. I am prepared to pay an additional twenty thousand dollars, in cash, to you or your firm, if you can find me the right home within the week.”

*That’s better*, thought the woman.

“Actually,” continued Tony. “I have a particular home in mind.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed.

“And which home might that be?” The woman reached for a thick, blue listing book sitting on the table behind her. She motioned to Tony with the book and said, “Follow me.” She led him to her office.

“The house I want has been tied up in probate court for some time,” replied Tony. “My accountant told me about it. Seems the owner died, leaving it to his three sons. But two of them are dead and the other is brain-dead or missing. Apparently the owner ran afoul with the IRS, some say the DEA.” Tony scratched his head. “I think the home was left in the custody of the family lawyer, while the tax courts sort things out.”

“The Sanchez estate?”

“Sanchez,” said Tony. “And the lawyer’s name, Cesar, I believe?”

The woman looked startled. She sighed, smiled and shook her head.

“I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do with that home, Mr.—”

“Sollozi. Antonio Sollozi.”

“Patricia. Patricia Crawford. Call me Pat.” She offered her hand.

Tony took the outstretched hand and kissed it softly on the back. He held it longer than polite business would dictate, and looked directly into Pat’s eyes. Eyes that registered surprise, first as he kissed her, then as she felt the hardness of his grip.

*This man’s hands feel like steel*, she thought.

Tony released Pat’s hand and she fingered the blue book. “We had that home listed some time back. But with all that’s happened—”

Tony interrupted her. “I wish to rent the home for six months, with an option to renew for six months more. I’ll pay a hundred thousand, cash in advance.”

Crawford’s eyes closed briefly, as she added up the figures in her head. Ten percent of the rent, ten thousand dollars. She’d angle for twenty percent. That plus the additional twenty thousand. Thirty thousand dollars to the firm, half of that to her, for one phone call.

“You say you know the home?”

“As I said, it was recommended by my accountant.”

“Whose name is?” asked Pat.

“Not necessary,” replied Tony. Murray need not be involved, at least not yet.

Pat considered Tony’s reply. She pursed her lips and tossed her hair to one side. She seemed to hesitate. What the hell? Cesar did have certain fiduciary responsibilities. “Why don’t we try? You free this afternoon?”

“I could think of no better way to spend the day.”

Pat Crawford bit her lower lip, smiled, then fingered through her PDA. She pressed the trackball to dial the phone. Then she tapped her right foot as it rang. She stiffened when the phone was answered.

“This is Patricia Crawford of DeWitt & Son. Mr. Cesar, please.” Pat relaxed.

Tony took a seat upon the edge of Crawford’s desk, while she waited for Cesar to come to the phone. He let his eyes wander about the office, discreetly watching Pat with his peripheral vision. Soon she stiffened again.



“Mr. Cesar? Patricia Crawford of DeWitt & Son. I have a man here who is interested in renting the Sanchez home.”

“The home is off the market. You know that.”

“Yes, but—”

“Sorry.” Cesar began to hang up, but stopped. “Wait. What does he look like?”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, ‘what does he look like’, this man who wants my estate? It is a man, is it not?”

Pat placed her hand over the phone’s mouthpiece and whispered to Tony. “He wants to know what you look like.”

Tony’s face softened, and his eyes rounded into a friendly, but focused smile. “Please, tell him.”

Tony jumped from the desk and posed like a body builder. Pat turned away and stifled a laugh.

“Well,” began Pat. “He’s well dressed, comfortably rich, I’d say. Handsome.” She glanced over her shoulder at Tony. “Keeps himself in shape.”

“Enough of that pabulum!” cried Cesar. “Does he wear glasses?”

“Yes.”

“Gold rims?”

“Uh, huh.”

“Slightly Oriental in features?”

She looked closely at Tony.

“I’d say so. But not too much.”

“And what else? What else is unusual?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Answer me! What is unusual?”

“His hands.”

“What do you mean, his hands?”

“His hands. They’re like, they’re like stone. Hard, like stone.”

Patricia turned toward Tony with the PDA still against her ear. She waited for what seemed like minutes.

“Mr. Cesar?”

She heard Cesar breathe...and breathe...and breathe.

“Just out of curiosity, what is he offering?”

“One hundred thousand, cash, for six months,” Pat said.

“Tell him it will take two hundred.”

Pat’s chin slackened and her mouth gaped open. Her shoulders drooped. Then she adjusted her features and smiled at Tony. Her eyes narrowed and she said, “I’m not sure he’ll pay that. The home needs lots of work.”

“This house has a market of its own, Miss Crawford. Is he with you now?”

“Yes.”

“Show him the place. The combinations are the same as last year.” Cesar’s voice grew friendly. “Then, why don’t you bring him by to see me? I’ll be here until seven. You said he offered cash?”

“Cash.” *Cash is king in Miami*, thought Pat. She had a deal and she knew it. What she didn’t know was, why?

Pat hung up the phone and lightly clapped her hands. “You may just have yourself a deal, Mr. Sollozi.”

“Tony.”

“Tony. Of course.” On impulse Pat playfully offered her hand again.

Tony took it, bowed and kissed it as before.

“Hands like stone?” he said. His face appeared to smile, but his eyes were hard to read. Pat turned over Tony’s hand and studied it closely. The tips of his fingers were callused. So was the edge of his palm.

“You’re a Master,” she said.

“In some things. And in most others, always a student.”

“You break things.”

“Breaking is part of our discipline. But a small part.”

Pat let Tony’s hand slip slowly from her fingers. *I think I might like this man*, she thought.

“Let’s look at the house,” she said brightly. “Then we’ll negotiate. He wants two hundred grand.”

Tony winced and said, “Oo, that smarts.” Inside, he smiled in triumph. He might have to beg his nephew for more money, but he’d get it. And he’d get the house.

Pat grabbed a set of car keys from inside her desk and said, “You want to see this place?”

This time Tony’s eyes did join his smile. “I would like nothing more.”

## CHAPTER 17



Pat shut off the engine to her hunter green, convertible Jaguar XJS V12. She was parked beside a twelve-foot, pink stucco wall that was topped with wrought-iron spikes and razor wire. Ahead of them stood a gate made of thick, black iron bars slung between two stone pillars. Pat motioned toward the gate, then looked at Tony, who was seated beside her.

“Back in a second,” she said.

Pat walked to a black metal box that was built into the imposing pink wall. Upon the box were two glass bubbles covered with wire mesh. One was colored red and brightly lit. The other was green and dull. Beside the lights was a small keypad that looked much like a pocket calculator. It was covered by a hard plastic housing. Pat inserted a magnetized key card into the box. The plastic covering slid back and Pat punched a series of numbers into the keypad. She watched as the light switched from red to green. Satisfied, she punched in another set of numbers and the gate swung open.

Pat turned and bumped into Tony. “Oh,” she cried, startled.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” said Tony. “Just needed to stretch my legs.”

Pat leaned against the wall for a moment to steady herself. “It’s not you,” she said. “It’s this place. Gives me the creeps. It is truly magnificent, but a lot has happened here.”

“Don’t be afraid.” Tony took Pat’s arm and led her back to the car. He guided her into the passenger seat, sat himself behind the wheel, and drove forward. As he wound the car through the overgrown jungle grounds, Pat began to speak.

“This is one of the few estates that hasn’t been fully cut up over the years. The fence is electrified and surrounds the entire grounds. As you see, the top is covered with spikes and wire. Very private. Twelve acres, six hundred feet of water frontage, indoor pool, two Jacuzzis, tennis courts. The house is small by today’s standards in some parts of Florida, but a good size for this area. And the view is spectacular.”

“No stables?” asked Tony jokingly.

“Yes, but they’re empty. Will you be adding horses?”

“Perhaps.” Tony did his best to play the part of the rich businessman. He would have to become comfortable in this role, and wondered if he ever could.

“Do you ride?” asked Tony.

“A little,” Pat said. She had been an Olympic Team alternate as a girl of eighteen. Too many years and a lifetime ago, she thought to herself.

“Perhaps we can ride some day?” said Tony.

“I’ve got jumpers in Ocala,” Pat said coyly, her eyes still staring forward. “Can you handle a jumper?” Tony felt something spark inside him.

“I jump very well, for someone my age.” He paused. “Perhaps we can ride together some weekend?”

“I am free on all Mondays, and Sundays, with notice.”

“Should I arrange my schedule for next Sunday then?”

Pat turned toward Tony and closely studied his face. A warm glow spread through her middle and down her legs. A tingle, then a shiver. *Oh dear*, she thought.

“Yes, please do.”

The Sanchez mansion was twelve thousand square feet of exotic Italian marbles and rare woods, with the scarred remnants of a plush lawn spreading out from the main home. The grass and weeds had grown wild and the home looked more like a haunted mansion than an opulent estate.

Tony’s first glimpse of the home was through a thick grove of bamboo trees. Then he saw the bay stretching out behind it. “Nice place. But it looks run down.”

“Needs a major manicure, but it’s structurally intact,” said Pat. “The jungle grows in fast down here.”

At the house, Pat used a second plastic card and a different combination to gain access into the Spanish style home. As Tony passed through the electronically controlled front doors, he noticed that they were a good eight inches thick.

“This house is a vault,” he said.

Tony’s attention was drawn to a floor of opaque marble, then upward to a thirty-foot entryway ceiling that was dominated by a ten-foot wide chandelier made of multi-colored crystal.

“More like a mausoleum,” replied Pat.

Tony’s rubber soled shoes scrunched upon the smooth stone surface, while Pat’s mid sized heels clicked with every step. They looked at each other and laughed.

“We sound like a jug band,” said Pat.

“Reminds me of home,” replied Tony.

“And where is home?”

“Greenwich, Connecticut. At least it used to be.”

Pat smiled to herself. Greenwich meant money. Often, big money.

“Greenwich,” she said. “That crowded suburb that New Yorkers call ‘the country?’”

Tony smiled knowingly. “Never really liked it myself. Just sort of ended up there. My wife wanted to live there. My late wife. I’m a widower. Twenty years, gone.” *Be quiet, Tony. You’re talking too much. Control yourself.*

Tony abruptly stopped. “I’ve seen enough,” he said. “I’ll offer Cesar a hundred thousand. That’s all.” He pressed his fingers together and pressed his lips against his index fingers, as if he were rummaging through some attic in his mind. “Then, of course, there’s twenty more for you.”

“Cesar wants two hundred.”

Tony raised his hand. “I’ll need to put fifty grand, or more, into this place to make it livable. You get me a meeting with Cesar and I’ll cut the deal.”

“We can see him now.”

Tony caught his breath. This was more than he could have hoped for. He did his best to appear bored, with Jaime’s kidnapper, or killer, so close. Was justice going to fall into his lap without a fight?

“Good, then. Let’s go.”

They drove in silence. Pat flipped through her memories for a handle on Antonio Sollozi. He was like no man she had known. He was mysterious, and vague about his finances, like many men of money and power. He was tense, but in a different sort of way. There was a kind, little boy streak running through him. It was something she felt, like only a woman can.

Tony’s mind was in a makeshift concert hall, where a young woman sang to the rapt faces of her aged audience. He felt the glow and the force of her youth radiate within him, even now. Then he saw the waxen face of Tania Bellows, the side of her face beaten into lumps, with darkened bruises shrouding her once flawless skin, and a black gap where ivory white teeth had once graced an infectious smile.

“What kind of work do you do?” asked Pat.

Tony was startled out of his thoughts. “Oh, I’ve dabbled in this and that over the years. Construction, real estate, finance. A few international contracts.”

Tony knew that Cesar would pump Pat for all she knew. And he needed her to tell just enough to draw Cesar into his second big mistake.

## CHAPTER 18



Pat drove her car through another exclusive residential area, one even more impressive than the one where Sanchez had lived. Tony's eyes studied the great homes along the quiet street, set behind tall walls and thick rows of trees and shrubs. He caught an occasional glimpse of a white railed balcony, where bikini-clad women sat sunning themselves, their feet propped on chaise lounges, with books and boat drinks in their hands.

Pat slowed the car and stopped before a closed gate that framed a driveway of sun-bleached crushed shells.

"Cesar's home. Also his office," she said.

"Nice place."

"I'll say."

Pat smiled at the two gatehouse guards. Neither man smiled back, and both men slipped rifles off their shoulders. One of them spoke into a headset and waited. After several moments he nodded, and waved them through. They drove forward and stopped near the house.

Tony followed Pat as she negotiated her heels through the driveway's bed of shells. Before she could ring the bell, the door was opened by a tall, curly haired man. He towered above them. Six foot five at least, thought Tony, with the shoulders of a pro linebacker.

The man pointed at Tony. "I must ask you to raise your hands, sir."

Tony looked toward Pat. She spread her arms in a show of helplessness.

Tony turned toward the large man. "I carry no weapons."

"Then we should have no problems."

The tall man waited. Tony locked eyes with him and slowly raised his arms. The big man ran his hands along Tony's frame. When satisfied, he offered his hand.

"Sorry for the frisk. House rules. Name's Carlos. Cesar is my uncle."

Tony took the man's hand casually. "Antonio Sollozi."

Carlos wrapped a smothering mitt around Tony's fingers. Then he began to

squeeze. The men stood face-to-face, with their hands locked tightly. Tony attempted to pull his hand free, but Carlos wouldn't let go. Instead, he clamped down like a bulldog, increasing the pressure with each passing moment.

The pressure grew intense and Tony tried to pull himself loose. Carlos smiled. He bared his teeth again, when Tony's face grew red. He looked like a guard dog preparing to attack. And he would attack; those were his orders.

"I want you to break him here and now," Cesar had told Carlos, just a few minutes earlier. "Crush his fingers. So he can never wipe his ass again."

Carlos stood up on his toes for better purchase and bore down on Tony's hand. Pat watched helplessly as her champion appeared ready to fold. Tony seemed to waiver, as Carlos pressed to bring him to his knees.

Then Tony straightened and calmly smiled. "Please let go of my hand," he said softly.

"Not until you shake like a man."

"Strength is not the only measure of a man."

"I'm afraid for you it is, *old man*," Carlos took a deep breath, and prepared for a final, crushing blow.

"Neither is age a good measure," said Tony. He began to squeeze, increasing the pressure gradually, standing rack straight until he met Carlos with equal force.

Patricia stood to the side, enmeshed in the battle. She stared at the hands. They were white from pressure. And she looked to the veins that were bulging along their necks.

"Are you sure you don't want to stop?" said Tony.

Carlos seemed to falter. He clenched his teeth and took a wider stance. This caused him to shrink in height, until his face was almost level with Tony's.

Carlos began to sweat, with drops popping like pox across his forehead. His eyes took on a startled, uncomprehending look, as he began to realize that he had been snookered.

"Are you sure?" Tony asked again.

"Screw you, gramps."

Now, Tony was the one looking cool and relaxed. He shrugged, and then made one final, massive contraction with his hand.

Carlos's fingers cracked under the strain and he crumpled to his knees. He tried to pull his screaming hand from Tony's grasp, but Tony wouldn't let go.

"Perhaps you would like to let go now?" said Tony. "If you ask me nicely, I will let go."

Carlos whimpered. "You suckered me. Bastard."

"Is that any way to treat a guest?" Tony let go. "I won't make you apologize for your rude behavior. Just run along and tell Mr. Cesar that we are ready to see him. And, Carlos? Thank you for the sport."

Carlos staggered into the mansion and slammed the door behind him.

As the door closed, Tony turned to Pat. His lips curled into a modest smile. "Sorry. That had to be done."

Pat took hold of Tony's hand and studied it once more. "It seems that you are more than meets the eye, Mr. Sollozi."

"I am but a simple man."

The door opened again and Cesar's long, sleek, feline frame filled the opening.

"Hello Patricia. Hello Mr.?"

"Sollozi. Antonio Sollozi," said Tony, extending his hand.

Cesar was nearly as tall as his nephew, but far thinner. His hair was fashionably styled and permed. It curled around his ears and draped to his shoulders in the back. His face was dotted with shallow pits from childhood acne, and deeply lined and leathered from years in the sun. Tony placed him in his early fifties. Graying temples, skin beginning to loosen around the eyes and chin.

Cesar blinked for a moment at Tony's outstretched hand. Then he raised his own hand to meet Tony's challenge.

"Carlos has a very strong grip," said Tony.

"He doesn't know his own strength at times." Cesar sounded bored, and his face showed no emotion. His eyes searched Tony's face and found it equally vacant. "Is that why you crushed his hand? Mano-a-mano?"

Tony smiled. Light bounced off Cesar's gleaming chandelier and it sparked in Tony's eyes. "He'll be fine in a day or two."

"He doesn't think so."

Tony continued smiling. "With time all things heal. Even wounded pride."

Cesar turned and motioned them into to his home. "May I offer you a drink?"

"No, thank you," said Tony. He took three steps and abruptly stopped.

Cesar turned back to face him.

"We're rather in a hurry," said Tony. He looked at Pat. "I'd like to rent the Sanchez home. I'll pay you one hundred thousand dollars, in cash. Not a penny more."

Tony tossed a stack of bills onto a small table in the entryway. "I believe we're both men of honor. So I don't expect we'll need a contract."

At the word *contract* Cesar seemed to harden. A contract could mean many things, good and bad.

"I told Miss Crawford two hundred."

Tony nodded. "A fair price under normal circumstances, Mr. Cesar. The home is quite nice, but it's not habitable. I'll assume the expenses to make it livable. And I'll invest the time. That will be fifty to a hundred thousand, maybe more. You'll benefit by the tax-free appreciation in the home. Capice?"

Cesar's eyes narrowed. What Sollozi said was reasonable, but it was an obvious



ploy to pay him less. “You’ll pay for all improvements then?”

“I’ll insist on it. Your people, however, will not be allowed upon the grounds without permission. You and I, we’re both private men. No?”

Cesar thought of McBride’s phone call. This man was out to get him, and he needed to know why. He could refuse Sollozi now, or he could keep him where he could watch his every move. *Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.*

“Your offer is paltry, but it bears some study, Mr. Sollozi. I shall give it some thought. Please, call me next week.”

“My offer stands for ten minutes only,” said Tony. “We will wait outside. It has been a pleasure meeting you. Tell Carlos I bear him no ill will.”

Tony Trance snapped his feet together, bowed slightly and walked out the door. Pat turned toward Cesar, grimaced, and held out her hands in a gesture of helplessness. Then she followed behind Tony.

“God you’ve got balls,” Pat said, closing the door behind her. “Who do you think you are?”

“Antonio Sollozi. I told you.”

“Maybe I should ask, *what are you?*”

“Not what I seem.”

“Well, *dub,*” said Patricia. “So, who and what are you?”

Tony couldn’t help but smile. “I am a man who finds you extremely attractive and would like to take you to dinner. This evening.”

Pat started to laugh, but she looked into Tony’s probing eyes and felt her heart stop, for the briefest of moments, like a camera flash that left her dizzy and disoriented. Tony had power. He had the physical strength to bring Carlos to his knees, and the mental and financial juice to toy with Cesar like he was a gangly puppy. She felt scared, exhilarated, and ready for the danger.

“I think I’d love to,” she said. At that moment, Carlos skulked out the mansion door. His hand was already packed with ice and wrapped with an ace bandage. He stopped several feet from Tony, wary of the distance.

“It isn’t broken,” said Tony. “You were only doing your job. I know that.” Tony’s voice was mellow and friendly. Then he paused. “But don’t cross me, Carlos. The next time I won’t be easy on you.”

As Tony spoke, Pat felt like she’d guzzled a pint of brandy, as liquid heat surged through her body. *Yes, this is a powerful man.*

Carlos grunted. “Mr. Cesar accepts your offer. Ms. Crawford has the codes and cards. He wants a detailed accounting of all improvements you make.”

Tony nodded wordlessly, turned, and walked away. There was no need to step inside Cesar’s house again. He’d do that soon enough, if he was lucky.

## CHAPTER 19



Pat drove slowly toward the offices of DeWitt & Son, feeling drawn towards Tony like a planet to its sun, circling around him with a sense of innate belonging. He was like a prowling jungle cat, every move calculated to a predetermined end. *Animal magnetism, chemistry, lust. Is that what I feel?* she wondered. Whatever it was, it was some law of nature she couldn't fight. Pat found herself trying to imagine Tony's body naked. She smiled, as she saw herself wrapping her legs around his muscular frame.

*How long has it been?* she wondered. Over a year, at least. Too long. Yes, much too long.

As Pat parked near her office she felt a sudden, irrational fear that she would never see Tony again.

"Would you prefer we meet somewhere, or would you like me to pick you up at your home?" asked Tony.

Pat exhaled. "My home would be fine. Is eight o'clock all right?"

She scribbled her address and phone number on the back of her business card.

"Any favorite place?" *Please tell me where I should take you*, thought Tony. *I have no clue what I am doing.*

"Oh, anywhere will be fine." *What am I doing?* she screamed to herself. *You're acting like a dumb blonde! Show him some backbone.*

"Good, then. I'll see you at eight."

Tony stepped out of the car and Pat waited for him to open her door. *How did I know he'd do that?* she wondered. She held out her hand and Tony took it gently. After closing the door, he kissed her hand once more.

"It has been a pleasurable afternoon," he said.

"Yes, it has." *And a damned exciting one, too.*

"Goodbye, Pat."

Tony began to walk toward his Mustang, then stopped in mid stride.

"Oh. Almost forgot."

Walking back, Tony pulled a jade and gold money clip from each front pocket of his pants. He peeled off forty, five hundred dollar bills and handed them to Pat. "Here."

Pat looked puzzled.

"Your fee. You did a marvelous job."

"Oh," said Pat. "I forgot." She hesitated. "You don't have to pay me that, Tony." *What am I saying? That's twenty thousand bucks.*

"Oh, but I have to."

Tony turned, and started whistling as he walked to his car. *I've done it!* he thought. He had confronted Cesar and rented Sanchez's palace, where he could train his army and get noticed. Word would spread quickly that there was a new man in town. In fact, Cesar was probably making calls now—grilling people across the country, trying to find out who the hell he was. Then there was Patricia. A beauty all right. A magnificent showpiece. He needed a showpiece. She was perfect. But would she go along? There was one problem he hadn't counted on—he liked Pat far more than he wanted to. This was no business deal. It was already far different.

Tony jammed his Mustang into gear, waved, and took off heading south. *What am I going to do now?* he wondered. *I'm not ready for this.*

Tony owned one suit, the same shiny brown one he had worn for over fifteen years. At least it was somewhat back in style. He was frugal with money, always had been. Except for the house. His wife had insisted on the house, everything went into the house. In forty years as an analyst and field agent for the CIA, he had earned just enough to pay for the house, send his kids to college and plan for retirement, but never enough to waste. It was a strange sensation to throw money around like confetti. Jack's money. Tony thought of his nephew. *I'll pay him back, somehow. Such a good boy. Maybe some day he'll be happy. If anyone deserves happiness, it's Jack.*

Tony passed the Upper Cut Clothiers shop. Its discreet, hand painted sign seemed to beckon him. And why not? He spun the car around and parked in front of the store. From the curb he could read the other small words carved in the sign and painted with gold-leaf. **Open ten until five. Private showings available by appointment.** He glanced at his watch. He had six minutes. He jumped out of the car, strode inside, and walked to the nearest salesman.

"I want two of your best suits, shirts, ties, shoes, and cufflinks. The works. Only if I can have them tonight, including the tailoring." He handed the salesman three one hundred dollar bills. "For your time." What the hell, he thought. It works on TV.

"I'll be right back, sir."

The salesman scurried through a closed door at the back of the shop. Tony hoped he had paid enough. There would be the tailor, the seamstress, and the

salesman to take care of, if they were available. Suddenly he felt foolish, like Oz caught behind the curtain.

The young man scuttled back through the door and smiled.

“Right this way, sir,” he said.

Tony followed the salesman as he sashayed forward.

“Would you prefer wool or silk?”

“Wool.” Silk wouldn’t last as long, thought Tony. Ever frugal.

“We have our Signature Series from Savile Row in London. Half a dozen of the best shops on the street. Each sends us an exclusive collection.” The salesman led him through a drawn curtain to a private room at the back. It was furnished with Louis XIV reproductions, and Oriental carpets on the floor. Good carpets, he noticed. Upon the walls, several original oils were hung in strategic locations. Mezzotint prints covered the rest. Larry Young sculptures rested on marble pedestals in two of the corners. Their soft curves and mesmerizing shapes put Tony strangely at ease. Tony walked to a small one that was similar to a large piece he’d seen at the Albrecht museum, *Bathers*. He rubbed his hands along the smooth blue bronze and looked toward the racks of impressive, elegant suits spread along the wall.

“May I offer you a drink?” said the salesman brightly.

“Tea, please.”

“Green or black?”

“Black, please.”

“Why don’t you browse as I prepare your tea?”

Tony watched the salesman walk primly through a narrow doorway into the kitchen. *So well mannered, well dressed, with every hair perfectly in place*, thought Tony. *I should be so suave.*

Tony walked to the size 42 suits and flipped quickly through them. Suits from Huntsman, Henry Poole, Gieves & Hawkes. Tony examined the stitching and noticed the precision craftsmanship. He wrung several of the sleeves and saw the fabrics spring back to perfect smoothness. He chose two lightweight suits of finely woven tropical wool and dropped them onto a chair.

“Those will wear like iron,” said the salesman, handing Tony a fine china cup. Inside the cup was a round perforated metal tea filter. Tony smiled to himself. This wasn’t Lipton.

“This is very fine tea,” he said.

“You are correct, sir. A special blend, hand selected by our owner.”

“Please extend my compliments. What do you think of the colors?” Tony waved toward the suits.

Tony had chosen a suit of charcoal gray with a rich looking check pattern built into the weave. The other was more casual, a cream colored tan.

“This...” The salesman held up the charcoal suit. “...is the best suit on the rack. You have an excellent eye for quality.”

There were no prices on these suits, and Tony felt himself digging deep into a financial pit.

“Let’s try them on,” said the salesman. He took the gray jacket and held it behind Tony’s back, low so that his arms went comfortably into the sleeves. As the coat slipped across his shoulders, Tony knew he had made the right choice. The suit molded to his body like a second skin.

Tony stepped to a full-length crescent of mirrors, while a short gentleman appeared out of nowhere with a wedge of white chalk in his hand. He checked all around the jacket but made no mark.

“This suit fits you perfectly, sir.”

“It does. Doesn’t it?” Tony felt extraordinary. The suit had a life of its own.

The cream coat fit the same, as did the vests that came with the suits.

“The pants, sir.” The tailor made a few marks on the slacks; four pairs in all. Then he vanished like a puff of steam.

Tony followed the salesman back into the main room of the store. “They’ll be done with the tailoring by the time we’ve finished choosing the rest of your wardrobe,” he said, smiling broadly. This was a big payday, Tony could tell.

They chose a black pair of Italian leather wing tips made by Artioli, and a black pair of stylish loafers with subdued tassels, from Ferragamo.

“The tassels are removable,” said the salesman. “I assume you want the same two pair in brown or cordovan?” he asked.

*He’s got me*, thought Tony. “Yes, whichever you suggest.”

With several shirts, half a dozen Charvet ties, and diamond and gold cufflinks by Van Cleef & Arpels, Tony was ready to leave.

“That will be just twenty-three thousand, six hundred and seventy dollars. Will that be charge or cash?” The salesman said the words exactly as he had been trained, so matter of fact, as if it were pocket change, which it was, to most of his clients.

“Cash,” said Tony.

“Excellent.” The salesman smiled. He made two percent more if the customer paid cash. This kind of customer was worth the extra effort.

## CHAPTER 20



One hour later and one hundred forty-four thousand dollars poorer, Tony pulled into his parking spot at the Final Rest.

Tony had hoped to hide his purchases from the Vigilantes, but as he stopped his car, his friends circled around him like beach seagulls on spilled popcorn.

“There you are,” shouted Muffy.

“Hi, gang. Love to chat but I’ve got plans tonight.”

Tony tried to brush by them but they blocked the way to his unit.

“What’s all this stuff?” said Gumbo.

“My new image.” Tony tried to get by his friends again, but they formed a wall.

“Upper Cut,” said Muffy. “Well, la di da.”

“I’ve also got us a home on the bay. We’ll train there from now on.”

“Speaking of training,” said Sophie. “People are talking about the changes that have come over us. Apparently we seem happier than we should be, and others are starting to notice. They think we’re on drugs. What should we tell them?”

“Why don’t we discuss this in the morning?” said Tony.

“She must be quite charming. How old is she?” said Murray.

“Does age really matter?”

Murray winked at Gumbo. “That young, huh?”

“We better let him go,” said Wendell, sheepishly.

“Remember, Tony,” said Muffy. “We’ve got training in the morning. Don’t let her tire you out.”

“Hutch didn’t seem tired this morning,” said Tony.

Muffy squeezed her husband’s hand. “That’s true. Well, all right, sweetie. You have a good time.” She turned to Hutch. “Think he’ll get laid?”

All eyes turned toward Tony, waiting for his answer. “I’m not talking.”

His friends exchanged knowing glances.

“I bet he scores,” said Gumbo.

“Must you be so crass?” asked Murray.

“Time’s too short to beat around the bush, Murray,” said Sophie. “In younger days, I’m sure Gumbo would have politely said, ‘Tony has an engagement.’ And in those days that’s probably all it would have been. But now? How many more days do we have left? If it were me, I’d be trying to score. Don’t forget to use protection, Tony.”

“You mean like a heart monitor?” said Gumbo.

“Better than needing an erector set,” replied Sophie.

“Oo,” said Gumbo. “That was low, Sophie. That was really low.”

## CHAPTER 21



Tony tossed the suits and shirts upon his bed. He dropped two black plastic bags containing four pairs of shoes, his ties and his cufflinks onto the floor of his closet. Then he collapsed into a maroon leather chair at the foot of his bed.

“Are you up for this?”

Tony closed his eyes for three minutes, breathing in slowly through his nose, then out through his mouth. *Calm, calm*, he thought. He felt his pulse rate drop, and soon felt at peace. He enjoyed this feeling for a few short moments, then opened his eyes.

He glanced to his watch. Six forty. He was cutting it close. “So much for peace and calm,” he said.

Tony grabbed the phone and dialed. He began to pace, swearing under his breath when there was no answer. Then, just as he was about to hang up, someone spoke.

“Hello?” His nephew’s voice was breathless.

“Jackie, you sound tired.”

Jack Trance was flowing sweat, despite the outside temperature of six degrees below zero. Steam rose around him in a cloud and his breaths came in winded gasps. “I’m out back, chopping wood.”

“In the dark? They sell that stuff, you know. Go buy a cord.”

“Yeah, well. I like the work.”

“They use oil for heating up there. And natural gas. You could get propane.” Tony smiled. His nephew could buy a small country if he wanted to, but he chopped his own wood for heat.

“I need another favor,” continued Tony.

Trance took a moment to catch his breath, then said, “What’s up?”

“I’ve got a, umm, date tonight. And I need advice.”

Tony could feel Trance laugh, but his nephew had the good taste to hide it. “You had the same training I did, Uncle Tony.”

The Trance men had all received the same instruction—as warriors, lovers and scholars. Part of this training was a month in an exclusive Japanese brothel where lovemaking was taught as an art. An ancient Japanese custom that Trance felt had



long outlived its time.

“Not sex, Jackie. *Dinner.*” Tony looked at his watch. “In seventy-five minutes. I don’t know where to take her and I don’t want to make a fool of myself.”

Trance thought about his uncle. Sixty-eight years old and widowed for nearly two decades. “Must be some woman.”

Tony described Patricia and said, “It’s important that I make the right impression. Where should we go?”

Trance thought for a moment. “Miami has a few good restaurants, but none I would call world class. There are two places you might like. There is a little hide-away on Jupiter Island called the Hobe Sound Club. I’m a member there, and I know the people pretty well. I could book you a room. They’ve got a decent golf course and the tennis facilities are outstanding. The food is more than acceptable and the atmosphere is relaxed. It can be a little snooty, but not too bad.” Trance paused, waiting for Tony to reply.

“I’m listening.”

“There’s The Forge, on 41<sup>st</sup> Street, in Miami Beach. They’ve got a wine cellar that will knock your socks off. Al’s crazy about his wines. The food is excellent and I could get them to cater to you like a king. The maitre d’ and I go back a bit. And Al, the owner, he pretty much owes me.” Trance walked back toward his house as he talked. “You could book a honeymoon suite along the strip and drink champagne looking out over the water from your heart shaped Jacuzzi.”

Tony thought for a moment. “I’ll take the wine and the Jacuzzi.”

“Tell you what, Tony. I’ll book you a suite at the Hyatt. Check in before dinner. I’ll have a limo waiting to take you and your lady. When you get to the Forge they’ll be waiting for you. I’ll order your meals and a good wine. You just show up and have a good time.”

“There’s just one thing, Jackie,” interrupted Tony.

“Which is?”

“I’m not using my name. I’m using the name Sollozi. Antonio Sollozi.”

This time Trance cackled. “The last thing in the world you look is Italian, Tony.” He frowned, and he felt a shadow begin to creep around his mind. “What are you into? You’re not using that Internet dating, are you?”

“No. And it doesn’t matter, Jackie. Please play along. It’s important.”

Trance sighed. “The maitre d’ is named Jacques, and the owner always keeps a table in reserve. I’ll arrange for a Mr. Sollozi and Pat Crawford to have the best seats in the house.”

Trance laughed again. “Sollozi? Where the hell’d you come up with a name like Sollozi? Sometimes you’re too much, Tony. Hey—”

“Yes?” said Tony.

Trance thought better of his question. “Have a good time. And be careful?”

“Thank you, Jackie. You’re a good kid.”

## CHAPTER 22



Patricia Crawford remained outside the office of Dewitt and Son, watching the back of Tony's car until it faded from sight. She felt like a school girl after her first kiss, and walked dreamily into the office humming a love song.

"Hello, Sheila," she said to her secretary. "Marvelous day, isn't it?"

Sheila was sitting at her desk, wearing a pair of bright red reading glasses upon the end of her nose. She was typing at her computer and lifted her head as Pat walked by.

"What's got into you?"

"Oh, nothing." Patricia continued into her office. She dropped her alligator attaché on top of a round mahogany conference table and walked around to her desk.

She punched her phone's intercom. "Charlie?" Charlie was the owner and broker of DeWitt & Son.

"That you, Pat?"

"Got a second?"

"Sure."

Patricia walked down the picture-lined hallway into Charlie DeWitt's office. He was standing just inside the door, putting golf balls toward an electronic ball retriever resting fifteen feet away. He drew the putter back and stroked a Titleist. It rolled wide of its mark, and settled into a group of other errant balls.

"You're jerking your putter, Charlie. Draw it back slow and straight," said Pat. "Not too far." She took the putter from Charlie and hit a ball into the center of the cup.

The ball popped back smartly and she handed the putter back to her boss. Then she watched as Charlie tried once more. This time he was successful.

"Been working on that for an hour, Pat. Thanks." He rested the putter against his desk and looked toward his star sales agent. "What's up?"

Pat presented the forty, five-hundred dollar bills that Tony had given her. "Just

leased the Sanchez mansion, for six months. This is the bonus from the guy who took the place. Cesar owes us ten grand. No written contract.”

“Nice job, kiddo.” Charlie took half of the bills. “This is cash. Certainly you don’t want this recorded, do you?”

“Of course, Charlie. Send me a 1099. We must pay our taxes.”

Charlie sighed. “Okay, I guess.” He tossed the bills into an opened safe in the wall.

Pat wrapped the rest of the cash around her right index finger and touched it to her forehead in a mock salute. “Got to go,” she said.

“Thought we might catch dinner,” said Charlie. “Al’s invited us to his table at The Forge.”

“Not a chance.” Pat smiled and turned to leave.

“Hot date, huh?”

Patricia turned back toward her boss. “Charlie, you know I think you’re a dear. But, well, you know. The physical part just isn’t there for me. I like being friends.”

Charlie smiled good-naturedly. “Go ahead then. Have fun at my expense. I’ll just stay here alone with my putter.”

“You do that, Charlie. But remember, don’t jerk it so much.”

## CHAPTER 23



Pat left her office and drove the short distance home. She parked the Jaguar in a pull-out, off the circular drive that curved up along the front door. The house was made of pale stucco, with a reddish, clay tile roof. It had fifteen spacious rooms, and sat on two acres of manicured jungle forest. Pat stepped inside, kicked off her heels and threw them into the hallway closet. She pulled at the bottom of her dress and lifted it over her head. She walked toward her bedroom, dress still over her head, making use of each precious second.

“Eight o’clock, for God’s sake. I need a manicure, a pedicure. Got to shave my legs, pluck my brows.” She turned on the water in her shower, then unstrapped her bra and pushed her panties to the floor. As she was about to jump in she said, “Oh, shoot.”

Pat turned and looked toward a full length mirror against the wall. She patted one thigh. “You’ve got to be *tight*, girl.” She turned off the shower, walked back into her bedroom and pulled a blue, one-piece bathing suit out of a dresser drawer. She stepped into the suit, stretching the straps over her shoulders as she walked out the sliding doors into her back yard.

An elaborate mix of flower and rock gardens stretched out from the back of the house. Within the gardens was a forty foot pool with a thirty–five foot lap lane extension. Pat walked beyond the pool to a small cabana. She opened the door and pulled a Timex Triathlon watch off the shelf. She strapped it to her wrist and pressed the mode button to set it to the Chrono timer. After stuffing her thick hair into a swim cap, she jumped into the pool and took a few warm up laps. Then she set the timer on the watch and started swimming again, this time hard.

Twenty minutes and over one mile later, Pat stepped out of the pool. She reset her watch and walked through a pair of sliding doors that opened to a full sized tanning room beside the cabana. “God, I don’t have the time.” She set the timer on her watch for five minutes and punched the start button. She flipped a switch on the wall and the sun lamps began to cook. She covered her eyes with a pair of

plastic eye shades and broiled herself on both sides for five minutes each. She didn't normally use sunlamps, and these had been installed for her ex-husband. But this was an emergency.

Pat jogged from the tanning room into her house and jumped into the shower. Under the pelting water she shaved her legs and rinsed her body with Dove soap. After the shower, she sat at her dressing table and rubbed lightly scented Hong Kong body oils into her skin, until it glowed like polished gold. Then she buffed her nails, plucked her brows and applied just a hint of makeup. At ten minutes before eight she was nearly ready.

Patricia chose a dress of white silk. It was her favorite, custom-made for her by an upstart Paris designer on the Avenue Montaigne. In the dress, Pat was one of a kind. The white made her tanned body project like a statue on a pedestal. The V neck hinted at the amplexness of her breasts while leaving plenty to the imagination. Her blond hair fell over bare shoulders, cascading like a mountain stream flowing over rocks. Full and silky and alive with movement. The dress and her hair made a perfect setting for the Cartier necklace of diamonds and sapphires that curled off her neck.

Pat looked to her plastic watch. Eight on the button. She unclasped the Timex and tossed it onto the top of her bedroom dresser. In its place she wrapped a thin, gold Corum. As she did so, her mind listened for the doorbell. But there was no sound.

Pat assessed herself in the mirror for one final time. "Not bad," she said, well satisfied. Then she walked to the parlor by the front door, to wait.

Tony didn't come. Ten minutes passed, then twenty. Pat began to feel like she'd been ditched by her prom date.

"I told you men weren't worth it," she muttered. The phone rang and she snatched it from the receiver.

"Hello." Pat's voice was smooth, but with a touch of hesitancy.

"Patricia."

*I knew he wouldn't come, thought Pat. I set myself up like a—*

"I'm running just a few minutes late and I apologize. I'm in the car now, and should be there in no more than five minutes. I'm sorry I didn't call earlier."

"It was sweet of you *to* call, Tony. Thank you."

Pat checked herself in the mirror, fluffed her hair, pursed her lips, and dabbed at a stray smudge of mascara. She had to admit it. She looked like a Cosmo cover.

Pat took a seat to wait, and found herself pondering her life.

Patricia Crawford was not a promiscuous woman. She had married at the age of twenty-two, to a wealthy romantic who turned out to be an incurable playboy. He had inherited Campari Restaurants and Catering, a prosperous food service company. Campari owned dozens of fast food franchises, but its main business

was servicing the airlines, ballparks, convention centers and restaurants with foods around the world. Pat's husband had found that he liked servicing airline hostesses and gum-chewing waitresses even more.

Pat had been a faithful wife for ten long years, ignoring her husband's diversions like bad dreams. But, as he'd grown older he'd begun drinking and drugging. His sexual exploitations grew increasingly public, until Pat's pride forced to file for divorce. They had made an amicable settlement. Patricia got the home, four million dollars in cash, the family ranch and her dignity.

She'd begun a career as a real estate agent, and in eight years she had earned her way to the top. Many accused her of screwing her way there, but that wasn't the case. She did let men show her off. But none had gone beyond that point. She was happy living alone, and she'd be damned if she'd use sex as a tool.

"I make a million a year," she said out loud. "I own a six million dollar home. I have my horses, and I've got no debts." She took a long, resigned breath. "Then why do I feel so empty and alone?" *It's been so long since I've lain naked with a man that I forget what it's like. I feel like a river that has vanished in a drought, my insides cracking like dried mud.*

Pat hungered for closeness, but she was tired of little boys looking for a new toy or a surrogate mother.

There was a firm knock on the door. Pat pressed the intercom and looked to the security monitor. She smiled, as she watched Tony straighten his tie like a man preparing for a job interview.

"Yes?"

"There is a humble man who seeks the pleasure of your company and forgiveness for being late."

Pat opened the door. Her heart leaped like a startled frog. *The man can dress*, she thought.

Tony wore a perfectly tailored, charcoal gray suit. His cotton and silk shirt was made with a nearly invisible and imminently tasteful chevron pattern within its white fabric. His tie was a deep maroon, with a subtle gray pattern that matched his suit. It was set off by a sparkling diamond tie tack. His suit pocket sported a handkerchief that matched his tie. And his expensive new shoes looked spit shined and glistened like black crystal.

"Tony," she said.

Tony felt his face flush when Pat walked into the doorway's lighted frame. It was almost as if he hadn't noticed her before. He remembered sensuous and attractive, but not ethereal. This was the most stunning woman he had ever seen.

Tony stuttered like an unprepared schoolboy, searching for an answer just out of his mind's reach.

"I...I." Tony offered Pat a dozen long-stem roses.

“Oh, they’re beautiful!” Pat motioned for Tony to enter.

“You look absolutely...” said Tony, hoarsely.

“As do you, Antonio.”

Tony reached into his pants pocket and hesitantly fingered a poem he had composed on his way to see her. He was afraid to read it, to a woman who was probably often showered with gifts. He left the paper curled in his hand. He couldn’t find the nerve. Maybe some other day.

Pat waved him to a chair.

“Your home is more than I had imagined,” Tony said. “It’s spectacular.”

Tony gazed around the living room, which was at least thirty feet long and just as wide. The floor was Indian green marble, and was covered by two oriental carpets with subtle green highlights. The rugs broke the room into two separate areas. One held a grouping of pale rattan furniture that was arranged informally around a square glass table. The other marked a formal area, composed of a sleek, pale green silk sofa and two matching chairs. In the corners sat an eclectic mix of modern sculpture. The walls were hung with pictures of horses—mostly photographs. There were shots of horses grazing, racing, and training, with and without people. There were pictures of Pat riding in full dress and several of her holding trophies.

“I married well. But not well enough,” she said, her eyes searching Tony’s face. “This house was one of his parting gifts. Would you care for a drink?”

Pat’s fingers trembled and she hoped he would refuse. She didn’t want him to see her shaking hands. What was it about Tony that made her feel that way?

“To be honest with you, Pat, I’m a bit nervous. And I think I would be more comfortable if we started moving.”

Tony stood and touched Pat’s shoulder. She shuddered at his touch, and followed him to the door.

“Perhaps you will give me a tour of your home, some other time?” Tony said, as Pat closed the door and set the alarm behind them. “I can see that it holds many stories.”

“It does, and I’d like that.” Pat tucked a key into her black, silk evening bag.

The silver Mercedes limousine was stocked with iced Taittinger champagne and fresh beluga caviar, both compliments of Tony’s nephew.

“Perhaps I can offer *you* a drink?” said Tony.

Pat smiled. She wondered if Tony was as nervous as she. Or was he just giving his usual lines? Inwardly, she shrugged her shoulders. What did it matter? Whichever it was, he was doing it perfectly.

“Please.” Pat eyed the caviar. “Oh, my one great weakness. How did you know?” She took a cracker from a silver tray and dug into the fish eggs like it was soft ice cream. She stuffed the whole cracker into her mouth and mumbled, “I absolutely

love this stuff. I can starve myself all day. Say no to Cold Stone ice cream without flinching. Chocolate? No problem. But put me in front of good caviar and I turn into a glutton. A true gourmand.”

Tony’s mind flashed to his childhood in Japan. To the young girl who had taught him the art of lovemaking.

“You will never forget me,” she had said. Tony, fifteen at the time, had laughed. But his mind saw the young girl smiling, even now. How right she had been.

“Penny for your thoughts,” said Pat.

“Oh,” said Tony. There was a sad, torn smile across his face, and he stared out the window. “I was remembering a time, a time half a century ago, when life was simple and the only things that mattered were youthful pleasures. You remind me of someone I knew back then.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Of the highest order.” Tony’s eyes grew sharply focused, then softened, with a touch of mirth. “It means that you have depth beyond your beauty. I shall try not to stare.”

“Stare all you want. I worked hard to look good for you.” Pat swirled her champagne. “Most men don’t see below the surface, Tony. What do you see?”

Tony reached behind his head and scratched his neck. He looked as if what he was about to say was painful. He hesitated. “You remind me of a beautiful, wounded eagle. No.” He paused. “An eagle once wounded, now fully healed, but afraid to spread its wings and soar to its greatest heights.”

Pat murmured, “Mmm.” Then she said, “Most men think of me as a peacock.”

“You are far nobler than any peacock, Patricia Crawford. And much more attractive.”

Pat grabbed another cracker and spread a thick mound of caviar across it with a silver butter knife. She offered it to Tony and let him take a bite. She popped the remaining half into her mouth. After chewing it down she said, “You make me feel half naked.” She laughed, a nervous but carefree laugh. “But for some reason, I like it.”

“It’s when we are most free,” said Tony. *Or most encaged.*

Pat held up her glass and offered a toast. “To feeling free.”

Tony laughed and clinked her glass, feeling almost free himself. “To being free.”

Pat moved subtly toward him. She took a sip from her glass, and said, “Tell me about yourself.”

They fell into an easy conversation, heedless of the time.

Pat was in the middle of a sentence when the driver stopped in front of the Forge Restaurant. Pat stifled a groan. How awkward was this?

Inside the Forge, an obsequious Jacques greeted them.

“Mr. Sollozi. We’re glad that you could join us for dinner. And you, Patricia,



you look most beautiful, as always.”

“Hello, Jacques,” said Pat.

Tony hid his surprise, as he palmed Jacques a hundred dollar bill. This was an unexpected complication. He’d have to change his story.

“I see you know this place,” he said.

“Been here a time or two.”

“Merci, Jacques,” said Tony in perfect French. The maitre d’ discreetly pocketed the money and motioned for them to follow. “We have a fine table for you this evening. Right this way.”

Tony noticed how all eyes in the room followed Patricia as she flowed between the tables. He straightened his back to make himself appear taller and more forceful. They would look at him, too, and size him up to decide if he was worthy.

Patricia caught a glimpse of Al, Charlie, and several of their friends in one of the nine dining rooms of the converted blacksmith’s forge. She blanched as Charlie saw her. He waved like a man greeting a military wife coming home from war, as her ship pulled into the dock.

“Someone you know?” said Tony.

“My boss. Al invites him over now and then.” She waved, but did not take Tony to meet them.

*Oh, shit,* thought Tony.

“Don’t really know Al myself,” he said.

Jacques stopped before a secluded table and allowed Tony to seat his guest.

“You’re too modest,” replied Pat.

Tony looked puzzled.

Pat whispered, “You’ve got Al’s personal table.”

Tony was speechless for several seconds. Then he flicked his wrist. “Aw...” He smiled. “Guess he wanted a change of scenery.”

Another dozen roses sat on the table, along with an open bottle of Château Latour ‘59. The wine steward appeared out of nowhere and hovered beside Jacques.

“The Latour is compliments of the house,” he said expansively.

“Funny, and you don’t even know him,” said Pat, as she adjusted the napkin on her lap. “Yet he gives you a wine that I don’t think is on Al’s usual list. Exceedingly expensive wine.”

Tony raised his eyebrows, but remained silent.

“I’ve taken the liberty of allowing your wine to breathe,” continued the wine steward. He produced the cork for Tony and poured a small amount of wine into his glass. Tony sniffed the cork, took a whiff of his glass and then a small sip. He let the wine roll across his tongue, then nodded toward the steward, who stepped smartly away.

“James will be your waiter this evening,” said Jacques, again in French. “He shall

be with you shortly. Please call me if you should need anything else.”

The maitre d’ turned and walked away. Seconds later, the uniformed James came to their table and introduced himself. He poured their wine, set up glasses of Perrier, dropped down a bread basket, set out a wedge of Camembert cheese, and left.

Pat and Tony sat in silence for several moments, before they regained the relaxed, easy conversation of before.

“James forgot our menus,” said Pat.

Tony smiled shyly. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve taken the liberty of ordering. It’ll give us more time to talk.”

Pat regarded Tony with a demure smile. “I see why you were late. You’ve been rather busy.”

*That’s not the half of it,* thought Tony.

Pat took the card from the bouquet of roses.

***To a woman whose looks are overshadowed only by her inner beauty.***

“You’re a clever man, Sollozi.” She paused, fighting a lump in her throat. “To this wounded eagle it seems like you think of everything. Are you for real?”

An electric undercurrent sparked between them.

“You deserve to be pampered,” Tony said. And he meant it. He would have to thank his nephew in the morning. And he hoped that, one day, Pat would forgive him for this uncharacteristic charade.