

Premeditation

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a novel by

Albert Da Silva

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In memory of

Manuel, Berta, Bonnie, Laura

THE FAVOR

Lower Manhattan -1995

Twilight faded into a cloud shrouded November night as Matt Sasso, in his old bedroom, comforted by childhood memories, slipped into a deep sleep. Outside his window, a black late model Buick with two men inside drove up Mulberry Street. The thick driver, who fit snugly behind the wheel, blew smoke out the window, while the leaner one next to him screwed a fat silencer onto the muzzle of his full-weight Colt .45.

A short time later, in the East Village on a street scarred with graffiti and littered with trash, a long line of rowdy punk-rock fans waited impatiently to get into Lizards, a popular dance club. The banner strung above the entrance blazoned a special sundown performance by the band, I Nailed Lucy. There was a roar protesting the delay, and the line surged forward pressing those up front into the door. The oppressed pushed back when the door, with a lizard's tongue painted on it, swung open, flicking loud music into the street. A broad-shouldered bouncer appeared in the entryway, counted the first ten in line and motioned for them to enter. After this group had been swallowed inside, the door shut, and the pierced, tattooed crowd howled again in protest. In stark contrast to the denim and leather-clad gathering were the two hit-men, who walked past, dressed in silk-blend suit jackets and black fedoras. Avoiding eye contact with the angry queue, they made their way to the narrow alley where the side entrance to Lizards was located.

The corpulent thug banged on the door. When it opened, he struck the security guard across the forehead with a hard rubber sap, knocking him to the ground. After taping the hands, feet, and mouth of the groggy rent-a-cop and stuffing him in a dark corner behind a jumble of wooden set-pieces, the two thugs inserted earplugs and followed the loud music to the back of the stage. Hidden in the shadows, they watched the four members of I Nailed Lucy pound their instruments and scream their lyrics, inciting the flailing dancers into wilder gyrations.

The club, like a huge breathing organism, fed off the energy of the young bodies in motion. The walls, ceilings, and floors had their own pulse, and the large space was thick with a moist mixture of sour sweat and sweet perfume. The drinkers and posers by the bar moved in place, bumping and grinding, while those on the dance

floor worshipped the gods of chaos. They threw themselves at each other, smacking into and head butting one another, inflicting and receiving pain. Squirming torsos were raised overhead and passed above the crowd by a sea of arms, then dropped to the floor and stepped upon. The dancers were urged on to greater pandemonium by the refrain Nails, the group's leader, and Lucy, the lead guitarist, shrieked at them. The devotees knew the words well and chanted along.

“Punish me, punish me - I need reaction! Punish me, punish me - I need sensation! Punish me, punish me - I need attention! Punish me, punish me - I need affection!”

Dressed in black leather from head to toe, Nails roamed the front edge of the stage, slamming chords on his electric guitar and spitting at the crowd, who spat back. It was a pagan ritual with the true believers loving and hating the high priests. They adored yet wanted to smash their idols: the source of good and evil. Nails protected his temple from those who stormed the gates and kicked them off the stage, back down into the roiling mass of worshippers.

But even more sovereign than Nails were the two hit-men, who decided it was time for real punishment to take place. They stepped forward to Nails' amplifier, alongside the drummer, who was too absorbed in his racket to notice the menacing pair. The squat thug bent down and yanked the electric cord attached to Nails' guitar, spinning him around. When he spotted the two hit-men and recognized the danger, Nails' wrath turned to fright. He froze all movement, except for his widening eyes, as the tall sinewy gangster pointed the .45 at his forehead. Nails saw the blurred projectile burst from the smoking barrel just before the bullet ripped into his brain.

The force of the single hollow point splattered blood onto the crowd, and Nails' body flew backward off the stage. His corpse was caught by outstretched arms and passed above the heads of the delirious throng. The dancers reacted to the spurting blood and exposed gray matter as if they were fake and the martyr act a new addition to the group's show. The crowd loved it and took part. Some stroked while others beat at Nails' flesh. Even the drummer and bass player believed it was staged and pumped up the rhythm, abetting the riotous blood orgy. Only Lucy understood what had happened. Her cries were full of real pain and horror, but no one noticed the difference in her voice.

In the small bedroom on Mulberry Street, Matt felt Rita pushing his arm, trying to wake him. But he didn't open his eyes. He didn't want to hear what his sister had to tell him. He didn't want to know for sure that his life had changed in a most dangerous way.

When did things turn so bad? When was the last time I was happy and excited to be alive? The questions drew him back to the cloudless night Laura had come to dinner. He recalled the simple pleasure of preparing the meal and the swelling anticipation of her company. Then came the black smoke, and after that, Thanksgiving Day, when his life careened horribly off course.

CHAPTER 1

Two days earlier

The evening was crisp and clear, and a big moon hung high over the Hudson, spilling light on an old battered tanker-trailer abandoned by the waterfront. Silent and foreboding, the grimy hulk sat across the street from Manhattan's ripe Washington Market. An oily ooze leaked from one of its valves, and the syrupy slime, colored with muck rainbows, collected in a puddle on the cobblestone street.

* * *

A block away up river, in a century-old, red brick storehouse, refurbished with polished wood and exposed steel beams, Matt Sasso stood in front of his bathroom mirror and plucked the last gray hair he planned to deal with that evening. Fresh from a shower and only wearing briefs, he ran a comb through his thick dark hair, while a visual forecast ran through his head. How many gray hairs will he have in five years, in the year 2000, when he turns fifty? He didn't have that many yet, but the few silver sprouts spoke of things to come, like the frailty of old age, which would one day plunder his powerful chest and arms and cloud his brown eyes.

Matt wondered how he would fare against the inevitable misfortunes he was on a collision course with. What will be the next great calamity in his life? Or will they come in bunches and overwhelm him? The toughness he had learned from growing up on the streets of Lower Manhattan taught him never to be a victim. When someone or something attacked, he struck back quickly with greater force. But how would he apply this aggressive technique to a debilitating tragedy. . . say, like impotence? Will he have new methods of coping or will he rely on old habits and lash his pride with a whip until it stood erect and performed circus tricks? Matt blanched and turned away from the mirror, postponing any more grim probabilities.

He knew the river would look spectacular on a moonlit night like this, so he crossed the bedroom - his bare feet pampered by a plump Persian rug - to a large bay window facing west. Matt enjoyed watching the wide, black water flow past, especially at night when he could block out the littered streets and the debris that

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bobbed in the current. In the dark, he only saw the glittering sheen of the moving water. Besides the mysterious beauty of it, he loved to look at the river because it reminded him of where he lived and who he was.

Matt had discovered the Tribeca area long before it became geographically swank and had the foresight to buy his own building before prices skyrocketed. He designed the interior reconstruction and did much of the hard labor himself, converting the dreary run-down warehouse into a spacious open environment. The living quarters were on the upper level, which ran half the length and width of the building, and Matt commuted to work by descending the circular cast-aluminum staircase to his cavernous studio below. He was one of New York's top fashion photographers, his studio one of its busiest. Matt was proud of what he'd accomplished in life. These are the things he should be thinking about.

"What the hell are you doing to me? I got a stunning young lady coming here for an intimate dinner, and you're thinking about impotence. Give me a break!"

Matt often spoke out loud when he lectured himself. "This is no time to worry if I'll go limp someday." He looked down at the bulge in his jockeys and patted it. "Laura's a real honey. If we play our cards right, we're gonna have one hell of a time. You hear me?" Matt smiled. He never lectured his dick.

Matt entered the downstairs' kitchen wearing a burgundy corduroy shirt, a new pair of loose fitting jeans, and tan canvas shoes. An hour and a half later, he was sampling the slow bubbling tomato sauce when Laura Bowden rang the rear doorbell, arriving a fashionable twenty minutes late. "I couldn't get a taxi to stop for me."

Right, like this long-limbed beauty wouldn't have caused a four cab pileup the second she raised her hand. "The way these cabbies pass you by, you'd think they were independently wealthy."

She laughed, charmed and more relaxed. Matt smiled back, content with the substance and effect of his borrowed quip. He didn't remember where he had heard this take on the local carriage trade, but whoever said it, Matt owed the guy. Accepting her gift of a dozen pink roses, he kissed her on the cheek and directed her toward the kitchen.

After twenty years of photographing and socializing with young, beautiful models, Matt knew what to expect and how to read them. Off the job, models usually work hard to look casual, flaunting a low maintenance attitude, but this evening, Laura had taken the time to carefully accent her sultry hazel eyes and style her auburn hair up off her shoulders in a way Matt had never seen before. She wore black linen pants and a scarlet leather jacket over a straight-cut, white cotton blouse. When Laura entered the warm aromatic kitchen and removed her coat, Matt noticed her nipples against the thin white fabric.

Laura didn't have to make an extra effort to get more assignments. She was in her prime and had all the jobs she could handle. No, it was more than that. She really liked him, and there's no bigger turn-on. He quickly sensed that every word, glance, and gesture was foreplay.

Matt had figured she'd be late and counted on the extra time to have the garlic and onions sliced and simmering in his special Marinara sauce and the pungent food smells washed from his hands by the time she arrived. He greeted her a second time with a nimble kiss on the mouth, poured her a glass of Chardonnay, then stepped back to the cutting board and chopped fresh basil and marjoram while they talked. This was the opening act of Matt's tried and true, cozy dinner routine.

Matt's domestic display seemed to relax his female guests. He supposed women like to see - or believe they're seeing - a man's feminine side. He, however, clearly understood why this routine put him more at ease. It brought other objects into the picture. It was show and tell. *Where do you buy your fresh herbs? How long do you let the sauce simmer?* Matt needed these diversions. What else would they talk about: serious matters like his mid-life self-prognosis? Matt was more than twenty years older than Laura. How could she understand his worries and doubts? Christ, he could see the downside coming. At twenty-three, her view was all uphill.

Then again, maybe she did have the capacity to discuss such sensitive concerns. But Matt didn't want to take the chance and possibly turn her into an asexual confidante. No way would he jeopardize the upcoming intimacy. He needed to feel her soft body against his. This would soothe his anxieties more than any talking could ever do. Besides, he'd been relying on this surface routine so long, he might be the one unable to hold a meaningful conversation.

* * *

Outside, the rusted tanker-trailer dripped its hellish cargo. A crud-laden drop broke the poison pool below, and rivulets ran the cobblestone maze out to the street. A heavy, black sedan with dark tinted windows rolled to a stop near the slithering stream. Inside, in shadow, a cigarette glowed brightly. The driver-side window lowered, and the red-tipped missile jettisoned onto the volatile liquid. The snake hissed and smoked at the sudden attack, ignited, and a flame rattled backward retracing its once meandering path, now with hot purpose. The sedan sped away into the night, while the flame rushed to meet the puddle and the two embraced in a brawny spark of fire. The flames reached high, grabbing and lighting the greased metal hull. In an instant, a mighty blast shredded the old steel. Scorched metal, flaming liquid, and hot gasses rocketed in every direction. A cloud of dense, black smoke billowed into the night sky, and the stars and big moon disappeared.

* * *

Matt and Laura heard something outside, but neither gave it much thought. He had her pinned against the kitchen wall. His right hand roamed under her loosened

blouse, and their lips locked over slippery tongues. The distant blast sounded just as Matt swept his adventurous thumb onto her left nipple, inciting the nub of brown flesh to rise and harden. A warm wave of peace and pleasure rolled through his body like a narcotic. His thoughts floated, strangely recalling from his Catholic upbringing that he was now in mortal sin territory. Violating the side, top, or bottom of the breast could, with a good theological attorney, be argued as a venial offense, resulting in a lesser, purgatorial sentence. The nipple, however, was the doorbell to hell.

Matt's enlightened soul could now smile at such inane beliefs, but when he was a handsome, hormonally juiced teenager these moral dictates caused him unbearable anguish. As he lightly turned Laura's hard point between his thumb and index finger, he thought of the young nipples he never got to touch. *Linda. . . Connie. . . Gina. . . Doris Donovan, maybe. . .* His nostalgic lament ended when Laura grasped his born-again cock and resurrected his total devotion to the breast at hand.

Encouraged by her firm grip, Matt unbuttoned her blouse. In the one-second exposure before he buried his face in her bosom, he appraised her breasts. They were exquisite. Pearl white in color, her firm, rising curves glistened like gemstone.

Nuzzling her playful as a pup, Matt felt his rolling pleasure tempered only by the thin guilt of their age difference. In the past, this guilt had sometimes grown, weighing like a crime against nature, as if he were mating outside his species. Matt licked her smooth, supple skin and tasted the Faustian lure he had long ago swallowed. He wondered if he would ever give up young flesh and seek the love of a woman closer to his age, one he might comfortably grow old with.

Laura twisted her body. Matt guessed she wanted him to stop. He lifted his head and saw that her eyes were half-closed and dreamy. A good sign, yet he asked, "What is it?"

"A picture on the wall was digging into my back."

He pointed with his eyes. "We can go to the couch."

Laura smiled, showing her perfect white teeth. "I'm okay, now." She put her hands on his shoulders and nudged him back down. "The couch is too. . . ordinary."

Once again her lovely breasts dazzled him. His thin guilt would not fatten tonight.

Savoring the soft landscape before him, Matt drew a moist line with the tip of his tongue between the two adjacent hills. He slowly traced the outside boundary of Laura's left breast, where it rose from the chest plain, then teasingly licked an unbroken, diminishing circle, softly climbing to the summit. Her stomach rumbled and flesh quaked beneath his tongue. He felt her skin warm. Another moan, more urgent.

When it came to lovemaking, Matt was a real crowd pleaser, a true giver, a tireless drone (the queen's favorite). Knowing himself, he knew this wasn't born of altruism. He'd gotten as far as surmising it was some kind of benevolent power trip.

He loved the first time the best. Experiencing a new woman made him feel like a kid again, his five senses engaged and vibrant with eternal youth and stamina.

After seeing, feeling, tasting, and hearing Laura's rising passion, he foraged beneath the light soap smell for her unique scent. As her breast grew hot and damp, the unearthed salts filled Matt's nose. Her mild odor was fresh with a sugary pungency. Instantly wild to sample her wet fur, Matt made travel plans.

He sucked her breast, while his fingers slid down her rippled ribs onto her smooth stomach and undid the obstinate wooden button before unzipping her pants. He edged his hand inside her satin panties to the tuft of matted hair - definite mortal sin territory - spread his fingers, and slowly combed downward. He cherished every parting hair as he reached for her soaked opening with his lead digit. When he pushed lightly into her, her chest contracted, pulling her breast from his mouth. *Damn! She's got a sensitive clit.*

He should've been more careful. A distraction like that could ruin the whole mood. What the hell was he rushing for? *Go slow. Go back. Linger on those pearl mounds of glistening skin.*

His right hand retreated to cup her left breast, while his mouth moved to kiss the other. Inexplicably, he missed his mark and burrowed his nose in her armpit. *Fuck! What's wrong with me?* Matt felt as if his brain had liquefied and become an eddy of distorted perceptions. He lifted his head and had to grab Laura's arm to keep from falling backward. He leaned his fevered cheek onto her bosom to rest, but couldn't abandon his lust entirely and began to plant erratic kisses.

Another spasm bent her at the waist. *Was that a cough? Did I tickle her?* Whatever happened, their foreplay had turned awkward. Even her sweat tasted stale and bitter. She pushed him away. He stared at her, focusing his bleary eyes, and saw that her breasts had become hanging sacks, withered like summer's end squash.

How could her beauty turn so quickly? This only happens over time as a relationship veers toward loathing. Her body nauseated him. And obviously, she felt the same about him. Glaring hideously with a pale yellow face, she lurched forward and threw up on him. Her hot vomit burned his face and eyes.

As Matt wiped his face with his sleeve, Laura collapsed onto him. Her dead weight knocked him into the carefully set dinner table. A vase of pink roses and a breathing bottle of Cabernet both toppled, smashing fine crystal, elegant china, and turning white linen a muddy crimson.

"Laura!"

He felt her gasping for air. Struggling to support her frame, Matt felt his own lungs sting with each breath. He grew faint, his vision even more blurred. He smelled the smoke.

"What the fuck!"

Matt spun around to check the stove. Nothing wrong there. He spun back toward the open window and saw the horrid black vapors rushing in, invading his kitchen, overpowering whatever light and air there was.

Matt lowered Laura's limp body to the floor, ran to the window, and slammed it shut. He had exerted too much and inhaled too deeply. The cruel smoke crowded his lungs. A vicious cramp gripped his chest and brought him to his knees. Coughing and wheezing, Matt fought for clarity. The best he got was semi-delirious. He crawled to Laura on all fours, turned her face-up, and dragged her toward the bathroom door. He pulled desperately, not knowing if Laura was alive or dead, until the relentless fumes sapped his strength, and he could no longer budge her.

Closing the window had only slowed the buildup of smoke. It still billowed in from some unknown breach. Matt estimated the distance to the bathroom - another twelve feet. He reasoned how some cold water on his face might re-energize him, after which he could come back and get Laura. Voices within him argued. *You can't desert her. She could be dead - save yourself!* Laura groaned.

Her sound lifted his spirit. He tugged her and they were slowly moving again. Matt had pulled her halfway, six feet closer to the door, when she threw up again. He dropped her arms, turned her head to the side, and shoved two fingers into her clogged throat.

As he slid his fingers in and out of her liquid mouth, rubbing them against her full red lips, Matt's penis grew stiff. He stopped plumbing her to adjust his hard-on painfully embedded in his jockeys. He remembered it was still their first date. Laura coughed and expelled the last of the blockage on her own. Matt pulled her into the bathroom and kicked the door shut behind them.

His lungs burned, his muscles ached, his whole body cried out for rest, but there was no time. The poisonous black smoke also filled the bathroom. Matt switched on the exhaust fan, grabbed a towel and soaked it under the shower before slapping it down at the foot of the door. He tried to lift Laura, but couldn't, so he dragged her into the shower stall. She shrieked when the cold water hit and struggled to escape, but Matt held her under the spray. He didn't feel her soft, supple body. The one he'd envisioned would soothe him. He only felt the uncontrollable shake as she sobbed in his arms.

A faint sound from far away made its way past the din of the fan and the splatter of the shower. He heard it getting closer, growing louder, then all at once becoming clear - it was a fire engine. He heard more sirens racing toward them.

"Laura, we have to get out of here!"

She didn't respond.

Matt saw she was drifting in and out of consciousness. He shook her. "Laura, we have to go!"

She looked at him, her eyes fearful. "No!"

"The building could be on fire! We have to get out of here, now!"

Matt tried to lead her out of the shower, but she fought him. "No! I'll die in that smoke! Please don't leave me!"

Her fright overwhelmed his tenuous decision for he too wasn't sure they could make it past the suffocating vapors and blinding haze. They stayed under the running water and clutched each other.

Being trapped and helpless was one of Matt's worse nightmares. On restless nights, he often dreamt of harrowing situations that he had managed to escape, like the time he was chased, cornered, and shot at by Puerto Rican Ray, when Ray caught Matt heavy-petting his sister, Maria Santos, on a tenement rooftop. Back then, Matt had only one-way out. It was a slim and dangerous option, but at least he had one. Luckily, on that day, he made the long leap over the six-story chasm to the next roof. But on this day, with the black smoke and cold water, all he could do was wait and. . . Matt jammed himself, fighting the word, the idea, the total hypocrisy of praying.

How could he pray after all these years of never speaking to God? To do so now would be a shameful act of cowardice, an insult to the Almighty. Matt tried to remember the last time he prayed, but couldn't. He weighed the merit of his frequent contemplation of the existence of God, but that didn't amount to prayer. He never praised God. He never asked for His help. For Matt to pray now would be to utter hollow words, syphilitic syllables rotting with insincerity. He refused to dirty himself this way. He'd rather die in a fire than pray.

Matt cursed his stubborn pride.

Laura gasped for breath. He'd been hugging her too tightly. He loosened his hold and looked at her sad ravaged face. Her eyes held no hope. He decided to pray for Laura's sake. Halfway through his third Our Father, Matt lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, a fine haze clung to the ceiling in Matt's bedroom. It was the last of the toxic smoke, diluted, yet still defying the fresh sea air that blew in through the open windows. In bed, under a heavy quilt, Matt twisted between sweat-dampened sheets, dreaming feverishly of the time when he was twelve and a group of teen-agers from Elizabeth Street asked him to play a rough and tumble game of Johnny-on-the-pony. It was an honor he couldn't refuse.

On that sweltering August evening, Matt and his three best buddies had watched the older guys, heroes and paragons at the time, take turns leap-frogging their full weight onto the other team's wavering column of bent backs, chain-linked together by arms around waists and heads against hip bones. Volleys and single shots of groans, curses, threats, and taunts echoed off the tight tenements surrounding the small, parochial school yard. Adding to the significance of the brute competition was a group of local Mafiosi who had gathered to watch and place bets on the outcome.

The wiseguys wore white sleeveless T-shirts and draped expensive Italian knits over their forearms. Like major league scouts, they evaluated the up and coming talent. Some were looking for hijacking crews, others for future hit-men. It was the early sixties, the economy was booming and the Mafia was recruiting. Most of the players had aspirations of joining the Mob and knew the big-shots were watching. For them this was more than a game. It was a time to shine, to be on the winning team.

Mikey Tan's group had just taken the prone position, when Bobbie Spinello's father, his face flushed with ire, ran into the school yard. What Matt noticed even more than Mr. Spinello's complexion was the Louisville Slugger clutched in his hand. Bobbie unhitched himself from the line and took off like a world-class sprinter. He scrambled up the 12-foot cyclone fence, spiraled his wiry body over the top, and vanished from the street like a startled cockroach.

The story was some cops had come by the apartment to question Bobbie about a break-in at Sy's Haberdashery on Allen Street. Bobbie's old man gave them an earful, defending the integrity of his son. The cops left unconvinced. Apparently, Bobbie's father wasn't convinced either. He tore up Bobbie's room and found three dozen Ban-lon shirts still in plastic.

Bruno Segretti's team whooped it up, celebrating victory by way of forfeit, but Mikey Tan, with his made-guy father looking on, wasn't about to be humiliated. He spotted Matt and his three pals in the crowd and walked over to them. Matt's

stomach churned, an acid mix of fear and excitement, as Mikey approached. Frankie Mazzarino, one of Matt's three friends, stepped forward, puffing out his chest, letting Mikey know he was ready to play. But Mikey ignored him. His eyes were on Matt all the way.

Mikey Tan got his name because he was a lighter version of his father, Mikey Brown, the most vicious and feared *button* in the neighborhood. Mikey junior had acquired the intimidating mannerisms of Mikey senior, including his way of asking. He stepped in front of Matt. "The word is you got balls. You gonna take Bobbie's place or what?"

As if a greater force had mugged his free will, Matt nodded.

Mikey's impatient scowl turned into a flinty grin. He slapped his hand onto Matt's shoulder. "You're all right, kid. Come on."

Mikey turned, leading the way for Matt to follow. But before he did, Matt looked to his friends for support.

Eddie and Lou flashed encouraging smiles.

"Show'em what you got," said Eddie.

"You can do it, Matty," added Lou.

Frankie, however, burned him with a hateful glare. It was a roundhouse punch to his pride that the older guys considered Matt to be tougher than he was. As Matt moved away to join the teenagers, he kept a wary eye on Frankie. He'd seen that look before. It often preceded a fist-swinging attack.

Though best of friends, they sometimes fought like the worst of enemies, Frankie always starting the confrontation to prove he was the pack leader, and Matt always kicking his ass, guaranteeing a future skirmish. Matt had even considered throwing one of the fights to give Frankie's conceit some relief, but Matt's competitive side wouldn't allow him to do so. Besides, he reasoned, it would be a greater insult to Frankie to let him win. This was the Lower Eastside, Little Italy's mean streets. Frankie had to earn it.

Matt took the lead position. Folding at the waist, he wrapped his arms around Fat Butchy's gelatinous gut. Butchy always played the *pillow* against the wall because he couldn't bend over. The action resumed when Freddy Fly, the other team's best jumper, sailed over four backs to land hard on Robby Zip, the guy gripping Matt's waist. Freddy continued to inch forward, ignoring the pony team's protests, and settled on Matt's vulnerable spine.

Four more jumpers came in quick succession, each landing hard then illegally pulling themselves forward, provoking more condemnation from Mikey's team until Tiny Chaz's two hundred plus pounds lumbered forward. Everyone fell silent. The players from both teams braced themselves. When Tiny launched himself, the outcome was unpredictable. He could easily knock one of his own team members to the concrete as crumble the back of an opposing player.

The big-shots elbowed one another, guffawed, and gestured, anticipating Tiny's effect. They placed additional bets on who would cave first. Matt was the odds-on favorite to be the weakest link.

True to form, no one could've predicted Tiny's jump. As he struggled to gain momentum, his flab bounced wildly under his stretched and sopping T-shirt. Closing in on the bent rump he would use to catapult himself, he grimaced, gritted his teeth, and loudly farted. Surprised by the sudden, boisterous ripple, Tiny tripped. He never gained an inch of vertical lift and crashed belly-first into the hapless pony team. The wicked crunch forward was too much for Matt. His knees buckled, and Freddy rode him to the ground, pulling Fat Butchy on top of them. The whole line, jumpers and all, began a riotous pile-on. Matt was at the very bottom, crushed by the rolling weight of a dozen bodies. He gasped for breath.

Matt struggled to push himself from the ground, fighting for the half-inch his chest needed to expand for a gulp of oxygen. But the weight on top of him was too great, and he remained pressed to the cement. He wheezed asthmatically, surviving on threads of air. Then things got worse. Suddenly, he was breathing water.

Farther up the street, another group of kids had opened a fire hydrant, and the ensuing torrent jumped the curb and flowed freely into the school yard. To the others in the stack of players, it was a hilarious way to cool off, but to Matt, with his face mashed to the ground, it was a life and death struggle. He gurgled and choked in the shallow stream, unable to free himself and too proud to cry for help. He envisioned the next day's Daily News headline - *Kid Drowns In Four Inches Of Water*. His death would sell lots of papers. People all over the city would shake their heads and feel sorry for his mother. He was losing consciousness and about to die, but he couldn't scream - only girls scream.

Fortunately, someone else screamed for him. Frankie Mazzarino rushed to the pile-on, yelling holy murder. He pushed, pulled, and kicked until every last teenager was thrown clear of Matt. Frankie lifted Matt's head out of the water. They locked eyes in a way they had never done before. Matt owed him. Frankie knew it. After that, they never fought again.

In his dream, the brackish water Matt coughed from his lungs turned to black smoke, which encircled and squeezed him like a python. Escape from the ghostly strangulation came when a noise from downstairs stirred him from his tortured sleep. The harsh bite in his throat and lungs welcomed him back to reality. As his lids flickered, Matt grasped that Frankie screaming for him was the same as he praying for Laura - sometimes it's easier to break the rules for someone else. He opened his eyes.

Matt's slanted vision multiplied everything in sight. He felt the first shock of searing pain, an ache in his head so severe he nearly vomited. He turned onto his side, curled like a shrimp. The nausea passed, but the stinging throb was there to stay. Matt had no intention of getting out of bed until he heard something downstairs. *No one should be down there. The studio's closed. Today's Thanksgiving.*

Matt reached behind the oak headboard to a hidden recess in the wood and located his Smith and Wesson snub .38. Anticipating the next cruel ache, he clenched his jaw and kept his finger off the trigger. When the pain hit, he safely gripped the gunstock until the agony subsided.

Rising up, he backed gingerly out of bed only to falter and drop to his knees like a kid again praying at his bedside. But this time, his hands were clasped around a gun. God was mocking him, he thought. *God wasn't happy with last night's deception, with last night's desperate plea.* He suffered another stab ripping through his head.

"Fuck God!" *He's the one who blew the smoke my way!* Matt lifted his eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that." He heard more noise. "I'm gonna kill the bastard down there!"

Gun in hand, Matt staggered to the door. He noticed he was fully clothed except for his shoes and recalled last night's events: the firemen storming into the bathroom, Laura being helped outside by paramedics, huge exhaust fans clearing out the smoke, and himself reassuring the police he was all right before crawling upstairs and dropping off into a wretched sleep.

He opened the bedroom door and slinked to the edge of the landing. Peering downstairs and seeing no one, he moved to the staircase, leaned his weight against the curved railing, and stepped down the cold metal stairs. When he reached the studio floor, there was a *bang* at the rear entrance. The steel-plate door was damaged and someone was pushing against it, trying to get in. Matt moved to the wall by the unhinged side of the door. Heart pounding, he waited for the intruder to enter.

Matt was no stranger to guns. In his youth, friends of his, who had fathers or uncles in the Mob, often found handguns and boxes of bullets in their homes, usually stashed behind a fridge or some other major appliance. He and his pals would point the discovered pistol at each other and make joking threats, then tote the handgun out to the end of an abandoned pier and fire at whiskey bottles before returning it to its hiding place. Among his cohorts, Matt had earned the rep for being the best shot, regularly scoring the most hits. He figured his keen marksmanship was due to his excellent eyesight. But now, standing just a foot away from the burglar's point of entry, Matt's 20-20 vision wasn't critical. What mattered more was how he would handle this singular event. He had never before confronted another person with serious intent while holding a weapon.

An ear-splitting, metal-against-metal *screech* preceded the door swinging open. A ski-capped man with a crowbar stumbled into the studio. Matt took advantage of the man's awkward entry and stuck the .38 to the intruder's neck. "Freeze, fuckface!"

The man stopped instantly. About 5 feet 10, 170 pounds, he was a few inches shorter, thirty pounds lighter, and a lot less muscular than Matt.

The young man blinked his blue eyes. "Matt! It's me. Robert."

Matt's viciousness turned to remorse. "Christ. . . I forgot you were coming this morning."

Robert Brody pulled the ski-cap off, releasing his long, sandy-colored hair. He threw his head back, shaking the hair away from his eyes. Matt had often seen Robert flip his hair in this manner, but this time Matt felt the phantom brush of his own long hair, the way he had worn it in the late sixties and early seventies.

Gazing at his twenty-one year-old assistant, Matt thought how much he was going to miss him. Robert was moving to Idaho in two days to live with his older sister. In the calm wake of Matt's passing aggression, it dawned on him, that other than his immediate family, there was no one who meant as much to him as his assistant did. In just a year and a half, Robert had become his closest friend.

Matt loved Robert's spirited enthusiasm, especially his one-man effort to clean up New York's environment. While most citizens looked at the city's filth and either ignored it or considered it hopeless, Robert shined a spotlight on the problem and forced others to see it and take responsible action. Single-handedly, he established a paper and chemical recycling program among scores of Manhattan photographers and film labs. Working his bright blue eyes with wondrous effect, he shamed the too-busy-to-care photo pros into feeling like gross spoilers of the earth. After hearing Robert's earnest assessment of how damaged our beautiful planet had become, only the most ice-hearted profiteers were able to reject his appeals.

Robert eyed the black metal in Matt's hand. "I didn't know you had a gun."

Matt lowered the weapon to his side and slid it behind his leg. "I'm not in love with it. It's a necessity."

"Guns are like magnets. They attract other guns."

Matt debated whether to let this pacifist notion be the last word or add a darker addendum, citing the daily occurrence of crime and violence and how leaving oneself without adequate protection was irresponsible. The inner discourse ended when his headache returned.

Pressing his forehead between thumb and middle finger, Matt spoke in a slow, tight manner. "Would it go against your homeopathic principles if I asked you to find me some aspirin?"

Robert smiled at the gentle rub. "Well. . . since you're letting me stay here a couple of days, I guess I'm obliged to break the rules. By the way, what happened to the door? It's all busted up like someone broke in."

"Get me something for my headache. I'll fill you in when you get back."

Robert stood there, looking apologetic. "I was banging on it for fifteen minutes. You weren't answering." He motioned with the crowbar. "I got this from the workshop to check out the studio."

"You did the right thing." Matt winced in pain. "Now go get the aspirin."

Robert joked, "You're getting too old to party hearty."

Matt shot him an impatient look, then softened it. "Enough with the lectures."

As he backed away, Robert bowed and waved his hands. "Yes, Master."

Matt was relieved that his glare hadn't crossed the line to intimidation, that Robert felt comfortable to joke with him. He knew his mean-street scowl, the one

he had used to ward off aggressors in his old neighborhood, could still frighten people. He didn't mind its payoff on arrogant types, like obnoxious salesmen, but hated when it unnerved decent people.

Matt's stomach rumbled. He leaned onto a tall director's chair next to the wall and settled into it. He placed the gun on a nearby shelf and covered it with an issue of Italian Vogue.

Robert reappeared, carrying a glass of water and a tin of aspirin. "What's that horrible smell?"

Matt described last night's explosion, how he and the young model were trapped inside with the suffocating fumes, and how the firemen had to bust in through the studio's back door.

"You think any of those chemicals got into the Hudson?"

Matt grinned, amused by Robert's greater concern for the river than for his or Laura's health. "How would you feel if I found the guy responsible for that tanker spill and put a bullet in his head?"

"A sort of ecological strike. . . I guess in some ways, I'd consider you a hero."

Matt liked the idea of being Robert's hero.

While he waited for the aspirins to kick in, Matt was content to listen to his fresh-faced assistant's heady plans to save an old growth forest in Idaho from the logging industry.

Of all the things Matt loved about Robert, uppermost, he reminded Matt of his own idealistic youth. At one time, he too had been a zealous advocate for protecting the environment. Matt's endearment to nature occurred during his first trip to Europe, when another island, a small one off the coast of Spain, dislodged him from Manhattan's cold steel and concrete.

Matt's maiden voyage to Europe came a year after he had dropped out of the Engineering program at Manhattan College. After leaving the Christian Brothers run school, he worked as an assistant to a catalog photographer and earned enough to pay for his Atlantic crossing.

Still in rebellion against the nine-month, mind-altering curriculum of Physics, Chemistry, and Calculus, Matt departed without a plan for discovering the Old World. After traipsing through London, Paris, and Amsterdam, he hitched a ride with a group of fellow travelers on route to Spain and Morocco. The eight adventurers rode in a rattling, sometimes groaning, VW bus and traded exotic tales. Of all the places described, Matt deemed Formenterra to be the most alluring. He broke from the group at Valencia and boarded a ship to Ibiza, where he took a smaller boat to Formenterra. He arrived thinking it would take a day or two to check out the little island. He stayed for the rest of the summer and half of the fall.

Amongst the tall pines, pomegranate groves, and peaceful lizards, Matt enjoyed sun-filled idyllic days, meeting scores of travelers from all over the world. With ever-changing groups of new friends, Matt played on the fine, white sand beaches and swam in the transparent blue sea. During one full moon party, he and Helen, a

Catholic girl from Northern Ireland, both dropped acid for the first time. It was an eternal night of heightened sensations. When they weren't exploring the moonlit, natural beauty of the island, they were exploring each other. They made love in the water, on the beach, and later in his cabin, where they smoked Moroccan hash until they fell asleep just after sunrise.

Surrounded by the Mediterranean, he called her Helen of Troy. She had dark Irish features and her deep brown eyes selected few to know her. Matt cherished every moment they spent together for they only had a week until she had to return to Belfast. To the bombings and bloodletting. The violence he had grown up with paled in comparison to her experiences. He wanted to ask how bad was it? How did she endure? How afraid was she? But he knew she didn't want to talk about her home. She was on vacation and would be back there soon enough, so he never asked. After Helen left, there were other girls. They were all special that enchanted summer, but none as memorable as the beautiful Irish girl, who had silently bared her wounded soul to him.

In the five months Matt remained on Formenterra, many travelers came and went, and he assumed the role of guide and *wise man* of the island. New arrivals looked to him to learn the secrets of Formenterra. They asked about the best nude beaches, the highest cliffs to dive from, the most secluded coves to make love. It was the greatest summer of his life. And though it was full of hedonistic pursuits, his mind and spirit were along for the ride, and they too expanded exponentially.

It was the first part of November when Matt left Formenterra. On the boat back to Ibiza, he sadly watched his magical island slip below the horizon. He vowed never to return for this serene sliver of land had already begun to change. During the time he was there, he had witnessed new construction ravage fields and orchards and seaside developments level majestic cliffs. Matt promised himself he wouldn't go back and suffer the sight of his lost paradise. Instead, he would visit his beautiful memories from time to time.

When he returned to New York, Matt often thought of Formenterra, but the pleasant images were no match for the polluted chaos that crowded him. The scarred neighborhoods, the rank rivers, the ubiquitous garbage of the city, depressed him. He tried to shake off the despair, but it held fast.

Matt soon left Manhattan and traveled on his own for three years through the Western states, documenting raw landscapes resplendent in natural light and using his artwork to promote environmental causes. He loved this sort of photography and considered it his most inspired work, but grew weary of the lonely existence and Spartan lifestyle. After much deliberation, he returned to New York, intent on becoming one of Manhattan's premier commercial photographers.

Seeking a unique style that would set him apart from the other New York photographers, Matt spent hours at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, immersed in the classical paintings, especially those of Rembrandt and Caravaggio. After six months, Matt compiled a portfolio of people and products that showcased a neo-

classical, chiaroscuro lighting technique. The assembled photos sparkled with a soft, radiant luminescence that revealed surprising depth, while targeted shafts of filtered light accentuated specific surfaces. As a result, Matt Sasso became the most sought-after young photographer during the 70's. The big ad agencies lined up like 737s on La Guardia's tarmac, their major accounts idling impatiently, waiting for Matt's busy schedule to open up.

Random events and opportunities led him to the fashion industry, and Matt was satisfied with his notoriety and success. Yet in his heart there remained a deep love for the beauty of nature, and Robert was an extension of that love. He provided Matt with the hope that future generations would sustain the activist energy he once had for the ideals he still cherished.

Robert paused, as if he just realized he'd been monopolizing the conversation. Which would've been the case if Matt hadn't drifted off and missed most of what he had said.

"I hope I'm not putting you out. It's only for a few days."

Despite the headache, Matt generated the most sincere look he could muster. "Robert, don't even think about it. It's my pleasure." Concerned that he may've overdone the emotion, Matt smiled. "Just save a few of those trees out West in my name. That'll square us."

Robert smiled back. "Deal. I'll even point them out when you come visit."

"Come visit, huh? So you finally got the hint I've been wanting an invitation. You bet, I'll come visit."

Robert's words were heartfelt. "Thanks for letting me work here, Matt. I learned a lot from you."

"Hey, you don't have to thank me. I'm losing a damn good assistant." He extended his hand. "And a close friend."

They shook hands and locked eyes. The intensity of the moment grew until Robert joked to save it from bursting. "Oh, now I'm your friend. A minute ago I was fuckface."

Matt laughed and pulled Robert to him, wrapping him in his arms.

CHAPTER 3

The chill afternoon breeze blowing off the waters of New York Bay, helped revive Matt as he pedaled a thirty year-old, ten-speed past Foley Square and its deserted government buildings. Pumping his legs and steering east toward his old neighborhood, Matt felt the dull fog begin to lift from his brain.

He had seen the flaming tanker on TV, and wanted to ride past the source of last night's poison cloud to see the burned-out carcass in the clear light of day, but he'd gotten off to a late start and decided to view it on his return home. He did, however, get around to calling Laura. There was no answer, so he left a message on her answering machine.

As Matt pedaled faster, his thoughts turned to Robert back at the studio. Matt had repeatedly asked his assistant to accompany him to his family's Thanksgiving dinner, but Robert politely refused, saying he needed to finish a set of prints before leaving for Idaho, where he might not have access to a darkroom. Matt understood how important it was for Robert to complete his portfolio, and felt he had tried his best to invite his young friend, but now, Matt had doubts.

He recalled how much of a struggle it had been to get Robert to accept the generous payment for his ten-speed. Clearly, Matt was trying to help him, and perhaps Robert initially resisted the cash offer, sensing it was charity and an imposition on their friendship. Matt ventured that Robert considered the invitation in a similar light, and, after accepting one kindness, felt obliged to refuse another. To placate his guilt, Matt vowed to shower his assistant with attention and kindness for the remaining two days he would be at the studio.

When Matt rounded Columbus Park, at the foot of Mulberry Street, boyhood memories filled his head, packing it tight like a rush-hour elevator. Although he only lived a mile away, it was as if he inhabited a different time zone. Not of hours, but of past and present.

If his family no longer lived here, Matt could've easily ignored these ignoble streets. Then again, wouldn't he have missed the bits of gossip his sister, Rita, relayed to him, while he reacted as if he didn't care to know, yet always pictured vividly the characters and plots as she told her stories? Wouldn't his sister, who was a perceptive creature, have known if he was really interested or not? Rita wasn't a compulsive talker. She spoke when someone was listening. Matt had to admit, he remained curious about the lives of the people he grew up around. He wanted to know of the swindles, the feuds, the infidelities, the abandonments, and the recurring

Mafia tales of intimidation, revenge, murder, and succession. He also enjoyed hearing of the happier events, like weddings, births, anniversaries, and of old people dying peacefully in their sleep.

These streets possessed the good and the bad, but here the mix was more intense than other places, and the people more intrusive. He appreciated their appetites and rituals, but remained on guard against their Mediterranean manner of invading his fortress of solitude. Matt would always pack love and hate in his heart when he traveled the brief mile to his past.

A couple of wandering cabs honked as he crossed Canal Street against the light. There was plenty of clearance between them. Being a light traffic day, Matt supposed they were looking for any excuse to score their daily fix of horn toots.

It was no surprise when Matt spotted Lenny Change at his post on the corner of Mulberry and Hester. More resolute than a mailman, Lenny endured all climes and elements to stand his ground each afternoon, Sundays and holidays included. Well dressed as always, on this Thanksgiving Day, he wore a silver-gray wool suit over a black knit shirt, topped off with a blue fedora. Lenny Change got his name from constantly rolling coins in his left front pants pocket. He couldn't stop doing it. All the private clubs and most of the local restaurants had banned him because of his annoying habit. If he had lived uptown, where the psychiatrists reside, he would've been called Leonard the Obsessive-Compulsive. Downtown, Lenny was *a fucking loony-tune*, clinging to his spot in the neighborhood.

Lenny's square face scrunched in puzzlement as Matt bicycled toward him. "Hey! Big-shot photographer. What'd somebody steal your car?"

Matt grinned. "How you doing, Lenny?"

Lenny cupped his crotch with his free hand. "I'd be doing a lot better if you brought me one of them delicious models."

Matt laughed as he rode past. "Next time."

"I'll be here."

"No doubt," Matt muttered to himself.

The proliferation of shiny new storefronts, ablaze with the Italian tri-colors of green, white, and red, reminded Matt how much Mulberry Street had changed from when he was a kid. Back then, few outsiders dared walk through the fiercely protected area. Occasionally, a few naive tourists, reckoned harmless by the natives, were allowed to stroll freely. But the visitors soon sensed their jaunt could be hazardous to their health, and after a couple of blocks retreated to the safety of tourist-friendly Chinatown.

These days, however, Little Italy was lauded in every tourist map and sightseeing guide published about Manhattan. And combined with its nearby Oriental enclave, they were the most popular stop on New York's ethnic neighborhood tour. The old family restaurants had blossomed into lavish dining extravaganzas, with prices to match. And the mean streets had turned family friendly with an explosion of sweet-scented bakeries, classy outdoor cafes, and ornate espresso houses. All very

profitable. The Mafia had given its blessing to the make-over by investing heavily in the expansion of local businesses. They had their hand in everything. Some things never change.

Gliding past the intersection at Grand Street, Matt swung his right leg over the seat and coasted past several buildings to his family's five-story tenement, where he stopped in the street alongside a parked car. He knew his father, Thomas, would be at the living room window, looking down at him. He glanced up to the second floor and saw his smiling pop wave a frail hand.

Matt's eyes welled with tears. He felt the guilt children feel when absent for a time then return to see how much closer to death their parents have gotten, the guilt children carry because they can never repay in kind all the love and caring they received from their parents, the guilt that persists even though everyone knows it is natural law that parents give more than they take. Being childless, Matt was cheating the system, but he knew he would pay when he grew old and there would be no one to take care of him. Things work out. It's the law.

Matt lifted the bike's front wheel onto the single step that separated the sidewalk from the building's entrance. He noticed the door had been freshly painted forest green, and wondered how many coats of paint had been slapped onto the solid oak over the years. Matt rolled the ten-speed into the long narrow corridor with its original floor of small tile hexagons, mostly white with colored borders and intermittent geometric designs. The building had been remodeled a decade ago, after its hundredth birthday, but many of its nineteenth-century features remained, like the wrought-iron staircase with its white marble slabs smoothed and beveled by countless footsteps.

He carried the bike up the stairs. At the mid-floor landing, he made a right angle turn up to the second floor, where he set the bike down next to the heavy reinforced door that he had installed to protect his family. It was more of a luxury than a necessity in this safe area, but it made Matt feel more secure.

On the door, hung a large Christmas wreath decorated with small red ribbons and white porcelain angels. Matt was fortunate that his sister had moved in with their father after their mother passed away. Rita bore the brunt of taking care of their pop without any resentment toward Matt. He knew it satisfied her need for family.

Rita's husband, Eddie Pomara, one of Matt's boyhood pals, had died years ago in Vietnam, and her only child, Lucy, was an aspiring punk-rock singer, who had distanced herself from her mother. Lucy lived close by on West Houston Street, but rarely visited. Matt tried to do his part by being generous with his family. It was easy to give them money. What he couldn't give them was more time. Not the amount of time they deserved.

Matt knocked. A few seconds later, the door opened, and a brute with a shaved skull and nose ring, wearing black leather, top to bottom, stood in the doorway, grinning at Matt's shocked expression. "You're late, Matthew."

Matt glared at the *Fuck You*, written in medieval script, tattooed on the stranger's forehead. "Who the fuck are you?"

A primal reaction to protect his family propelled him forward. He was about to do something, he wasn't sure what, but it involved force. Suddenly, Lucy appeared. Matt didn't recognize her at first, with her pierced brow and lip, and red streaked hair hanging in her face. It was her voice that stopped him. "Back off, Uncle. Nails is with me."

The two men stood close and stared at each other. Matt tasted the unwashed smell coming from Nails, who was bigger and about fifteen years younger. If they ever got into it, Matt knew what he had to do. Strike first and hard and dirty as need be.

Rita removed garlic and cheese breadsticks from the oven and set them on the stove to cool. She took off the bright orange mittens that matched the apron she wore to protect her blue cotton dress. She looked at Matt, who sat at the kitchen table, squeezing his forehead.

Rita's big, winsome eyes were dark brown, the same color as her long, thick hair, tied with a blue ribbon. A few years ago, Matt had bought Rita a membership at a Soho gym, and ever since, she had kept herself fit and trim. She would turn forty-three in two months, but looked like a woman in her mid-thirties.

Rita asked, "You okay? The smell was awful here. I can imagine how bad it was at your place. Lolly, next door, told me it was on TV last night."

Matt loved his sister dearly, but wished she didn't sound like a neighborhood girl when she spoke. He'd gotten rid of his Lower Eastside accent in college when he first mingled with WASPs and no longer wanted to sound *greasy*, as his girlfriend from New Haven called it.

Matt furrowed his brow. "I'm all right."

"What kind of lowlife would leave a truck full of chemicals like that?"

"I don't know." He picked up the bottle of aspirin in front of him and considered taking more. He set it back down. "Pop doesn't look too good."

Rita's face dropped a notch. "He says he's ready to join Ma in heaven."

Matt lowered his eyes and stared at the black and white checkerboard linoleum. "What's with Lucy bringing that fucking yammo to the house?"

"Please Matt, don't start. Okay! I can't stand looking at the creep either. He's an ex-con who did hard time for manslaughter. I hate having him in my house. But I want my daughter here for Thanksgiving dinner."

"I don't understand Lucy. She was such a beautiful girl. Now, she looks like. . ."

Rita's pained expression stopped him.

"You think it doesn't tear at me to see her like this? She's got this dream of being a rock and roll star. They all look like that, now. What can I do? I don't want to drive her away. I can only pray and wait for the day she changes back."

Matt rose from his chair and hugged Rita. "Don't put all your faith in what prayers can do."

She spoke softly into his chest. "It worked for Ma."

Matt leaned back so he could see her face.

"Ma always prayed that you'd cut your long hair and stop being a hippie."

He laughed.

"She said God got you interested in photography."

"Then praise the Lord for a most excellent way to meet chicks."

Rita punched his arm. "Hey! Don't make fun of Him."

"I hope you're not comparing what I was to those two out there. There's a big difference. I had positive values. I was trying to stop a lousy war. All I see them doing is disfiguring themselves and trashing everything else."

"I know there's a difference. But Ma didn't. You turned into a strange person in her eyes. She lost her beautiful son. She worried the same way I worry about Lucy."

It hurt Matt to hear this. He knew Rita's recollection was accurate. His rage against the Vietnam War and maverick appearance had confused and upset his mother. But it was an insane period, and Matt had to do his part to object to the madness.

It had been a while since Matt thought about the war, but the angry memories bubbled to the surface. In the sixties and early seventies, the country's leaders were sending boys off to fight and die in a war that made no sense, and in the process killed thousands of Asians in their own homelands. The whole damn Domino Theory - the foundation for our strategic defense paranoia - was based on assumptions that proved to be patently wrongheaded.

After the United States *honorably* pulled out of Southeast Asia, Vietnam never became the puppet state of Red China. In fact, they soon fought a major war against each other. Wasn't it evident to our military intelligence bureaucrats that Ho Chi Minh would never allow any foreign power to control his country? That was the whole point for throwing out the French.

These were the same arguments Matt had debated with himself to make certain his beliefs were rock-solid. Back then, it had been crucial that he have righteousness on his side when he faced his wounded and bewildered family, especially his younger sister, who had lost her husband, the father of her baby, in the war. And he needed convictions strong enough to shield himself - the *longhaired, Commie loving, draft-dodging coward* - from the hateful eyes of his blindly patriotic Italian-American neighbors.

It was at times like this, recalling the turbulent era and how he had hurt his mother, that Matt hoped there was a heaven and that his mother, Angela, was up there knowing her son's strange behavior was honorable and justified.

In the living room, Thomas sat in a wooden folding chair by his favorite window. Matt walked toward him, avoiding eye contact with Lucy and Nails, who were snug in a leather recliner, laughing as they flipped through the pages of a worn family album. Nails grew louder when he saw Matt.

“Who’s that?” Nails roared, pointing at an old photo.

Lucy snickered, “That’s my Aunt Marie.”

“She’s ready for slaughter.”

Matt felt his throbbing headache return. He knew the prick was trying to provoke him.

Thomas reacted to his son’s gentle hand on his shoulder and turned from the window. Matt choked with emotion. The irreversible frailty was unmistakable. His father’s brown eyes had taken on a confused view of the world. His neatly combed, fine gray hair and clean-shaven face, more reminders of Rita’s dedication.

“Hey Pop, dinner’s ready.”

Thomas sputtered like a hand-cranked car. “Your sister. . . she’s a good cook.”

“She learned from the best.”

“I hear. . . you cook pretty good.”

Matt smiled. “Yeah, I’ll make a good wife someday.”

“Your mother. . . she was the best.”

Matt’s chest tightened. He took his father’s arm and coaxed him to rise from the chair. “Come on. Let’s go eat.”

While guiding his father to the doorway, Matt heard Nails laugh and saw him sneer at another family photo - a snapshot of Matt with long hair, in a white T-shirt with a blue dove on it.

Nails looked up, smiled with mock tranquility, and flashed a V-sign at Matt. “Peace, brother.”

Matt glared at Nails until Lucy slammed the album shut. He looked at his niece and saw past the caked-on mascara to the familiar brown eyes. There was a little bit of Rita, even some of his mother, but what he saw most was his beautiful young niece. His anger withdrew.

At the dinner table, Matt finally got Rita to sit down, telling her no one would eat until she stopped fussing over them and joined them at the table. This didn’t include Nails who had already sampled everything within reach. Lucy tried her best to control him, and sat him as far from Matt as possible. Fortunately, there was plenty of room for them to spread out. The heavy mahogany table was fully extended to hold the great array of food Rita had prepared: the traditional roast turkey with all the trimmings, baked ham, and a supply of pastas, meats, cheeses, and breads arranged next to the giant bowl of tomato sauce mandatory at every Italian sit-down.

They were gathered in the spacious kitchen, which accommodated both cooking and dining areas. Matt had hired a contractor a few years ago to knock down a wall and extend the room another fifteen feet. He would’ve bought his family a house in the suburbs if they liked, but his father wanted to live where he had raised his children and slept with his wife. At his age, the past was more precious than the present. Thomas wouldn’t appreciate the beauty of unfamiliar trees. So instead of buying them a new home, Matt made sure they had every convenience he could provide.

Matt saw Rita smile when Lucy complimented her on the table setting and thanked her for the dinner. It reminded him what Thanksgiving Day was all about and spurred him to do something he hadn't done in a long time. "I'd like to say the prayer, if that's all right?"

Rita lifted her eyes, surprised by his soft-spoken request. "Sure, Matt." She hadn't heard him pray since their mother's funeral, fifteen years ago.

For Matt, a sincere offering of gratitude for today's family gathering was a way to make amends for yesterday's forced prayer. "I'll keep it simple."

Folding his hands, Matt dipped his head. Rita did the same, and Thomas stared at the uncut turkey on his plate. Lucy placed her hands together, while Nails ate vigorously.

"Thank you, God, for all the bounty you have provided us with." Matt stopped, took a breath, and spoke in a more heartfelt manner. "I really don't know who or what I'm talking to. You haven't shown yourself to anyone since Biblical times, and I only have the rumors of ancient witnesses to attest to that."

Rita looked up and joined Lucy in staring at Matt. Even Nails could tell the prayer was unorthodox and stopped chewing to listen.

"Yet I know there is something out there greater than I can ever comprehend. And on this special day. . . gathered with my family. . . I want to express my gratitude to that great something, whether it's responsible or indifferent to the happiness I feel being with my loved ones at this table of plenty. Thank you."

Matt had walked a tightrope of words without a net, relying on the balance of his beliefs to guide him in an honest declaration of thanksgiving. He looked up and saw Rita's warm smile. He knew he had safely made the crossing.

"Amen," said Rita.

Right on cue, Nails followed with a loud belch. His quick apology appeared genuine. "*That* was not done on purpose."

Matt's unexpected solemnity had a refreshing effect on everyone. Even Nails seemed less aggressive, eating smaller amounts of food.

After fixing Thomas' plate for him, Rita turned her attention to Lucy. "How's your group doing?"

"Some good stuff's happened. Nails lined up a month of weekend gigs starting tomorrow night."

"That's great. Where will you be playing?"

"Mostly the East Village."

"Isn't that a dangerous area?"

Lucy rolled her eyes.

Nails crowed, "Don't sweat, Rita. When Lucy's with me, she's covered."

"You said you were gonna change the group's name. Did you?"

"Ma. . . enough with the questions."

Rita looked away. She pushed her food around the plate, working her fork like an earthmover. Matt had the urge to scold his niece.

Nails nudged Lucy. "Go on, tell her."

Lucy shot him a dark look.

Rita asked Lucy, "Tell me what?"

Nails jumped in again, "The name of the band."

Rita waited to hear from her daughter.

"It's I Nailed Lucy."

Nails roared with laughter. "It's so bitching."

Thomas got up from his chair. He made his way around the table until he reached Nails and stared at his scripted tattoo. Nails' laugh dwindled to a snicker as he eyed the old man, who was in his face.

"Somebody put a curse on you." Thomas said.

Nails let out a howl of laughter that jolted Thomas backward. The belly laugh soon turned to harsh coughing. Nails rose and stomped around the room as he tried to catch his breath. Nails was still snorting when he approached Thomas and gave him a friendly but solid slap on the back. "You're all right, old man."

Thomas buckled with the blow. Matt and Rita shot up from their chairs to support their father. Matt eased Thomas onto the seat that Nails would no longer be using.

"I didn't mean to hurt him," Nails explained.

Matt growled, "Outside, asshole!"

The open threat sidetracked Nails' attempt to apologize. "You wanna mix? I'm ready."

Nails led the way with Matt at his heels. Nails dipped his hand into his vest pocket and slipped on a pair of fingerless leather gloves with large metal studs at the knuckles. When he exited the apartment, Nails turned quickly. His fists cocked. "What's on your mind, Unc?"

Matt caught the gleam of the metal studs and rushed forward so Nails wouldn't have to wait long for his answer. "Your balls!"

A powerful kick to Nails' crotch lifted him onto the toes of his motorcycle boots before he whiplashed forward, groaning. Matt followed with a solid uppercut to the jaw and a vicious kick to the ribs. Nails sailed backward, tumbling down the short flight of stairs to the mid-floor landing. Swooping onto Nails' crumpled torso, Matt beat him with punches to the head and kicks to the body.

Lucy ran from the apartment to the railing and screamed down at Matt. "Get off him!"

But Matt didn't hear her or notice the neighbors pouring into the hallways and onto the steps above. He focused on making sure Nails had nothing left to strike back with. As a finishing touch, Matt lifted Nails' battered body just enough to push him off the landing and roll him down the long flight of white marble steps. Nails smacked into the wall below and lay at the foot of the stairs in a stunned heap.

Lucy shoved her way past Matt. "You're a fucking animal! I hate you!"

Rita ran from the apartment, leaned over the banister, and pleaded, "Lucy, don't go!"

Lucy tried to help Nails get up, but he pushed her away. He got to his feet, flinched in pain, and grabbed his ribcage. “This ain’t over, Matthew. You’re a dead man!”

He reeled and leaned against the wall for support. Lucy grabbed his arm. “Nails!” “Let go of me!” He turned toward the door and staggered down the hallway.

She started to follow him. “Nails, wait!”

He yelled without turning. “I don’t want you coming near me tonight!”

Lucy backed into the wall and slid down until she sat on the cold tile floor. She pressed her legs to her chest and lowered her head to her knees.

Rita made her way down the stairs.

“I’m sorry, Rita.” Matt said.

“Go up and stay with Pop.”

Matt watched Rita kneel down next to Lucy, put her arm around her, and talk quietly to her. He couldn’t hear what she said, but could tell Lucy was listening. Rita knew how to comfort, she was a natural caretaker. Beneath her composed exterior, Matt saw Rita working hard to salvage her daughter’s Thanksgiving Day visit.

CHAPTER 4

It was early evening and the murky blue sky would soon be black when Matt dismounted his bike and stood behind a ribbon of yellow crime-scene tape. He massaged his bruised right hand and stared at the charred debris of the burned-out tanker. Floodlights illuminated the area for the fire inspector, who was getting holiday pay, to poke about the ruins. The tanker's tires and wheels had disintegrated, sinking the truck an axle-width from the ground. With only parts of the blackened steel ribs of the oval shell left, it loomed like the devoured remains of a Cajun whale platter.

A policeman, one of two taking turns napping in their squad car, told Matt the cause of the fire was still under investigation, but he had heard, unofficially, it was most likely a case of arson. Matt was too exhausted to feel much hatred for the person who'd almost killed him. Last night's ordeal had taken its toll, and the little energy that remained had been spent on Nails. Matt just wanted to go home, crawl into bed, and sleep.

He mounted the ten-speed and pedaled toward his studio, enjoying the privacy of the night. Harrison Street was dimly lit so he decided to take it. Considering his mood, it seemed a more appropriate route, even though it was the long way around his block. The only working light on the narrow street flickered on and off like a last gasp SOS to Con Edison.

Matt thought of his empty bed waiting for him and posed a hypothetical question: if Laura Bowden were at his door waiting for him, would he have the strength to make love to her? He laughed. The answer was a no-brainer; even the fantasy of it had already awoken his pride.

Behind him, a car with its lights off curved slowly onto the darkened street. It continued to creep forward, gaining quietly on Matt, who sensed something and turned as the high-beams flared and blinded him. The tires screeched, spreading rubber, and the car accelerated toward him. Matt drove the pedals forward and twisted the handlebars to the left, but he ran over a broken bottle and the front wheel slid on the glass. He went down directly in the path of the onrushing car.

Certain that Nails was behind the wheel, Matt screamed, "Fuck you, asshole!"

The car suddenly swerved and came to a stop alongside Matt, who looked up and saw it was a late model Cadillac. Not the type of ride Nails could afford. The driver-side window powered down, and a glowing cigarette revealed a vaguely familiar smirk.

ALBE

The mystery man, hidden in shadow, exhaled a stream of smoke. "There're a lot of sick bastards in this city just looking for a victim." It was Frankie Mazzarino, Matt's one-time, best friend.

More surprised than angry, Matt said, "Frankie. . . you son of a bitch."

Frankie leaned into the flickering light, leering like a gargoyle at a Paris disco. "You're lucky we go way back. No one calls me names to my face."

Matt lifted himself from the ground and brushed dirt from his pants. "Yeah, I hear you're a made guy, now."

Frankie turned off the engine, got out, and grinned at his old friend. Frankie was a menacing figure. His smile did little to warm his cold, dark eyes or cover the ferocity etched in his thick face. His neck and shoulders were huge, either from lifting weights or from regularly throwing guys through windows, and the expensive, dark blue silk suit was appropriate attire for attending the funerals of rubbed-out mobsters. He was the same age as Matt, but looked older, and his post-summer tan would add more lines to his already tough hide.

Frankie tossed his cigarette before he reached out and wrapped his arms around Matt. "How you doing, Matty. Long time no see."

Matt waited for the powerful hug to subside so he could take a breath and reply. "I'm doing good, Frankie."

Frankie let go and stepped back for another look. It was obvious Matt didn't appreciate the prank. Frankie shrugged. "Sorry about the tumble. Just trying to show you how vulnerable you were."

Matt wasn't ready to warm up yet. "Unusual teaching technique." He bent down and picked up his bike.

There'd be no further apologies. "A guy shits his pants, he's gonna learn the lesson."

Frankie spit the words out as if they were his own creation. But Matt remembered the day they first heard Tony Cova, a Mafia underboss, come up with it. Frankie had idolized Tony. Now, he was still honoring his fallen hero by quoting him. A wild thought crossed Matt's mind. Was Frankie the hit-man who had whacked Tony and taken possession of his words like spoils of war?

"How long you been following me?"

Frankie removed a pair of calfskin gloves from his inside jacket pocket and slipped them on. "Since you left your father's. I heard about the incident in the hallway. Let me know if you need help with this guy."

"Nails is a punk. I can handle him."

"You sure? I heard he threatened to kill you."

Matt smiled, amused that modern technology with portable phones, beepers, and call-waiting had made the neighborhood grapevine work even faster.

Frankie continued with his offer. "You're not the same tough kid you used to be. You've gotten soft. Me. . . I'm in training every minute of my life."

"I'm not so soft, Frankie."

Frankie turned left and right, eyeing the darkened street. He flashed Matt a warm grin. "You know, when we were kids, you were the only guy I was ever afraid to fuck with. You had that look. That look that you'd do anything to win." Frankie's smile flattened. "If you hadn't gone off to college thinking you were smarter than the rest of us, who knows? Us two together. . . We could've had our own family by now."

"Gee, Frankie, I didn't know you had such fond memories of me."

"Still the wise-ass."

"I haven't seen you in years. It's a little hard to digest this nostalgic affection."

"I guess I'm getting old. I think more and more about the good old days. Me, you, Lou, and Eddie. . . We did some crazy fucking things."

Matt cracked a smile. "You ever see Lou?"

"Matter of fact, we had a long talk some six months ago."

"Oh, yeah? What about?"

"The demise of Mikey Tan."

Matt narrowed his eyes.

"He brought me in for questioning."

Matt stopped himself from asking, but Frankie read his mind. "The answer is *no*. I had a solid gold alibi."

Frankie grabbed the bike from Matt and looked it over. "Where'd you get this?"

"Bought it from my assistant."

"I can get you anything swag. What'd you pay?"

"Too much. He's moving to Idaho. I wanted to help him out. He's a good kid."

"Idaho. . .? Who's he gonna see, Mr. Potato Head?"

"He's got a sister out there."

Frankie mounted the bike and reacted to the narrow seat, rising from it quickly. "Whoa! That's a hell of an intrusive saddle."

Matt laughed.

Frankie eased back down onto the seat and started to pedal away, wobbly at first, then got the hang of it and circled back toward Matt.

"How far you live?"

"You make a left, another left, half-way down the block, you're there."

Frankie fished his car keys from his side pocket and tossed them to Matt. "Keep an eye on my back."

Matt watched Frankie steer his way up the street. He grinned at the sight of the burly mobster, in a fifteen-hundred-dollar Armani, planted atop the thin frame of an old ten-speed.

Frankie led the way, occasionally looking back at Matt for pointed directions. It didn't take them long to get to the studio's fenced parking lot, where they settled in front of the red-brick, four-car garage, now used as a workshop and storage space. Frankie straddled the bike, leaned his weight against the handlebars, and reminisced with Matt, who sat behind the wheel of the Cadillac.

It amazed Matt how quickly and easily they connected to one another. Their twenty-seven years of separation didn't matter any more. They were kids again, staying up late, swapping stories into the night.

They covered much ground, beginning with polite questions about each other's families. Frankie nodded sympathetically when Matt spoke of his father's failing health, and Matt smiled when he heard about Frankie's wife and three kids. They had reached the subject of girls they each dated and were comparing notes on how far they had gotten with them, when Frankie mentioned one of his teenage fantasies had recently come true. He told Matt he had run into Maria Santos, one of Matt's old girlfriends, and had a one-night affair with her.

"So who'd she marry?" Matt asked.

"She married this loser. Some Greek guy from Brooklyn. The only Greek I know who can't open a successful restaurant."

"She was a knockout."

"I wanted her bad back then. But us being best friends, I never made a move on her."

"I hope it was worth the wait?"

Frankie snorted, "It didn't come cheap, that's for sure."

Matt was eager for the details. "What?"

"After the one-night stand, I found out who she was married to. Her Greek husband was into me for two large, and he'd been missing payments." Frankie shook his head. "I felt too guilty to go after him for the loan. So like it cost me two Gs for a fucking quickie. And on top of that, she threw me a bum lay."

The sorry look on Frankie's face got Matt to chuckle. He opened the car door. "Could've been a setup."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe it was worth the two grand and no broken bones to have his wife screw you?"

Frankie looked sorrier than before. "That rat bastard pimp. I got fucked coming and going."

Matt laughed again, but his fun was interrupted by a loud noise. Something had crashed into the parking lot's chain-link fence. A big beefy guy, who had fallen against the fence, picked himself up and scrambled away. When the man passed under a street lamp, Matt got a good look at him. "Nails!"

"That's the punk?"

Matt and Frankie ran toward the fence. They got to the street just as Nails turned north at Washington and disappeared. Matt thought about giving chase until he noticed the front door to his studio was open.

"Motherfucker!"

Matt rushed to the open door. The reception area, dimly lit by the outside street lamp, was in shambles. Matt stared at the destruction in disbelief. Frankie stood behind him.

Sidestepping a broken table and shattered lamp, Matt reached the door to the front office. When he opened it, he felt the debris. On his way to the light switch, he stumbled. Even in the dark, Matt knew by the hollow sound that he had bumped into a fallen file cabinet. He flipped the switch, and the lone unbroken fluorescent buzzed and brightened. The desks and chairs were upturned, phones had been ripped from the wall, office supplies were scattered everywhere, and two computers had been smashed against the floor. Matt felt his stomach cramp.

Frankie placed his hand on Matt's shoulder, but Matt couldn't be comforted. He envisioned a worse sight and pushed his way through the rubble to the studio.

The high ceiling lights had been spared. When Matt switched them on, the devastation in the studio was fully illuminated. The vandalism was ruthless. Nothing was taken, everything was broken. His photo lights were smashed, stands, umbrellas, and light boxes were bent, torn, and busted, mangled cameras and lenses scattered everywhere, and paint splattered over everything, on the floor, and on the walls. The same thick walls, built for cold storage, which had kept the sounds of rampant destruction from reaching Matt and Frankie in the parking lot.

If only he had gotten there sooner, Matt thought. If only Frankie hadn't shown up, Matt would've caught Nails in the act. Then another possibility dawned on him. Maybe Nails would've been hiding in the dark, waiting to kill him as he had threatened.

Matt wandered through the debris, glass crunching under every footstep. What was he looking for? He was sure there was nothing left to salvage. Was he looking for a special wrecked object that would bring him more pain and explode his hatred and need for revenge? Then Matt saw it. The only untouched item in the studio. A large framed beauty shot of Lucy, taken by Matt, when she was sweet sixteen, still sugar and spice.

Frankie stood next to Matt. They stared at Lucy's image. Matt's body began to shake with rage. Frankie turned him by the shoulders. "What are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna hurt him bad."

"Let me help you."

"No!"

"I can handle this real easy."

Matt pushed Frankie away. "No! I gotta do it myself."

Matt turned his back to Frankie, picked up a cracked Hasselblad lens, and rotated the focusing ring. It barely moved because of the crushed glass inside the barrel, but he toyed with it. He twisted it back and forth, listened to the awful grinding, worked the ruined, three-thousand-dollar, wide-angle like a string of worry beads. He thought about his insurance coverage, and how long it would take to get his studio back in shape, but what he thought about most was how he would punish Nails.

From the corner of his eye, Matt noticed something. A dark liquid seeped from under a closed door. It was blood. Matt dropped the heavy lens and rushed to the dressing room. He steadied himself before he looked inside.

Matt gasped, “Oh, God! Robert! No!”

He moved slowly, reverently, toward his young assistant. “Why did he hurt you?”

Kneeling beside his best friend, Matt brushed a strand of hair from Robert’s eye. Matt shivered and groaned. “He didn’t have to do this.”

Robert bled from a jagged wound on the left side of his chest. Naked from the waist up, he sat on the floor with his back propped against the wall. Spring fashions, hanging on a wall rack, had been parted to make room for him. His outstretched arms were tacked to the drywall by a nail driven through each palm. On his forehead, the words *Fuck You* were written in dried blood. His skin was white and his chest didn’t move.

Matt ran his fingers along Robert’s arm to soothe it, then held the impaled left hand and tugged gently to free it. He leaned his cheek against Robert’s body and cried out, “He didn’t have to kill you!”

Frankie placed his hand on Matt’s shoulder. “Matt. . . call 911.”

Matt shot up, brushing Frankie aside, and moved quickly to the door.

Frankie caught up to Matt in the studio. “Don’t be stupid. You gotta call the cops on this!”

Matt didn’t look back. “I know what I have to do.”

When Matt reached the spiral staircase, Frankie grabbed his arm, but Matt knocked his hand away and took a step up.

Frankie bear-hugged him from behind. He lifted Matt and carried him back down to the studio floor. “You can’t do it this way!”

“Let go, you bastard!”

Frankie’s grasp was vise-tight. Matt circled his right foot behind Frankie and threw his weight back, tripping the two of them onto the floor. Matt landed hard on top of Frankie, who took the blow, held fast, and rolled over onto Matt, pinning him under his massive body.

He spoke close to Matt’s ear. “He wants you to go nuts. He’s waiting for you.”

“I want him dead! Now!”

“Think! Even if you kill him, you do a lotta time in the joint.”

“I don’t care. Let me up!”

“There’s no way I’m getting off till you start listening to me.”

Matt continued to struggle. He had only one purpose in life now and that was to destroy Nails. But the previous twenty-four hours had been brutal and Matt was a weakened combatant. With Frankie planted on top of him, it was hard for Matt to catch his breath. Strength and determination drained out of him.

Fifteen minutes later, they sat at the kitchen table, drinking coffee. Frankie set his cup down. “If you whack him, there’s no big mystery who did it.”

Matt shook his head. “I can’t let that kid’s death go unanswered.”

“You gotta think about your family. What this would do to them.”

That was Frankie's trump card. Matt had no way to beat it. "Maybe I don't have to kill him. Just fuck him up real good."

Frankie frowned. "You did that already. And that led to this. I'll do the hurting for you."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You ain't asking."

Matt looked Frankie in the eye. "How would you do it?"

"I don't know yet. But I'll need some help."

"What can I do?"

Frankie glared. "You?" He shook his head. "You can't be involved. You need an air-tight alibi when this goes down."

"What kind of help you talking about?"

"I gotta go to some outside people."

"I don't understand."

"It creates a buffer, so there's no link between me, you, and this punk. Know what I'm saying?"

Matt rose from his chair. "This is getting complicated."

Frankie stood up, stepped in front of him. "Trigonometry's complicated." He pointed through the wall to where Robert sat in his blood. "Revenge is simple."

Matt's face hardened. There'd be no more objections to Frankie taking control.

Frankie gripped Matt's arm to get his attention. "You gotta call the police as soon as I'm out the door. I can't be here when they come." He pointed to the coffee cups on the table. "Clean this up." He lifted Matt's bruised right hand. "Keep this hidden. And above all, do not mention Nails. Neither from this afternoon or tonight. You understand? Not one word about him."

Matt sought Frankie's eyes. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because an old friend needs my help."

Matt moved to embrace him. Frankie raised his hand and stopped him. "You got blood in your hair. Don't wash it out. You held the body in grief. That's okay. Makes sense. Everything has to make sense. No fuckups, Matt." He made strong eye contact. "Never call or visit me. I get in touch with you. You got that?"

Frankie waited for Matt to nod before he walked out of the kitchen.

When the metal door slammed shut, Matt padded to the nearby wall phone. He was on automatic pilot. He didn't have to think. Only follow orders. Someone else was doing the heavy lifting for a change. He'd be back soon to pull his own weight, but for now, he just needed to rest a little.

CHAPTER 5

Outside Sasso Studio, a tangle of official cars with flashing lights blocked off most of the street. Three uniformed cops huddled by the front door and puffed little clouds into the damp night air. Scattered groups of onlookers had gathered to gawk at anything that moved. Their attention turned to an unmarked brown Chevy sedan that rolled toward the coroner's van and parked behind it, leaving space for the gurney.

Lou Randazzo, homicide detective, first-grade, stepped from the car. His face, tight and humorless, reflected the way he viewed the world and lived his life. Lou looked older than his forty-five years. The charcoal gray suit he wore had shine at the elbows and knees. Purely functional, it hung loosely over his slouched frame. He was stocky and walked with a slight limp, which disappeared when he approached the patrolmen. After trading grunts and nods with the cops, Lou opened the front door and stepped inside.

* * *

In a corner of the studio, Matt sat on a wooden box, distant from the police activity. Though unable to see Robert's body from where he sat, Matt stared vacantly into the open dressing room, waiting for the body to be moved so he could rise and say good-bye to his young friend. Elevating his vigilance to a solemn responsibility kept him from dwelling on what Frankie might do. He didn't want to be distracted when his old friend, Lou Randazzo, questioned him. He had to focus on his grief and nothing else. If he started worrying about Frankie's plans, Lou would pick up on it and wonder where the fear was coming from.

Lou wrote in a pocket-size notebook while the assistant medical examiner talked. The detective nodded and occasionally glanced at Matt, and at times seemed more interested in Matt than what the pathologist was telling him. Lou stopped writing when he saw Matt stand for the laden body bag as it rolled past him. Lou snapped his notebook shut and walked toward his boyhood friend.

Matt noticed the slight limp when Lou approached and remembered the war wound. Of the four close friends, Eddie had enlisted and Lou had been drafted into the army and both sent to Vietnam, while Matt and Frankie managed to evade the conflict. Frankie's dodge was more acceptable to the neighborhood than Matt's.

The future big-shot took advantage of Mafia connections to grease the palm of a high-ranking officer at the local draft board.

After Lou returned from Southeast Asia with his injured leg and Purple Heart, he couldn't accept Matt's anti-war beliefs. They argued fiercely about the war, and on a few occasions came close to trading punches. Apparent that neither one would change their opinion, they avoided all contact. As the years passed and time stitched the tear between them, they again exchanged pleasantries whenever Matt ran into him in the old neighborhood, where Lou still lived with his widowed mother. The war and their differences regarding it, however, would always be a topic for them to avoid.

Lou extended his hand. Matt did the same. Three words echoed in his head. *No fuckups, Matt*. To hide the bruise on his knuckles, he angled his palm up, making their handshake a bit awkward. Lou seemed to accept it as such.

"Sorry what happened here."

"He was a good kid."

Lou nodded sympathetically. "How's your family?"

"My father's got health problems."

"Old age. Nothing you can do."

"But Rita's great. She always asks about you."

A slight blush colored Lou's cheeks. "She's a very special lady. Say hello for me."

"How's your mother?"

"She's fine." The clipped response meant it was time for police business to begin. Lou read from his notes. "So. . . Robert Brody was your assistant for two years. His lease just ran out. And he was gonna stay here a few nights before going to Idaho, where his sister lives."

"That's right."

"Any idea who might've done this?"

"No."

"I know it's hard to tell at this time, but does it look like anything's been stolen?"

"I couldn't say."

"This doesn't look like a robbery."

Matt stole a breath. He hoped Lou hadn't noticed. *He must have. Why else did he pause?*

"This is personal. The body was configured to make a statement."

Matt nodded, like he understood Lou's words.

"You know if Robert Brody had any enemies?"

"I don't know of any."

"How about you?"

The direct question stalled him. "Me? No."

Lou hinted at a smile. "Everybody has enemies. Tell me about yours."

Matt didn't like the shift from curious cop to interested friend. "Lou. I don't know anybody who would do something like this."

Lou gripped Matt's hand and turned it to inspect the bruised knuckles. "How'd this happen?"

Matt felt his veins tingle and suspected his face had betrayed him. Lou was waiting for an answer. Matt dove into the dark sea of lies and speared a good one without too much time lost. "I punched the wall when I found the body."

"Why were you hiding it from me?"

"I don't know. . . You're a cop. Old habits. You think I killed him?"

"No, I don't think that." He reached out and touched Matt's hair. He checked the crimson smear on his fingers. "You're too smart. You would've washed the blood out."

The sight of Robert's blood tortured Matt. "I loved that kid. He had such a good heart. I was gonna miss him, but I was glad he was leaving. He didn't belong in this cold prick of a city. Goddammit, he didn't go soon enough!"

Matt's impassioned spew drew looks from the policemen and forensic technicians. Lou read Matt's grief and appeared to accept it. The detective closed his notebook.

The next morning, Matt sat at the kitchen table, sipping his fourth cup of coffee, thinking about Frankie. Did Frankie plan to kill Nails or just brutalize him? Matt could accept one method, but not the other. He didn't want to go against Frankie's precise orders not to contact him, but decided if he didn't hear from Frankie within twenty-four hours - by noon tomorrow - he'd wait near Frankie's club on Mott Street for a *chance* encounter.

Now that he'd come to a decision, Matt felt guilty about having ignored the patrolman who stood watch over the crime scene in his studio. Lou had done Matt a huge favor by not sealing off the entire building, allowing him use of his upstairs quarters and downstairs kitchen, along with a narrow strip at the back of the studio that connected the two. Because of this arrangement, Matt could only use the damaged rear door.

Matt had spent the sleepless night agonizing over the murder and fretting about his pact with Frankie. When he came downstairs that morning for his caffeine fix, Matt avoided the cop on duty for he had too much to think about and didn't want to encourage conversation. But now, with a set game plan and his mind more at ease, Matt was free to be courteous to the officer and walked toward the studio to offer him a cup of coffee.

Just as Matt passed the wall-phone, it rang. His heart stopped. "Hello."

The muffled voice said, "You should go out with some friends tonight."

"Who is this?"

"Sorry, I must have the wrong number." A *click* followed.

"Wait!"

Matt's thoughts spun out of control, tumbling and crashing. Was that Frankie disguising his voice, or was it someone else? Either way it was a definite message,

and it meant whatever Frankie had planned for Nails was happening tonight, and Matt better have a provable alibi. Matt wasn't sure if he'd smacked into paranoia or clarity, but he now had little doubt Frankie's plan was to kill Nails. He had to go to Frankie's club immediately.

Matt had been instructed by Lou not to move either of his two vehicles or Robert's jeep from the parking lot until the site investigation had been completed. He considered riding the ten-speed, but didn't have a chain to secure it so he walked. Keeping a brisk and steady pace, he made it to Mulberry and Hester in fifteen minutes, where he spotted Lenny Change across the street. Matt turned right to avoid him.

Matt wore dark sunglasses, a wide-brimmed rain hat, tipped forward, and a safari jacket with the collar turned up. Lenny gave him a long hard look, but to Matt's relief, no greeting bellowed out. He continued one street east and crossed Hester at Mott, a block and a half from Frankie's hangout.

Matt saw many familiar faces on Mott Street and could've easily swapped *hellos* a dozen times, but luckily, he remained unnoticed. In his favor was the frosty weather, which kept the doors closed to the three social clubs he had to pass before reaching Frankie's. If it had been a warmer day, chairs would've been set outside and filled with up close spectators.

The social clubs that dotted Little Italy were the favored places for the neighborhood men to meet and spend their idle hours away from wives and children. This tradition was brought over from the old country and modified to fit into the American system. When obstacles arose, like a failed fire inspection or a surprise gambling raid, the old ways won out and payoffs were slipped to the appropriate officials. The flimsy legality of these hangouts was based on a New York State license commonly known as a *social club charter*. With this paper document displayed on the wall behind the bar, the clubs were permitted to serve alcohol only to their members and without charge for the drinks. Of course, these rules were never kept. The establishments were all profit generating businesses, and most of them owned by connected mobsters.

A typical *joint* was located in a street level storefront, consisting of a main room where the full bar ran along a side wall, and wooden tables and chairs filled the remaining tiled space. This is where the regulars gathered to talk or play cards for token money, while others opted to sit by themselves, sipping espresso and reading Italian and New York newspapers. If the club had a back room, the big-money card games took place there, with the house cutting five percent from every pot. This secretive room was also where the wiseguys conspired their nefarious deeds, from numbers and sports betting to hits on rival mobsters.

At the corner, before crossing Grand Street, Matt planted his right foot on a fire hydrant and retied his shoelace while he scoped out Mazzarino's Social Club, which stood catercorner and five buildings farther up Mott. He saw Frankie's Caddy parked out front, and noticed two unfamiliar hoods standing in the club's doorway, staring at

him. They were about the same weight, easily over two hundred pounds, but one was six inches taller than the other. Intimidated by their hard looks, he altered his course and headed east toward Elizabeth Street. Out of sight of the two goons, Matt planned his next move.

The Caddy was a good sign Frankie was inside the club, but Matt couldn't wait until the coast was clear to make his move because Frankie could drive off at any time. Matt steeled himself to push past any of Frankie's cronies that he might encounter and deal with the subsequent anger of his old friend.

Matt crossed Grand Street and made his way back to Mott, where he turned the corner and was doubly relieved to see the Caddy was still there and the two big guys weren't. He stepped quickly past the corner bakery toward Frankie's joint.

When he reached the front door of Mazzarino's Social Club, Matt peered through the thick, green glass blocks that bordered one side of the doorframe and saw figures moving about. Unsure whether to knock or try the handle, he stalled for a moment until the door swung open. The smell of smoke and alcohol rushed out, stinging his eyes and nose. Directly in front of him, stood the two hoods, their heads turned as they shouted *good-byes* to others in the club.

Twisting away, Matt continued up Mott Street to give his plan renewed thought. He heard the door shut and felt the hoodlums' eyes on his back. Matt fought the impulse to quicken his step, and nearly broke into a run when he heard someone shout, "Hey, bonehead!" Instead, he stopped and looked over his shoulder to face whoever called out.

He saw the two thugs walk toward a police car that had double-parked in front of Mazzarino's. A patrolman grinned out his window. *How the hell did I miss a blue and white drive past me?* Matt took his time moving on, hoping to hear something of interest.

The cop asked, "Is Frankie inside?"

The squat thug replied, "What are you a fucking cop?"

Matt heard them laugh.

The cop tried again. "His car's here, so he must be in there."

It was the taller thug's turn at humor. "That don't mean nothing. If his liver was here, that would mean something."

More laughter.

The fire-plug added, "No wonder you ain't made detective."

The cop chuckled even as he raised his voice. "Jerkoff, is he here or not?"

The same hood insisted. "He ain't around today."

"So where's he somewhere getting laid?"

The taller one answered with sham indignation, "Hey! Frankie's a happily married guy. What are you besmirching his good name for?"

"Besmirch this, asshole."

Matt heard another round of laughter as he moved out of earshot.

With the patrol car parked outside Mazzarino's, Matt had no choice but to kill time before going back. He mostly believed the thug's assertion that Frankie was elsewhere, but still felt a strong need to enter the club and make sure for himself. This course of action was dangerous. If Frankie killed Nails and the word got out that Matt, out of the blue, had inquired about Frankie earlier the same day, then a connection could be made between the pair of them and the murder.

The more Matt thought about the consequences the less certain he was about visiting Mazzarino's. How could he jeopardize his friend who was going out on a limb to do him an extraordinary favor? True, it was a favor he didn't want, but nonetheless it was a situation he was stuck with.

Suddenly, his lack of sleep overwhelmed him, and he lost control of the burgeoning options. Matt desperately needed another cup of strong coffee, but didn't want to linger in one of the local cafes. He decided to go to his family's apartment to refresh himself and analyze his predicament more clearly.

Matt and his sister sat at the kitchen table, while Thomas napped on the living room couch. The news of Robert's death had greatly upset Rita, and her tears made Matt realize how distant he'd gotten from the carnage in his studio. So preoccupied with stopping his involvement in another murder, Matt hardly felt last night's horror. He promised himself that after he contacted Frankie, he'd be able to grieve again for his young assistant.

With Matt's handkerchief, Rita wiped tears from her eyes. "I can't believe it. He was such a sweet boy."

Matt nodded. The coffee hadn't stimulated him the way he had hoped.

"His poor sister. It's gonna break her heart. Did someone call her?"

"Lou said he'd take care of it."

"He's a nice, sensitive man. He'll do it right." Her mind jumped to vengeance. "They should never have gotten rid of the electric chair."

Matt shifted in his seat and looked away from Rita. *What punishment would I suffer if Frankie killed Nails?*

"You all right?"

"Is it okay if I lie down for a while? I haven't had much sleep, lately."

"Of course, Matty."

Her honey voice and tender concern reassured Matt that he had made the right decision to come *home* for a brief rest.

Matt entered his old bedroom, closed the door behind him, and drew the heavy, rose-colored drapes to darken the room. He kicked off his shoes and lay on the bed. His stiff vertebrae sunk into the thick, matching rose quilt, and his body thanked him a thousand times. The comfort was so exquisite he feared he might doze off if he kept his eyes closed, so he opened them. Though the wallpaper, furniture, and the color of paint on the ceiling were different now, in the dark, it appeared to Matt as if nothing had changed. Caressed by the familiarity, he felt protected and was able to drift peacefully, forgetting his dilemma. In his childhood room, traveling back in time,

seeking refuge, Matt had reached halfway to the womb when he shut his eyes and dozed off. The dense sleep enveloped him, and he would recollect no dreams for they were buried fathoms deep in sub-conscious waters.

Rita had to shake Matt several times to wake him. "Matt. Wake up, Matt."

Sweat beaded on his forehead as he slowly opened his eyes.

"I'm sorry I had to wake you."

He didn't ask why she did so, and why she looked so troubled. He didn't want to hurry the messenger. But there was no way to stop the message. No way to turn back the clock. No way to alter the afternoon's failed plans.

"Lucy called. Nails was killed. She's coming over. I don't think you should be here."

The faint hope that he had misread her distress died, and the shock spread a thin veneer of calm over the turbulence unleashed inside him. His thoughts were too jumbled to focus on any one of them. He could only do what was expected of him. "Yeah. . . right." Matt got out of bed and put his shoes on.

Rita stared at him. "You didn't have anything to do with this, did you?"

Matt was caught off guard. "Me? Why would I do that?"

She searched her brother's face for the truth. He moved close to hold her, to evade her eyes. "Rita you're thinking crazy thoughts."

"Terrible things have happened. I'm afraid."

He tightened his arms around her and spoke in a soothing voice. "It's over. No more terrible things."

Five minutes later, Matt found himself walking south on Lafayette Street. He didn't notice the cold night air. Inside his body was a furnace burning question after question. How did he get into such a mess? How would he avoid being implicated? How could his decision to visit his family seem so right, yet turn out so wrong? When a taxi stopped at the corner for a red light, Matt next considered whether to take a cab or walk.

He whistled at the taxi, keeping it as an option. While approaching it, he weighed the pros and cons of having a cabby log his pickup and drop-off spots. Matt was close enough to see his troubled image reflected in the cab's window, when he finally decided it was more important to support his alibi of being with Rita, than to hide the fact he was anywhere near Frankie's club. He opened the door and slumped into the back seat.

The cabby asked, "Where to?"

It took Matt a moment to answer. He first had to shake the thought of Formenterra from his head.

It was a short ride to his studio, but long enough to re-examine the nightmarish events. Matt wished he could go back in time and have the chance to heed Frankie's advice to call the police, but tragically that opportunity was lost forever.

His history of retribution played in his head like a warped album, skipping from one aggressive incident to another. Throughout his life, Matt had consistently reverted

to the primitive reactions he'd learned on the tough streets. Why, as a kid, did he follow the examples of wiseguys and Saturday matinee heroes, instead of Christ and Gandhi or other compassionate persons who would've turned the other cheek? Why did he take the low instead of the high road? Was it more attractive, more manly, more satisfying? Or was it because he would always be closer to the animal than to the spiritual realm, no matter how much he tried to fool himself with counterfeit enlightenment?

Reeling with shame at how stupidly he had gotten into such a mess, Matt vowed he would never again allow his base emotions to override his common sense. He took a deep breath and counseled himself to stop the self-degradation. He had to preserve his strength. The grisly events would certainly place him under suspicion, and he needed to be strong to endure the inquiries.

His self-control lasted a few seconds until he tormented himself for not having run into Mazzarino's, screaming at the top of his lungs, making it impossible for Frankie to kill Nails. Matt would've gone on to another should-have-done, but the cab stopped in front of his studio, and the driver wanted money.

The damaged rear door resisted his first attempt to open it, so Matt lowered his shoulder and slammed his weight against the steel door. The studio was dark except for the light coming from the kitchen, where a different cop stood in the doorway looking at him. Matt turned toward the spiral staircase. A hand shot out from the darkness and grabbed his arm. It was Lou, his face strained with anger.

"Lou? You scared the shit outta me."

"That's what I should've done yesterday."

"What are you talking about?"

Lou pointed with his eyes. "Upstairs."

Matt led the way.

They entered the bedroom, and Lou shut the door. "There was a murder tonight. You know anything about that?"

Matt hesitated, getting it straight what he should and shouldn't know. "A guy in Lucy's band."

Lou raised his brow. "How'd you find out so fast?"

"Lucy called the house. I was sleeping over."

"So you were there at the time of the murder?"

"Yeah."

"Rita can vouch for you?"

"What are you getting at?"

Lou stepped closer, spoke directly in Matt's face. "Fuck you!"

Matt curled his fists, said nothing.

Lou poked Matt twice on the forehead, accenting each word. "Fuck you!"

The rules of what he should and shouldn't know were jumbled. "I had nothing to do with him being killed."

“Coincidence? Give me a fucking break. I wouldn’t believe that crapola in a million years.”

“This is personal, isn’t it?”

“You prick! I should kick your ass for trying that bullshit!”

Matt realized his mistake, but didn’t back down. “You gonna give me a police workover or do I get to fight back?”

Lou jabbed Matt’s bicep. “This ain’t about the past. Don’t treat me like a fool!”

Matt glared back. “I had nothing to do with it.”

“I don’t believe you. And I’m gonna find out the truth. Bet on it!”

The detective turned and left the bedroom, leaving his threat to fester in Matt’s mind.

Later that night, looking out his window at the river, watching the glimmering sheen of the moving water, Matt feared he might lose where he lived, and of greater consequence, who he was.

CHAPTER 6

Saturday morning, when Matt made his way down to the kitchen, he saw a swarm of forensic technicians buzzing over the field of potential clues. Clearly, Lou was giving this case renewed interest. Matt noticed one of the techs lift a print from a smashed camera body and wondered if Nails might've left it. He could only hope Nails had worn gloves like Frankie had throughout the time he was at the studio.

Matt had spent another restless night, his third in a row, mostly worrying about what Lou suspected and what he would soon find out. He knew Lou to be tenacious and thorough, and feared the detective might uncover Frankie's connection. This would get Lou to run an even tougher investigation because he hated Frankie's guts.

After Lou returned from Vietnam, wounded and bitter, he never accepted the way Matt had dodged the war, but Lou was the only guy in the neighborhood who considered Frankie's method of evasion more despicable and cowardly.

Matt entered the kitchen and saw the same cop from yesterday morning. He sat at the table, two take-out coffees in front of him, and munched a glazed donut. The cop swallowed most of the chewy dough in his mouth. "I hope you don't mind I took a break in here?"

"No, take your time."

After cleansing his palate with a sip of coffee, the cop said, "Help yourself to the extra cup. My partner didn't want it."

Just what Matt needed. "Thank you."

As he doctored his coffee with milk and sugar, Matt could see that the cop was a nice fellow, but he didn't want to be around any cop. No matter how nice they were, their job was to arrest criminals, and Matt was a criminal. Last night, while lying awake in bed, he concluded the charge against him would be manslaughter. To what degree he didn't know. He remembered how Rita had described Nails - *He's an ex-con who did hard time for manslaughter* - and the disgust in her voice when she said it.

The take-out coffee tasted surprisingly good, but it did little to comfort his concern that if this nice fellow in uniform knew the truth, he would aim his service revolver at Matt's chest and take away his freedom. Matt noticed the garbage was full and saw a way to escape the kitchen.

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He gulped down his coffee and tossed the empty cup into the trash. Matt carried the bulging bag past the patrolman and mumbled without looking at him. "Better toss the garbage before it stinks."

The cop nodded, not wanting to hurry another mouthful of sugar and starch.

Matt stepped outside into the late morning sun. The bright light felt warm and luxurious on his skin. He made a mental note to enjoy the outdoors as much as possible in the coming days.

Shielding his eyes from the sun, Matt searched for the dumpster that changed location every pickup day. A woman with her back toward him, stood by a group of green plastic bins, each stenciled *Photo District Recycling*. She was tall with an abundance of sandy colored hair, tied back as if done in a hurry. She wore hiking boots, blue jeans, a heavy wool shirt, and a green down vest. A suitcase rested next to her. Matt was certain he knew the state she had traveled from.

"Carol?"

She waited before turning. "Yes."

The first thing Matt noticed was Carol Brody's striking resemblance to her brother. She had the same blue eyes, high cheekbones, full lips, and robust peach skin. And now that she faced him, her flowing blonde curls rimmed with sunlight, framing her fresh beauty, Matt remembered how handsome Robert had been.

The next thing he noticed was the sadness in her eyes, and he felt powerless to do anything about it. "I'm Matt Sasso. Robert worked for me." He regretted his lame introduction.

She nodded. "Robert told me about you."

"I'm very sorry for your loss."

Her chest rose and fell. "For three years, I begged Robert to leave New York. I finally convinced him. He was all set to come. . ." Carol looked at the recycling bins. "But he had to finish his damn project first."

"He poured his heart and soul into this. He got most of the big studios to recycle. It's a huge success. It's a tribute to Robert's spirit."

"A tribute to his spirit? I want a warm flesh and blood brother I can hold in my arms."

"Everyone loved him."

"Not everyone!"

Matt watched her anger turn to exhaustion. She reached out with her right hand and rested her weight against the bin marked *Clear Glass*.

Her strong, elegant fingers were finely callused, reminding Matt that Carol was an artist. Robert had proudly spoken of his sister as a creative and successful painter. In her rough diamond hand, solid and precise, Matt saw a polished instrument capable of turning artistic inspiration into hard earned craft. Her hand alone had smitten him. He set the black plastic bag on the ground. "You look tired."

"I was on a plane all night."

"Come inside. I'll make you coffee."

She didn't respond to his offer. Matt lifted her suitcase and led her by the arm. "Come on."

They were a few feet from the studio door when Matt remembered the crime scene inside. He decided to serve her coffee in the upstairs quarters. Then another idea came to him. "Where are you staying?"

"I don't know yet."

Matt pointed to the door at the top of the iron grate staircase that ran up the side of his building. "I'd like you to stay in my guest room."

"No, I'll find something."

"I don't want you to go through this alone. With everything else you're dealing with there's other stuff like paperwork and bureaucracies to take care of. I plan to help you with all that. And if you were close by, it would make it easier for the both of us."

His words had no visible effect on her until she saw tears in his eyes.

"I feel partly responsible for Robert's death. It happened in my studio. Please, let me help you."

"Thank you, Matt. I'll take your kind offer. But don't feel it's your fault. You were doing Robert a favor by letting him stay here."

"I enjoyed his company. He was always so full of energy. He reminded me how it felt to be young."

"Robert liked you a lot. He said you were a good teacher."

Matt smiled, motioned toward the metal steps. "Let me get you settled upstairs."

As Carol led the way, Matt lowered his eyes, watching his step and fighting the growing impulse to glance at her buttocks. Suddenly without plan, as if a gust of wind had blown every thought from his head, his eyes shot upward and settled on her well-shaped bottom. It had such a pleasing form to it that Matt didn't sense the least bit remorse for watching it shift weight and contour from one side to the other. He made it clear in his mind, in case Robert's soul was floating overhead, that it was more of an aesthetic admiration than lust. He even ventured that Carol was someone he could fall in love with.

Matt could've laughed at himself, but in truth it didn't surprise him how much a shapely backside meant to him. It wasn't everything, but when combined with Carol's lovely face and what appeared to be a sensitive and artistic nature, it amounted to a total package he could probably *settle down with*. Hearing himself think these last three words, however, did surprise him.

His current mid-life review had increased his desire for a serious relationship, and Matt had considered all the women he'd romanced within the last few years for the position of lifetime partner. For one reason or another, he hadn't come up with a viable candidate. And now, in less than ten minutes from the time he met her, Carol was already at the top of his list. Guessing she was in her mid to late thirties, he liked that she was older than most of the women he dated. Closer in age, they would have more in common and a greater potential for becoming soul mates.

He accepted this infatuation. After all, *love at first sight* does happen in songs, books, and movies, which are for the most part inspired by real life. Matt also acknowledged how everything about this meeting was extraordinary. It was brought on by great tragedy. He imagined how falling in love would bring some comfort.

Carol stopped at the couch. Matt set the suitcase next her. "It opens into a sleeper. It's very comfortable."

"Robert was working on some prints. Do you know which ones?"

Matt nodded. "He always showed me his work."

"I'd like to see them. The negatives too. I'd like to do a series of paintings based on them." Carol nodded to herself. "It'll be inspired work. Keep me close to Robert." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "He's the last of my family."

Matt put his arms around Carol. Her hair was stale and humid from the hurried trip. He liked her smell. A tingling desire stirred within him. As he planned what to say next that would keep the magic alive, the phone rang.

Few cars traveled on Duane Street near Greenwich on a Saturday afternoon, so Matt wasn't too watchful of the traffic since there was little chance he wouldn't notice Frankie drive by while he waited in the recessed entryway of an abandoned machine shop. The secret spot where he and Frankie smoked their first joint of marijuana.

The muffled voice on the phone had grunted, "Go to our special place." No one else knew about this location. When they were teenagers, smoking pot among Italian-Americans was a great taboo. They didn't even mention it to Lou or Eddie. For Frankie, it was his one and only experience with grass. The paranoia he suffered kept him from ever trying it again. Matt, on the other hand, loved the effect and smoked pot regularly for the next fifteen years. He finally quit cold-turkey when he started running several miles every other day and his shortness of breath became apparent.

Matt brooded how ironic it was that this spot, which had been a fork in the road where best friends chose different paths, would now be the place where he and Frankie would reconnect, fused tighter than ever as co-conspirators in a premeditated murder.

Matt blamed himself for losing control and blamed Frankie for going through with the revenge killing. He saw no way out of this mess. The black tunnel he was in had no light at the end. He only envisioned a prolonged investigation and inevitable conviction to follow.

Matt didn't want to think of the ultimate consequences. He wanted to think about Carol. He wanted to block out the odor of urine that rose from under his shoes. The smell of a lifetime of living among men. The smell of prison. He wanted to forget where he was and who he was waiting for. He wanted to fill his senses with the scent of Carol's golden hair, to hide in her sunlit wheat field, to escape New York, never to see or hear from Frankie again.

A silver-gray Taurus sedan turned the corner and made its way to where Matt was divining his future. *Heaven or hell?*

Matt opened the car door and was struck by a noxious cloud of smoke. Frankie glowered through the haze, a cinder growing red and hot as the scary creature sucked air into his lungs. Matt got in and the car sped from the curb. He felt his future beginning. He had entered the devil's carriage for a ride to the inferno.

Matt erupted, "For chrissake! I didn't think you were gonna kill him!"

"You saying we miscommunicated? To me the words - *I want him dead, now!* - have only one meaning."

"I was in a rage. I was talking crazy. Gees! I didn't think you'd actually do it."

"And what the fuck's wrong with you coming to my joint like that? I thought I was dealing with someone I could trust."

Matt turned away and shook his head. "It's too obvious. Lou's all over me."

"There's no way he can connect you."

"It's personal with Lou. He's not gonna quit till he gets me."

"The only way he'll find out is if he puts us two together. Now, don't fucking panic on me."

An uneasy truce settled between them. "Where're we going?"

"Over to Jersey."

Hell for sure, Matt thought as they entered the carbon-stained mouth of the Holland Tunnel.

They rode in silence through the gray haze and fumes of the moderate tunnel traffic. Ten minutes later, they were driving on Highway 9 past the giant oil refineries and petrochemical mazes that blanket the Central Jersey Coast. Matt had always considered this section of the Garden State, with its wretched smells, to be the armpit of civilization.

He understood the rationale for this toxic wasteland, how it lubricated the muscles and joints of commerce and industry throughout the New York area. And he couldn't avoid the sting of culpability knowing his profession and business relied heavily on vile places like this. Photography was chemically based. The light-sensitive paper and film that Matt used had layer upon layer of goeey substances. He certainly wasn't blameless when it came to polluting the planet.

Frankie pulled off the highway, and they were soon driving through the broken streets of a blighted industrial area. The Taurus wound through an entanglement of oil storage tanks, connected by miles of intestine-like pipelines. Up close, Matt was moved by the immensity of it all. He understood why many revered these enterprises as majestic accomplishments and accepted the resultant poisons as necessary evils.

Matt suddenly wondered why they were cruising this area. Was Frankie looking for the lucky spot where they buried Jimmy Hoffa? Was Frankie going to whack him? "What are we doing here?"

Frankie watched the road. "I thought we'd drive by some chemical plants. They're just up ahead."

Matt had to see Frankie's eyes. He raised his voice. "For what?"

Frankie looked at Matt. "Remember Napalm? That little Vietnamese girl running naked with her skin burning?"

Matt didn't like the evasive response, but it somehow reassured him execution wasn't on Frankie's immediate agenda.

They drove past the last of the flame-breathing towers and the main office building came into view. Frankie pointed to the *Dow Chemical* sign that crowned the insipid gray bunker. "You still hate them the way you did during the war?"

"I don't think about it much."

Frankie grinned. "Sure, all that good looking pussy you been getting. Bound to shake up the old value system."

"I don't need bullshit morality from you. Tell me what the fuck we're doing here!"

Frankie lifted his hand to calm Matt. "I'll get to the point. But it involves a little re-education." Ignoring Matt's heated look, Frankie attended to his driving and proceeded with his mini-lecture. "We'll start with the alphabet. PCB. . . TCE. . . HCB. . . All deadly chemicals manufactured around here. Then, we'll move on to vinyl chloride and Lindane. You heard of Lindane? It's a pesticide. Also a carcinogen. Found all over Love Canal." Frankie glanced at Matt and saw he was growing angrier. "The reason I'm telling you this is we're gonna visit a dump where tons of this toxic shit is buried. For ten years, these poisons have been leaching into the drinking water under most of New Jersey."

"What the hell does this have to do with our situation?"

"It's all related. Bear with me, Matty. I gotta do it this way."

Confused by Frankie's strange behavior, Matt turned away and stared at the cold, bleak landscape. He didn't want to be here. He thought about Carol again. He pictured them together, naked in his warm bed under a heavy quilt.

The Taurus crushed and scattered rocks as it rolled alongside a crumbling chain-link fence. Next to a hole in the aged barrier, a rusted sign warned against entering the encircled landfill. Frankie stopped the car. "Let's take a closer look."

Matt didn't know why he opened the door and followed Frankie to the fence.

Frankie pointed across the wide expanse of the landfill. "Besides that other crap I mentioned, there's also TCP in there. They say when this crud gets hot, like in a giant compost heap, it turns into TCDD, one of the most killer substances known to man. Three ounces can wipe out New York City." Frankie planted a foot on the bottom edge of the torn fence and pushed the top part up with his hands. He motioned for Matt to pass through the opening. "Go ahead."

"I'm not going in there."

Frankie released the fence, its mesh teeth snapping. "I don't blame you. But you can't get away from it. It's gonna find you. In the water you drink and the food you eat."

"What is this? You want me to join the fucking Sierra Club?"

“I want you to get pissed off.”

“I’m already there.”

“Not at me. I’m the messenger. At the chemical companies. They’re still the enemy.”

Matt bit one more time. “You saying they dumped it?”

“They keep their hands clean. They pay others to do the dirty work.”

Matt turned toward the car. “I’m tired of this game.”

Frankie caught his arm. Matt pulled away and pointed at Frankie’s face. “Don’t fuck with me!”

Frankie raised his hands, palms out. “Easy. We’re real close to the bottom line here.” He waited for Matt to settle down. “You know Jimmy Junk?”

“Jimmy Cascone. The Garbage King.”

“Right. He controls the unions and the Mob’s carting rackets.”

“He dumped it?”

Frankie nodded. “He ran this site. And when it was full, he abandoned it. He made a shitload of money for himself and the Mafia. The Mob’s found something more lucrative than dope.”

Matt clenched his jaw. “Bottom line, Frankie!”

“You hate this guy?”

“Yeah, I hate him.”

“No, Matt. You really gotta hate him.”

Matt pushed Frankie into the fence.

Frankie bounced back, unfazed. “This motherfucker works hand in hand with giant corporations that produce more hazardous waste than they can safely get rid of. And they love Jimmy because he’s got hundreds of illegal dumps all over the country. North, South, East, and West. Without him it wouldn’t be so easy to hide these poisons. The chemical companies would have to be more responsible. Without him, future generations like my kids would have a safer place to live.”

“Bottom line!” Matt yelled.

Frankie turned more grim. “Bottom line. The bosses who helped us want Jimmy Junk dead.”

Matt’s body hardened as if Medusa had given him the eternal look. His thoughts focused on the words Frankie had uttered what seemed so long ago on that fateful night of Robert’s death, the first night of their conspiracy. *I gotta go to some outside people.*

He remembered his fearful reaction and telling Frankie it was getting too complicated. But he was unable to recollect how Frankie had brushed his concern aside. Something about Mathematics. . . *No!* Suddenly, he recalled, word for word, what Frankie had said. *Trigonometry’s complicated. Revenge is simple.*

Matt wanted to lunge at Frankie and choke the shit out of him. He couldn’t believe how two goddamn quips, stitched together, had calmed his fear. How five words had caused a Svengali brain-lock. And because of that, wicked strangers

now owned a piece of him. A portion so large it gave them the power to turn Matt into a hit-man. More power than Matt had over himself. These evil traders now held over fifty percent, the majority share of him.

Frankie's voice began to compete with Matt's anguished thoughts. "I thought if I showed you what a world class slime Jimmy was, it would make it easier to whack him."

Veins bulging at his temples, Matt shouted, "You never said anything about owing the Mob for this! You never made that fucking point clear to me! Didn't you think you had an obligation to make that crystal clear to me?"

Frankie lowered his eyes, his thick skin sagged, the nascent jowls previewing how he'd look in ten years. "I didn't know what the payback would be. But I should've seen it coming. The way they accommodated me so easy. I fucked up. I'm sorry I got you into this."

Frankie's uncharacteristic contrition leveled Matt's anger. "I can't kill anybody. I mean, Christ. . . with Nails I was talking crazy. I was full of hate at the time. Hell, I don't know Jimmy. It's not personal."

"What about that truck by the docks? Is that personal enough?" Frankie watched Matt's eyes widen. "I heard you got a good dose. Could've killed you."

"How do you know it was Jimmy's truck?"

"He's done the same shit before. The bosses are tired of his fuck ups and the official heat he attracts. That's why they're going after him."

"Why can't they do it themselves?"

"Jimmy's too powerful. He makes a lot of money for two of the families. Our friends want to be removed from the hit. A gangland war at this time would be devastating."

"But if you're involved?" Matt already knew the answer.

"I can't be connected either. I can help set it up. But you gotta be the trigger."

The word staggered Matt. *Trigger*. His new designation, his new honored title.

Photographers use the word *shoot*, but this time, he wouldn't be squeezing a shutter for an ad agency. His new clients were much different. They wanted Matt to squeeze a trigger and shoot a man dead.

They drove back to the City in silence, Frankie giving Matt time to be alone with his thoughts. Matt retraced the events that had cornered him so dangerously. He recalled the overwhelming grief and hatred that consumed him when he saw his young friend's lifeless body. He should've remained in control. But what did that mean? Allow Nails to get away with murder, without punishment? *No, you idiot! The sensible reaction would've been to call the police like Frankie had said.* Matt shook his head. Frankie had given him wise advice. He had only himself to blame. He had to take full responsibility, gain control, and do everything right from now on.

His stomach heaved. How the fuck was he supposed to do everything right from now on? He had to choose between killing someone or being killed himself.

Having this choice, what would be the sensible course of action? *Run away and leave everything behind? Give up my profession. . . my business. . . my family? Leave them vulnerable to retaliation?*

Matt noticed Frankie look at him. He felt his face flush, his heart race, ready to drive off and leave his body. Fortunately, it was only a glance, and Frankie's eyes were soon on the road again, giving Matt more time to sort out things.

Matt understood it was far too late to involve the police. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life or for that matter even one day in jail. There seemed to be only one real option. To go through with the killing of Jimmy Junk. He felt his body about to shudder, but fought it off. It was time to be strong, to do what was necessary or at least consider all the possibilities without feeling feeble. He proceeded to think anew about killing Jimmy.

Hell, the guy is a low-life scumbag. Guilt wouldn't be a factor. No, it was a matter of balls. Primeval, down to the basics, gutter reaction balls. Did he still have them the way he did when he was growing up on the streets of Little Italy? He was a kid to be feared back then. Did he still have that craziness somewhere within him, somewhere he could reach down and grab hold of? And if he did, and made use of it, would he be able to let go again? It had taken him so long to escape his violent past and become a peaceful person. He wondered if squeezing a trigger and killing another human being would blow away what he most loved about himself. Matt could feel things dying around him already.

Frankie pulled the Taurus over to the curb, upsetting his passenger's introspection. So mired in his predicament, Matt hadn't realized they were back in Manhattan until the car stopped on a deserted Lower Westside street. He looked at Frankie. He knew his quiet time was over.

"If you don't whack him, I'll have to do it. And if our friends ever find out, they'll come after the two of us."

"I gotta think about this."

"Don't take too long. I need an answer by tomorrow."

Matt had to get away from Frankie's piercing black eyes. He'd gotten his old friend into a jam and didn't know how he was going to make things right for both of them. The brave thing would've been to just say *Yes, I'll kill the bastard*, but caution and fear held those words back. He could only repeat himself. "I gotta think about this."

Matt turned away from Frankie. He was sure Frankie saw him as a coward, a cheap replica of the fearless kid he once considered his best friend. But Matt wasn't about to be heroic without giving all the options painstaking thought. There would be time to re-establish his valiant image at a later date. For now, he would grasp the door handle and abandon ship, leaving women, children, and old friends to fend for themselves. Matt fled down the darkened street and hid once more among his tortured thoughts.

CHAPTER 7

When Matt arrived back at his studio, there was no policeman on duty, leading him to believe the on-site investigation had been completed. Though physically drained, Matt had too much on his mind to go to sleep so he decided to keep busy by cleaning his trashed studio. Not having the stomach to be near the scene of Robert's brutal death, he went to the office to begin his therapeutic labor.

Lifting and pushing the heavy file cabinets and office furniture quickly exhausted him. The last few days had taken their toll on his stamina. He spotted the answering machine on the floor. Except for some surface scratches, it was surprisingly intact. He set it on the antique oak desk and pressed the play button. Crackling voices filled the room as Matt settled into his secretary's chair and hunched forward with his forearms on the desk. He clasped his hands in front of him and listened to fragments of the dozen or so messages while he weighed his options regarding Jimmy Junk.

On one side were the consequences of not doing the hit; he, Frankie, and possibly their families could suffer physical harm. On the other side, if he attempted the hit, only Matt would be in peril. The scale tipped toward him committing the murder. But whenever he tried to envision how he would actually go through with it, the gravity of the deed stopped him cold. He felt there was no way he could resolutely kill another man, no matter how despicable the person was. His only hope seemed to be that somehow the options would change. Perhaps minds could be altered. Maybe Frankie could convince the mobsters, who were setting the agenda, that Matt wasn't hit-man material. He could definitely live with this slight to his reputation.

The messages ended, and Matt liked the silence even less. He pondered whether going out and getting a drink might refresh him and unveil new vistas. It wasn't Matt's practice to use alcohol to solve problems, but he was in a maze that required a new kind of compass. North wasn't where it used to be.

The phone rang and it was Steve Shephard leaving a second message, this one more urgent. "Matt? SOS. This is Steve. I'm still at Bumpers with two ravishing ladies. I need help! Are you there?" Matt didn't move.

Steve continued, "Remember, you owe me big for that last shoot. You made a bundle." A gush of wind broke the short pause. "Aaah! I'm an idiot. I should know better. That approach won't work with you. So let me appeal to your compassionate nature. I need to get laid. . . to keep my creative pump primed, so to speak. My future at the agency depends on it. I'd even get down on my knees, but I've had a

few too many and I might not be able to get back up. Don't let me down, old bud." The message machine clicked, chirped, and whirred. The disturbing quiet returned.

Matt pictured Steve at Bumpers sweet-talking two young women, models most likely, whose combined ages totaled far less than Steve's 56 years. He wondered how many times Steve had already trumpeted his lofty position in the advertising world, especially his role as creative director for a slew of cutting-edge fashion accounts. And if the young ladies mentioned Steve's British accent, he'd undoubtedly market his meeting the Beatles back in the 60's. Matt smiled, recalling Steve's despondent, hound dog expression the day Steve stated this bit of personal notoriety had steadily lost its cache over the years, adding that *the uncultured young masses will soon group everyone before 1970 as contemporaries*. Then Steve impersonated a vacuous youth. *Attila the Hun? Wasn't he like the first drummer for the Rolling Stones?*

Matt felt the grin on his face and realized he hadn't smiled all day except briefly to Carol. He thought about her and tried to recapture their meeting and the extraordinary affection he had felt for her. But that was so long ago, back in time, in the age of relative innocence, before the great burden of the summons to kill. Thinking of Carol no longer served as a diversion. Even when Matt tried to picture her, he wasn't sure if he was seeing her or her brother's face.

Suddenly, the image of Robert's lifeless body sprang out at him, its claws and fangs, slashing and ripping. Matt's gut squeezed tight. He looked beyond the wall and vividly recast the bloody crime scene. He shot up from the chair. Perhaps a few drinks and a laugh or two with Steve might provide an interim haven. He grabbed his brown bomber jacket and headed for the door.

Matt didn't have to wait to get into the popular nightspot. The behemoth guarding Bumpers' velvet rope was an old acquaintance from the Lower Eastside. Larry Tank, six feet-five inches tall and pushing three hundred pounds, spotted Matt the second he got out of the cab and waved him forward. Matt greeted him with a firm handshake and a neatly folded twenty. Being an old friend, Larry shook his head, refusing the *baksheesh*, but Matt insisted, knowing the unspoken rule that Larry was supposed to refuse and Matt was expected to insist. Rites and rituals pop up everywhere.

The music inside was painfully loud with a bass bottom that would shake a small mountain. Matt pushed past the packed bar crowd, an index finger in each ear. He wasn't about to let some trendy dance club accelerate the onset of hearing loss. His health was more important than momentary chic. He felt contempt for the tipsy flock of sheep he pressed against. *See how much fun it'll be learning sign language when you're sixty. And that cute, little butterfly tattooed on your plump breast is going to de-metamorphosize to a mottled mass of discolored larva so hideous, even a hairy mole would be more desirable*. Obviously, it wasn't a good night for Matt to be at Bumpers.

But he had come this far, and waded through the sinuous wave of dancers toward the quieter mezzanine, where Steve always held court.

On the dance floor among the dancers, Matt mellowed a bit. He even removed his fingers from his ears, not wanting to distance himself from his comrades in motion. He was more sympathetic to this group than he was to the posers by the bar. The occasional hit by a dancer's body or arm didn't bother him. He was comfortable with that. Matt liked to dance. He had always liked to dance. Dancing was one of those time-honored excuses for men and women to showcase their sexuality in public. He understood this cultural dispensation early on.

In grammar school, Matt learned at the Catholic Youth Organization dances that he could approach a young girl, even one he had never met before, and ask her permission to rub slowly against her body for three minutes. Wow! What a revelation. In this accepted social setting, even the nuns and priests, who kept a close eye on the pre-teen dancers, were reluctant to enforce their onerous codes. Early on, Matt saw how dancing provided a privileged pass to things he was ready and excited to experience.

He was in the sixth grade when he began to learn more complicated dance steps, primarily East Coast Swing. He copied the older guys who had the slick moves, and worked his craft in secret in front of a full-length mirror. After he'd practiced enough, Matt performed his rhythmic act on the dance floor in front of friend and foe alike. Even derisive comments from Frankie - *You move like a fag* - didn't deter him. In a greater context, dancing helped him begin his liberation from the rigid rules that dictated behavior in his conservative neighborhood. For Matt, dancing was a gateway drug that led to more potent forms of freedom.

On Bumpers' dance floor, Matt spotted women he knew and greeted them with smiling eyes as he watched them wriggle to the music. One of the women circled close by and gave him a playful bump with her swaying hip. Matt liked this *meat tenderizing* disco move. It gave strong hints about the availability and promiscuity of the bumping parties. He locked onto the woman's inviting stare and recalled their one night of passion several months ago. He remembered she was an adventurous lover, eager to be thrilled in a variety of ways. Her hair was longer now and colored a lighter grade of honey, which splendidly set off her pale green eyes. He also recollected that below the waist, she was a true brunette.

Matt was the first to let go of their visual embrace. He hoped he had held it long enough to signal he was interested in future adventures. With his mammoth concerns affecting his flirting skills, Matt decided to avoid any further eye contact to prevent leaving a negative impression on other beauties he might glance upon.

Matt looked up at the chrome fenders of vintage cars that hung on the walls. These gleaming artifacts, along with the bright red, animated neon figures that bumped bottoms, gave Bumpers its identity, separate from the rest of Manhattan's hot dance clubs. Matt had heard others refer to Bumpers as just another cheap meat market, but he enjoyed coming here and was certain most of the critics would change their

minds if they had as good a time as he did when he dropped by. At Bumpers, Matt was the proverbial kid in a candy store, surrounded by goodies of all shapes, sizes, and flavors, and being a handsome, fabled fashion photographer, he had the favorable exchange rate to acquire much of what he saw and wanted.

It was a good bet Matt could score on any weekend night and wind up in bed with a desirable woman. He understood how fortunate he was in possessing this ability, and out of respect for this gift, he didn't abuse it. Growing up just blocks from the Bowery, Matt had met and heard tales from soiled and barren persons whose storybook lives had turned tragic in an instant. Heeding these sorry lifescapes, he watched that his pleasures didn't rise to the level of hubris and piss off the gods. To please the Fates, known to be females, he never promised a woman anything in order to get her into bed. Matt played it straight up, clear for all to see, that he was out to have a good time with no commitments either personally or professionally. He didn't announce this beforehand. He wasn't responsible for errors in judgment.

Matt no longer frequented the clubs as often as he did during the wild disco days of the 70s. He now savored his visits more and used the longer intervals to build his desire for the feel and delight of smooth skin over firm muscle. Like holding back an orgasm, his intent was to have a sensual explosion on every visit. Tonight's sojourn, however, was purely restorative. Emergency care.

A short flight of stairs connected the dance floor to the mezzanine. Matt took it two steps at a time and looked to the far corner table where he saw Steve busily entertaining two young ladies, who appeared to be in their early twenties. The women were long boned and brown-skinned, each of them lit with flaming hazel eyes. A mix of Africa and Europe, they were a lovely matched set, a slight difference in shade between them.

As Matt neared the trio, he grew more certain that his evaluation of the women's appeal was purely clinical. The thrill of the hunt wasn't in him tonight. Quickly reading the scene at the table, Matt saw that the women were on the edge of their seats, planning exit strategies, while Steve, flushed with drink and effort, let loose a stream of words, hoping the verbal tide would keep them from politely excusing themselves.

When Steve, a baritone Brit, spotted Matt, he hit a high note of jubilation, "Matthew Sasso!" And then, as if he'd just seen Manchester score a winning goal, he jumped to his feet. "Welcome! Welcome!" He gripped Matt's hand and pointed with pride to the pair of beauties he had cornered. "I want you to meet two lovely ladies. This is Mona, and this is Lutece."

Matt smiled. "Hello, ladies."

They smiled sweetly in return and responded in unison, "Hello, Matthew," then slid farther back in their chairs.

Steve flicked his arm toward the two empty chairs by the table. "Pick one."

Matt looked at the two women and stated dryly, "I'll take Lutece."

Steve roared with laughter.

Matt settled into one of the chairs and grinned at the women. "Steve's an easy chuckle."

Steve caught his breath and pushed back the wisps of thin gray hair that had fallen onto his brow. He pointed to the women and asked Matt, "So what do you think?"

"They're beautiful," Matt replied.

The pair smiled at him, and Mona said, "Thank you for the compliment."

"Good, then we'll use them," Steve added.

The creative director was well aware of Matt's code of ethics: that he wouldn't promise a model work in order to win her affection. They had tussled over this in the past. Steve trying to change Matt's position, to enlist a more willing partner in his seduction schemes. He had even argued that Matt had the luxury of such high morals only because women came easily to him. But with Matt holding firm, Steve was left to figure out, in imaginative ways, how to use Matt's honest responses to his advantage.

Steve beamed with hope, his normal ruddy complexion glowing like a stoplight. "I knew Matt would adore you girls." He put his arm around Mona, who narrowed her almond eyes and grinned tightly.

Steve did the heavy lifting, carrying the major portion of the conversation on his round shoulders. The models had little to add to the introductory chatter of where they were from and what types of modeling they had done, and Matt, slouched back in his chair, was too distracted by thoughts of impending doom to lend Steve a hand.

He took cues from the others and merely returned their smiles and nods, while occasional grunts substituted for commentary. His inattention confused the two exotics, unaccustomed to being ignored, especially by a man, and Matt felt the discomfort level rising. He wanted to excuse himself from the trio, but was unable to come up with a slick way of doing so. He also worried his strained behavior might be interpreted by the brown-skinned women as some sort of racial hang-up, so he made a mental note to hire them in the near future to show them he was just having a bad night on their first meeting.

When the two models announced they were going off to the ladies room, Matt sat up, prepared to break the bad news of his departure to Steve. But as the women sauntered out of earshot, Steve spoke first and rapidly.

"What a pair of lovely creatures. I've heard French-African women are delightful in bed. Come on, old chum. Let's get them over to the studio. I'm dying to see if Mona lives up to her name." He grinned like a salesman with gambling debts.

"Tonight's not good."

"Matt, please! You know I count on you to get me laid."

"Yeah, Steve. I know why you hire me."

"Ah, I'm a pig's ass. You're upset about Robert."

Matt let the statement stand. He knew Steve had gotten the message and would take appropriate action, which Steve did when he saw the two models return.

Sealing his resolve in a thin smile, Steve whispered to Matt. "Two on one. Maybe I can relive the seventies." He gulped the last of his Bombay martini and rose from his chair. His eyes were on the approaching ladies as he spoke to Matt. "We're still on for Thursday."

"Fax me the layout."

Steve patted Matt on the back as he moved from the table to intercept the two models. He held his arms out like a police barricade, protecting the wounded from onlookers. "A slight change in plans, ladies."

Matt watched the three disappear down the short flight of stairs. The sought-after solitude was worse than having company. He slumped back in his chair and faced the wall. He decided that tonight he would do something out of the ordinary and seek refuge from reality by swilling an inordinate amount of 12 year-old Scotch.

A lovely, raven-haired woman with bewitching dark eyes approached Matt from behind. By looks alone, she appeared to be in her early thirties, but her polished manner and self-assured stature would cause an expert carnie to add a decade if guessing her age. Her skin was clear and creamy, the type that tans nicely in summer. Well dressed, she wore a fitted, black wool pantsuit over a tight, gray silk blouse, which pressed against her generous bosom and bared her cleavage for public admiration.

She spoke with a sultry voice. "Did they leave?"

Matt stared at the wall. "Yeah, but I'm staying. And I'd like a double shot of your best single malt. No ice. Bottled water on the side."

The woman stepped forward and placed her hand on his shoulder. Her tone surged like a sensual current. "Sounds good to me."

Matt turned. His eyes brightened. He straightened in his chair. "Traci. I thought you were in Europe?"

Her soft smile tumbled at the corners. "They killed the ad campaign. I'm now unemployed, and I can sure use a drink."

He rose from his seat and embraced her. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Chanel No. 5, Traci's favorite, held him in an ethereal web while she initiated lower body contact and kissed him lightly on the ear lobe.

Matt shivered before leaning back to face her. "I gotta warn you, I won't be good company tonight."

She smiled seductively, her warm breath on his cheek. "And I gotta warn you. I don't want to be alone tonight."

Matt knew Traci Norton well. They'd been lovers off and on for years. Their history of rekindled intimacy - before and after failed relationships with others - included Traci's two brief marriages. In Matt's consideration of female acquaintances for lifetime partner, Traci was among the leading candidates. Her stunning looks alone ensured that. But just as he had for all the others, Matt found a flaw in her ample enough to keep him from pursuing an *until-death-do-you-part* commitment.

He found her a little too hard-edged, too calculating. He liked that she was strong-willed, successful, and brutally honest, but he wanted someone more tender, more romantic, more. . . Ah, he didn't know what the fuck he wanted! He would just have to wait until he saw it, and then he would know. But what if he never found what he was looking for? Should he go through life without a partner, just because he was unable to compromise a little? He liked Traci a lot, and sometimes wished he could make a leap of faith and believe in the possibility of true love between them, but he knew deep down she wasn't the one, and he couldn't change that.

The great irony was her disqualifying traits mirrored his over-analytical nature. This observation supported his theory that what he wanted was someone to soften his own hard edge and quiet his own calculating mind. It also didn't escape him that perhaps Traci would never consider him for a lifetime partner. Maybe all he was to her was a good pal who listened, and capable of pleasing her in bed.

Matt saw all this and more the instant he looked at her. Their past had nurtured an endearment that was strong and wordless. He was comfortable with Traci. He would drink doubles with his lovely, slightly depressed friend and try not to calculate where it would lead.

God! Can she fuck!

Lying under her, Matt fixed his eyes on Traci's damp, scarlet face as she sat on him, working herself over his erection. With her head raised high and her eyes shut tight, she ground her dewy lips majora against his pubis, meshing and tearing coarse hairs. She moaned and shuddered as spasms of pleasure rocketed through her. Her body, hot to the touch, stifled him with its heat. He lay there in a sweaty stupor mesmerized by her fervor.

Traci had upped the thermostat to 90 degrees when they entered Matt's bedroom. Dreading the coming winter months and seasonal gloom, she told Matt she wanted to feel as if they were in a tropical climate. She wanted the fantasy of their last vacation together, the one on Saint Croix Island, when they spent much of the time *diddling* each other without a stitch of clothing and no sheets or covers over their steaming bodies.

The substantial amount of Scotch he'd consumed plus Traci's incessant flirtation, which included under-the-table caresses, had coaxed Matt's great worry to the back of his brain, where it coiled in a dark recess and waited. He felt the lurking serpent even as Traci rode him and knew with the inevitable light of the morning-after, the viper would spring and strike him with a paralyzing fear. If it weren't for Traci's powerful craving for sex, he would've been content to lie with her all night and cuddle her like he would a security blanket.

Matt sensed there was something desperate about Traci's erotic pursuit. She was a wild woman, intent on her own satisfaction, pretty much oblivious to his wants and needs. He didn't feel slighted by the neglect. He owed her for past trysts when she hadn't been totally in the mood, yet went on to service him anyway. It was a rare occurrence when they didn't mutually desire and satisfy each other, and as

Matt gripped her firm full hips tightly in his hands to keep her from rubbing him raw, he realized this was the first time he was totally servicing her.

Matt struggled to keep himself hard for Traci. Whenever the shadow fear within him began to uncoil, he beat it back by savoring the beauty of the woman on top of him. He liked that her black hair had come loose from its coifed confines and hung primitively over her shoulders and draped her ruby cheeks. He liked that her body was drenched in sweat. He liked her natural odor and the way she tasted. These aesthetic delights surpassed his physical lust in providing the essential blood flow to his rigid penis. Traci made enormous demands on this energizing fluid as she pounded herself against him, mashing her Venus mound against bone, forcing his stiff dick to drill into her as deeply as possible. With each thrust, she took greater possession over his member. Gulp by gulp, she swallowed it into her. He felt his cock becoming more a part of her than it was of him.

He reached up with both hands and caressed her large breasts. He loved the shape and fullness of her noble bosom set high on her chest. They had a regal, matriarchal allure. In comparison to the slim models he dated, this made Traci more of a full-blown woman in his eyes. He squeezed her breasts. He felt the fleshy hints of how time had begun to take its toll, how her large breasts would lose their stature and sag with age. Were Traci's breasts another strike against her? Would he do the foolish thing and marry a tight, young model because of fabricated projections? And how would he react when the younger woman left him in his old age, the most vulnerable time in his life? Would he accept the apt justice in that? Matt began to lose stiffness.

Traci lowered her right hand behind her and stroked, then squeezed Matt's testicles. He got the message. He placed his hands back onto her wriggling bottom, and guided her movement over him, reviving his hard-on. She responded to his new interest and churned herself with fresh ardor. Her moist breasts bounced and slapped with each thrust. He rose up and sucked her hard nipples. She moaned and wrapped her arm around his head, cradling him, demanding more from her suckling lover.

Her shudders, moans, and whimpers intensified, and Traci began to yelp and cry out with greater frequency. He wondered about her exhilarated state. What was behind it? Was her rapture an exorcism of life's frustrations? Was her career setback, her failed relationships, her growing older, fueling her passions? Had she lost her anchor and set adrift in the turbulence of middle age, the same as he? He read her distress signal as such.

Though distant from the thrill of the sex act, Matt felt a personal union with Traci deeper than he had ever experienced before, and sought a new way to join with her. Instead of controlling her random gyrations, which confused his sense of rhythm, he followed her chaotic lead. Surrendering himself in this way unexpectedly increased his penile sensation, and he grew larger. Traci reacted to his invigorated member with a rumbling moan, which excited him even more. He joined in her song, pumping her as she released staccato bursts of breath

and mining her deep and hard during sustained arias. Matt lost track of the number of orgasms she had.

Traci had always been boisterous during sex, and for this reason, his place was the preferred arena for their couplings since he had no neighbors to be concerned with.

Fuck! Except for tonight!

Matt suddenly remembered Carol was just beyond the far wall of his bedroom. He pulled Traci down onto him, placed his hand on the back of her head, and faced her into the pillow. She fought her way back up and straddled him even tighter with her muscled thighs. There was little Matt could do but allow Traci to ride him and hope she'd soon come to some finality.

Less sympathetic to her lust, Matt began to lose his erection. Traci felt it and tightened her vagina around his shrinking member, exhorting it to swell again, but Matt was thinking about Carol and could only maintain a respectable presence inside Traci.

Matt hoped that since he was wearing a rubber and no telltale fluids would be squirting into her, Traci would conclude he'd already come and she had somehow missed it, and that she would then work herself into one more conclusive, big bang climax. Which she soon did, resounding screams and all. Matt was relieved when Traci fell onto him, exhausted and exhilarated. He hugged her tight, trusting her demons had been driven off.

His thoughts returned to Carol and wondered if she had heard Traci scream out. He was certain she had. He doubted Carol could've slept through the clamor, or for that matter, slept at all considering her terrible grief. Matt felt awful that he might've added to her loneliness and despair.

Shutting his eyes, Matt was startled by the haunting specter of Robert's lifeless body. Bloodied and nailed to the wall, it opened its eyes and moved its mouth, speaking in a halting, breathless manner, repeating Frankie's frightening message - *The people who helped us want Jimmy Junk dead*. Matt felt his own demons unwrapping.

CHAPTER 8

Bright and early Sunday morning, Carol Brody left the upstairs loft with a set of keys in her hand. She locked the door and turned to see Lou at the foot of the stairs, glaring up at her.

He zeroed in on the keys. "I'm here to see Matt. You got the keys to this door?"

She stammered. "He. . . got in late last night. I think he's still asleep."

"That's not what I asked you."

Lou's gruffness straightened her spine. "I don't know who you are. I'm not about to let you in."

Lou dug into his inside pocket, pulled out his gold shield and displayed it with a sneer. "Police business. Toss me the damn keys."

Her eyes watered. "That's no reason for you to be rude to me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Look, besides being a detective, I'm also Matt's friend. Please toss me the keys."

It was a good throw, straight at him. Lou nodded in her direction, unlocked the studio door and entered, leaving the key in the lock.

Lou climbed the spiral staircase and grew more upset as he negotiated the triangular steps, favoring one leg. Halfway up, he yelled out. "Matt, get your ass outta bed!"

At the landing, he called out again. "Matt! You in there?"

Lou had his hand on the knob when the bedroom door opened. Matt leaned against the doorjamb, groggy and bare-chested, clutching his uncinched sweatpants.

His voice was hushed and raspy. "What do you want?"

Lou scowled. "We gotta talk."

He tried to push past Matt, who held his ground and backed Lou out of the doorway. "I got company. Give me a few minutes."

"Company. . . huh?" He pointed with his eyes down to where Carol stood behind a strip of police tape lying on the studio floor. "Who's she. . . the maid?"

The sight of Carol viewing the crime scene squeezed Matt's stomach. It gurgled, and he tasted alcohol. "That's Carol Brody."

Lou lowered his jaw. His eyes were on Carol as he spoke in clipped sentences. "Two minutes. In your office. Don't make me wait." He pushed Matt back into the bedroom and turned toward the spiral staircase.

Matt closed the door, and worried about Lou's urgent visit. He saw Traci twist in bed and tighten the purple silk sheet against her long naked form. It didn't distract

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him from wondering what new information Lou might've discovered. He quietly uttered Frankie's warning. "No fuckups, Matt."

Lou approached Carol from behind and stood next to her. "Miss Brody. I'm Detective Lou Randazzo. I called you yesterday in Idaho."

She looked at him, but didn't say anything. Her tears and evident sorrow caused him to swallow before continuing. "I'm sorry the way I spoke to you outside. I didn't know who you were." He paused for a reaction. There was none. "I would've escorted you to the hospital yesterday, but aspects of this case had me busy all day."

"I understand," she said softly.

"This was a terrible crime. I want to assure you I'm doing everything I can to find the assailants."

He waited for another response. Her liquid eyes wandered away from him, back to the rubble in the studio. He shifted his weight uneasily and removed a business card from his side coat pocket. "Here's my card. If you need information or my help, call me anytime."

Carol took the card. "Thank you."

Lou seemed unsure what to do next until he noticed the door to the dressing room was open. He stepped over the yellow ribbon and walked to the door. He stared at the crusted blood and chalk outline that rose from the floor onto the wall. He shut the door. His eyes lifted when he heard Matt's footsteps on the landing above. Anger colored his cheeks.

On his way to meet with Lou, Matt detoured into the kitchen and removed two cold coffee drinks from the fridge. He finished one bottle right away and chugged down the second as he approached Carol. He could only think to say, "You should eat something. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen," then moved on, bracing himself for Lou's onslaught.

As soon as Matt entered the office, Lou dogged him. "I spoke to Rita. Your alibi's solid. But I also found out you busted Nails good on Thanksgiving."

Matt shrugged. "Some punches were thrown."

"You saw no need to tell me this fact the other day?"

"You were coming on heavy. Maybe you haven't noticed, but I'm hurting over Robert's death. I didn't want you in my face."

Lou rubbed lipstick from Matt's chin onto his finger. "Yeah, I can see how much you're suffering."

"I had nothing to do with Nails' murder!"

"Like I said before, I'm gonna find out the truth."

Lou shifted his weight to his other foot and flinched in pain.

"What's wrong with your leg?"

"It's a war wound. Something you know nothing about."

"Still bitter."

"Yeah, I hold onto it for the guys who can't, like Eddie."

“He should never have gone over there. He left my sister with a year-old daughter to raise.”

“Don’t talk about him, you goddamn coward!”

“You’re still blaming the wrong people. I didn’t send you over there.”

“But you stayed home and let us do your fighting.”

“It wasn’t my fight. It wasn’t your fight. It was a fucking mistake they wrapped in a flag. When a real threat comes along, I promise you, I’ll join up.”

“A lot of words, college boy. Safe to say now that we don’t have enemies.”

“There’ll always be enemies.”

“Yeah. Right.”

They traded fierce looks.

After Lou left the office, Matt troubled over what the detective might discover next. He worried about Nails’ fingerprints showing up in the studio and once again hoped Nails had worn gloves like Frankie had.

On his way to the kitchen, Matt pondered when and how Frankie would get in touch with him. He also reaffirmed not to be the one to make a mistake that would reveal their alliance. When he entered the kitchen, he saw Carol sitting at the table, staring at a near empty glass of orange juice. Her brown parka was draped over the chair next to her. Matt put his own worries on hold.

“Can I make you some breakfast?”

“I usually go for a walk before I eat.”

He heard a subtle request. “Let me get my jacket.”

He was about to leave when Carol added, “Traci said to say good-bye.”

Matt wondered what the two women thought of each other.

A brisk wind off the Hudson greeted them when they turned the corner at West Street. The raw weather seemed to revive Carol’s spirit. Blush freshened her face and her blue eyes brightened. Her energetic stride showed she wanted their outing to be a long one.

Matt pointed to the empty street. “Sunday’s the best day to walk down here. This is as quiet and peaceful as Manhattan gets.”

Carol surprised him when she asked, “Why was Lou angry with you?”

“We grew up together. Old wounds.”

“So it has nothing to do with Robert’s death?”

“Nothing.”

The only moving car in sight drove past them. He took the occasion to change the subject. Matt grabbed her hand. “Come on, let’s walk by the river.”

He led her across West Street just upwind of the burned out tanker. Wisps of black smoke still lifted into the air. She gaped at the wreck. “What happened there?”

“It caught fire the other night.”

Matt enjoyed holding her hand, but they had completed the crossing and it was time to let go. He did so reluctantly. The initial fondness he had felt for her was

rising again within him like a light puffy cloud. She was definitely special. First or second on the list.

As Matt continued to assess his infatuation with Carol, he remained oblivious to the piles of putrid garbage, rusted-out car bodies, and wind-blown trash that they passed along the riverfront. Meanwhile, Carol, her eyes huge and sad, stared at the dirt and filth that lay all around them. They neared a hill of junk, whose shredded couches, dismembered appliances, and broken plaster no doubt sheltered an army of rats. The collective decay overwhelmed her. Noticing her stunned discomfort, Matt guessed the reason for it and pointed her onto an old pier, lined with less rubble and fewer abandoned auto wrecks.

The last hundred feet of the pier was impassable due to rotting timbers and crumbling cement, so Matt led her to the south side, between the remains of two stripped cars, where they got a closer view of the Hudson. He looked out over the wide river, while Carol stared at the scummy debris floating in the water. She appeared sickened by the liquid acres of slime and drifting waste.

Unaware of her growing nausea, he remarked glowingly about the river he loved to watch from his window. "I forget how huge this river is. It must've been an awesome sight when the Indians were here." He glanced at her and saw her pallid expression. "What is it?"

Her eyes fixed on the slippery water below. She shook her head. "It's so dirty." She turned and looked at the rubbish surrounding them. "Everything is so dirty here."

Matt took her arm. "We'll go somewhere else."

She pushed his hand away. "Robert wanted to make a difference. He wanted to do something for the city he was born in before leaving it. That's the way he was. That's why he started recycling. That's why he stayed."

"He made a difference."

"His life, his death. . . meaningless. Look at the filth. One person can't make a difference." She kicked a fender on one of the plundered car hulks. It clanged to the ground. Her fury vented, she returned to despair. She lifted her inconsolable eyes and looked at Matt. "What can one person do against all this?"

Matt didn't know what to tell her. He only knew to reach out to her. She accepted his touch and comfort, and cried against his chest. He felt his heart sink, heavy with the loss of Robert and the weight of Carol's sorrow.

CHAPTER 9

After his walk with Carol, Matt went to the office and listened to phone messages. “Same place at two,” meant he had to make his way back to Duane Street. Fearing he might now have a police tail on him, Matt took precautions.

It was a short cab ride to the Municipal Building, where he grabbed the Lexington Avenue Express to Grand Central Station and sprinted to catch the 42nd Street Shuttle. After the quick cross-town subway ride, he mixed in with the tourists at Times Square, then caught the Seventh Avenue downtown local to Houston Street. From there he walked to the secret meeting place.

Matt waited for Frankie in the soiled nook of the abandoned machine shop. The smell of new urine stung his eyes and nose, and again reminded him of a lifetime among men. He recalled the last time he had waited there in the cold, when he worried he might be guilty of conspiracy to commit murder. Now, his culpability was far more troublesome. If he went ahead with the execution of Jimmy Junk, he would be guilty of cold-blooded, first-degree murder.

Matt braced himself against the chill wind as he stuck his head from the doorway and surveyed the street. He clung to a shred of hope that perhaps his old friend had talked to the mobsters and had changed their minds about having an untested hitman, like Matt, do the job. But his optimism frayed and tore when the silver-gray Taurus stopped in front of him. One look at Frankie and Matt knew there’d be no good news.

Matt quickstepped to the car and got in. “Did you talk to these guys again?”

Frankie pulled away from the curb. “They’re not budging.”

“Did you tell them how I could fuck this thing up?”

“Yeah, I told them.”

“Did you tell them I haven’t fired a gun in twenty years?”

Frankie yanked the steering wheel to the right and braked hard. The car skidded and jumped the curb before coming to a stop. “Matt, I tried every fucking which way to talk to these guys, but they ain’t budging. They ain’t moving an inch. Do you hear me? “Not a fucking inch!”

Frankie backed off the sidewalk, made a U-turn, and drove toward Hudson Street. Matt slumped in his seat, a heavy chain of hopelessness around his neck. He stared at his right hand, which rested on his leg. He looked at the aging skin and thought how time was running out on the life he loved. Making a fist, he peered beyond the elastic sheath to the intricate machine underneath, to the minute circuitry

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and to the pulleys and levers of tendons, muscles, and bones. He envisioned how this mechanical marvel of nature would soon be precisely wrapped around a deadly weapon and wondered if there was a mathematical equation for the amount of torque needed to pull the average trigger.

They drove north, about a half-mile, to the Holland Tunnel and crossed over to New Jersey without another word spoken. Matt hadn't yet started the tedious work of fortifying himself. He was still drifting in and out of fantasyland, thinking how killing Jimmy - *the guy responsible for that tanker spill* - would make him Robert's hero.

With light traffic all the way, it took them forty minutes to get to an industrial area west of Union. Frankie veered off the asphalt two-lane and drove onto a dirt road, which cut across a large tract of land under development. He parked the car between two low ridges of dense brush and turned toward Matt for the first time since they left Duane Street. "We're here."

Matt jerked in his seat.

"You ready to take a look at Jimmy's operation?"

Matt stared out the window, nodded.

They crept behind a stand of trees, bushes, and tall weeds that grew untouched in the middle of the massive construction site toward a giant earthmover, parked on a high mound of earth. It was one of two dozen mammoth machines spread over the fifty-four acres under development.

Frankie assured Matt, "The security here is kind of lax. They don't start coming around till dark."

They climbed onto the huge steel treads, hopped into the cab, and looked over at the adjacent lot. A tall, wood-slatted, cyclone fence, topped with razor concertina wire, surrounded the busy yard, and the sign by the front gate read, *J.J. Waste and Carting Co.*

From their high vantage point, Matt and Frankie had a clear but limited view of the activity next-door. They watched a tank-trailer arrive and wait for the front gate to roll open. Once inside, the tanker drove past an open trailer being filled with trash by several front-loaders. The eighteen-wheeler then disappeared inside a large hanger-like building.

Frankie explained, "That tanker's loaded with toxic liquid. What they do now is empty it into trucks full of garbage and it all gets dumped illegally in a municipal landfill. Probably the future site of some residential community."

Matt curled his lip. "Devil's work on the Lord's Day."

"This is one of their kinder methods. Lots of times they just drive out to the country, find a stream and open the valves."

Matt still hadn't convinced himself he would do the hit, but needed to gather important information just in case. "How often does Jimmy come out here?"

"Like clockwork. Ten-thirty to three-thirty, five days a week."

"How do I get inside?"

“If I were doing it, I’d tail a tanker till it stopped. Then I’d hijack it and come back to the yard. The guy at the gate just checks the truck.”

It sounded complicated. *What would I do with the driver?* “When else is Jimmy vulnerable?”

“The only other time is when his sons drop him off at the house.”

Matt’s expression, more glum. “In the neighborhood.”

Frankie nodded. “You got about ten seconds from the time he’s outta the car to when he’s in the front door.”

Matt shook his head. *Not on Mulberry Street.* “He gets home near four-thirty. Lots of people around.”

“Plus there’s no place to hide. So you gotta run up to him fast.”

“I’ll do it here.”

Hearing himself vow to his friend that he would kill Jimmy was a shock to his own ears. The possibility of him committing murder had taken a giant step toward certainty. Matt shivered in the cold wind.

A familiar gang of questions jumped out and attacked him. What had caused this misery? What might’ve been done differently? Matt was too exhausted to fight back. He had no answers to defend himself. He covered up and took the beating. He accepted that he’d been overwhelmed by the rushing tide of tragic events, and had lost his foothold on the perfect life. Only his inner strength could save him. If Matt had no other choice, he would surely fight back, and if that were the case, Jimmy Junk would soon be dead.

On their way back to the car, Frankie said, “Jimmy walks around the yard without a care. Once you’re in, it’s cake.”

“You gonna get me a silencer?” This time, Matt’s ears weren’t shocked.

Frankie stopped in his tracks. He read Matt’s eyes. “Tomorrow, you’re gonna get the hit-man’s deluxe.” They both knew a significant step had been taken.

During the ride back to Manhattan, Matt worked on a plan to highjack one of Jimmy’s trucks. He would tie up the driver and leave him in a secluded spot until the hit was done, and then anonymously tip the police to the driver’s location. Thinking about the police reminded him of Lou. Matt wondered if Lou would ever find out about the crimes he’d soon be committing. He turned to Frankie. “Lou paid me another visit.”

“That’s his job. He’s gotta keep fishing.”

“Did you know he was wounded in the war?”

“Yeah, I knew.”

“I never noticed the limp before.”

“He hid it so he could become a cop. Now, he’s older. He can’t hide it no more.”

“He still holds a grudge cause I was one of them long-haired hippies who didn’t go fight.”

“Don’t worry, he hates me a lot worse.”

“You paid to get out.”

Frankie smirked. "Two Gs equaled 4-F."

"I can see that really steaming Lou."

"Yeah, he's a very steamed individual. You know, he tried to hide his injury for other reasons."

"What?"

"It left him impotent."

"How do you know that?"

"From a hooker. He tried some professional help."

"You believe her?"

"This girl knows not to lie to us."

Matt stared out the window. "He always had an excuse when I told him to ask Rita out."

Raindrops began to fall. Seconds later, a downpour drummed against the Taurus. The swish of the wipers, metering time and space, lulled them into a hypnotic state until a glowing exit sign for the Newark Airport appeared up ahead and caught Frankie's attention. "You remember that big fire a couple of years ago, south of the airport?"

"The recycling plant in Elizabeth?"

"Yeah."

Matt had seen the conflagration on the evening news. The flames rose in furious columns, fueled by drums of toxic chemicals that threatened to ignite thousands of additional drums, all illegally stockpiled. Over four hundred firemen, some from New York City, battled the blaze for sixteen hours. Even with protective masks, many of the firefighters suffered serious injuries from the oily smoke, including his Cousin Butch, whose lungs were so scarred he was forced to retire from the N.Y.F.D. Fortunately, he collects full-disability, but, as he has often told Matt, he'd rather have his health back.

If the firemen had failed, the consequences could've been catastrophic. The great fear was if the remaining drums of hazardous waste caught on fire, a monstrous cloud would float over Staten Island and result in fatalities of third world proportion.

"What about it?"

"Jimmy was responsible for that."

Matt twisted in his seat toward Frankie. "How?"

With his eyes focused on the rain-slicked road, Frankie explained, "The plant's owner was an Irishman from Newark, named John Fine. He had a sickness for the ponies and ran up a hundred thousand dollar tab to Sam Tumino, a mob connected bookie and shylock. There was no way John could come up with the cash, so to avoid severe bodily harm, he cut a deal with Sam that covered his weekly vig. Which made it a contract for life. This is where Jimmy comes in. The deal was for Jimmy's operation to store drums of toxic waste at John's site until another storage location became available. Of course, no other site ever materialized, and poison-

filled barrels were only added and never subtracted from the Shamrock Recycling Plant.”

Frankie paused to fire up a cigarette. “In time, it became appalling. Crammed and piled high with 55-gallon drums of hazardous waste, there wasn’t even room for a person to walk. Lots of the drums leaked, and since they were there for eternity, all of them would leak. They were packed so tight against the fence some of the barrels fell outside and broke open on the street. Hazardous teams cleaned up whatever liquid hadn’t run into the storm drains and into Newark Bay. And the plant was cited. But in spite of all the glaring safety violations, the plant was never shut down.”

Matt opened his window a crack to let the smoke out. Frankie did the same. “Not only were the local inspectors on the take, but State officials didn’t want to confront the problem either. The big industries in Jersey produce huge amounts of toxic waste, and they need easy ways to eliminate them. To keep the corporate tax dollars flowing, the State turns a blind eye to these companies defecating in public.”

Frankie looked at Matt. “I’m talking about the largest corporations in the United States. General Motors, General Electric, and all those other Gee-I-didn’t-know-nothing conglomerates. These so-called efficient companies never ask where their poisons are being taken or what methods of recycling are used. They’re just glad to be rid of the responsibility. And they pay Jimmy well for their corporate peace of mind.”

Frankie took a long last drag on his cigarette and flipped it out the window. “In turn, Jimmy gives a sizable cut to two of the five New York crime bosses to protect his carting business.”

Matt figured it was the odd guys out who wanted Jimmy whacked. Then again, any and all of the five could’ve been behind the hit, fearing Jimmy’s golden enterprise was making him an up and coming boss in his own right. The Mob’s intrigue and backstabbing would’ve inspired Shakespeare.

Frankie powered up his window, Matt did the same. “After the disaster at Shamrock Recycling, there was a face-saving, official investigation. But it was a complete whitewash. The biggest punishment went to a few local inspectors, who were reassigned, losing their hush money benefits. And John Fine, the primary witness, couldn’t be interrogated because he was nowhere to be found. The rumor is his body was stuffed in a 55-gallon drum and buried in a New Jersey landfill.”

If the purpose of Frankie’s story had been to inflame Matt’s hatred of Jimmy, it worked for Matt imagined his Aunt Theresa, one of a dozen relatives who lived on Staten Island, suffering an excruciating death from poisonous asphyxiation. Her tortured visage was especially painful because she was Matt’s favorite aunt and closely resembled her older sister, his beloved mother, Angela.

For the rest of the rainy ride back to the City, Matt dwelled on the evil Jimmy represented and how it would be good for society if the vile polluter were exterminated. Little by little, he built a mind-set in which nothing was as important as killing Jimmy.

When fear or morality or other distractions knocked, Matt shut the door on them. The time for alternative plans and safe solutions had passed.

Matt entered his studio through the back door and immediately smelled food. With light coming from the kitchen, he assumed Carol was cooking dinner. The tantalizing aroma reminded him he hadn't eaten much all day. In fact, except for Thanksgiving dinner, he hadn't eaten well since early Wednesday, before the black smoke signaled a life-change.

It would've done him good to sit down with Carol and have some dinner, but in his troubled state, he didn't want to socialize with anyone, not even with the woman he had begun to fall in love with. He would've snuck up the stairs without saying hello, but he needed to get a six-pack of beer from the fridge to help him fall asleep. Matt prepared himself for the brief encounter with Carol. He ran his hands through his hair and flexed his face muscles so his smile would appear less strained, more genuine.

Matt entered the warm, scented kitchen and saw Carol standing by the stove, stirring something in a large pot. He felt like an intruder in someone else's home. "Hello, Carol."

She turned. "Hi Matt. Are you hungry?"

He stepped toward the fridge. "Uh, no. I already ate. Thanks." He broke eye contact too soon and continued past her. "Just need some beer to help me sleep tonight."

He opened the refrigerator and removed a six-pack of Heineken. He tried to think of something to say, small talk to lessen the awkwardness. Unable to fabricate a relaxed tone, he planned an excuse and quick exit instead. He pressed three fingers to his left temple. "I got a killer headache. I'm gonna hit the covers."

She appeared disappointed. This stalled his plan of simply pivoting and walking away. He tried again for words to say, but the neurons in his brain weren't passing notes to each other. He came up blank, and no way was he about to wing it. *Not tonight, dammit! I got murder plans to deal with.*

Matt lowered his eyes and muttered, "See you tomorrow," then headed for the door.

He must have rushed his departure because he barely heard her say, "Goodnight."

As he climbed the stairs to his bedroom, Matt hoped he hadn't hurt Carol's feelings and vowed to make it up to her the next time he saw her, when he was in a better mood. *In a better mood? When the fuck would that be? Right after I whack Jimmy?*

A half hour later, Matt rested in a brown leather chair, finished off a bottle of beer, and placed it next to two other empty bottles on a white wood and enamel serving cart. Dressed in dark blue cotton sweats and gray woolen socks, he lifted himself from the chair and padded to his balcony. He opened one of the double doors, bent down and grabbed another beer, then quickly closed the door to keep the cold night air from entering his heated lair. He took a big swig, set the bottle on the

serving cart, and began to pace the room. Matt had enough strong reasons and genuine animosity to kill Jimmy. What he needed to do next was to fire himself up for the actual deed, to prepare for battle the way he had when he was younger.

Matt recalled the lessons he'd learned on the streets from vicious role models who demonstrated the power of intestinal fury. As a kid, secluded in his bedroom, he had mimicked their language, tone, posture, and timing while confronting phantom enemies first with reasoned talk, and when that failed, with a sudden powerful attack, swinging his fists and kicking his feet until he was drenched in sweat, breathing hard, and exhausted. He also regularly did push-ups, leg squats, and shadow boxing, and carefully analyzed his fighting technique in a full-length mirror.

On one occasion, Matt had readied himself for an upcoming fight with Mikey Tan for putting the moves on Gerry Li Puma, Matt's girlfriend at the time. It didn't matter that Mikey was well-connected, Matt had to protect his honor, and he had to do so in spite of the fact he didn't even like Gerry that much.

Matt was first attracted to Gerry by her striking beauty. Tall and slim with long black hair, clear olive skin, high cheekbones, and luminous amber eyes, she looked like a young European model. Beyond that, he felt she was empty-headed and possessed a bland personality. At the time of the flirting incident with Mikey, Matt was in the slow but steady process of dumping her. And she knew it. He was certain Gerry had invited Mikey's advances just to get Matt to fight over her. This wasn't the first, nor would it be the last time Matt found getting into a relationship was a lot easier than getting out of one. Gerry, that pretty, empty-headed young girl, had figured out a clever way to get Matt into a big jam.

From the moment he learned of Mikey's disrespectful behavior, Matt, like a bull in a poppy field, worked himself into a frenzied state. Lou and Eddie tried to talk him out of confronting Mikey, while Frankie supported retaliation. What others said, however, didn't matter; Matt was only listening to the inner voice demanding he restore his honor.

Matt stormed over to Mikey's joint with his three friends in tow, ready to back him if any of Mikey's crew jumped into the fray. When Matt pushed opened the club's door, he was surprised to see Mikey standing alongside his big-shot father, Mikey Brown. Nonetheless, Matt spoke up. "When you finish with your father's visit, I wanna talk to you."

Stepping forward, Mikey Brown took control. He snarled at Matt. "We're gonna take care of this matter right now." He then swept the room, freezing everyone with an icy glare. "I want everybody outta here except the two guys who gotta settle this thing."

Nobody had to be told twice.

The elder Mikey's presence persuaded Matt to be less hostile, but still intent on affirming his territorial rights and local prestige.

Once the room was cleared of onlookers, Mikey senior spoke less harshly, and became the voice of reason between the two disputing parties. What soon followed

was a tactful performance by Mikey Brown whereby he relayed a roundabout apology from his son, who never said a word the whole time Matt was there. And Matt attained satisfaction from the wiseguy's efforts because Mikey Brown skillfully bandaged every wound to Matt's self-respect. In reality, this was child's play for Mikey Brown, who had years of experience keeping the peace among feuding mobsters.

After he left Mikey's place, Matt figured that Mikey senior had heard about the potential fight and wanted to prevent it, fearing Matt, who was righteously enraged, would whip his son in a fair fight. Having a seventeen year-old kid kick Mikey's twenty year-old ass would've been an embarrassment to both Mikeys. And why the wiseguy didn't rough Matt up to protect his son was such an action would've been considered *unethical* since Matt was from the neighborhood and had a legitimate beef. For Matt, this widely noted incident upped his status in the neighborhood as a young man who wouldn't take insult from anyone, not even connected guys.

In the past, Matt had revisited this and other rousing memories when he needed to work himself into a rage. But now, in his middle years, and confronting a much higher level of mayhem - a meticulously planned murder - Matt wasn't sure he could bridge the gap of time or climb the steep rise in violence.

CHAPTER 10

Around eleven-thirty the next morning, Matt drove a tan Taurus into his parking lot. He backed up to the low, red brick building that he used for a workshop, and purposely blocked from his mind what he would find in the trunk when he opened it. He shut off the engine, sat back in his seat, and considered how the day had gone so far. Perhaps it would reveal a pattern or omen as to how the day would end.

Last night, Matt had finally dozed off after finishing his fifth beer. He only got three hours of sleep, but awoke relieved the longest weekend in his life was over. He felt better that it was Monday and the rest of the working stiffs would be miserable along with him while his life swirled down the toilet. As for the fat cats, well paid and little worked, he loathed them. Matt wished he could line up a dozen CEOs alongside Jimmy and blow them all away. His dawn rage sought more victims. He entertained the crazy notion of going after the Mob bosses, who were ordering him to kill Jimmy, and even pondered the consequence of killing Frankie. Would it change the situation in any way? Matt had begun the day full of venom and uncensored plans.

He lay in bed, watching the morning light fill the room, and sampled more criminal plans and destructive impulses. He underscored how his existence had become shit and how he needed to lash out. To be the aggressor, not the victim. It took him a good hour and a half, from the time he awoke, to settle down and reason with himself that no matter how much he abhorred his plight, all he had to do was kill one person and get on with the rest of his life.

At about ten-thirty, his studio manager, Linda Stern, pretty, petite, and permed with loads of jet-black curls, knocked on his bedroom door. Matt got out of bed, unsociable and ungroomed, so they spoke through the door. Her voice choked with emotion. It was the first time she'd been to the studio since Robert's death. It reminded him how everyone loved Robert. He remembered again how he got into this mess.

Linda told him somebody called and left a message without leaving his name. And when she repeated the message, "Tell Matt, the car is ready," he leapt into action, disrobing and rushing to take a two-minute shower.

Just the way Frankie had described, during their ride back to the City, a nondescript tan Taurus was waiting for Matt at the spot where Frankie had dropped him off the previous day. Matt opened the unlocked door and got in. He reached under the front

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seat and found the car key taped to the floor. When he started the engine, his thoughts turned to the cargo he'd be transporting back to his studio. He wasn't sure of the exact contents. Only that, when he opened the trunk, he would find the *hit-man's deluxe* Frankie had promised.

Matt lifted himself out of the Taurus. His review of the morning had produced little. But he would go through this eventful twenty-four hours checking and rechecking every plan and action. This was definitely a day for *no fuck-ups*.

Matt opened the trunk, pushed aside a blanket, and uncovered a piece of medium-size luggage. In swift moves, he reached in, lifted out the brown suitcase, and shut the trunk. Weighing close to sixty pounds, the case was heavier than he'd expected, but in no way slowed him from quickstepping to his workshop and entering.

After double-locking the door behind him, Matt walked to a cleared, wooden worktable, where he set down the suitcase. Inside, he found three handguns and a sawed-off shotgun with corresponding ammunition, extra clips, holsters, and silencers, all packed in custom-cut Styrofoam. Matt ran his fingers through his hair while he sized up the cache of weapons. He recognized two of the three guns as a .22 and a .38 snub, both Smith and Wesson. He lifted the third and felt its weight. He remembered holding a similar gun many years ago. It was a .357 magnum, semiautomatic.

Raising it in a two-hand grip, Matt aimed at the nearest poster on the wall - Ansel Adams' *Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada*. This simple exercise made him realize all the weapons were for close work. Frankie hadn't provided him with the means for a long-range kill shot. It wasn't something they'd discussed, but Matt was now wishing he had the option of being far from his victim.

This new wrinkle caused Matt to doubt the way things were going. A powerful negativity washed over him and fear seeped through his body. He trembled from the unexpected weakness and groaned. He placed the handgun back in the suitcase and wrapped his arms around his chest to keep from shaking, then yelled, "It's too late!"

Matt went to the window and peeked past the black curtains to see if anyone was in the parking lot. No one. He repeated, in a quiet resolute voice, "It's too late."

Matt returned to the suitcase, removed the clip from the .357, and loaded it. He calmed his fears by convincing himself it was better to be close to Jimmy when he aimed and fired. Then, if things were to go horribly wrong and Matt were to die, he would at least leave this world knowing he had killed the polluting son-of-a-bitch. He'd die with the glorious hope that he had started a new action for killing those at the top of the pollution chain. He'd die with the satisfaction he had put fear into the frosted hearts of all the motherfuckers who were destroying the Earth. He'd die believing one person did make a difference.

Matt assured himself it wouldn't be difficult to look an evil corrupt man in the eye and kill him point blank. After all, it wouldn't be the first man he had killed.

The last bullet slid into place and Matt palmed the clip into the handgrip. He felt its weight, and again aimed at the serene black and white on the wall. He thought

about the quickness in which Frankie had supplied the weapons. It was a clear indication Matt was to act fast.

He had already decided to do something today, but not the actual hit. Careful preparation had to come first. Matt had planned a trial run for later that afternoon to follow one of Jimmy's trucks. He set the loaded semiautomatic back into its place and shut the suitcase, then carried it to the prop area and hid it among other pieces of luggage. He lingered for a moment and thought if he should take the loaded gun with him to New Jersey, just in case a perfect opportunity to kill Jimmy occurred.

An hour later, Matt sat in his office, browsing through pictures of models and separating them into three piles. The room was neat and clean thanks to Linda's efforts that morning. She had also contacted his insurance agent and made arrangements for workers to come to the studio tomorrow to replace the rear door, clean up the mess, and repaint the floor and walls. In appreciation, he'd given her the afternoon off. Besides, he wanted to be alone in the studio while he prepared for Thursday's photo session with Steve. Matt had given some thought to canceling it, but decided to keep a normal schedule in the event he later came under suspicion. This way, he could claim there was nothing out of the ordinary going on in his life. With such a busy agenda, how could he possibly plan and commit a murder? He would spend the day and the entire week doing what was necessary for the upcoming production, and one of his first chores was to check the availability of the models he preferred to work with.

The photo shoot was for *BeeTee*, a new clothing line featuring the creations of a *nouveau* French designer, Beatrice Tomar. Part of a national ad campaign that Steve's advertising agency had acquired the previous week, after another agency had been abruptly fired by the stormy designer. In a normal situation, with a longer lead-time, Matt would've already secured the models he required, but at this late date, he would have to settle on the available talent. The three piles of photos represented the models he liked, the models he'd settle for, and the models he wouldn't use.

From looking at the clothes and reading the designer's notes regarding her creative vision, Matt had settled on the image and attitude he wanted to express. Claire Devane was his first choice, but she was a problem model to deal with. In heavy demand since she was sixteen, this now twenty-one year-old behaved like a spoiled child and required tedious cajoling for her to deliver the *look* she was famous for. Matt was well acquainted with Claire's routine of working at her own pace and only delivering her best effort for a short period of time, usually at the end of a long day. But her vulnerable yet menacing allure was fabulous, and most clients, art directors, and photographers were willing to endure the temperamental vixen for her bewitching image.

Ordinarily, Matt would try to book Claire, along with her favorite make-up person, Donatello, whom she loved to bitch to, but Matt had enough on his troubled mind and worried he might lose his temper with Claire if she tried to dominate the set. He

checked the sheet attached to her promo for his notes on her menstrual cycle. It appeared by his rough calculation that Thursday would be a bad day to deal with Claire. He placed her photo in a fourth pile between *maybe* and *no*. Undoubtedly, she was already booked for Thursday, but Matt would have to give Claire's agent a call to cover his ass for later inquiries by Steve and Beatrice.

When Matt reached for another photo, his stomach grumbled. He decided to take a break and go get something to eat. Since his next few days would be unpredictable and stressful, it was important he eat well whenever he felt hungry. He knew the amazing powers of the brain were influenced by the tangible world of proteins, carbohydrates, and other nutrients, and keeping physically fit would keep his mind sharp.

Matt stepped out the front door into the unexpected sunlight. It had rained heavily the night before and the morning had been overcast, consequently he was pleasantly surprised to feel the warmth on his face. A good omen, he hoped.

Turning to his left, Matt saw Carol walking toward him and immediately wished he could become invisible. He didn't want to talk to anyone, especially to Carol, whom he'd brushed off the last time they met and feared behaving rudely to her again. He resolved to be as pleasant as possible and produced a big smile. "Hello, Carol."

She reacted stiffly. "Hello."

"Did you go for a walk?"

"Yes."

"That's nice you took advantage of the sunshine."

She shifted her weight and looked past him as if ready to move on.

Matt guessed his recent behavior had her thinking she was a burden on him. "I was going to get some lunch. Would you like to join me?"

"No, I'm not hungry. Thanks." She flashed a quick smile, then stepped to pass him.

He put his arm out and stopped her. He spoke with sincerity remarkable even to himself. "I could use the company."

"You sure?"

"Very sure."

Fuck my other problems. I like this woman. I want to spend as much time as I can with her.

Cecilia's Kitchen, a popular Tribeca restaurant, had a few customers left from the lunch crowd, and all of them, including Matt and Carol, sat at the red Naugahyde booths by the windows that looked out onto Greenwich Street, where a glittery sun shower splashed over the shiny asphalt.

Carol ate the last of her spinach and goat cheese ravioli, while Matt twirled his fork in a mound of fusilli primavera. He had lost his appetite halfway through lunch. He figured his stomach had shrunk from lack of eating. He'd survive the next few days as lean and mean as required.

They had conversed at length during their walk to the restaurant and before the food arrived. He'd again offered his help - all she had to do was ask - and Carol had mentioned her greatest concern was getting her brother's body released from the morgue so she could have him cremated. Matt didn't like her motive for swift action. He didn't like hearing she wanted to leave New York right away.

Matt wished she would stay long enough to be with him after he had taken care of Jimmy, when he'd be free to show her a better side of himself. But until Jimmy's last breath, Matt's world wasn't under his control. Being with Carol made this limitation even more painful. He tried but couldn't shake the awareness that the only way for him to get back to normal was to focus on his deadly mission above all else, even above the lovely and desirable woman sitting across from him. Since the food arrived, they had said nothing to each other.

Matt noticed her looking at his half-eaten lunch. He felt he should apologize for not finishing his meal, and for his aloof behavior, and for everything else in his miserable life. "I'm sorry. I planned on being better company."

Her response - a puzzled look. Her silence easy to decipher - *Wasn't it he who had invited her?*

Matt did a better job reading her thoughts than he did his own because out of nowhere, for some urgent need, he spoke of something he had never mentioned to anyone who hadn't witnessed the event. "A long time ago, when I was a teenager, I killed someone."

Her one blink betrayed a heavy blow, but she said nothing.

"I didn't mean to. He attacked me with a knife. I was walking by the East River with three friends, when one of them - his name is Frankie - cursed at a bum. A homeless person. We called them bums back then. I wasn't really paying attention to the guy until I heard him scream. I turned, and all of a sudden, there he was with a crazed look in his eyes, coming at me with a butcher blade. In a split second, without thinking, I grabbed his hand and twisted it back into him."

The memory of the man's surprised face stopped him. He recalled how the man looked down at the knife sticking in his gut and the blood soaking his torn shirt. The wounded man clutched Matt's hand and muttered softly before he fell to the ground, dead. That day and for a long time afterward, Matt wished he had heard the dying man's last words. Christ! He took the man's life. He could've tried harder to hear the guy's final comment on leaving this world.

"What did you tell the police?"

Matt lowered his eyes and shook his head. "No. No police. We dumped his body in the river."

He didn't notice her wide-eyed astonishment and continued to speak without plan, using words that bubbled needfully from primordial fissures. "Most of the time life changes slowly. But every now and then a clear distinct event happens, and you know you'll never be the same again." He lifted his eyes to look at her. "But you never know how you'll turn out."

Carol narrowed her eyes. Matt guessed she was turning keys, searching for the one that would unlock his message. Obviously, his words were relevant to her own life-altering event, that of her brother's murder. More evident, however, was the personal nature of his statement. Surely it concerned a grave matter distressing to him. Carol would need more information to unravel the mystery of Matt's impromptu confession, but she asked no further questions, and her face gradually saddened.

Matt was certain his words had upset her. *This is not the time to be with Carol.* Their chance encounter was no guarantee of a joyous mingling. *Sometimes coincidences are plain wrong.* Matt decided to say no more and to leave her when it was appropriate. He had to get on with the rest of the day. Oh yes, and he would bring the loaded .357 with him, just in case.

CHAPTER 11

A steady rain beat on the tan Taurus as it cruised along a two-lane route on the outskirts of Union, New Jersey. The heavy drops echoed inside, where Matt flicked his eyes from mirror to mirror, checking for other vehicles. He rounded a bend and saw the entrance to J.J. Waste and Carting up ahead. To the right, a dirt road cut into the construction site he and Frankie had visited yesterday. He turned onto it and parked behind a tall bank of thick brush that ran parallel to the two-lane. Just fifty yards away, with a clear view of the entrance, Matt judged it to be a good location and shut off the engine.

He slid his hand under the seat and assured himself the .357 remained wedged in the opening he had sliced in the carpet. Matt considered putting the weapon in the inside pocket of his leather jacket, but decided to leave it where it was.

Because of the rain, no construction work was being done. The assemblage of giant machines lay idle and the huge tract of land deserted. This wasn't the case with Jimmy's operation. Tank-trailers and refuse hauling trucks regularly entered and exited the waste facility. Some roared right past him. None noticed his hiding place. He checked his watch. It was 3:20, ten minutes until Jimmy's expected departure. Matt settled back in his seat and thought about Carol.

He wondered why he had mentioned to her that he had killed a man. What purpose did it serve? What did she represent? Some sort of confessor, some sort of salvation from his predicament? Was he speaking to Robert through her. . . to the dead man. . . or even to God? Maybe he was searching for an alternate way to pray? If so, why couldn't he just overcome his pride and speak directly to God?

His chest throbbed and tears misted his vision. He looked up at the weeping sky. "Please help me get through this. Forgive me for taking another man's life. But Jimmy is a horrible person who deserves to die. If he wasn't so evil, no amount of intimidation could get me to kill him. He's a fiend who's destroying the beautiful home You gave us. Earth is most precious. It should be cherished by all who believe in You. Please understand I trust my actions to be justified. Please forgive me."

Matt felt lighter, consoled that he had addressed the Supreme Being, Creator of all things. This soothing state reminded him of when he was a grade school boy upon receiving Holy Communion. With the wafer host slowly melting on his tongue, he would return from the altar rail to his pew and bury his face in his hands to commune silently with the Holy Trinity. His foremost plea at the time was that his parents live until he was old enough to withstand the great pain of losing them. God kept His part

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of the bargain, but Matt didn't. His mother died when he was thirty years old, long after Matt had forgotten to keep in touch.

Would God accept this renewed contact born out of desperation? Matt hoped He would listen and forgive, for God is merciful and understands the weakness of man. What Matt needed to do from now on was to be virtuous in all aspects of his life. He could no longer simply turn morality on and off whenever he needed God's help. He would have to evaluate the purity of all future actions. Suddenly, a vivid picture of him sucking Laura's breast gripped him body and soul. Was physical arousal an element of wanton immoral behavior? Would he have to give up the pleasure of soft skin in order to please God?

This same conflict had destroyed his piety to God and religion the first time around. Labeled impure thoughts and ranked as mortal sins by the Church, these prurient images and desires had flooded his adolescent brain, gradually swamping all doctrinal taboos. The sheer number of impure fantasies had overwhelmed him. With his defenses weakened, Matt surrendered without a grand and final theological battle. Like a used-up general, his religious devotion merely faded away.

But now that he was older and wiser and understood that Catholicism with its rigid rules wasn't the only avenue to holiness, perhaps there was a way he could have his lust and heaven too. Matt sensed such a self-centered compromise was a form of hubris, and worried it might turn God against him. His moment of peace had ended.

Matt lowered the window, and the car filled with the clay scent of wet earth and the freshness of hard rain. These physical elements offered some relief from his ethical skirmishes, but more was needed for a return to tranquility. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the sound of rain splashing the roof and nearby puddles. Inhaling and exhaling, slowly and rhythmically, Matt began to empty his mind of thought and induce a meditative state. This technique, which he had learned from Buddhist Yoga, many years before, nudged the conflicting ideas of spiritual morality and supple breasts from his mind.

But another contentious thought asserted itself and posited that the modern world, with its free market of religions, provided easier access to a personalized deity, and Matt, like most people, sought God in a non-sacrificial manner easily suited to his lifestyle. Matt was drawn to defend himself. Instead, he focused more on his expanding and contracting diaphragm. As he struggled to get his meditative pursuit back on track, another pestering thought broke through and mocked his efforts by asking - *Can a Buddhist reach a higher level of consciousness while sitting atop a semi-automatic handgun?*

In the distance, Matt heard a telltale creaking sound and opened his eyes. He saw the front gate to J.J.'s yard slowly roll open and unveil a long black Cadillac blowing smoke from its tailpipe. Matt snapped back to the palpable world. By Frankie's account, he knew Jimmy was in the limousine, about to be driven home to Mulberry Street.

A stout security guard, dressed in a dark uniform like one of Il Duce's Blackshirts, strode from the yard and looked up and down the two-lane. Matt saw that the bulky employee with a shiny badge was no ordinary rent-a-cop. Obviously, Jimmy was keen on having special protection around him, perhaps suspecting he was on someone's hit list. Matt thought how this complicated his plan. It now seemed certain if he were to shoot Jimmy inside the waste facility, he would never make it out of there alive.

The Fascist thug turned and shouted back into the yard. Another man came into view and walked toward the limousine. It took a moment for Matt to recognize it was Vic, one of Jimmy's two sons, opening the driver's door and sliding in behind the wheel.

Matt had never liked either one of Jimmy's sons. He recalled the afternoon he had given the other brother, Joe, a broken nose in a fight, while they were waiting for the Second Avenue bus to take them home from school. At the time, they were both high school freshmen at La Salle Academy. Matt didn't remember the cause of the altercation, other than the fact there had always been a general dislike between him and the Cascone brothers. Maybe they had a hunch Matt would someday kill their father. In turn, perhaps Matt had a premonition that someday the brothers would be hunting for him. Matt believed in intuitive knowledge.

The limousine left the yard and turned right toward Matt, in the direction of the New Jersey Turnpike. Matt slid down in his seat and positioned the rear-view mirror to watch the black Caddy as it passed. He heard Vic accelerate, and only caught a glimpse of the limo as it flashed by in his mirror. The one important piece of information gleaned from this brief sighting was all the passenger windows were heavily tinted. They were so dark Matt had to discount another of his alternative plans, that of shooting Jimmy during his ride home.

Matt sat up, leaned forward, and rested his head on the steering wheel. He was running out of murderous options, but still resisted the idea of whacking Jimmy in the neighborhood. There was no way he could kill someone in cold blood just a block from where his family lived. He would have to hit Jimmy in the yard. He'd plan carefully and execute his plans perfectly. Once inside the yard, Matt would wait until Jimmy was alone and, using a silencer, shoot him without anyone knowing. If Matt were able to do that, then he could easily drive back out in the truck he had used to enter.

His gut heaved and growled, telling his brain to stop the bullshit. Nothing ever works out so neatly. Anything could go wrong, and one misstep or unlucky break would be fatal.

Matt descended into despair, imagining where the bullets would strike him and which one of his vital organs would be the first to fail. He grabbed the steering wheel and rocked back and forth, screaming silently. *Stop it! I've got serious business to do. I need to follow the next truck that leaves the yard. I need to do a trial run. . . how to hijack it. . . what to do with the driver.* Matt stopped

scolding himself when a tanker poked its nose through the open gate and made a slow wide left turn onto the road.

Matt started the car and shifted into reverse, but the front tires spun in the wet ground. He stepped harder on the gas pedal, and the Taurus jumped backward, spraying mud under the chassis and out in front of him. Startled, he braked in a hurry. The car skidded at an angle and stopped with its rear-end jutting onto the road. In his rear-view mirror, he saw an eighteen-wheeler round the bend and fast approach. He heard loud air-horn blasts. Matt floored the accelerator and the Taurus shot forward onto the side of the road. The truck thundered past, the driver on his horn, delivering as much contempt as he could.

Trembling and damp with perspiration, Matt gripped the steering wheel and took deep breaths. He re-adjusted the rear-view mirror, pressed cautiously on the gas, and steered onto the two-lane. Slowly picking up speed, Matt searched for the tanker that was somewhere up the road. He reassured himself, by the time he saw the truck's taillights, he would have a more thought-out plan of action.

The rain drummed harder against the car and windblown torrents limited Matt's view. The wipers, at the quickest setting, barely kept up with the downpour, and even with the headlights on it was difficult for Matt to see the road ahead. Smaller routes on either side of the two-lane suddenly appeared, and he worried the tanker might've turned onto one of them. The abysmal weather forced him to reconsider what he was doing. Matt decided he'd search a few more miles before calling it quits.

A large white sign with *Welcome* written on it whizzed past before he could read where he was being welcomed. The road led into a wooded area. Matt assumed he had entered a state park. The thick growth of trees further diminished the light coming from the dour sky, and he found it difficult even to see the asphalt in front of him. A sharp curve came quickly, and he rushed his foot onto the brake pedal. The Taurus swerved toward the side of the slick road, but Matt let up on the brake and steered back onto the middle stripe of the narrow two-lane.

Matt had to reduce speed, giving him little to no chance of catching up with the tanker. He was about to stop and end his pursuit when he spotted a set of dim red lights floating like the bloodshot eyes of a ghost among the dense trees off to the right. He slowed the car and leaned forward. Peering through the fogged windshield, he spotted the smaller road that the tank-trailer had turned onto. He was lucky to have noticed the truck when he did or he would've surely passed by the obscured lane.

Now what? Matt thought, as he turned to tail the tanker deeper into the woods. His first move was to switch off the headlights so the truck driver wouldn't know there was a car following behind. With the dark sky, heavy rain, and dense foliage, there was hardly any light, but trailing close enough to the tanker, Matt was able to use the big rig's taillights as guiding beacons.

The brake lights in front of him glowed, and the huge vehicle came to a stop, twenty yards ahead of the Taurus. Matt pulled off the road into some brush for cover. From his position, he was unable to see the tanker so he powered down the window, shut the engine, and listened for sounds coming from the truck. The heavy rain made it impossible to hear anything else. He slid his hand under the front seat and removed the .357 from its pouch.

Matt stuck a brown tweed cap on his head, pushed the door open with one hand and used the other to hold the .357 under his jacket to keep it dry. Big drops of rain soaked him as he slinked toward the center of the road. He was surprised to see the truck was nowhere in sight and hurried back to the Taurus. Matt set the handgun between the floor console and passenger seat. He started the engine and shifted into reverse, but the wheels spun in place, rocking the car back and forth. He could tell, this time, it wouldn't be so easy to escape the mud.

He got out of the car and checked the front tire. His bad feeling was confirmed. The mud was above the wheel rim. He spotted some nearby fallen branches, grabbed a few, and began snapping them over his knee. It was difficult work and would've been more painful except for the adrenaline flow that kept him from feeling the bruises on his leg, just above the joint. When he'd broken enough wood to work with, he lodged it behind the front wheels. He chose a sturdy branch and used it to stuff the broken limbs deeper under the two tires. Positioned on the driver's side, Matt pushed with his legs and leaned his full weight against the thick branch. As he struggled mightily, he lost his footing and his feet slipped out from under him. He fell forward onto his hands and knees and splashed brown muck over the front of his face and body.

"Fucking cocksucker son-of-a-bitch!"

Matt lifted himself up, wiped his muddy hands on his pant legs, and got back into the car. He shifted into reverse and eased down on the gas. He felt the tires crush the branches and slowly roll backward. He stepped harder on the accelerator and the steel-belted radials sprayed mud and wood chips in every direction. All at once, the Taurus freed itself from the soggy earth and leapt back onto the narrow road.

Too dark to see, Matt turned on the headlights. He drove cautiously with his head over the steering wheel. He smelled a strong chemical odor and worried he might've punctured a fuel or brake line or caused mechanical damage to the car's underbody with the flying debris. But he had no intention of stopping to find the source of the troubling smell. He would press on until the car died, if it came to that.

The stench of rotten eggs poached in sulfuric butter increased, and it began to affect his mental clarity. He turned off the defroster to limit the chemical stink, and powered down all four windows. Instead of fresh air, he was blasted with more of the sickening smell. Ripping a handkerchief from his back pocket, Matt placed it over his nose and mouth. He struggled to stay focused on the road. Flashbacks of the ruined night with Laura whirled about his intoxicated brain.

Matt saw the red glows again and switched off his headlights. In the dark, he hit a large flooded area. The roaring splash and strong resistance of the water jarred him. Gripping the wheel, he kept the car straight, while muddy sprays shot out from underneath. He was relieved when he made it across the small lake, but there was little to celebrate, the nauseous odor met him at the shore. Matt blinked repeatedly to flush the hot tears from his eyes, which caused him to veer onto the mushy shoulder. The slipping tires tossed mud and leaves and tore grass and weeds from the ground.

The road conditions slowed the tanker, making it easier for Matt to follow, however, a new problem arose. Thick smoke filled the Taurus. Matt coughed and gagged and tried not to vomit. The car drifted to the side and hit a thick patch of brush, grabbing the fender, nearly spinning the car out of control. Matt jerked the steering wheel and the risky maneuver brought him back to the middle of the road. He turned the headlights back on, and saw a stream of black smoke blowing out from under the car's hood and chassis. Lots of rubber was burning somewhere on the Taurus.

Perhaps some of the engine hoses were on fire? Or considering the great volume of smoke, maybe the front tires were on fire? But in this downpour and on a flooded road, how the hell could the tires catch fire?

The heavy smoke forced him to close all the windows again, but there was no escaping the noxious haze inside the car, and he continued to choke. Matt's determination to follow the tanker deserted him. *It isn't worth sacrificing my health on a goddamn trial run!* He heard the screeching sound of metal scraping the windshield and saw that the rubber on the wipers was mostly gone. The little that remained smoldered as it disintegrated before his eyes.

“What the hell's going on?”

Soon there was only metal left on the wipers, and they rumbled noisily over the molten rubber smeared across the windshield. He switched the wipers off and noticed the windshield sizzle in places where an orange muck had stuck to it. He saw paint from the hood bubble up, peel off, and stick to the windshield.

As Matt tried to make sense of the bizarre events, he kept driving, distracted from the irony that there was no urgent reason for remaining inside the car. There was little to be gained by following the truck. The sensible thing would've been to evacuate the Taurus immediately, before the whole damn thing burst into flames. But Matt had shifted into obsession and was rocketing downhill, smashing into red flags.

Only when the tires blew out did he stop his maniacal chase. The front end suddenly dipped, and the grating squeal of metal on asphalt signaled he was now riding on rims. The Taurus swerved right toward the brush, and Matt jammed on the brakes. The car spun and slowed a bit before smashing into a sturdy elm. The impact was powerful enough to whip Matt's head into the side window and cause the airbag to bludgeon him in the chest. He sat in the front seat, bloodied, dazed, and coughing. It took him a while to unharness himself and push against the door handle.

The door sprung open, and he tumbled out of the car. He stuck his arm out to break the fall, but the ground came fast and hard, and his left side and ribs joined the swelling congregation of hurt body parts.

As he crawled away from the smoking wreck, several of his injuries cried out for attention. He'd deal with them in time, for now a possible explosion concerned him most. He dragged his sore body across the road until the outstretched fingers of his forward hand felt hot. A burning sensation enveloped his left hand. He yelled out, withdrew his pained fist, and sat upright. Examining his blistered fingers, he saw that three of them were coated with a sticky orange film. To cool his seared flesh, he stuck his hand in a mud puddle.

Sitting in the middle of the road with the rain beating down on him and his hand resting in a pool of muck, Matt began to make sense of what had happened. His scorched fingers had made contact with the thick orange slime that ribboned along the narrow road. So too had the melted tires and wipers, the smoking undercarriage, and the peeling paint, which had scarred the entire body of the car. It was now clear to him. The big truck had stopped, and the driver opened the rear valve to flush the toxic stew from the tank while he drove down the wooded lane.

Matt removed his hand from the puddle and inspected his blistered fingers. Looking at the raw results, he suspected the sticky slime to be highly acidic. He thought about the driver who took advantage of the downpour and the lonely byway through a state park to conceal his brutal attack on a rare island of lush greenery in Central New Jersey. Matt wondered if the driver would take the saved time to load up again and increase his profit, or maybe he was a family man, who would spend the extra hours playing with his kids. No matter what motivated the Teamster, Matt hated the man and would've choked him to death with his bare hands if had the means to catch up with the poison dumping rig. But that was impossible now. What was possible and most definite was Jimmy Junk would soon pay with his life for this and for all the other atrocities he had committed against man and nature.

Matt gingerly lifted himself from the ground and stumbled toward the smoldering Taurus to retrieve the .357. He wasn't yet thinking how he would get home that night. He was thinking how he would explode a piece of lead between Jimmy's eyes, up close and personal.

CHAPTER 12

Early the next morning, there were only a few shoppers at the Salvation Army store, where Matt picked through a rack of full-length winter coats. He'd gotten little or no sleep last night, unsure if the mad ramblings and furious imagery were febrile dreams or raging hallucinations. Regardless, he was wide-awake before dawn and made certain he was at the second-hand store the minute the doors opened. During the long night, Matt had come up with a plan for killing Jimmy and how he would escape the murder scene. Before going to bed, he'd already taken care of some items on his lethal list of things to do, shopping for used clothing was next.

Fingering the different material, Matt wasn't looking for a quality coat or a good price; he was looking for something on the ragged side. There was only a small selection of winter coats and they were all in good condition so he chose the blandest gray among them. With the wool overcoat folded under his arm and totting a pair of used running shoes, Matt moved toward the tables piled with dress pants. He walked slowly for each step had the potential to inflame his bruised ribs. Wincing in pain might bring attention, and he didn't want anyone in the store to recall he was there.

Except for the leather glove on his unguented, scalded left hand, Matt wore the same clothes from yesterday. His rain-rumpled khakis and weather-beaten leather jacket helped him to blend in like a true bargain hunter. In fact, his own musty scent was so strong, he didn't smell the usual stale odor of contributed apparel. He stopped in front of a stack of pants, four inches wider than his size, and examined each pair. As he did so, he thought about last night.

After Matt had left the charred Taurus, he walked for miles in the cold rain until he found a fluorescent refuge in an all-night diner. By that time, the mud had washed from his clothes and shoes. He sat in one of the back booths and warmed himself with black coffee and a number one breakfast, while he waited for the cab to arrive. The long wet trek to the diner had given him plenty of time to sort through the different scenarios and possible mishaps that might occur during a hit on Jimmy, and he had come to a final decision on how he would do it.

There was no going back. No need to re-evaluate his plans or reasons. Matt was at the Salvation Army store to buy clothes he would use in a disguise to secrete himself close to family and friends and wait on Mulberry Street like a snake-eyed assassin for Jimmy to get home.

Matt chose a pair of dingy green cotton pants and walked toward the cashier. Without warning, a current of fear lit up his spine and a shrill chorus unnerved him with chants of failure and doom. The reality of a daylight street killing and its consequences screamed in his head. To stop the panic attack, Matt hushed the alarmist choir with a loud “No!”

The unprovoked outburst caused the frail white-haired cashier to turn and look at him. She tilted her head and peered over her bifocals, evaluating Matt’s sanity and potential for trouble. He dropped his eyes and tried his best to look harmless. *Fuck!* Just what he didn’t want, someone to remember him. He paused at a selection of ties to give the woman time to forget the weird guy who shouted *No!*

This loss of control angered Matt. How could he do such a stupid thing as to yell at himself in public? Every action had to be done with great care and consideration, like the way he’d come up with the address he gave to the cabby last night.

The taxi had dropped Matt off at *Long John Silver*, a well-known gay bar on West Street, four blocks from his studio. He figured this destination would answer the driver’s curiosity about the disheveled passenger to the City. Matt was concerned the New Jersey Police, looking to connect someone to the abandoned Taurus, might check the local taxi logs. Frankie had made sure the car wouldn’t be traced to either one of them, so Matt had to keep his end of the bargain. *No fuck-ups.*

On his way home last night, Matt hobbled along the deserted streets near the Washington Market and passed a long line of locked delivery trucks, waiting for daybreak when they would be loaded with fresh produce to be distributed throughout the Metropolitan Area. Whenever he saw this grouping of trucks, he recalled the sixties when many of the delivery trucks were left unlocked and opened to ventilate the cargo areas.

The Stonewall riot hadn’t occurred yet. It was a time before the widespread liberation of gays and lesbians, when almost everyone, even a great many homosexuals themselves, believed they were aberrations of nature. Back then, prohibition and shame forced many gays and lesbians to lead desperate lives, and some turned to depraved acts, like the tortured men who waited in the black corners of rancid trucks to mouth the proffered cocks of faceless strangers who climbed into the darkness.

Matt was sixteen when he first heard about the Washington Market truck scene. He and his three pals went to see if the stories were true. Sure enough, they saw all sorts of men, sailors, longshoremen, even white-collar types, gathered under the old West Side Highway, lined up alongside a number of trucks, waiting their turn for the next free mouth to open up.

There was no conversation. No joy in the sullen faces, as if the men were languishing in a slow line at the DMV. Perhaps they were ashamed, not for the quick blowjob from a queer - no one’s masculinity would be questioned for that - but for admitting publicly they each lacked a woman in their life who could satisfy their manly needs.

On that first visit, Matt wanted to leave right away. He felt a mix of loathing and fear. He was disgusted by the degenerates inside the trucks and afraid of the rough group of guys assembled and determined to be sexually gratified by other men. It was a new, highly charged situation, and Matt didn't know the ground rules or what emotions could be unleashed that might put him and his friends in danger. It was the one time Matt ever felt the apprehension of male rape.

Frankie, on the other hand, was fascinated by the whole scene and wanted to stay. He even challenged Matt's courage and called him *chickenshit* for wanting to rush home. Matt wanted to deck Frankie then and there, but stopped himself from doing so. He didn't want to reduce his backup in case the horny mix of men got tired of waiting and advanced on the young boys to satisfy their lust. It didn't take much effort for Matt to convince Lou and Eddie to leave the area, and Frankie grudgingly left with them, griping all the way back to their neighborhood.

Later that same week, Matt and Frankie went to an after-hours club on West Broadway, not far from the Washington Market, hoping to meet new girls. The place was dead so they didn't stay long. When they stepped outside into the warm summer night air, Frankie started up, pestering Matt to come with him and *get a blowjob off one of them queers*. Matt wasn't the least bit interested, but Frankie kept yammering away, and eventually convinced Matt to accompany him in case there was any trouble.

Another reason why Matt returned was to confront his initial fear. He knew the nibbling memory would gnaw at him until he faced whatever it was that frightened him.

There were only a few guys by the trucks that second night, and Frankie went straight to the shortest line, which consisted of one round, humorless construction worker still wearing his hard-hat at ten o'clock at night. Frankie talked excitedly about not having to wait long and joked *the fleet must've left town*, annoying the fire plug in front of him, who turned on occasion to check out the chatter-box kid. Frankie was too jazzed to notice.

He made a few more attempts to get Matt to join him, but Matt had no interest in some pervert slobbering over his pride and joy. He didn't consider this a fear he had to confront. There's a difference between fear and repugnance. He had long ago passed this common sense test when he was seven years-old, and a group of older kids dared him to kiss a dead rat.

Frankie's excitement skyrocketed when the heavy canvass curtain slid open, and a tall wiry man, sporting cowboy boots, jumped from the tailgate. Obviously an out-of-state trucker, the man ambled off, never making eye contact with those who were set to take his place. When the stocky construction worker struggled to pull himself up onto the truck, Frankie could hardly contain himself and almost lent a helping hand. Fortunately, Frankie controlled his impulse and didn't double palm the hard hat's bulbous cheeks.

When Frankie surfaced from his covert adventure, all smiles, Matt stormed off like a speed walker to distance himself from the foul trucks.

While Matt had been waiting for Frankie to finish up, he was humiliated knowing the people who walked past assumed he was there for a deviant purpose. On top of that, a rusted steel bolt fell from the decrepit West Side Highway, when a car rumbled overhead, and dented the asphalt a foot from where Matt stood. Clearly, the construction worker with the hard hat wasn't as loony as Matt first thought. The bolt could've cracked Matt's skull and killed him. Which meant family and friends would've forever remembered him as a tragic victim, brained by a bolt from above, while waiting to get sucked off by some deranged freak of nature.

Frankie caught up with Matt and gabbed excitedly about his adventure inside the rank truck. But Matt didn't want to hear about it. He'd already done a lot more than he was comfortable with to accommodate his friend's scummy curiosity.

Frankie told how he had smacked the *fag* in the face after he had finished coming in the pervert's mouth. He then laughed like a sadistic mug who gets a thrill out of hanging alley cats. Matt told him getting a blowjob like that and then hitting the guy was sick, and it showed he was ashamed of what he'd done. Frankie struck back, saying Matt probably had *homo* tendencies and was afraid to try it because he might like it too much. Matt gave up on the argument and they never discussed the matter again.

Though left unspoken, it continued to fester, especially for Matt who considered Frankie's sexual brutality to be an indication of mental and moral flaws. It was also common knowledge that Frankie often returned to the produce trucks late at night by himself.

There had always been things Matt didn't like about his one time best friend, but this particular behavior was the strangest yet, and it weakened their friendship. Within a year and a half, they would no longer hang out together. In those eighteen months, Matt started his first year in college, listened mostly to the Beatles, and let his hair grow over his ears, while Frankie started running numbers for his uncle, still played Sinatra on the juke box, and got his razor-cut every other Friday.

It was difficult for Frankie to accept Matt's *desertion*, as he bitterly labeled it. And when they met by chance on Mulberry Street, Frankie would ridicule Matt's tousled appearance to provoke a confrontation. But Matt was learning about peace and love and avoided the temptation to nostalgically whip Frankie's ass one more time. Eventually, their random encounters in the neighborhood became less strained and in time even friendly - but never close.

As Matt walked from the Salvation Army Store with his three purchases, he thought about the strange stuff Frankie had done as a kid. *How the hell did I get mixed up with Frankie again?* Matt flashed to the horrific night: Frankie's prank meeting, Nails killing Robert, Matt's uncontrollable rage. He wished he could blame everything on Frankie, the malevolent kid who slapped suffering souls in the dark, but he couldn't because it was Frankie who had spoken with reason and pleaded

with Matt, even fought with him, to call the police. Frankie may be a disturbed individual, but the deep shit Matt was in was his own crap.

Climbing into his van, Matt dropped the plastic bag of clothes and shoes on the floor behind the passenger seat. He started the engine and checked the traffic. He noticed Christmas lights were up and twinkling in most of the stores. “Happy Holidays, Matt.”

CHAPTER 13

Later that day, Matt huddled against the building just south of Jimmy's stoop, one block north of his family's apartment. He was wrapped in the second-hand coat with the collar pulled high, covering his neck and cheeks. He waited in a crouched position, ready to spring into action. Someone approached from the right, and Matt lowered his head, attentive to the stranger's feet, making sure they continued past him. He had to avoid all eye contact. His eyes were a dead give-away. They contrasted with the rest of his appearance. They were focused and bright with nervous energy, while for any passers-by who noticed him, Matt looked like a wobbly derelict who had drifted in from the Bowery.

The gray long coat had been soiled with dirt and smeared with grease. Using this same technique, Matt also degraded his green pants, socks, running shoes, gloves, and longshoreman's cap, which was pulled down over his eyebrows and ears. The little skin that showed on his face was streaked with dirt and discolored with makeup, and the oily strands of hair that jutted out from under his cap were smeared with Vaseline. Matt had taken great care to make himself look like a panhandling wino, the type of creature ordinary citizens go out of their way to avoid and ignore.

Lifting his left arm, Matt let the coat sleeve drop a half-inch, enough for him to see the minute hand on his cheap but reliable wristwatch. It was four-fifteen, another quarter hour to go until Jimmy's expected arrival. Matt moved his right hand across his body and felt the bulge, reassuring himself the .357 Magnum, back holstered on his left hip, was still there.

The skies had been clear all day, and with the sun's descent, the late afternoon quickly turned chilly. He could feel it was cold, but the outside temperature stopped at his skin.

His eyes and ears focused on every sight and sound, while his mass vibrated with restrained power humming in his muscles. He waited, like a boulder perched on a cliff, for Jimmy to step from his limousine, when the pure force of gravity would take over and he'd crush the polluting son-of-a bitch like a bug.

The pedestrian activity had increased during the time he'd been there. Mostly women, with shopping bags and packages, returning home to cook for their families after some early Christmas shopping. He hoped Jimmy would arrive soon before the streets became more congested with the rush-hour crowd of returning workers, who'd be mostly men.

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Matt had begun this final phase of his plan to whack Jimmy about a half-hour earlier when he parked his studio van in a commercial loading zone on Wooster Street. He walked seven blocks to the corner of Kenmare and Mulberry, where he scoped out Jimmy's street and steeled himself for what he was about to do. He teetered in place, faking an intoxicated state, then plodded to his pre-planned spot - the building just north of Jimmy's tenement - from where he would strike. Like a drunk waiting for the bus to sobriety, he leaned his weight against the brown brick edifice and sunk to a low position, as invisible as possible.

After settling in this location for twenty anxious minutes, Matt heard the window above him rumble open, and a woman yell, "Hey, bum! Get outta here before I call the cops on you."

Dammit, this nosy bitch is ruining all my fucking plans! Matt didn't wait for her to yell again. He stood immediately. Even worried he may have blown his cover by reacting too quickly. He reconstructed his stagger as he moved past Jimmy's stoop. Without looking up, he detected the woman, who leaned out a window. *A window in Jimmy's building!*

He owned the whole tenement, but it wasn't the voice of Jimmy's wife or any other family member Matt could recall. *Who the hell is this shrieking harpy?* Whoever she was, she wasn't finished with him yet. "And don't come back here again, you filthy louse!"

In a perfect situation, with no witnesses, he would've drawn his gun and shut her up for good. He let this fantasy pass, and stumbled south to the corner of Mulberry and Broome where he gathered his thoughts and refortified his determination. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that the snoop had disappeared from the window, so he made his way back. He hugged the buildings and walked under the fire escapes for cover, and stopped just short of Jimmy's tenement to settle in his current spot.

He liked this location less than his original one because the limousine would come up the one-way street from the left, and he'd be visible to the driver and passengers before the car stopped in front of Jimmy's. Matt slid down the tenement wall and sat on the cold pavement. He was encouraged that at this level the Cascones would only spot Matt when the limousine passed directly in front of him. He rose to a crouched position and resumed his surreptitious lookout for Jimmy's black Caddy to appear.

The traffic was normal for a weekday afternoon, but the number of police cruisers that passed by troubled Matt. It wasn't unusual to have so many patrol cars in the area since the 5th precinct and the old police headquarters, still operating as a police facility, were within a five-block radius. They had always been part of the local scene. But now that he was packing a weapon and poised to commit murder, the blue and whites seemed to be everywhere. The roving armed vehicles with enemy soldiers inside had to be avoided at all cost. He swore that under no circumstance would he shoot at a policeman, even if it meant surrendering his freedom. Matt hoped, in the heat of battle, he would remember to keep this promise.

Lingering thoughts of police involvement chipped away at his resolve. He sensed a looming avalanche of reluctance, capable of hurling him from his post and burying his plans. He shifted his attention. He fantasized how life would be after his deadly mission was completed. He thought about Carol.

He imagined wonderful moments with her, like a candle-lit dinner at his favorite restaurant, *Chez-moi*, a cozy spot in Brooklyn Heights with a close view of Manhattan's magnificent skyline and display of night lights. He envisioned building beautiful memories. The kind she could bundle up and carry back to Idaho. Memories that would compel her to invite him for a visit, and lead to a loving future together. When Matt sought to fight off his despair, he dreamt of the blonde goddess from the West. The one thing in his known universe that could save him.

But as cars passed and people walked by and residents stared at him from their windows, Matt's desperate grab at the future weakened, and his desires settled into simple yearnings for normality. When *this* was over with, Matt wouldn't have to avoid Carol and everyone else, the way he had yesterday. He would never again have to lock himself in a garage to fashion the methods and means for a premeditated murder, spending hours scraping paint and serial numbers from a ten-speed and transporting it in the black hours of night so no one would see him chain the defaced bike to a street lamp on Mulberry Street.

Matt snuck another peek at his watch. It was exactly four-thirty. His heart beat faster, his muscles swelled, the hair on his arms rose and tingled. Yet, deep within him, there stirred an embryonic relief that it would soon be over. One way or another.

Waiting for his prey, Matt felt like a predator in the wild, stalking a meal, killing to survive. He considered the carnage taking place, at this very moment, all over the world, as millions of carnivores tore into the underbellies of stunned victims. He wondered if the seized creatures suffered while they were being chewed on, or had God mercifully provided them with sufficient shock to deaden the pain. Matt paused at this point, not wanting to question God's cruel creation. He was relying on good luck to succeed in what he was about to do.

Suddenly, there was a palpable shift in the forces around him, as if a spontaneous vortex had disrupted the fixed rules of nature. Eerily crowded, he at once felt his vision dim, his ears hum, his breath stall, and his heart falter. The same window above rumbled open just as a police cruiser braked directly in front of him. A beefy, red-faced Irish cop, with a gold shield and three stripes on his thick arm, pushed himself out of the car and walked straight toward Matt. The woman above shouted, "That's him, Johnny. I told him two times to move already."

Matt rose, his eyes glued to the Irishman's nightstick. He remembered Rita once telling him Jimmy Junk had a housekeeper. *That's who the nosy bitch is!*

The sergeant stepped closer, raised his club in front of him, and slapped the business end of it against his left palm. The cop's ruddy scowl made it clear Matt would soon feel the sting of hard maple. Matt shuffled to his left so the first blow would be a backhand shot - theoretically, less forceful and less painful.

Matt brushed against the tenement wall. His wool coat snagged on bits of coarse mortar. The sergeant stayed with him and cocked his arm. "Hey you! What's a matter? You don't understand English? I gotta use the international language?"

Anticipating the cop's swing, Matt turned and positioned his upper arm to take the brunt of the blow. He heard the thud of wood striking muscle before he felt the dull ache. If that was all the whacks he would get, Matt considered himself lucky. It didn't hurt so bad.

Matt moved quickly to let the sergeant know he'd been taken seriously. But the cop, apparently resenting he'd lifted his cumbrous ass from a comfortable seat for a wino, swung once more. This time, he hit Matt square in the middle of his back. The searing pain folded him backward.

The sergeant bellowed, "Now, stay the fuck outta here!"

The message implied there'd be no further clubbing. Matt was free to acknowledge the vast ache from the second blow. The lower half of both sides of his trapezius throbbed with sharp pain - the left side more than the right. He pictured the size and color of the welt that would soon mark his skin.

Matt continued down the street, faking a stumbling strut, while rapid-fire questions ricocheted in his brain. What should he do now? *Give up for the day, forget about Mulberry Street, try the hit in Jersey, tomorrow?* He had come so far with this plan, he hated the thought of starting all over again. But what choice did he have? The snoop would be up there today and every day, calling the cops on him as soon as he showed up looking like a bum. Then again, any delay for working out a new strategy would only prolong his misery. Matt wasn't ready to call it a day, just yet.

He was about to glance back at the cops when a long black Cadillac turned onto Mulberry Street. He stopped and stared at the partly opened rear window. In the back seat sat Jimmy Cascone, chinning and laughing with his sons, Joe, who sat up front, and Vic, who drove.

An adrenaline rush spun Matt's head around. He saw the fat ass cop drop his weight into the cruiser and shut the door. Without giving thought, Matt turned and started back toward Jimmy's stoop. When the limousine rolled past him, Matt sped up, no longer faking a drunk's walk. His primary goal was to be in perfect position for a clear shot at the grinning Garbage King.

Matt undid the middle button of his overcoat and slipped his gloved hand inside. The fine calf leather had been scuffed and dirtied as part of Matt's disguise, but the glove's skin-tight fit allowed him a firm grip on the .357.

Everything around him, buildings, traffic, pedestrians, floated on the periphery of his vision and awareness. The only things Matt paid keen attention to were Jimmy's Cadillac, Sergeant Johnny's patrol car, which was now crossing Kenmare, and the ten-speed, his trusty steed, that he'd soon be mounting to make his get-away. As he passed the marked-up bike, he looked to see that vandals hadn't disabled it. It appeared ready to go.

Matt saw the Caddy pull in front of Jimmy's building and double-park. A good sign the three Cascones were sticking to their normal routine. According to Frankie, the sons typically let the old man off and immediately departed to beat the heavy tunnel traffic to Brooklyn, where they both lived in the Italian enclave of Bay Ridge.

Allowing additional time and distance for familial good-byes, Matt slowed his pace. Suddenly, a neighborhood guy appeared in front of him between two parked cars, having crossed the street at mid-block, in an anxious hurry to get somewhere. Matt lowered his eyes, but kept the man in sight.

As Jerry (Matt didn't recall his last name) approached, he gave Matt a long hard look, zeroing in on Matt's right hand stuck inside his overcoat. Resuming his staggered walk, Matt released his grip on the gun and tugged at his belt, pretending to adjust his pants. He withdrew his hand into the open. He hoped these pretenses would abate the wiseguy's suspicions, and Jerry *something* would forget Matt and go back to worrying about his own problems, like how to cover his next vig payment or how to explain the lavender lipstick on his dress shirt to his wife of twenty years. Whatever thoughts reclaimed Jerry's attention, Matt was grateful for them as the nervous goombah rushed past him.

To make sure Jerry wasn't full of pretense himself, Matt located Jerry's reflection in the storefront window of Loretta's Candy Store. He saw Jerry rapidly distancing himself and was reassured enough to turn his attention back to the idling Cadillac.

Matt was about twenty yards from the limousine when the rear door opened. Jimmy swung his legs out, lingered for one more round of chitchat, then lifted the rest of his stocky frame from the car. He shut the door, waved good-bye, and stepped between parked cars toward the curb. The Caddy roared off, yelping as it left a stain of rubber behind. Jimmy smiled to himself, as if enjoying an inside joke with his rapidly departing offspring.

The Garbage King moved quickly for a man of his age and dimensions, which brought Matt to lengthen his stride. Jimmy noticed the swift moving wino, squinted with concern, and hurried even more. He fished a set of keys from his coat pocket and took the steps two at a time up to his doorway.

At the point of no return, Matt leapt into an arms-pumping sprint. Running with such naked agility and brawn, no one could now mistake him for a derelict. The cold damp fear on Jimmy's face attested to that.

Fumbling with fat fingers to isolate the door key, Jimmy cursed, "Fuck!"

He stuck the key into the polished brass lock on the oak portal with a centerpiece of thick, etched glass. The same moment the door pushed open, Matt, on the run, slipped his hand into his longcoat and withdrew the .357. He reached the foot of Jimmy's stoop and took aim just as the old gangster foolishly turned for one more look at the hit-man pursuing him. Jimmy stared, seemingly to identify his assailant, to snap a picture and carry it with him in death as if he'd have the capacity to resurrect and take revenge on his killer.

The housekeeper's cries and the Cadillac screeching to a halt registered somewhere in Matt's brain, but he was unaware of them. He was focused on the vile polluter. Matt had never before peered so intensely at another human being as he did now. And what he saw was a pathetic, frightened, sixty-four year-old man.

A canopy of bushy brows shielded Jimmy's deep, dark eyes, inordinately squeezed together in the center of his face. From birth, the closeness of his orbs had given him a deceitful appearance. By looks alone he could never be trusted. Poor Jimmy had no chance of being a doctor or lawyer or candlestick maker. His black beady eyes had destined him for a criminal career.

Sympathy rose within Matt for the startled, balding senior citizen, whose round head and close-set eyes gave him the tragic-comical look of a terrified bowling ball. He allowed this compassion for Jimmy to come and go. Matt didn't fear it. Now that he was in the act, with his gun drawn and pointed, nothing internal could keep him from pulling the trigger. Nor did he require further motivation.

Matt didn't need to remind himself how horrid Jimmy was, how the Garbage King had poisoned vast regions of the country with toxic waste that would ultimately spread cancers and other diseases throughout the population. It wasn't necessary for him to recall the memory he feared most, that of his mother's last month before her death, how she had suffered horribly from the pancreatic cancer that ravaged her once robust anatomy. He didn't have to revisit the image of her gaunt, yellowed face, her shrunken lips too weak to move, unable to whisper to her son how much she loved him. All the preparations had been done. He was in the act. Nothing more was needed.

Matt wasn't conscious of pulling the trigger. He had willed the bullet to explode from his hand. Flesh ripped from the left side of Jimmy's neck and stuck to the etched glass. Spurting blood quickly followed.

The force of the first bullet spun Jimmy into the hall and the heavy door closed behind him. Matt moved forward to jump the steps but stopped when Jimmy came to rest with his back against the plate glass and used it to keep from falling. The victim's second foolish mistake allowed Matt to remain where he was and will seven more bullets to explode from his hand.

Thick glass shattered as bullets, two and three, tore into the back of Jimmy's head. There was no longer any doubt as to whether Jimmy would survive or not. The old man had lost too much brain matter. Nonetheless, Matt emptied the rest of the clip through the heavy oak, estimating where Jimmy's now hidden body had slumped. Firing all the bullets in this manner also prevented the .357 from being used against him after he tossed it away. Which he did so, immediately, under the car parked directly behind him.

Seizing a last look at the bullet-riddled door, shards of glass, blood sprays, and moist patches of flesh - some stuck, some sliding down vertical surfaces - Matt absorbed a visual account of what he had done. This pause for a last look was similar to Jimmy's two mistakes, yet Matt was compelled to fix the scene in his

memory. It seemed important that nothing go unnoticed and sink into his subconscious, where it might wreak havoc. But it was impossible to grasp it all, so he took what he could before fright and flight pulled him away.

His escape route down Mulberry Street looked clear. The few pedestrians who had been on the sidewalk were now trembling in hallways or fleeing for their lives to the other side of the street, and there were no approaching cars in sight. Matt ran, steadily building speed, his lean muscular legs moving at full stride, his athletic body devouring distance.

The housekeeper's screams - "He shot Jimmy! He shot Jimmy!" - echoed in the tight tenement canyon. Even more disturbing was the furious sound behind him of the Cadillac thundering in reverse, driven by hateful kin intent on avenging their father's murder.

As Matt ran for his life, he relied on a fragile barrier to hold back the sea of panic within him. He had to make it to a safe place before the realization of his actions caused him to shake with fear and remorse. Fortunately, for now, he was protected by a substantial amount of shock, and for this he thanked God.

Reaching the ten-speed, Matt tugged at the partly sawed-through chain and it snapped apart as planned. He again thanked God. Twice so soon. Matt suspected he was praying. But this time, he didn't belittle his motives. As he mounted the bike to pedal away, praying seemed most appropriate.

Matt drove his legs down on the pedals and accelerated to a reckless level of control, at which point he eased onto his seat and cruised at high speed past the parked cars, storefronts, and empty doorways.

The Caddy squealed and skidded before it sideswiped a parked car and came to a stop in front of Jimmy's tenement. Matt glanced back to make sense of the crashing sound and saw Joe jump from the limo with a gun in his hand. Matt leaned his body over the steering bar to present as small a target as possible. He worried how much damage a bullet in the ass might do. How far would it travel up his back? Would it explode a kidney, lodge in his liver, or shatter his spine? His sphincter tightened like casehardened steel, striving to make his anal passage bulletproof. Luckily, no shots were fired.

Why Joe hadn't pulled the trigger was a glorious mystery to Matt. Perhaps the angry son was running after him, trying for a better shot. It would be a few minutes before Matt became aware of the other threat closing in on him, and then Matt would guess Sergeant Johnny, while wedged between driver and windshield, had screamed at Joe to *put that fucking gun away!*

At the moment, however, what most concerned Matt was Jerry *something*, just ten yards ahead, rooted like a war memorial, feet apart, determined to do a heroic deed, perhaps with the illusion the Cascones would pay off his debts or his wife would forgive his indiscretions. In full throttle, Matt drove straight at the wannabe hero, and watched for clues Jerry might offer.

Fear flashed in Jerry's eyes just before he quick-stepped to the right to attack Matt from the side. But lacking the cojones of a veteran bullfighter, Jerry had moved too soon, giving Matt time to adjust. He twisted the steering column and rammed into Jerry with bone-shattering force. The rookie toreador howled in pain as he flew backward into a crowd of metal garbage cans.

Crumpled in a heap, the deflated wiseguy became old news, and Matt turned his attention to the Caddy moving past him in reverse. Vic, behind the wheel, his face disfigured by malevolence, mouthed something soundless and fierce. The image of the mute monster growing smaller as the Caddy pulled away gave Matt the false sense Vic was running away from him.

But the comforting delusion didn't last long. It quickly became apparent Vic was racing ahead to cut Matt off and trap him between the two brothers. To avoid this snare, Matt would have to dart between parked cars and speed away in the street or opposite sidewalk. It would take a precise move, and up until the final moment before braking hard and pivoting on a dime, Matt wouldn't know which of the two brothers he would try to out-race, especially if Vic also had a gun.

Matt spun his head to locate Joe and caught sight of the police cruiser gliding alongside him. Matt riveted his attention on the black steel revolver as it swayed for a clear shot. His eyes traveled up the outstretched arm to the red-cheeked sergeant, who leaned across the patrolman driver and yelled, "Stop, or you're a fucking dead man!"

Matt ducked as low as he could, pressing his chest against the steering column, his head at an angle, keeping the patrol car in sight. Ahead, the Caddy swerved to a stop at the intersection, and Vic opened the door. There was a flash of light. A neighborhood teen charged from the left with a garbage can lid raised high, reflecting the waning daylight.

Matt's leg shot out and struck the kid, whom he recognized to be Pauly Beans, the son of an old friend, square in the groin. Pauly doubled over and banged the metal cover against the side of Matt's head. It wasn't a powerful strike, but enough to send Matt careening into a parked car. His shoulder hit first, then the side of his face slammed into the car. Matt managed to straighten the wheel and keep the bike rolling.

The sneak attack and hard jolt had Matt confused as to where his three pursuers were. The instantaneous data feeding his cranial supercomputer had been interrupted. He could no longer calculate the triangle threat closing in on him.

Untethered in a cracked reality, except for the acute sense of danger, Matt contracted every muscle in his body and squeezed the hand brakes until the bike skidded and screeched to a stop. The smell of burnt rubber rushed up his nose. It took a moment for the patrolman driver to react, and the cruiser stopped a full car length in front of Matt.

Matt jumped from his bike, and in one fluid motion, lifted and turned the ten-speed, fitting it between two parked cars. He raced across the street, pushing the bike ahead of him. He angled up the street toward Joe, and away from Vic and the

two policemen. A nearby fire hydrant provided a wide passage between parked cars to the sidewalk. Matt mounted the bike on the run and pedaled with wild abandon.

Up ahead, a loose group of four men stirred nervously, as if undecided how to react to the approaching killer. This angered Matt more than it frightened him. *Mind your fucking business like you would any other whack-job!* He wanted to shout, but didn't. Someone might recognize his voice. Another option was to transform himself into someone more dangerous than a *bum on a bike*. Matt needed a weapon. He saw one.

Matt braked next to the gleaming candy-apple fender of Richie Trattori's beautifully restored "58" Impala. He grabbed one of the long chrome antennas and snapped it off at the base. *Sorry Richie*. He heard a scream and looked down to see a terrified woman hunched low by the Impala's rear bumper. It was Mrs. Ravecchi, a graying, sixty-year old. Matt felt awful for having frightened her. He looked up and saw the police car speeding in reverse, the sergeant leaning out the window, pointing his gun.

Sorry Mrs. Ravecchi. Matt raised the antenna and whipped down onto the Impala's trunk. It left a gash, chipped paint, and sent the old lady screaming into the street. Just as Matt had planned, she ran directly into the path of the cruiser, and just as he had hoped the cop car stopped before running into her. Mindless with terror, she threw herself onto the patrol car's trunk for protection. Crawling, clawing, clutching, she held on as if it were the last spaceship to heaven. The sergeant screamed at her to move, but she wouldn't budge. Matt turned his attention to the four guys ahead.

Pumping the pedals and picking up speed, Matt slashed the air with his silver rapier to send a message to one and all. *Don't get in my fucking way. I'm more than a bum on a bike. I'm a man to be feared.*

Matt recalled doing the same exact thing as a kid. On a bike, with an antenna, in disguise, pretending to be Zorro. It was hard to shake the nagging image that he looked like a joke and might be inviting interference. But it was too late to change tactics, so he continued whipping his foil to and fro.

To his astonishment and relief, the four men, one by one, removed themselves from his path. Evidently, he appeared more threatening than a kid playing make-believe. No doubt, the fact he had just pumped eight bullets into a powerful Mafioso carried a ton of weight.

It wasn't yet time to celebrate. Joe, the avenging son with pistol in hand, was nowhere in sight. Matt feared Joe might be hiding among the parked cars, waiting in ambush. He stopped pedaling and let the bike glide along the sidewalk at a more cautious speed. He stared at every space between cars and held his breath as he passed each one. Near the end of the block, Matt had a gut-gripping premonition that an attack was about to occur.

Bam! A shot rang out. It shattered a Chinese laundry's storefront window and pelted Matt with stinging glass. The weapon had been fired from across the street,

where Joe stood in the bullet-riddled doorway, his father's body at his feet. Two more bullets ripped into the parked car at the end of the block, and another two struck the sidewalk just as Matt turned left at the corner and sped away on Kenmare Street.

For the time being, Joe and Vic were no longer threats, but the cops were still a danger. Matt saw the patrol car reach the intersection, jammed with traffic. The cars, cabs, and trucks, on the one-way cross street, made it impossible for the blue and white to chase Matt directly. The policemen had two options: continue up Mulberry or go in the other direction on Kenmare.

Matt slowed at the corner of Centre Street and waited for the cops to make their move. He watched them reverse onto Kenmare, then speed up Mulberry, siren and lights flashing. He knew they would drive to the next cross street and make two consecutive left turns at Spring and Centre to circle back on him.

Matt raced ahead one more block to Lafayette, where he jumped the curb onto the asphalt, turned left and pedaled with Herculean effort. He covered the short stretch to Broome Street in a matter of seconds. At the corner, he turned right toward the industrial area, where his van waited, all the while attentive of the wailing siren in pursuit. He had traveled three more blocks by the time the cop car reached the intersection of Broome and Centre. He steered uptown onto Mercer Street and wheeled desperately toward Spring.

Matt wasn't sure he'd make it to the end of the block before the patrol car crossed Mercer and spotted him. He considered hiding behind a parked vehicle, then realized the siren was moving away from him. Somewhere along the way, the cops had guessed wrong and turned left toward Chinatown. It seemed like a small miracle. Perhaps God *was* on his side. . . and killing Jimmy was justified. . . and Matt was a divine instrument, a chosen Crusader, protecting the Holy Grail of God's earthly creation.

Stop it! This might be a set up. The Fates about to stick a foot out. Matt concentrated on pumping his legs.

At the corner of Spring and Wooster, he braked, dismounted, and lifted his bike onto the sidewalk. He peeked around the corner and saw a muscular man by the open end of a furniture delivery truck across the street from where the van was parked. The mover would definitely recall a *disheveled guy with a bike* - how the police would describe the suspect.

Matt laid the ten-speed on the ground and steadied himself for the walk to his van. When he angled the corner, he saw that the mover had turned toward a large desk inching toward him, pushed by someone inside the truck. Another fortunate occurrence. It was hard not to feel blessed. He reached the van unnoticed, unlocked the side cargo door, and stepped inside. He slid the door shut, sat on an upturned plastic bucket, and took a deep breath. Matt closed his eyes and whispered, "Thank you."

CHAPTER 14

The only light in Matt's workshop came from a 60 watt desk-lamp masked with a dark blue filter; an extra precaution to prevent light from showing through the windows that were covered with black velveteen and duct tape, while Matt eliminated evidence linking him to Jimmy's murder.

Matt rubbed a sleeve of the wool overcoat against the vertical blade of a table-saw until it tore enough to rip the rest off by hand. He placed the amputated sleeve in one of the plastic trash bags arranged next to him on the floor. His plan was to cut the clothing he had worn in disguise into small pieces and dump them at different locations throughout Manhattan. He had already disassembled the lighter items - the pants, socks, shirt, hat, and undergarments - with a pair of scissors. All that remained to be worked on was the sturdy coat and sneakers, which needed to be sawed through. And the gloves. He still wore the gloves. They would be last, after he cleaned and vacuumed the immediate area and inside the van.

Attentive to the smallest detail, Matt strove to leave nothing for the forensic technicians to analyze. He even soaked the clothes in water before cutting them to prevent fibers from floating off to other parts of the workshop. He was trying to think of everything, for the slightest mistake could send him to prison for life, or worse.

Leaving the bike behind still troubled him. Though he had removed the serial numbers and other identifiers, there was always the possibility he had missed something. Perhaps a unique part, which might be identified and traced back to Robert. Matt had almost stopped the van at the corner of Wooster and Spring to retrieve the ten-speed, but with approaching sirens howling all around him, he decided not to take the chance. He eyed the bike lying on the ground, as he drove past it, and hoped for the usual outcome when something of value was left unattended on the sidewalks of New York. The likelihood the bike had been recycled within minutes by a street entrepreneur was of some comfort to him.

Another concern for Matt was his van had been parked in the general area of the crime scene at the time of the murder. Maybe parking patrol would remember his plates and pass this information on to the police. He'd considered this problem during the planning stage and had come up with an explanation. He'd say he was roaming Soho snapping stock photos of early century cast-iron architecture. If the investigators asked to see the photos he took that day, he'd claim he didn't find

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anything of interest to add to his stock collection. He was examining how this would sound to a skeptical listener, when someone knocked at the door.

The proverbial *knock at the door* caused Matt to catch his breath and freeze all movement. He tried not to make a sound as if total silence would turn him invisible. Three more taps at the door. Hesitant. Lacking the authority of a policeman's call. *Who could it be? A delivery person? An assistant with a portfolio? At this hour? Go away,* Matt willed. *I'm not opening the door for anyone.*

Matt feared he still had traces of makeup on his face. He had washed once, quickly in the back of the van, when he emptied a gallon jug of water into a bucket, soaped up, and scrubbed his face in a hurry. After removing his coat, stripping down to the pair of jeans he had worn underneath the green slacks, and changing his shoes, Matt checked himself in the rear-view mirror, but didn't spend time to make a careful inspection. Only after a long hot shower would he feel comfortable facing anyone.

More knocks. Matt roared as loudly as he could without making a sound. *Go away!* He heard Carol's voice. "Matt? Are you in there?"

Dammit! He wanted her to go away, but suffered great guilt for not responding to her. Hadn't he promised when Jimmy was eliminated he would concentrate on comforting Carol. Matt pictured her outside, shivering in the cold, wanting something, needing to hear him speak. "Just a minute."

He switched off the desk lamp, waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, then walked to the door. He took a steadying breath and brushed hair from his forehead. He undid the locks and positioned himself, one gloved hand on the knob and the other behind his back. Opening the door slightly, Matt avoided being lit directly by the outside security light.

Carol looked confused by Matt's guarded welcome and stared at him as if she spotted something out of the ordinary, perhaps a bit of streaked makeup. He would've been more concerned about what she saw, except he was overwhelmed by how sad and lovely she looked. He wanted to fling open the door, impervious to the light that might fall on him, and smother his fears and her sorrow in an embrace. Instead, he could only hide in the dark and lie to her. "I can't open the door anymore than this. I'm working with light sensitive material."

"I'm sorry. I'll wait till you finish to talk to you."

"It's okay. What is it?"

"I'm having my brother's body cremated tomorrow. I thought I should tell you."

"I want to be there."

Her mouth lifted toward a smile, but didn't quite make it. "Thank you. I'd like that."

"What time should we leave?"

"Is nine o'clock okay?"

"Yes."

"I'll let you get back to work. Goodnight."

“Goodnight.”

He watched her walk away, and thought of the smile that had almost broke upon her lips. Exaggerating the happiness he may have brought her, he delayed for a few moments longer the bleak night that lay ahead of him.

While Matt drove, searching dark streets and alleys for dumpsters to unload his black plastic bags, a disquieting presence accompanied him. It swelled from inside and grew beyond the confines of his skin. In a torturous rhythm, the sinister tumor leaked gory images and piercing frights. Overflowing, they sloshed in the back of the van, and dripped out the door, leaving a moist trail for Lou to follow. Matt wondered how long he would suffer this way? Would relief only come by confessing to the murder?

Fuck! Matt hated the thought. He even hated when it happened in movies, seeing it as a cheap plot device, a short cut to the end. But now, he understood the reality of it. *A man with a conscience could be beaten senseless by regret.*

Matt had to fight back. Yes, he was a man of conscience, but he also had sufficient reason to kill. Jimmy Cascone was a mass murderer whose victims perished painfully over time. The Garbage King had to be stopped. The New York State Courts would never see it this way, but Matt was hopeful God would understand. He needed only to confess to God for relief.

After dumping the last black plastic bag and tossing the suitcase with guns into the East River, Matt headed back to the studio. He focused his eyes on the rain-slicked streets passing under him, and slumped back in time to the formality of Catholic confession. He began his contrition with the words, “Bless me father for I have sinned. It’s been a long time since my last confession.” Matt felt no obligation to have a priest relay the message.

There was little chance for sleep that night so Matt didn’t even try. He avoided thoughts about the murder by reviewing the cover-up in detail. When he exhausted that subject, he turned his attention to the upcoming photo shoot. A big budget production required much preparation. Matt had to look over the art director’s drawings and blend them with his own perspective, list the materials he’d need to create the images he imagined, and hire the required crew. The sleepless night provided him with an abundance of time, and Matt was able to complete his initial planning by the time dawn broke. At seven o’clock, he called Allen Podowski and asked him to be first assistant on the BeeTee shoot.

Promptly, at eight-thirty, Allen arrived at the studio, eager to prove his ability to handle the job of lead assistant. The young photographer, one year out of Design School, had worked for Matt before as a back-up to Robert, but this would be the first time he’d be carrying the bulk of assisting duties, which included giving direction to others. Matt had celebrity status within the assistant community. Besides his acclaimed artistic skills and openness to teach others, Matt was known to pay well

and treat his workers with respect, even forgiving the occasional screw-up. It was obvious by Allen's nervous intensity, the way he locked onto every word Matt said, that he wanted to impress Matt and be offered the now vacant position of full-time studio assistant.

The clear sky and bright sun had produced an unusually mild December morning. The kind of early brilliance that gave most New Yorkers a positive shove out the door. Taking advantage of the warm sunlight, Matt and Allen spoke in the parking lot near the studio's rear entrance, which had been repaired yesterday, while two other work crews had cleaned-up and repainted the studio.

The puffiness and dark circles framing Matt's bloodshot eyes were in stark contrast to Allen's wide sparkling orbs. Flush with enthusiasm, the young apprentice grabbed the sheet of hand-written notes from his mentor and listened to Matt's instructions.

"Here's the purchase and rental list. Check everything yourself. Especially the diffusion screens. Look for doubles and missing gradations. When you get back, first thing you do is paint the cove flat white, twenty feet up, twenty-five wide, and twenty-five out on the floor. Measure it. I rather you be over than under. Understand?"

"Totally."

Satisfied with Allen's emphatic nod, Matt continued. "Watch for drips and globs. Use a side light to spot them. Give the paint plenty of time to dry before you set up the equipment the way I sketched it. I want an 8 f-stop. Any questions, give me a call."

Allen backstopped toward the van. "I'll have everything done by noon."

"You got all day. There's no need to rush. What's important is you do it right."

"Gotchya."

Watching Allen bolt to the van, Matt wasn't sure if his last bit of counsel had gotten through.

Matt heard the door above him close. He looked up and saw Carol at the top of the iron staircase. Her sadness was apparent, yet her presence brought him joy. He had seen many enchanting blue eyes, but Carol's drew him like no other, as if he had known them in another lifetime - instantly intimate, eternally familiar. Matt concluded the sun must love her because once again she was radiantly lit by its morning glow. It inspired him enough that he thought to use a rim light with a cool filter on the first blonde model in the BeeTee shoot to recapture the exquisite image he was now enjoying so much.

As Carol made her way down the stairs, her simple gray cotton skirt bounced off the tops of her knees. On alternate steps, Matt saw halfway up her thighs. Her long legs were sheathed in black tights, concealing her skin, but not their firm contours. It occurred to Matt that this was the first time he'd seen her in a dress. He felt a tingling sensation in his groin and took pleasure in it. A good sign that his burden would eventually be off-loaded in a foreign port. A place he could visit, but not be

forced to stay. The soft swelling against Matt's leg reassured him he would soon return to a normal and vibrant life.

"Hello, Matt."

"Hello."

"Are you ready to go?"

"Yes." He pointed to the street at a black Mercedes with a gray-suited driver behind the wheel. "I leased a car for the day. It'll make getting around easier."

Carol embraced him. "Thank you, Matt. Your help is a great comfort to me."

Matt loved having her in his arms, but stopped himself from burrowing his face in her curls and kissing her hair. *Be careful.* They would share many emotions on this sad day. *No kisses. Just hugs, today. I can let her know how I feel, later.*

How do I feel?

I need more time to answer that.

They said little during the brief ride to the mortuary in Chelsea. The funeral home had a dark slate exterior and colonial-style windows with rose-colored panes, adorned with stained glass flowers. The large green awning above the entryway symbolized its original clientele: the Irish community that dominated Manhattan's Westside in the early 1900s.

Mr. O'Donnell, the proprietor and funeral director, was dressed entirely in black except for his stiff white shirt. He greeted Matt and Carol, and immediately informed them Robert's remains wouldn't be a pleasant sight since the body had only arrived a half-hour ago from the morgue. While Mr. O'Donnell spoke, Matt found it difficult not to focus on his ashen pallor and wonder if breathing in too much formaldehyde had already partially embalmed him.

The monochrome mortician explained, "We haven't had the time to properly prepare the deceased for family viewing."

Carol didn't hesitate to voice her opinion. "I saw my brother yesterday at Bellevue. Today, he can remain covered." She turned to Matt. "Unless you want to see him?"

The news of her visit to the morgue surprised him. "No."

Mr. O'Donnell pointed to a maroon velvet couch. "Please have a seat while I prepare a few things. It won't take me long." He left them and disappeared into his office.

"Did you go to Bellevue by yourself?"

"I couldn't find you, so I called Detective Randazzo. He arranged the visit and met me there."

"I'm sorry I wasn't available."

"I figured you were busy with your photography."

Not exactly. Matt took Carol's hand and led her toward the couch, the color of which reminded him of the blood that had pooled around Robert's legs. He recalled how hard he had labored to mop the caked blood and chalk outline from the dressing room floor. He had avoided the room ever since. They sat on the blood red couch and held hands.

Mr. O'Donnell kept his word and it wasn't long before Matt and Carol stood by Robert's body, which had been placed on a polished wood table and covered by a thick, white linen cloth. In the dimly lit viewing room, the two held hands while each rested their other hand on the body.

They bereaved silently. Matt assumed Carol was praying. He opted for a less formal method and spoke to Robert as if he were still alive, telling his young friend he had killed the man responsible for the toxic spill by the waterfront. Matt hoped this would gratify Robert's spirit. If nothing else, the memory of Robert stating he'd consider Matt a hero for such a deed made him feel better, even proud of what he had done. Unexpectedly, Matt found some consolation in his final good-bye to Robert.

The rest of the cremation service proceeded without delay. A few hours later, after the remains had cooled and been placed in a ceramic container, Matt and Carol walked through a dirt field in Central Park, looking for an appropriate site to spread Robert's ashes. The fresh air and the feel of earth under Carol's feet seemed to invigorate her. She spoke without apparent sadness for the first time that day. "I remember there being a bridge over the lake somewhere."

"You sure you don't want to do this in Idaho?"

"New York was his home."

Matt pointed to group of trees in the distance. "The lake's over there."

They walked alongside the lake toward a small stone bridge that spanned a narrow channel of murky water.

Reacting to the sight and smell of the pea-green slough, Matt said, "It's not very clean here. We could try another part of the lake."

"I didn't expect to find crystal clear water in the middle of Manhattan."

When they reached the center of the bridge, Carol took the ceramic container from Matt and removed the lid. "Maybe his presence will work a miracle here." She tipped the urn, and the ashes and bone fragments dropped into the water below.

They watched the gray flakes, which had settled on top of the water, float slowly toward the main body of the lake. Carol broke the silence. "Robert was the only family I had. I needed him. He gave me strength. I should never have left him on his own." Tears ran down her cheeks.

Matt placed his arm around Carol's waist as his own eyes flooded. He strained to keep the vanishing flakes in view.

Carol held out the ceramic container. "What do you think I should do with this?"

"We could break it and bury the pieces in the ground. It's all natural. Red clay and water and a strip of cork."

"That's a good idea."

Not far from the stone bridge, among the exposed roots of a naked elm, Matt dug a shallow hole with his heel. It didn't take much effort, but it was enough to remind him how tired he was, having had no sleep the night before. After covering the ceramic fragments with dirt, Matt said, "I could use a cup of coffee. Can we go somewhere and sit for a while?"

“I’d like that.”

The sunny December day had encouraged mothers and nannies to shepherd flocks of pre-schoolers to the park. The cafeteria at the zoo wasn’t as tranquil as Matt and Carol had hoped, so they took their coffee and moved outside to the patio area to sit by themselves. Using a discarded New York Post, Matt brushed autumnal dirt from the table and chairs before he and Carol sat down. They had an unobstructed view of the nearby seal pool, whose denizens were either on the decks, basking in the summery light, or in the water, splashing and barking with glee.

Matt resisted the pleasure of the sunlight on his face. He wanted the weather to be cold, dismal, and rainy with a dark sky weeping for Robert. He looked at Carol. Her eyes were closed and her head lifted toward the sun. Her chest rose and fell noticeably. She seemed to be inhaling the sunshine. With the apparent comfort the temperate weather was providing Carol, Matt changed his opinion in an instant and was now grateful for the surprisingly mild day.

This abrupt one-eighty brought Matt to realize this day was more about caring for Carol than grieving for Robert. She was the future. Her lost brother, now a beautiful memory, was the past. Matt suddenly wanted to know everything about her. The initial probe slipped out before he could censor it. “Your brother said your parents died in a car accident.”

Her eyes opened slowly and her expression remained serene, calming Matt’s concern that his statement might’ve been ill timed.

“Robert was only six. I had to leave Art School and get a job to take care of him.”

“That must have been rough.”

“It was, but taking care of Robert answered a lot of questions. I had no doubts then what my purpose in life was.”

He wondered if she knew her purpose in life now, but she spoke before he asked. “You’re lucky to have your family.”

“Yeah. But they can attach you to people and events you no longer want in your life.”

What the hell is this? I’m blaming my family for the mess I’m in? Lucy! I’m blaming Lucy!

“You don’t like your past?”

Matt’s sudden anger toward Lucy unnerved him. “It had good and bad. I want to get beyond it.” He didn’t want to talk about himself. “You had guts packing it all up and leaving this city. I tried that once. I went out West. Did some landscape photography. Kind of a discovery trip.”

Fuck! I’m back to me. This day isn’t about Carol or Robert. It’s like every other day. It’s about me.

“Did you find yourself?”

His self-disgust produced a rambling response, “Yeah. But I came back. And I got lost again.”

“It’s an ongoing quest. We’re always changing.”

Christ, now she’s taking care of me. “I stopped looking. I settled in a comfort zone.” He shook his head. “I don’t mean to sound callous or shallow.”

“You don’t.”

Ask for her help.

What?

She has wisdom. It’s in her eyes. In her voice. She knows things you need to know. Ask her! “Do you have any advice to give me?”

Her eyes lifted. “What kind of advice?”

“I don’t know. Whatever you think I should hear. I never listen to anyone. I trust you.”

“I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what kind of advice you need.”

Her discomfort made it clear how ridiculous his request had been. “I didn’t mean to get heavy like that.”

A smile lit her face. “That’s nice. . . that you trust me.”

Her brightened expression made a world of difference. Matt pushed aside his troubling thoughts and accepted the pleasure of her company. The rest of their time together that afternoon was both comforting and fruitful. Matt achieved most of what he had set out to do. He learned much more about her and added to the history of cherished moments between them - his ticket to Idaho. What didn’t occur was the magical spark. The metaphysical indication of passion. But with Carol, he wouldn’t hurry it. He was prepared to let their fervor ferment slowly like a promising vintage. By the time they arrived back at the studio parking lot, Matt had a growing optimism they would someday be lovers.

The sky was dark when Matt and Carol stood at the foot of the iron grate staircase. She took his hand. “Thank you for everything, Matt. You’ve helped me in so many ways to get through this difficult time.”

“It was the least I could do.”

Carol glanced at the steps. “I’ll be out of your way as soon as I get a plane ticket.”

“There’s no rush. You can stay as long as you want.” *Tell her how you feel.* “I. . . enjoy being with you.”

Sadness came over her. “I have to go home. Start my life without Robert.”

Back off. “If you need anything at all, please ask me.”

“Thank you.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Goodnight, Matt.”

“Goodnight.”

She turned and walked up the stairs. With each step that took Carol farther from him, his companion torment moved closer to take her place. Matt knew it would be another long night.

CHAPTER 15

Matt was glad to be at the center of the bustling activity taking place in his studio. It was a true diversion from his unrelenting worries. Unlike last night, when he tossed and turned in bed until dawn, and may have totaled two hours of sporadic sleep.

When Matt first entered the studio that morning, he was pleased to see the back wall and floor correctly painted and the lights and camera properly positioned. Allen had done a thorough job yesterday. He'd spent the whole day at the studio and worked into the night, setting up the BeeTee shoot. It was after ten o'clock when Matt ordered him to go home. He liked Allen personally, and now that he'd demonstrated the ability to manage a large-scale preparation on his own, Matt was ready to offer him the position of studio assistant. The job had to be filled quickly, plus Matt didn't want - so soon after Robert's death - to interview and reject a dozen or so young, vulnerable applicants.

Sharon Baxter, a lanky brunette with flaming hazel eyes, walked onto the set. Matt complimented her appearance and pointed where he wanted her to stand. Moving closer, he studied the light on her face and on the cobalt blue dress she wore. It was made of cotton and Lycra, fitted on top with a slight flair starting at the waist and stopping three inches above the knees. He was pleased with the way Sharon's angular shoulders and sleek neck accented the thin straps, selling the overall sensuality of the summer evening dress.

Matt wanted more contrast between the light and shadow areas. He directed Allen, "Move the key light to the right and come in with it." When the shadows were correct, he said, "Stop. Set it there." After another careful inspection of Sharon and the blue dress, he walked from the set to the camera.

Matt had consumed a great quantity of coffee to get his sleep-deprived brain through the initial stages of the production, which included the required conferences with Steve and Beatrice to make sure all three were in agreement on the *look* they were after, and with the scores of questions and detailed instructions to the eight models, two make-up artists, two hairdressers, one stylist and her assistant, and three photo assistants. But now that he was behind the camera, ready to snap pictures, his compulsive precision provided all the stimulation he needed.

When Matt announced he was ready to *fire off* the first Polaroid, Steve and Beatrice rose from their plush, green leather chairs in the lounge area and selected layouts, sketches, and design notes from the papers scattered across the large, glass

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and chrome conference table. They walked to the set and sat behind Matt in their designated places, two tall director chairs, one labeled *Client*, the other *Art Director*, and waited for the Polaroid to develop. The rest of the production staff lined the sides of the set, prepared to spring into action at Matt's request.

After a number of Polaroids had been taken of Sharon in slightly varied positions, and the instant images examined and discussed by the designer and art director, Steve announced, "We like her left side better."

Matt turned to the model. "Sharon. Work camera right. We got a fast shutter, so it's okay to move."

Matt looked into the eyepiece and rotated the barrel of his new 180 Hasselblad lens, right and left, checking the focus on the swaying model. He began to press the shutter release and expose film. The power packs equipped with infrared sensors triggered the lamp heads with every exposure, and throughout the darkened studio each flash of light produced a *popping* sound and lifted a faint acrid smell from the sizzling glass and metal components. Working in an animated style, Matt shouted instructions and encouragement to the model on set. He would soon be in his creative *zone*, totally concentrated on his art and craft, directing and searching for the look that would sell thousands of Beatrice's summer dresses - perfect for enjoying a casual dinner after a day of sun and sports, or *derigueur* for all-night dancing at a steamy disco.

It happened during the second roll of film when Sharon and Matt joined in a spontaneous rhythm. Like a free-form dancer, she stepped, pivoted, dipped, and swung her arms, then paused for Matt to click the shutter and fire the lights. All the while, he cheered her on, boosting her confidence, eliciting her best performance.

"Good. Very nice. Chin up. More smile in your eyes. Beautiful. Now, burn me. Ouch! You are hot. Great. Play with your hair."

After six rolls of film - seventy-two exposures - Matt was certain he'd gotten enough outstanding chromes for Steve and Beatrice to choose from. The satisfied photographer applauded the model's performance. "We're done. You were wonderful, Sharon. Terrific moves. Go change, now."

His compliments had Sharon smiling as she strode from the set. Matt stepped away from the camera so Allen could remove the film back and replace it with the Polaroid back. As Matt did so, he noticed Carol by the kitchen doorway, standing in the dark, watching the photo shoot. He was about to wave to her when Beatrice gasped loudly.

The flustered designer sprang from her chair and shouted in the direction of Lynette Verdan, the model approaching the set, who wore a more luxurious silk rendition of the previous dress. "Her hair is all wrong. It must be shorter. It cannot touch her shoulders like that."

Matt put a hand on Beatrice's arm to calm her. "We'll take care of it. It's not a big problem."

"But it is a big problem. Will this girl allow her hair to be cut?"

Matt turned to the pearl-skinned blonde. “Lynette, can we cut your hair?”

The model’s big blue eyes narrowed. “How much?”

In the French manner, as old as Gaul itself, Beatrice emptied her lungs in a single burst, “Awfff,” and flailed her hands. “We are wasting so much time.”

“We’ll fix this *vitement*.” He turned to Lynette. “Just a little to get it off the shoulders.”

Matt was watching Lynette consider her options, when an angry voice screamed at him from behind. “You killed him!”

The shrill attack pierced his back like a Roman dagger. Matt could tell the words were awful and filled with contempt, but he couldn’t fully comprehend them or identify the speaker or even recognize where he was for the moment. Matt turned and saw Lucy glaring at him.

She moved closer. “You killed him, you bastard!”

The force of her rage continued to stall him. He didn’t know what she knew, but her ironclad conviction spread terror throughout his body.

“You had some goons blow his brains out!”

“Lucy, what are you talking about?”

“Don’t give me that bullshit! I know you killed Nails.”

Jesus! Everyone’s hearing this. Carol! Matt moved to smother Lucy in his arms, to quiet her. “You’re making crazy accusations.”

Lucy raised her hands to fend him off. “Get away from me. Don’t you touch me!”

“Lucy, we’ll talk about this later.”

Lucy stopped retreating and began hitting Matt’s arms with her fists. “I hate you! I hate you!”

He grabbed one of her hands, pulled her close, and circled his arms around her. Lucy was unable to strike him, but continued to struggle and toppled the main power pack with an errant kick. When the pack hit the ground, a shower of sparks shot from the breached capacitor. The key light, connected to the damaged power pack, fired rapidly and triggered the other lights on the set to flicker. The overall effect was a dizzying stroboscopic light show.

The eruption of sparks, echoing *pops*, and flashing lights distracted Matt, and Lucy was able to wriggle free. Allen rushed to the smoking pack and disconnected the power cord, ending the frenzied fanfare.

At a safe distance from Matt, Lucy shouted, “Nails didn’t do anything to you! He didn’t trash your studio! He didn’t kill Robert!”

Matt’s face burned with anger. He pointed a threatening finger. “Get out of here, now! Or I’ll throw you out!”

“You bastard! I hope you pay for this.” She rushed past Linda and left the studio.

After Lucy slammed the front door shut, the studio fell into an unbearable silence. Matt had two immediate and competing needs: one was to overcome what had just

happened and continue with the photo shoot, the other was to crawl into a deep dark hole and hide from everyone who was now staring at him. He felt the weight of their eyes, the burden of their questions. Almost to the point of tears, he wanted desperately not to be so mortified, guilty, and afraid.

Steve's florid face suddenly appeared in front of him, talking, saying something in earnest. Matt missed the beginning sentences, but took the last one to heart. "I don't know what the hell that was all about, but we have a photo shoot to finish."

Matt didn't respond to Steve. He simply blinked once, as if to wipe the slate clean, and with cold determination, stepped behind the camera. He had Allen replace the damaged power pack, and the session resumed, but none of the participants could dispel the shock of what had just taken place. It seemed as if everyone had secretly conspired to get through the production as quickly and quietly as possible. Beatrice never again mentioned the length of Lynette's hair and barely opined on any other style decisions. The models did as they were told and little else. Their spontaneity had quit for the day. There was hardly any chatter to break the surreal image of automatons working without affect, except for the occasional gush of gossip that swirled about when the photographer wasn't looking.

As for Matt, he concentrated on his photography in a way he had never done before. There would be no idle talk. No flights of fancy of the kind that often led to fresh lighting and styling techniques. Instead, he wrapped his mind around the core of his craft and moved cautiously down a familiar path. He believed if his thoughts wandered, he'd be paralyzed by fear and unable to continue. Matt was terrified to ponder the ramifications of what Lucy had said to him.

But it was impossible to stop them completely. *How could she know those things? Did someone tell her? Who else knows? Do they know about Jimmy? Shut up, dammit! Shut up!*

Throughout the afternoon, he did his best to fight off the barbed queries, but the wounds mounted and he steadily weakened. Fortunately for Matt, he was able to survive the photo session without collapse.

Allen was the last to leave. Matt had hurried him out, excusing him and the other assistants from their cleanup duties. Finally alone, Matt's anticipated relief didn't last long. The unleashed fears soon crashed the fence and broke through. The frightful rush tossed him head over heels and he landed face to face with the image of Carol's shock and pain when she heard Lucy scream Robert's name. Matt never turned back to look at Carol, at that moment or any time afterward. One glance at Carol would've unnerved him beyond control and cause him to cancel the photo shoot. But now that he was alone, there was nowhere he could turn without seeing the imagined anguish on her face.

Matt climbed the stairs to Carol's quarters and prepared himself to deny everything. He had to protect her from the truth. *Bullshit!* He had to protect himself from the truth.

He knocked at the door and waited. Enough time for him to panic. The words he had planned to say escaped him, the only thing left was his determination to deny everything. *That's my total defense? Jesus! I'm standing here naked.*

Carol opened the door, stared at him.

"Can I talk to you?"

She turned and walked past the open sofa bed, whose covers were in disarray as if she'd just been lying under them. She stopped by the window, where she faced him, tall and straight, waiting for him to speak.

He stepped inside but kept his distance. "What my niece said wasn't true."

"So are you going to tell me what's true? Or are you going to hide behind what's best for me to hear?"

He looked away. *I can't lie to her. She'll see right through me.*

His hesitation seemed to convince her he wouldn't be truthful. Her toughness melted into sadness. "I forget how deceitful people can be."

"Carol, I had no way of knowing Nails would hurt Robert. I only met him that day. He insulted my family. He hurt my father. I had a fight with him. He had no reason to take it out on Robert. I'm sorry. But I'm not. . ."

". . . To blame?"

Matt nodded

"Did you kill Nails?"

Matt shook his head. "I can't talk about that."

"You don't want me to know what kind of person you really are. The kind of person who put my brother in danger."

"No, I'm not like that."

"Who killed Nails?"

"I can't tell you."

Carol's eyes flared. She turned her back to him. "Go away."

Matt moved closer, but stopped himself from reaching out to touch her. "Carol, please listen to me."

"If you don't leave, I will."

"I don't want you to go. I just want. . ."

Carol spun to face him. "Get out!"

Her eyes brimmed with tears and burned with anger. Matt was helpless to do anything but turn and walk to the door. He closed it quietly behind him.

The cold evening air hit him just as the next urgent matter cried out for attention - *What did Lucy know about Nails' murder?* Was it pure speculation or did someone tell her something? And, if so, who told her? He had to talk to Lucy, right away.

These were the questions Matt fixed upon as he rode in a taxi to his family's apartment. Since he didn't know Lucy's current address or phone number, he'd have to get it from Rita, and decided it would be best to speak with his sister in person about Lucy's suspicions.

The cabby with an East European name on his license and thick accent broke Matt's concentration. "I miss number. Go back."

Matt looked out the cab's window, but paid little attention to the passing scenery until he spotted a uniformed cop sitting in an unmarked car, staring at him. He fought off the impulse to turn away quickly. *Don't do anything a guilty man would do.* He slowly turned his head to the other side of the street. That's when he saw it.

His body reacted before his mind understood. The ganglia of nerves at his solar plexus shuddered, and shock waves rippled throughout his body. After a stunned moment, Matt realized he was staring at the spot where he had recently taken a man's life. The first clue was the boarded-up window on the door, the clincher was the vertical line of bullet holes in the wood, each clearly circled and numbered in white chalk.

His eyes were glued to the damaged doorway, but what he saw were the vivid images of bullets ripping away parts of Jimmy's head. Matt relived the killing, felt the recoil of the gun, smelled the odor of seared cordite, and heard the sound of bullets bursting from the hot barrel. Matt recalled the seized look on Jimmy's face when he realized he was being hunted and Jimmy's puzzlement as he tried to figure out who the disguised assassin was. Apparently, it had been important for Jimmy to know which of his enemies to curse with his dying breath. The taxi rolled past the crime scene, but the brutal sights and sounds continued to play over and over in Matt's head like a scratched record. The needle finally lifted when the cabby flipped the meter and announced the ride was over.

As Matt walked up the old stairs, on the warm path of consanguine footsteps, he hadn't yet decided what he would say to Rita. Unnerved by the day's events, he found himself, once again, ill-prepared for an important face-to-face. He allowed himself the excuse that with Carol and Rita there was much personal emotion involved. But this exception didn't stop his growing concern that perhaps he was losing control, and the next time Lou grilled him, he might crack and make one of those pathetic movie-ending confessions.

Lou. He's the prick who talked to Lucy. I'm sure of it.

As always, Rita was happy to see her brother, but she saw something was troubling Matt and her smile quickly disappeared. After a hug and a kiss, she told him their father had already gone to bed for the night. Matt was glad to hear this because he needed to talk to Rita in private. There was no easy way to tell her about Lucy's outburst in the studio. He knew it would hurt her and hated being the bearer of bad news, but he had to get crucial information fast, so he got to the point of his visit right away.

Rita listened as Matt described what had happened. She gradually stopped setting out cold cuts, cheeses, and bread for her brother's visit. She moved to the kitchen table and sat down, hunched forward with worry. Seeing her this way slowed him like a roadside accident would, but he couldn't let sympathy distract him from what he had to do. He sat down next to Rita and pumped her for information.

"I tried to call Lucy. Her phone's disconnected."

"She moved in with a girlfriend after Nails was killed."

"Do you have her new number?"

"Lucy made me swear not to give it to you."

"I gotta talk to her. Convince her I had nothing to do with Nails' murder."

"I can't break my promise to her."

"Dammit!" Matt turned away from her.

Rita reached out and touched his arm. "Give her some time. Give me a chance to talk to her."

He faced her. "Why does she think I was involved?"

"I don't know. Maybe someone said. . ."

"What?"

It wasn't easy for her to finish. "That you went crazy when you found Robert's body."

He flinched. *Convince her you didn't.* He looked her in the eyes. "Yeah, I went crazy, but I had time to settle down. I'd be the number one suspect if somebody killed Nails."

"Why did you spend that night here? You haven't slept over in years."

Caught in a lie by his kid sister, Matt spared no ethical expense in protecting himself. "You think I had something to do with it?"

"I don't know what to think."

"You think I hired some hit-men to whack Nails?"

"I don't give damn about that creep! I'm worried because my daughter is hurting, and my brother's a suspect."

Lou! Matt clenched his jaw. "Has Lou been talking to you?" She didn't answer. "He's been coming around and spreading lies. Hasn't he?"

A tear rolled down Rita's cheek. "He never talks bad about you. He's just doing his job." She began to tremble. "I'm so scared."

Matt drew Rita close to him. She rested her head against his chest and hugged him until Thomas walked into the kitchen, sleepy-eyed, wearing a blue terry-cloth bathrobe over green and white striped pajamas.

The sight of his father brought a smile to Matt's face. Now that he and Rita had finished their talk, Matt was glad to have his father join them. "Pop, I thought you were asleep."

Thomas shuffled his slippered feet toward the kitchen window. He rubbed his right elbow and grumbled, "Can't sleep."

Matt traded his smile for a look of concern. "You taking your arthritis medicine?"

The old man stared out the window. "You hear what happened to Jimmy Cascone?"

Wrong topic. "I saw it on TV."

"They should fry the bastard who done it."

"Jimmy was no saint. He hurt a lot of people."

“I don’t know anyone he hurt. His father was a good man. His poor mother. His boys’ll find out who did it. They’ll do the right thing. They’ll get even.”

Matt shot up from his chair and shouted at his father. “You think he didn’t hurt anyone? He torched that tanker the other night. I could’ve been killed. He got what he deserved!”

The old man stood slack-jawed by the window, staring at his red-faced son. Rita also had her eyes fixed on her brother.

“I’m sorry Pop. I didn’t mean to yell at you.” Looking exhausted, Matt turned to Rita. “I’ve had a long day. I don’t even know what I’m saying anymore. I better go.”

No one spoke as Matt walked to the door and left the apartment.

He hailed a taxi on Canal Street, and during the ride back to his studio, he debated whether or not to tell Carol everything, including who killed Nails and how Matt was involved with the murder. The thought of her leaving New York, carrying a deep distrust of him back to Idaho, proved to be the deciding factor. He would make this one confession, only to her. Committed to this decision, Matt sat back in the seat and reflected on how this was probably the closest he’d ever come to an act of true love.

Matt stepped from the cab and was heartened to see the light in Carol’s window. He could tell her everything, right away, and avoid an interminable night of rehashing his decision to confess.

When she opened the door, Matt saw no sign of tears. She waited for him to say what she wanted to hear. He had left knowing her terms, so he’d better speak the whole truth or retreat down the stairs.

“You can ask me anything. I’ll tell you the truth.”

It was the greeting Carol demanded. She turned and walked to the middle of the room, where she sat on the sofa bed now in a closed position. Matt sat next to her. She looked him in the eyes. “Did you kill Nails?”

“No.”

“Who did?”

“I don’t know who pulled the trigger. But it was arranged by someone I know.”

“You paid him?”

“No. It was a favor.”

She tilted her head as if judging his response.

“He thought I was going to kill Nails. He wanted to protect me from going to jail.”

“He volunteered?”

“You don’t understand the people I grew up with. I haven’t seen him in years, but we have a history. He felt an obligation to help me.”

“Would you do the same for him?”

Matt was about to say *no*, when an inner voice reminded him he had just killed Jimmy.

Carol asked again, "Would you kill for him?"

He wanted so much to say *no*, but this would be lying to her, the very thing he had promised not to do. "To pay him back. Yes! I'd have to kill for him."

She stared at him with an intensity that made him think she was reading his soul. Then her eyes filled with tears. The tender reaction confused him for he had prepared himself for an outburst of anger. He watched a tear trickle down her cheek. It struck him that she was crying because she cared for him, that his honest answer had horribly upset her opinion of him.

"This isn't who I am. I left violence behind a long time ago." He became more anguished. "But when I saw Robert's body. What Nails did to him. I went insane. I wanted to spill his blood like he did to your brother. I loved Robert." He reached out and touched her hand. "Can you see how I got into this mess? Please understand."

Carol turned from him, but didn't push his hand away. She stared at the floor and sobbed quietly. He moved closer to hold her, but stopped when she stiffened.

Without looking at him, she said, "Please go."

He thought what he might say or do to change her wish, but he had no appropriate words or inventive plan, so he rose from the couch and left the apartment.

The black sky and frosty air went unnoticed for Matt was focused on the warm notion Carol no longer hated him. He deemed his return visit had been successful. But he knew better than to celebrate because over the long night, Carol could change her mind in a number of unforeseen ways.

Matt thought about Carol until he dozed off. After four hours of solid sleep, violent dreams woke him, and from then on, he slipped in and out of a restless slumber filled with visions of Jimmy's murder and the humiliation of Lucy's public accusation. In one dream, Jimmy's corpse cupped a decaying hand to Lou's ear, and with foul breath whispered secrets, leading his old friend to place Matt in handcuffs. But the most distressing of all the dreams were those of his sister and father in awful torment, crying unstoppable tears.

CHAPTER 16

Matt awoke before the first light of day. A carnivorous worm of worry, chewing inside, made it impossible for him to sleep any longer. He got out of bed in the pitch room and went directly to the bathroom to shower. The hot water refreshed and cleansed him, but it didn't wash away the disturbing image of his family in anguish. Matt dwelled on this vexation and came to understand why it made him so afraid. This vision seemed to be a premonition of things to come. His great fear was that he was somehow seeing the future and the torment his family would soon suffer because of him.

Matt donned a pair of khakis, a thin black wool sweater, and white tennis shoes. He made two phone calls: one to Linda, telling her not to come to the studio that day, the second to Allen, instructing him to deliver the BeeTee film to the lab and to take the rest of the day off. Matt headed out the bedroom door for a much-needed cup of coffee, but stopped at the top of the stairs when he saw the light in the kitchen and heard the *clink* of silverware. He wasn't ready to see Carol, not without preparation, not without caffeine, but the thought that he might not have much time left before she returned to Idaho coaxed him, ill-prepared as he was, to go downstairs. At the kitchen doorway, Matt inhaled a magnificent aroma. It claimed his senses and caused the immediate future to look much improved. It was the smell of fresh-brewed coffee.

Wearing a Pendleton shirt and bluejeans, Carol stood by the fridge and poured herself a glass of orange juice. She had her back toward Matt, who was stalled in the doorway, eyeing her flowing golden locks, and thinking how nice it would be to see her in the kitchen every morning. She became aware of his presence and turned without surprise to face him.

Matt stepped toward the kitchen counter. "You're up early."

"I have a lot to do today."

He removed a cup from the drying rack. "What?"

"Finish boxing Robert's stuff. And I have to get a plane ticket."

Though he knew she would soon be leaving, hearing her say *plane ticket* made him unexpectedly grim. In the time it took him to pour a cup of coffee, add sugar and milk, and take a sip, Matt decided to skip over last night's conversation and go directly to what he most wanted to say, "Spend one more day with me." Sounding too bare on its own, Matt added, "I'd like to show you around New York."

"I was born and raised here. I know this city."

“One more day.”

She stared as if examining his motives, but he never flinched, believing the longer she took to answer, the better chance his offer would be accepted.

A short time later, they walked down lower Mott Street through crowded Chinatown. Matt could only guess at why Carol had nodded and said *okay* to staying one more day. What he knew for certain was he was thrilled to be walking alongside her and had another twenty-four hours to regain her trust and win her affection.

The early morning crush of Asian-American shoppers, most on the prowl for groceries, intrigued Carol. Her eyes widened at the variety of food on display in the outdoor stalls, some of which were attached to brick and mortar stores, while others orbited freely in public space, limited only by the width of the sidewalk and the entrepreneurial zeal of the vendor. An extravaganza of fresh fruits and vegetables favored by Chinese households were everywhere. Wooden bins overflowed with bok choy, celery, Chinese cabbage, sugar peas, and peppers of many shapes, colors, and degrees of heat. There were scores of tins brimming with ginger, parsley and other spices, plus rows of large plastic buckets filled with water for the bamboo shoots, water chestnut, and assorted bean curds.

This transplanted third world bazaar, provided plenty for the eye to see, the nose to smell, and the ear to hear, especially for someone like Carol, who was unfamiliar with this Oriental spectacle. She appeared happily overwhelmed by the teeming masses and exotic surroundings. Just what he had hoped for - a diversion from her grief and plans for returning home.

They passed a stall in front of a fish store, and a loud exchange broke out between the seller and an elderly woman shopper. Apparently, the buyer was arguing, in Cantonese, that a fish with a missing tail should sell for less than what the vendor was asking. Unmoved by her argument, he stuck his hand deep into the box packed with ice and red snappers and dug around until he retrieved the missing piece and held it to the end of the fish. With a proud grin, he presented the now complete red snapper to her. Clearly insulted, she slapped the fish out of his hand, and walked off to haggle with the next seafood peddler.

Matt and Carol laughed. She was still smiling when she turned to him. “When I lived in New York, I only visited Chinatown a few times, but I always remembered how much it fascinated me.”

“I grew up next door to them but I know so little about these people.”

“You ever have a Chinese friend?”

The first persons who came to mind were the three Asian-American women Matt had slept with - a model, an abstract painter, and a Tribeca neighbor - all of whom he met after moving from Little Italy. He spotted a doorway on Bayard Street, just off the corner of Mott, and answered, “I’ve been up close and personal with a few of them.”

Big mistake. But before he could mention the *chicken that played tic-tac-toe* at the old Penny Arcade near Chatham Square, Carol asked, “What do you mean?”

Shit! He would now have to narrate another violent incident. “I had a few fights down here.”

Carol half-smiled. “Now why doesn’t that surprise me?” She looked at him, waiting to hear the story.

Matt pointed to a bright red door with a small diamond-shaped window. “See the second doorway down. . . number forty-seven?”

“Yes.”

“One time, a friend I was with cursed at a Chinese guy standing by that door. Before we knew it, there were six of them against four of us. We were kicking butt, until one of them let out a secret Tong whistle and another group came charging down the stairs with bats and lead pipes. I finished off the guy I was working on and ran to the door. I grabbed the doorknob and held on for dear life. Through the window, I saw a dozen pissed-off Chinamen screaming in my face. I was the fastest runner so I told my friends to split. And they did. I held onto until someone inside smashed the window with a pipe. That’s when I let go of the doorknob and took off like a bat outta hell. I swear I must’ve knocked twenty people on their asses running through Chinatown.”

Matt finished with a tight grin on his face. Carol looked at him in mild disbelief. “You make yourself sound so innocent. Like it was always your friends who got *you* in trouble.”

It’s true, he thought. *It was always that damn Frankie’s fault. He’d look for a fight and when he got in over his head, the rest of us had to bail him out.* “I’m just telling it the way it happened.”

“If you hung out with them, you were just as responsible.”

“You stuck with your friends. It was a matter of honor.”

“So you’d fight even when you were in the wrong?”

Matt glanced at the pavement. “What can I say? I was young.” He turned to her. “It taught me a lesson though. By the time Vietnam rolled around, I knew better than to get suckered into that mistake.”

She said nothing. Matt wondered what she was thinking, but didn’t ask. He was glad to be off the subject of combat and violence. At the end of Mott Street, they crossed Chatham Square and headed south on St. James Place. Matt did most of the talking, giving her a guided tour along the way. He told her most of the neighborhoods adjacent to Chinatown had been taken over by the spreading Asian community. They were the latest ethnic group in a long history of immigrants to dominate this section of Manhattan. From the Dutch to the English to the Irish to the Jews to the Italians to the Puerto Ricans, it was now in the hands of the hard working Chinese, Koreans, and Vietnamese.

They passed a small cemetery, about a dozen headstones, tucked away between two turn-of-the-century, red brick tenements. Matt didn’t point it out because he was planning to show Carol another historic grave site and feared the sight of too many cemeteries might turn her sad again. But she asked about it.

“It dates back to the sixteen-hundreds. Might be the oldest existing cemetery in Manhattan. A burial place for a small colony of Portuguese Jews.” Matt went on to list and describe the different nationalities that inhabited the early Dutch settlement, New Netherlands. When he turned to suggest they move on, he saw her gazing at him, which gave him the notion she was impressed with his knowledge of historical facts. Suddenly, a very schoolboy thing occurred, he felt his face warm with color. He turned away. *I can't believe I blushed. When's the last time that happened?*

A half-block from the tiny cemetery, they passed St. James Church and Elementary School, where he resumed his guided tour. “Alfred E. Smith, four time governor of New York State and the first Catholic to run for President, received his only formal education here. His father died when Al was a boy, and being the oldest son, he had to leave school and work at the Fulton Fish Market to support his mother and family.”

Matt had learned this from Ellen Doyle, an Irish girl and eighth grader at the time, who attended St. James, while he was at Transfiguration School. Though their schools were just four blocks apart, she lived in the *fourth ward* and he lived in the *sixth*. These territorial tags were old political demarcations for two primarily Italian-American neighborhoods on other ends of Chinatown. When he was dating Ellen, the boys from these two sections weren't friendly toward each other, so it was always an adventure when he crossed the Oriental divide to visit her. In safe and secure moments, they laughed and compared themselves to *Romeo and Juliet*. Like Shakespeare's tale of adolescent romance, there were plenty of skirmishes, where Matt had to fight off protective brothers and jealous suitors. Overall, it was a cute story, but not one he would now share with Carol.

Matt pointed out the Municipal and Woolworth Buildings, each of which, he informed her, had been the world's tallest at the time they were built. Approaching the Brooklyn Bridge, Matt's favorite of all New York landmarks, he told her it was the longest suspension bridge of its day and considered an engineering marvel, often referred to as the eighth wonder of the world.

“I love your black and white photos of the bridge,” Carol said.

“Thank you. To be honest, I'm enjoying them myself. I hadn't seen them in years until Allen picked them out of storage and hung them up in the studio.”

“I've experimented with the zone system, but I've never gotten the subtle tones that you have.”

“Ansel Adams and the bridge inspired me. Maybe when I retire, I'll get back to art photography. If my commercial work hasn't destroyed my creativity by then.”

“I've seen your advertising portfolio. It's very impressive.”

“That's nice to hear, coming from a dedicated artist like yourself.”

Their eyes met and they smiled.

Matt and Carol walked under the granite and steel bridge. He explained how the massive stone towers were built, how the giant steel cables were put in place,

and then strung with a web of smaller cables to support the suspended platform of roadways and trolley tracks.

“The original designer, John Roebling, died from complications of a crushed foot from a construction accident. Then his son, Washington Roebling, took over. Unfortunately, he also suffered an on-site accident and was crippled for life by caisson disease. But he continued to work as chief engineer and directed the construction from an apartment window on the Brooklyn side. He used field glasses to keep an eye on the bridge’s progress.”

Facts of all kinds streamed from Matt’s mouth. Years of accumulating bits of information about Lower Manhattan were suddenly at his fingertips. He wasn’t trying to show off, but neither did he hold back his sudden gush of encyclopedic knowledge. He was powered by the sheer delight of Carol’s company. The morning was turning out to be perfect. So perfect, he didn’t even think to worry about the Fates and their cruel sense of humor.

At the South Street Seaport, they walked out onto the open pier, where carefully restored tall-masted ships were docked broadside for public viewing. With a clear blue sky, an ocean breeze tickling his face, and Carol by his side, Matt felt inoculated from the plague of fears that had afflicted him. He watched her flaxen hair lift in the wind, and took pleasure in her wide eyes, gleaning the majesty of the classic sailing ships.

Carol turned to him. “How did you avoid the war?”

What brought this on? The war ships? The connecting oceans? “My college deferment ended while I was out West. At first, the military bureaucracy lost track of me. Then they just gave up on me.”

“That simple?”

“Yeah. Nothing brave or extraordinary.”

“Why did you come back?”

“I missed New York. I feel connected here. I went out there for nature, but I feel more natural here.” *Nice play on words, asshole. You just talked your way out of an invite to Idaho.* Matt finished with a rambling, “What can I say?”

“You tried it and you didn’t like it.”

Apparently, it didn’t matter to her if he ever again left New York. It wasn’t by accident that Matt emphasized the past tense. “I guess, at the time, I *had* needed a certain amount of noise in my life.”

“All your friends and family are here.”

“My family, yeah. And I know a lot of people. But no close friends.” *Don’t say it! Why? It’s the truth.* “Robert was close.” Matt hoped his mention of her brother hadn’t upset her.

There was no hint it had as she went on to pose another question, an even more personal one. “What’s your relationship with Traci?”

She heard us in bed that night. Matt felt his Adam’s apple stiffen like an erection. He didn’t want to discuss Traci, but the subject matter was pertinent enough

to fall under his promise to tell Carol the truth. “She’s an art director. . . an acquaintance.” *She heard Traci scream!* “We’re not exclusive or anything.”

He suspected Carol was teasing him when she slowly repeated the words, “Not exclusive.”

His face turned beet red. “That’s a dumb way to put it.”

“The meaning’s clear.”

He wanted to get off the topic of Traci, but not stray from the intimate conversation Carol had initiated. “Stay here longer.” His words fell short of what he wanted to say. Nonetheless, he felt exposed by the earnest delivery.

“Come visit me in Idaho.”

There they were, those long-awaited five little words that now filled Matt’s heart with exhilaration. He gave her a big smile. “I’d like that.”

He struggled with the impulse to take her hand. *You got your invitation. Don’t push it.* Matt would’ve talked himself out of holding her hand if she hadn’t first taken his. The touch of her soft fingers sliding across his palm warmed his body, and when she smiled at him, he was launched into orbit around her starry blue eyes.

They walked hand in hand, leaving the wooden pier and old boats behind. Matt was content to let their enfolded fingers do all the talking between them. Weightless in the light air of happiness, he pondered why he felt the way he did and sensed no embarrassment when *true love* seemed the answer.

As they strolled south along the East River, Matt examined his passion for Carol. She was beautiful to look at, but so were many of the women he knew and dated. Perhaps, she simply showed up at the right time when he was serious about settling down. Or maybe, during this troubled period, she was an idealized escape. Would she be as vital to him if the times weren’t so perilous? *That’s enough! Don’t belittle what Carol means to me.*

Matt dug for the roots of this invasive negativity and unearthed the conclusion they were the residue of recent events. He tried to convince himself everything was on the mend. He’d been forced to do what he did and had taken care of every detail connecting him to Jimmy’s murder. *What about Lucy? What about Lou? There’s no chance this will just go away. You’re in serious trouble, Matt!*

Carol wriggled her hand as if he’d been squeezing it too tightly. She stared at his forehead. “You’re sweating.”

Matt became aware of the heat and perspiration coming from his body. He had to tell her something, but not the truth. *A white lie.* He let go of her hand. “I guess I’m worrying too much about Allen. This is the first time he’s taking my film to the lab.”

“Should we go back?”

“No. I wrote all the instructions down. He’ll be fine. It’s just me.”

By the time they reached the foot of Wall Street, Matt had collected himself. He even appeared upbeat when he pointed west to a high steepled church at the crest of the financial ravine. “I want to show you Trinity Church. It’s one of my favorite places in New York.”

Matt and Carol ambled the easy slope, while swift stepping veterans of the busy street slalomed around them. She took note of the rapid pace. "It's amazing how fast people move through the crowd without bumping into each other."

"I used to dart around these streets like a pro at one time." He pointed to a building up ahead. "I worked at 60 Wall Street. Part-time after high school. I was an office boy and runner for a high-powered law firm. They hired a lot from my Catholic high school. There were about twenty of us and the office manager, an old pervert with a taste for young boys, clocked our deliveries. We'd run through the streets in record time, but few of us ever got back before expected. We'd use the extra minutes to goof off somewhere. Relish our freedom from the office."

"Did the office manager ever come on to you?"

"One time, he said I had dirt on my jacket. Before I could even look down, he was already brushing his hand across my leg. I grabbed his helping hand, looked him in the eye, and told him never to touch me again. After that, he kept his distance."

"How about the other boys?"

"My best friend, at the time, told me about this party the manager had. He fed my friend so many drinks he got stinking drunk and had to spend the night at the creep's apartment."

"Did anything happen?"

"My friend said *no*. But I have my doubts about that."

"Why?"

"Because all of sudden, Frankie started getting special treatment."

When they neared the symbolic heart of capitalism, the crossroads of Broad and Wall, Matt sensed a familiar dark mood close in on him, most likely beckoned by his mention of *Frankie*.

Matt drew Carol's attention to the scarred face of the Morgan Bank Building. He told her the gouges in the granite foundation dated back to the notorious Wall Street bombing of 1920, which killed 35 people and wounded over a hundred, and was attributed to a radical group of Bolsheviks. He pointed out the New York Stock Exchange, the American Stock Exchange, and the old Federal Building with its regal statue of George Washington, the site of the nation's first Capitol and where Washington was inaugurated first president.

A block later, they entered the grounds of Trinity Church. The bright sun guaranteed a large lunchtime crowd. Some came for the noon service, others looked for a spot on one of the outdoor benches to eat their sandwiches. By design, Matt had gotten them there before the neighboring skyscrapers unloaded their swarms of hungry, liberated workers.

He led her into the church to look at the white marble interior with its high vaulted ceiling and majestic columns that rose toward the heavens. At the gilded altar, a dedicated housekeeper vacuumed the deep red carpet for the upcoming service, while a troop of other volunteers swept the aisles and placed religious pamphlets on the tables in the foyer.

Matt and Carol were soon outside again, walking on a narrow slate pathway that coursed through the old cemetery and surrounded the church on three sides. Carol gazed up at the towering steeple. "This church is incredibly beautiful."

"It's Gothic Revival." He pointed to a nearby headstone. "That's Alexander Hamilton's grave. And on the other side is Robert Fulton's."

Matt could've gone on and named other notable gravesites and recounted the history of Trinity Church, but he didn't. He had played the role of tour guide long enough. What he desired now was to sit beside Carol and commune in a more reflective manner. This is why he had brought her here. Trinity Church and its graveyard was his favorite place for solace and repair.

They sat at his preferred bench, which faced north toward the largest section of the cemetery. Carol noticed the traffic and office workers had swelled on the streets outside the spiked iron gate. "It's getting busy out there."

"That's why I come here. To sit in this old cemetery and close my eyes and separate myself from the noise and commotion. The contrast forces a powerful inward focus."

"Wouldn't the countryside be better for that?"

"It'd be different. In the woods, you start listening to the birds and the bubbling brook and your consciousness expands outward to include the peace and beauty around you. Here, you work to tune everything out. You build a wall of silence and exclusion, and the isolation funnels you to the core of your . . . being."

Carol's indecipherable smile made him a bit self-conscious. "I don't know if that's the right word, or if I'm making any sense."

"I understand. It's just a little funny that you come to Wall Street to meditate."

"I guess you can call it meditation."

"Robert told me you had a spiritual side."

Matt smiled. "He said that?"

"I didn't see it at first, but now I do. You asked me for some advice the other day."

He winced, recalling the *dumb* question.

"Listen to your inner voice."

He smirked. "Which one?"

"The quiet one."

The simple truth of her words resounded in his ears like the purest tone from the perfect bell made from the finest metal. A crystal tone so overpowering, he envisioned a transcendent future, free of the brash pitch of city life and the harsh dissonance of his crimes. He wanted her to repeat what she had said so he could closely watch her lips and memorize by heart the sound and effect her advice had instilled in him.

But he didn't ask. In time, he'd be free to speak his mind to her. For now, he would simply listen to the echo of her words, keeping them alive and vibrating within him. *The quiet one.*

CHAPTER 17

During their stroll back to Tribeca, Matt remained in a glorious mood. They swapped lighthearted banter and he learned more about her. He was genuinely interested to hear about her artwork and preferred style of painting. He asked a lot of questions, and often took her hand without the slightest hesitation. He'd gotten his invitation to Idaho, plus she saw his spiritual side. The most significant *outside eye* in his life had validated a cherished part of him. His feet may have stepped on hard cement, but the greater reality had him gliding in the wind, guided by a quiet voice.

Carol stopped to look in an art gallery window. "Can we go inside?"

Matt smiled, "Not today."

"Why not today?"

"It's not on the schedule. Maybe tomorrow."

She smiled back. "Tomorrow?"

"It's not my fault there's so much to do here."

"So what's on the schedule?"

"An essential New York experience. A home cooked dinner."

He watched her smile fade, her eyes sadden. He knew she was thinking of Robert. "Or we can go out to eat. I know a lot of good restaurants."

"No. Home cooking sounds nice. I just thought about my brother, and. . ." Her voice choked and her eyes filled with tears.

Matt drew her close and placed her head against his shoulder. He stroked her hair. "I miss him too."

She looked up at him. "I'm grateful that you loved Robert. It means so much that I can share my loss with you."

Matt kissed her forehead and cradled her back into his arms. "The studio's not far from here. Why don't you go there and rest while I do some shopping? Soak in a warm bath. Whatever makes you feel good. I'll do all the work because I like to cook. All you have to do is help me eat the food."

"You sure know how to make it difficult to leave."

"That's the plan."

After Carol assured him she knew her way back to the studio, Matt walked four blocks north to Dom and Delphina, the premier food shop in Tribeca. He had decided on a simple dinner of salad, grilled salmon, wild rice, asparagus, and some sort of dessert. Of course, the menu was open to change, depending on which fish and

vegetables looked the freshest. His plan was to be in and out of the store as quickly as possible, so he zipped past the gourmet canned goods and displays of kitchen gadgetry that he customarily perused and sometimes bought like the miniature blowtorch he used once to brown creme brulee for last year's Christmas dinner.

Following a favored approach of purchasing food items in the order he planned to serve them, Matt headed to the cheese and cold-cuts counter to select the ingredients for an antipasto. Huge Provolones and long salamis hung over the counterman's head as he sliced pastrami for an elderly customer. Tall and thin, George LaPatrice had avoided the temptation to sample the wares and nibble himself into obesity. He saw Matt approach and greeted him warmly. "Hey, Matt. How you been?"

"Up and down. How about you?"

George motioned to the counters, left and right of him. "Back and forth. The usual."

Matt grinned.

George held up his hand. "I'll be with you in a minute." He then asked the white-haired lady if she wanted more pastrami.

Matt surveyed the cheese selection, and had just spotted an uncut round of one his favorites, a *Doux du Montagne*, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Matt turned and was shocked to see Frankie standing there, looking grim.

"Frankie! What are you doing here?"

Pointing with his eyes, Frankie directed Matt to an empty aisle. "The Cascone brothers know you whacked their father."

The words hit like a sledgehammer. Matt barely managed three syllables. "How the fuck?"

"I don't know. Maybe someone recognized you. Maybe it's Lucy. She's been saying crazy things about you."

Matt's eyes wandered off until Frankie grabbed him by the arms. "They're looking for you. You can't go home."

It was getting worse and Matt was down to one syllable. "No!"

"I can set you up somewhere until this. . ."

Matt pushed Frankie's hands away. In his eyes one could see the stirrings of a plan. "I gotta get Carol."

"Who the fuck is Carol?"

Matt's response was directed more to himself. "She's at the studio."

Frankie tried to hold him. "You can't go there!"

But Matt was too quick and deflected Frankie's grip as he rushed past. Frightened shoppers scurried from the path of the crazed big man and watched as Matt rammed his way out the door. When the onlookers turned to see what had triggered the running of the bull, Frankie had already stepped out of sight.

Dodging people, cars, and trucks, Matt raced through the streets of Tribeca. Fortunately, he was wearing tennis shoes, which allowed him to run with abandon

without too much fear of injury. He covered a lot of ground quickly, and decided not to waste time looking for a phone to warn Carol. Stopping and starting would've cut the efficiency of his hot engine body.

He concentrated most on his stride, breath, and avoiding collisions. After this hierarchy, three imperatives recycled through his brain: he had to get Carol out of the studio, discover how the Cascones found out, and protect himself now that the Mob was after him.

Matt broke stride and came to a stop at his street. He peeked around the corner. It appeared safe, so he made his way toward the studio. But he hadn't looked carefully enough, and now saw two men in a black Lincoln Continental, near the entrance to his parking lot.

Backpedaling to the wall, he kicked over a wine bottle, which broke on the ground. He leapt into a nearby doorway and hid in the shallow recess. After a few anxious moments, Matt stole a look at the Lincoln. Its bulky passengers were still in the car and not turned in his direction.

The one in the driver's seat, a heavy-set man, read a newspaper, while the other one talked. Matt recognized the *talker* by his profile. It was Chooch Morici, a strong-arm for the Cascone gang. He wasn't a neighborhood guy, so Matt didn't know him personally, but had heard Chooch was from a notoriously violent Jersey City crew. Now that Matt had identified one, he guessed whom the other thug was - Chooch's partner, Biggy Pecoraro, also from New Jersey.

Chooch opened the door and got out. He looked up and down the street while he pushed his shoulders back to straighten his spine. He leaned into the car. Matt was close enough to hear most of the conversation.

"I'm gonna go stretch my legs. See if there's another entrance or back alley. So put the fucking paper down and keep your eyes peeled."

Biggy folded the paper and dropped it onto the seat next to him. "Yeah, yeah. Go take your fucking walk."

Matt watched Chooch pass the front entrance to the studio and continue toward West Street. He planned to make his move when the goon turned the corner. His engine was still hot. There was no way he could stay parked in the doorway much longer.

When Chooch disappeared from sight, Matt left the doorway and dipped down without losing a step to grab the intact neck of the broken wine bottle. Sneaking up on Biggy became easier when the three hundred pound goombah picked up the paper and started reading it again. When there were no more parked cars ahead of him to hide behind, Matt walked out into the street and approached the Lincoln at an angle, which he estimated to be its blind spot. He reached the rear fender, bent low, and scooted to the sidewalk. Another three steps had Matt at the open window, pressing the jagged edge of the broken wine bottle against Biggy's multi-folded neck.

"Sit on your hands, fat man."

Biggy dropped the paper, but didn't lower his hands quick enough. Matt dug the green glass into a layer of fat and drew blood.

Biggy shrieked, "Okay! Okay! I'm doing it."

Matt kept the shard hooked inside the open wound to remind the obese hit-man he was one false move away from death. In full compliance, Biggy slowly tilted to the right, raising his left butt cheek, then carefully lowered his left hand and slid it under him. He rolled back and trapped his hand under his great weight, then repeated the process until his right hand was similarly imprisoned. Heavy beads of sweat formed like storm clouds on Biggy's forehead.

"Where's your gun?"

"Left side."

Matt pulled aside the fat man's leather jacket and smelled the fear coming from his humid body. After retrieving a snub .38 from its side holster, Matt removed the glass from Biggy's jugular. The big man swallowed once before Matt struck him repeatedly on the side of the head with the gun grip. When Biggy appeared sufficiently unconscious, the skull bashing stopped.

Matt held Biggy by his hair to keep him from slumping forward onto the steering wheel. He placed the thug's huge head against the door column and checked for signs of blood. A red stream suddenly broke through the levee of black curls and began flowing down Biggy's neck.

"Fuck!" Matt leaned into the window and grabbed the newspaper by Biggy's feet. He spotted the handle of a small baseball bat - the kind used by Pee Wee Leaguers and Mob enforcers - under the passenger seat. He leaned deeper into the car to claim the wooden club. To do so, he had to stretch his body across Biggy's paunch. In such a vulnerable position, Matt hoped to God there would be no miracle recovery for the massive hit-man.

With part of the newspaper in one hand and the small bat in the other, Matt extracted himself from the car. He crumbled the paper and used it to wipe the blood that trickled down the side of Biggy's neck. Next, he blotted the source of the blood flow and discretely stuck some wadded-up newspaper between Biggy's head and the column to divert further drips toward the back of his flubbery neck. Moving to the front of the car, Matt examined Biggy's appearance. There were no traces of blood, and Biggy looked like he'd fallen asleep. There was nothing left to do but hide behind the car's rear bumper and wait for the other goon to get close enough for Matt to throw his second surprise party.

"Wake up, you fat prick!" Chooch bellowed as he neared his *slumbering* partner.

Chooch's eyes lit with alarm. He'd probably noticed some blood because he was reaching inside his jacket when Matt hit him flush in the face with the Pee Wee sized bat. Chooch screamed and grabbed his busted nose as blood spurted through his fingers like a ruptured water main. Matt continued to club him on the head, and the wounded mobster crumpled to his knees, groaning with each blow.

Matt struck with a vengeance. "Trying to kill me, you motherfucker!"

He stopped swinging, when he realized a few more blows would probably kill Chooch. At this point in Matt's life, it didn't matter much if the hit-man lived or died. It was more of an elemental decision to stop hammering another man's head. Matt dug inside Chooch's jacket for his weapon and felt the wounded man's chest rise and fall. As far as Matt knew both thugs were alive when he left the bloody scene, carrying two handguns and a small bat.

When he entered the studio parking lot, Matt heard a phone ring. The sound came from the Lincoln. Others would soon be arriving to find out why nobody answered the car phone.

Taking the iron grate steps, two and three at a time, Matt quickly reached the landing outside Carol's door. He flung the bat onto a nearby rooftop and stuffed a pistol into each side pocket of his bomber jacket. He rapped on the door before trying the knob. It was locked. He banged again, harder this time.

"Who is it?"

"It's me. Open up. Hurry!"

When she unlocked the door, his panic and terror were plain to see. Carol backed up to let him in. "What's the matter?"

"We have to leave right away." He rushed to the closet, snatched an armful of clothes and threw them, hangars and all, onto the sofa.

Fear and confusion darkened Carol's eyes. "Why?"

He pulled a drawer from the dresser. "There's no time to explain."

She latched onto his arm. "Explain!"

"Some hoods are after me. They could hurt you too."

The news shocked Carol, but he didn't have time to comfort her. He pulled his arm from her grip and tipped the drawer, dumping more clothes onto the pile. "Please hurry!"

She stared at her heaped and scattered clothes. "I can't take this anymore."

"Carol! We have to go!"

She shouted back. "Why are they after you?"

Matt tightened his jaw. "I had to pay my debt. I killed someone."

The sight of Carol's anguish and disbelief devastated him. There was no escaping the hard fact he had betrayed her trust. He had coaxed her to care for him, maybe to even fall in love with him, all the while hiding the awful truth that he was a murderer. Matt couldn't bear to think she would now hate him and spent a few precious moments to explain his motives.

"He was an evil, dangerous man. He hurt a lot of innocent people. He deserved to die. Now, his goons are after me. We have to go."

Matt hoped his few words would be enough for Carol, right now. He picked up her suitcase and brought it to the sofa. He stuffed whatever clothes were within reach into the suitcase until it was full and then squeezed it shut. He carried it to where Carol stood frozen in place. He took her hand and eased her toward the door.

There was nothing else to say but repeat, "We have to go."

They were almost to the bottom of the stairs, when a car sped down the street and braked alongside the black Lincoln. Four tough looking guys jumped from the car and converged on Chooch, who was sprawled on the sidewalk in a blood puddle. One of the men spotted Matt and pointed him out to the other three.

Matt's heart bounced in his chest when he saw all four unzip their jackets and reach inside. He dropped the suitcase and pulled Carol toward the studio entrance. With his free hand, he found his keys in his pants pocket and had them out by the time they got to the steel door. He unlocked the door and pushed Carol ahead of him into the studio. He glanced back. The men were inside the parking lot, coming at him with four guns drawn. Matt darted into the studio and yanked the heavy door behind him. A bullet ripped into the steel, and flying shrapnel tore hair from Matt's scalp a split-second before the door slammed shut. His ears were ringing from the exploding bullet. He wasn't sure if he'd heard Carol scream until he looked at her and saw the panic in her eyes and was certain she had.

He led her to the spiral staircase and spoke quickly, "Go up to my room. Lock yourself in. Use the fire escape to get out if you have to."

She looked terrified and made no move to walk up the steps.

He put his arms around Carol and drew her close as if it were the last time he would ever hold her. He whispered in her ear. "Go, now."

She leaned back to see his face. "What about you?"

Whether he believed it or not, Matt said, "I'll be all right."

Bullets pierced the steel door, hitting the lock, which would soon be blasted apart. He pushed Carol toward the stairs and was about to shout when he faltered and instead begged her. "Please go."

She turned and ran up the stairs. He wanted to yell out that he loved her, but only watched until the bedroom door closed behind her, just as the steel door pushed open a half-inch, stopped by stalwart scraps of shot-up metal.

Matt ran to the circuit box and flipped the overhead light switches to the *off* position. The studio blackened for a few seconds before the steel door flew open and daylight lit the immediate area. Matt hid behind a large light box set on the floor. Made of black rip-stop nylon, it wouldn't do much against a bullet, but it gave him cover from where he could track the men as they fanned out from the doorway.

One hood tried a light switch and got nothing. Another, on hands and knees, started to climb the spiral staircase. Matt reached into his right pocket and pulled out a large caliber pistol, probably a semi-automatic. He'd been in such a rush when he took Chooch's gun that he hadn't noticed what type it was. He stuffed it back into his pocket and pulled out a very familiar snub .38.

From about thirty feet away, Matt aimed for the center of the shadowy mass slowly moving up the stairs. He pulled the trigger and a shower of sparks exploded from the gun barrel. He'd never noticed this before and realized this was the first time he ever fired a gun in the dark. His bullet struck the center pole of the circular staircase, missing its mark by a wide margin, but it gained him what he wanted. The

hit-man leapt backward off the steps and smacked the ground hard. What Matt lost in return was he gave up his position.

A hail of bullets from the other three thugs tore through the nylon light box and everything else around him. With his stomach scraping the ground, Matt crawled to the safety of a cement support column. The bullets continued to strike the area he had left, which meant the shooters didn't know where he was. The flaming bursts, however, were spreading out, moving closer, surrounding him.

Matt saw the lighting equipment and came up with an escape plan. Allen had pulled the power packs and lights from the set and gathered them in one place. Luckily, it wasn't a complete teardown. The packs and heads were still connected to each other and to their power source. Matt snuck toward the equipment and hid behind a full size 4 by 8 sheet of Foamcore, which leaned against a pair of light stands. The next thing he had to do was turn on all the power packs, but the shooting had stopped and the encircling hoods would clearly hear the *clicks* if he hit the switches. Matt picked up a metal lamp-cover from the floor and flung it in the direction of his previous location. Gunfire erupted, and he was able to power up the packs during the long fusillade.

Matt reviewed his plan. Triggering an enormous blast of white light to temporarily blind his pursuers was a long shot. Each power pack was basically a huge capacitor that stored a large amount of electricity. Upon release, at the highest setting, the entire charge instantly dumped to the lamp head and emitted a bright flash of light. At that point, the pack would begin to recharge, taking about six seconds to fully recycle. Matt couldn't think of any other way to distract the hit-men, long enough for him to make a dash past them and escape out the front door. The alternative would be to shoot it out with four pros, and the chance of him surviving such a firefight was slim to none.

Matt checked the packs' remote sensors. *Everything's ready to go.* He took a moment to listen for any hints of where the hoods might be, but they were as silent as he was. *It's time to do it.* Matt stretched his legs and rose to a crouched position. Holding the gun in his right hand, he placed his left index finger on the closest pack's test button. He turned his head away from the lights, shut his eyes tightly, and pressed the red button.

The flash of light was so brilliant the inside of his eyelids lit up like white sheets in sunlight. Knowing the hit-men were temporarily blinded, he stood up to make a run for it. Unfortunately, the thugs responded to their collective sight impairment by spraying bullets in every direction. With deadly lead missiles whistling past him, there was no chance of making a run for it, nor could he remain where he was. Bullets tore the soft Foamcore and showered him with bits of white polystyrene that stuck to his clothing and hair like dry snow. He dove behind the low shelter of assembled power packs. Sparks erupted from one of them. He thought a bullet had hit the pack until he saw a piece of white tape attached to it. It was the damaged pack Lucy had kicked over.

The continuous arcing of the errant pack set off the other lights, which never had a chance to sufficiently recharge. Matt now faced a pulsating dim illumination, similar to the flickering light of a silent movie. He had expected to exploit total darkness after the blinding flash, but the wavering low light gave the thugs enough glimmer to spot him if he made a run toward them.

Matt found himself gasping for breath. He had to make a move while the thugs were still incapacitated by seared retinas, their rods and cones going haywire, their vision throbbing with ghost light. Matt hit the ground and slithered GI style toward the make-up room, about fifteen feet away.

Random shots rang out as Matt crawled closer to the make-up room. He saw that the door was ajar. He wouldn't have to reach for the knob.

The damaged pack exploded and caught fire. Matt pushed his way into the dressing room just as the stronger glow from the burning power pack replaced the soft flickering light. Three bullets ripped past Matt's head in rapid succession. At least one of the hoods had spotted the door move. Matt leap-frogged into the room and kicked the door shut as he rolled past it toward the far corner. It closed hard, but the lock didn't catch and the door popped open a few inches.

Inside the make-up room stood a refrigerator used to store refreshments and ice for the models and stylists. Matt inched it away from the wall and got behind it to protect himself from the high-caliber bullets that were penetrating the Sheetrock walls of the small room. Crouching low, he placed the .38 by his feet, then fished out the other gun and recognized it was a nine millimeter semi-automatic. He released the clip. It held eight bullets, which meant he had a total of thirteen left and had to use them wisely. Before he fired each one of his precious bullets, Matt had to make sure he had a clear shot - a kill shot.

The thugs stopped firing their weapons when the glow in the studio ended. It was now impossible for Matt to see anyone who might enter the dressing room. An idea came to him to use the light inside the fridge to his advantage. He had to turn the heavy appliance so he could still use it as shield, but also have the ability to open the door when he needed to light the room.

Matt stood up and wrestled with the refrigerator. It wasn't heavy, but it was stuck in place. Probably a buildup of crud at its base. He gave it a mighty shove and it twisted the way he wanted, but it also squealed loudly as it scraped the floor. The response was immediate. A hail of bullets sprayed in the direction of the noise, and Matt was pinned in the corner of the room. He dropped to his knees, leaned against the fridge, and covered his head with his arms to prevent blasted debris from hitting him in the face.

The barrage of deadly missiles seemed to last forever. They pierced the walls and ricocheted around him. The fridge was struck repeatedly, and he feared a large caliber might make it through both ends and hit him. Matt picked up the guns, but there was little he could do. Because of the intense firepower, he was unable to move or even poke his head out to see if anyone had entered the room. He could

only trust that none of the hit-men would be so foolish as to position himself in advance of the other gunmen's bullets.

Liquids and Freon gas leaked from the fridge. Matt felt a cold puddle collect around his knees and lower legs. His pants and shoes were soaked. The hissing gasses began to choke him. He coughed and struggled to breathe. The notion that this was how and where his life would end sent a bone-gripping chill throughout his body. He thought of Carol and felt a great loss. He would never get his chance to fulfill the fanciful plans he had imagined for them. He hoped Carol had escaped and was safe and wouldn't hate him after his death. His next thoughts were of his family and how his death would devastate them. His greatest concern was for Rita. He suffered the vision of her dressed in mourning clothes, crying at his casket.

All at once, the gunfire stopped and there was an extraordinary silence as if a stubborn tornado had suddenly changed its mind and moved on to the next town. Matt pricked his ears for the slightest noise in case the thugs were about to storm the dressing room. What he heard were muffled sounds, and they seemed to be moving away from him, before fading out completely. Matt didn't know what to make of this turn of events until he heard the wail of approaching sirens.

Matt clutched a pistol in each hand as he crawled away from the choking refrigerant. He took deep breaths and his head began to clear. Wary of a lingering hit-man or two, Matt kept low to the ground and slowly made his way to the door. He stood up, listened for any noises, and peeked past the open door, but was unable to see much in the darkness. He heard a *click* and one of the modeling lights switched on. He saw Carol kneeling next to a power pack.

She spotted him in the doorway, got to her feet, and ran to him. "Are you hurt?"

It seemed so unreal how his fate had changed in an instant. He barely believed Carol was actually standing in front of him. It took him a moment to respond. "No. I'm okay."

She looked at the two guns in his hands and spoke as if confessing a misdeed. "I called the police. Was that all right?"

Of course it was. It was the smartest thing you could've done. It was such a simple solution and Matt hadn't even considered it. He was thinking like a mobster, more fearful of the police than he was of the shooters. *What a fucking idiot I am.* "You did the right thing. You saved my life. Thank you."

The thought of cops soon swarming into his studio quickened Matt to the make-up table, where he removed a towel from one of its drawers and wiped down the two handguns.

He walked back to Carol. "These aren't mine. I got them off two hit-men who were parked outside the studio just before I went upstairs to get you."

His latest explanation, added to all the previous ones, sounded and smelled like a mounting pile of bullshit. *Kiss her good-bye Matt. You'll never see her again. And don't try to stop her. Let her go back to Idaho and find a nice cowboy to settle down with.*

Carol must have seen it in his eyes, heard it in his voice, what he was thinking, for she said the most startling thing. "I believe you."

Matt yearned to hug her, to put his lips by her ear, and whisper words of affection, but he had a gun in each hand that he had to get rid of before the police arrived. "Thank you."

Matt walked into the studio and placed the two handguns on the floor as if the shooters had left them.

CHAPTER 18

The police arrived, and the burly, mustached sergeant in charge asked Matt and Carol just one question. “Are any of the gunmen still in the building?” Matt answered, “I’m not sure, but I don’t think so.”

The sergeant informed them Detective Lou Randazzo was on his way, and they should wait for him in the office. Matt considered not having Carol there while Lou grilled him. But he took her hand and led her toward the office. He’d let her hear whatever Lou might accuse him of. Carol had to know what she was getting into.

When Lou arrived, he spoke briefly with the uniformed sergeant, then went to the office, where Matt and Carol stood next to each other, exhausted yet too tense to sit. Lou walked through the doorway with a heavyhearted look. The unexpected expression worried Matt. He had anticipated controlled or even outright anger, but Lou’s somber face caused Matt to fear Lou was about to arrest him. There was no other reason Matt could figure for Lou’s gloomy mood. The honor bound detective would take no pleasure in arresting Matt. Though they fought like enemies, there remained an affectionate bond between them, and neither one would seriously hurt the other unless they were forced to. Apparently, Lou had enough evidence against Matt for at least one of his crimes.

Lou nodded toward Carol. “Hello, Miss Brody.”

She stared at him. “Hello.”

Lou turned to Matt, who couldn’t bear the detective’s telling discomfort and looked away. Lou asked Carol, “Would you be able to identify any of the gunmen?”

“No. I was upstairs hiding.”

Lou glanced at Matt and said to Carol, “Can you excuse us while I ask Matt some questions?”

Matt was quick with his opinion. “She can stay.”

Lou asked Matt, “Can you identify any of them?”

“No. It was dark. It happened fast.”

Lou took the time to steady himself with a deep breath.

Matt’s eyes widened. *What the fuck is he about to unload on me?*

“Let me help you, Matt.”

All of a sudden he wants to help me? What am I getting now? Lou the good cop? “I don’t need your help.” He turned away from Lou.

The detective yelled, “Look at me, goddamn it!”

They locked eyes, Matt's fury rising to match Lou's, when suddenly Lou's anger turned to anguish. "I'm offering you my help. You need my help."

Matt shook his head.

"Think of Rita and Lucy," Lou pleaded.

Why did Matt focus on the omission? It might've meant nothing, a simple oversight. But with all that had happened, including Lou's odd behavior, Matt noticed it immediately. "What about. . . my father?"

"Your father's dead."

Everything within Matt deserted him. He had no breath, no thoughts, no feelings. Then a great reversal occurred and all the original parts plus added ones rushed back in, stuffing him, but nothing worked as it should have. His breath labored, his thoughts streamed chaotically, and his senses were bludgeoned by grief. "How?"

"Thomas was coming back from his morning walk to have lunch and was shot as he entered the building around noon."

Rita! "Did my sister see him like that?"

Lou grimaced, his lips like thin lines. "I stayed with Rita the whole day."

Matt had seen this flat-line expression before. His old friend was holding back. Matt envisioned it all. Rita hearing the shots, opening the window, seeing the sprawled legs in the doorway, a puddle of blood forming around pop's shoes. Rita running down the stairs, her heart beating furiously, coming upon pop's frail twisted body. Matt hoped he was dead by the time Rita got to him. Why give her hope then take it away again. Or maybe, if he lived a little longer and told Rita he was happy that he'd soon be with his beautiful Angela. Yes, that would've been better for Rita. *Shut the fuck up!*

Matt buried his face in his hands. "What have I done?"

Carol put her arms around Matt. He shuddered against her.

"I'm sorry, Pop. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, Rita." He lifted his eyes to look at Carol. "I'm sorry, Carol."

Carol placed his head back onto her shoulder.

Lou stared, gauging their relationship. "You need my help. I'm giving you police protection to visit your sister."

There would be no argument from Matt. The thing he wanted most in the world right now was to see his sister.

Matt asked Carol to accompany him to Mulberry Street. He was afraid to let her out of his sight. But she didn't think it was appropriate to tag along at a time when his sister needed privacy with family and close friends. It was a good reason not to go, plus the two policemen Lou had assigned to remain on site would protect Carol, so Matt didn't try to change her mind. He had the presence of mind to ask her to call Linda and Allen and tell them not to return to the studio until further notice and to instruct Allen to deliver the film directly to Steve and have the ad agency do the editing.

Matt climbed into the back seat of the police car and sat directly behind Lou. A few words passed between the patrolman driver and his sergeant, but Matt remained silent throughout the short drive. He mostly stared at the back of Lou's head and watched the familiar streets pass by. It was a strange, out-of-body experience to be actually sitting in the back seat of Lou's official car, for many of Matt's recent dreams had placed him in this exact spot after his undeterred friend arrested him. Matt had considered these dreams to be nightmares, but in comparison, he was now living a worse horror. He would gladly take an arrest for *murder one* over the agony of his father's brutal death and the punishing guilt of knowing he had brought this tragedy upon his family.

The Cascone brothers got their revenge. A father for a father. Matt knew they wouldn't be satisfied until they killed him too. Though there was little chance they would target his sister or niece, Matt couldn't be certain of this. He'd have to inform Lou the rest of his family might be in danger. Matt was confident he wouldn't have to reveal his own crimes to get Lou to watch out for them. If no other reason, Lou would protect Matt's family out of love and respect for Eddie, the husband, father, and friend, who had made an even greater sacrifice in Vietnam than Lou had.

As for what to do about the Cascones, Matt needed to get Frankie's advice on this and other Mob matters. Besides the two sons and crew members who were hunting for Matt, a family boss would put a contract out on him. It was Cosa Nostra policy that killing a made member, especially a capo like Jimmy, put you on the death list. The more Matt thought about it, the more he concluded he'd have to go into hiding and leave New York for good. Where would he go? Idaho? *No! That would put Carol in danger. Fuck! My life's become a hell hole.* Matt was considering a number of risky ways to make contact with Frankie, when the car slowed and came to a stop.

Matt stared at the yellow tape and the burgundy spill of dried blood that coated the front step and pavement. *So much blood from that little old man.* The patrolman driver appeared by his door and opened it. Matt guessed he'd been staring out the window too long. He exited the car and paid little attention to the crowds of people who watched his every move and whispered. Matt was careful not to step on his father's blood. *This is my body. This is my blood. But this is all wrong. The father shouldn't die for the sins of his son.* Matt crossed himself. "Good-bye, Pop. I'll always love you."

Rita met them at the front door to the apartment. Matt clutched her in his arms, and they wept. He nodded when she told him their father was now in a better place with their mother. This was no time to question the existence of God and heaven. Every consoling word and deed had to be made and taken to heart. He would be a blind follower, a sheep to tradition and ritual acts as long as they brought relief to him and his family.

Rita would suffer the loss of their father more than Matt would. A great part of her every day had been spent taking care of Thomas. To most people, the care of an

aging parent is an obligatory chore. For Rita, it was an act of love. And now that he was gone, she'd feel a great emptiness for a long time to come.

Matt was thinking of his sister's self-sacrifice when Rita whispered in his ear. "Go see Lucy. She's in the living room. Tell her it's not her fault."

Even now, with a mountain of grief upon her, Rita was concerned about someone else who was wounded. *I love you dear sister*. Matt kissed her on the cheek before leaving her with Lou to go see Lucy.

Lucy sat on the straw colored couch, gazing at the family album, which lay opened on her lap. She didn't look up when he approached. Matt wasn't sure what this indifference meant or how she would react if he sat down next to her. As he got closer, he saw that she was teary-eyed and appeared fragile. He eased onto the couch next to her. "Are you okay?"

She shook her head. "No."

"You had nothing to do with Grandpa dying."

"I caused it. I brought Nails here. That's when the killing started. I'm such a fuck-up."

"Lucy, you're not to blame. I am."

He sounded so troubled, so serious, Lucy faced him. "How?"

Now that her eyes were upon him, he felt a great shame. "I can't say. I'm only telling you this much because I don't want you to feel the pain I'm feeling. You're not to blame. I am. Please forgive me, Lucy. I need you to forgive me."

Lucy put her arms around him. "Whatever you did, Uncle Matty, I know you didn't mean for Grandpa to die."

Her words and embrace soothed and strengthened him.

Matt considered spending the night at his family's apartment, but feared putting his sister and niece in danger. There were still people with guns, roaming loose, trying to kill him. He gave the excuse of important work related duties, and promised Rita he'd be back tomorrow. There was no mention of the attempted hit on Matt's life that afternoon.

When they descended the staircase, Lou handed Matt his official card along with his personal one that had his home phone number on it. He promised Matt he'd have around-the-clock police protection. This would certainly help, but on the flip-side, it would make it almost impossible for Matt to get in touch with Frankie.

At the foot of the stairs, Matt peered down the narrow hall to the entryway, beyond which lay the blood stain he would again have to step over. He turned to Lou. "I want to see my father's body."

Lou frowned and rubbed his chin. "They're probably still working on him. Why don't you wait till tomorrow."

A blanket of low stratus clouds had dimmed the afternoon sky. Lou stepped outside first. Though there were three patrol cars and five policemen close by, he made a visual sweep of the passing vehicles and nearby windows and rooftops. He stopped scanning the area when he saw a silver-gray Cadillac pull in behind one of

the police cruisers. Lou's bore intensified, as if he recognized the car, and sure enough, Frankie Mazzarino got out on the passenger side and walked toward them.

Frankie stopped some ten feet away and addressed Lou. "I'm here to give Matt my condolences."

Lou glared at him before turning to Matt, who stared at Frankie.

Matt guessed Frankie had something up his sleeve to chance such an open meeting between the two of them. Seeing that Frankie was intent on keeping his distance, Matt stepped in front of Lou and walked to Frankie.

"I'm sorry to hear about your father."

"Thanks, Frankie."

Wrapping one arm around Matt, Frankie brought him close. It felt like an awkward hug until Frankie slipped his free hand into Matt's jacket pocket. And instead of further condolences, Frankie whispered, "When you're alone check your pocket."

Frankie stepped away from Matt. He spoke in a voice loud enough for Lou to hear. "If there's anything I can do for you or your family, let me know."

Matt nodded, and Frankie walked back to his car.

When Matt sat down in the backseat of the patrol car, he was surprised to see Lou slide in next to him, leaving the driver up front by himself. He didn't like that Lou was sitting so close. This prevented him from dipping his hand into his pocket to finger whatever Frankie had put inside. It had to be some kind of note, probably an address or street location or phone number. Still, Matt wanted desperately to feel it, as if it were a charm given to him by his protector to ward off further evils, and if he rubbed it just right, he might be rescued from his miserable plight.

The police cruiser started up Mulberry Street. Lou turned to Matt. "I'd be careful not to accept favors from our old friend."

Too late for that. "Why?"

"You know he's connected, don't you?"

"I heard the rumors."

"They're not rumors. He's a capo with his own crew. And a very productive one at that. The word on the street is when Tommy M. retires, Frankie'll be made boss."

Frankie's that high up? Maybe he can get me out of this jam. Matt slipped his hand into his pocket and fingered the folded piece of paper. "Frankie was just saying what was expected."

"I'm only warning you so you don't get ideas about this wiseguy helping you get even with who did this to your father."

This prick's getting too close! "Christ! I'm not gonna get involved with the fucking Mob."

A strange cast came upon Lou's face, as if a light bulb were glowing above his head. *What the hell did Lou just realize?* Matt was certain his last lie had been delivered convincingly. No, it wasn't anything he said, it was what Lou said. It was what the detective heard himself say out loud about *wiseguys helping to get even.*

Matt saw the wheels spinning, how Lou was starting to make sense of recent events. All of a sudden, the short ride back to the studio was taking forever. Growing more uncomfortable, Matt shifted in his seat. He wanted to get away from Lou's suspicions and find a secret place where he could pull the note from his pocket and read the future.

Apparently, Lou had a lot to think about because he didn't say anything else until they arrived at the studio. Lou pointed out the window to the two patrolmen who stood guard by the front entrance. "I know these guys. They're good cops. They'll be here till the shift change. Then another two will take over. I'll be back early in the morning. Wait for me. I want to go over some more things with you." Lou patted Matt on the arm. "Try and get some sleep tonight."

Matt left the patrol car. He worried about Lou. The detective probably wanted to check some facts, maybe some notes he had written and left at the office. To get it clear in his mind before he came down heavy on Matt. Out of respect for the Sasso family's great loss, Lou would wait one more night before unloading his accusations of Matt's involvement with the Mob.

Nodding to the two policemen on watch duty, Matt walked past them and opened the front door, which was unlocked. One of the cops said, "We need you to leave the door open in case an emergency requires us to enter."

"No problem."

Matt moved through the front office, eager to reach his bedroom where he could read Frankie's note in seclusion. When he entered the studio, a great heaviness came over him, and his thoughts broke apart and floated off like wind-blown chalk. He stopped. In the stillness of the cavernous studio, he heard the reverse echoes of that afternoon's gunfire. The shots became louder and repeated more rapidly until he heard the high-fidelity blasts that had ripped past him as he hid in fear behind the refrigerator. Revisiting the recent terror was bad enough, but what frightened him even more was the approach of a greater horror. Paralyzed in mind and body, he waited for the gloom to tap him on the shoulder. By its touch, both gentle and familiar, Matt didn't have to turn to know it was his father's spirit. *Pop. I've lost you forever.* Matt shuddered and cried without tears, having run dry of them.

With all his other worries, Matt had forgotten the tragic death of his father. A fresh guilt settled onto the previous ones. He asked for his father's forgiveness. He felt his chest tighten and his limbs grow weary. He could do no more for his father other than endure the raw pain of eternal loss. He took no cover when grief in many guises struck with many weapons. When the torment spent itself, Matt slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and removed Frankie's note.

The unlined paper had been folded twice. He opened the quarters and saw it was typewritten. He read the message. He felt his pulse quicken and his mouth dry like a sponge left in the sun. He crumpled the note, and held it tightly in his fist as he raced to the rear exit. He opened the damaged door and scanned the parking lot and street before he stepped outside. The sky was almost black, but the path to Carol's

room was well lit by the outdoor safety lights. Matt kept close to the wall when he padded lightly up the iron stairs.

Carol opened the door. "Are your sister and niece all right?"

"They're okay." He moved past her to the center of the room, where he turned and faced her again. "Have the police come up to check on you?"

"No. They said they'd be out front if we needed them."

He hated throwing her life into chaos again, but he had no choice. "We're not safe here."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been warned there are cops on the take from the people who are trying to kill me."

"Matt, I have to know what's going on. Who did you kill?"

"I killed a guy named Jimmy Cascone. He was connected to the Mob. They called him the Garbage King because he ran the carting rackets. He dumped tons of toxic waste and poisoned the drinking water of millions of people. Him being the target made it easier for me to pay them back."

"How can murder be easy?"

"It wasn't easy." He held back, then spit it out. "But it gives Robert's death some meaning."

There were tears in her eyes. Matt struggled to stay on track. "We have to go. Jimmy's sons are after me. They killed my father for revenge. They'll do anything to get me. I'm in danger as long as they know where I am. I'm sorry I got you involved."

"You think I'm in danger too?"

"If they can't get me, it's possible they'll go after people close to me."

He'd been obligated to make the urgency real to her, and he succeeded. She began to follow his directions without question.

In their separate quarters, they each packed a medium-size suitcase with clothing and personal items. Matt also stuffed his pockets with all the paper money he had on hand, which totaled over thirteen hundred dollars, and took the .38 from behind the headboard. As planned, a half-hour after he had left her room, they each climbed out a window and met on the fire escape, then snuck down to the alley and out onto West Street. They walked south for two blocks and hailed a taxi to an upper Westside hotel. From there, Matt lugged both suitcases five blocks before he stopped another cab. They rode back downtown and over to the Eastside and departed the second cab two streets from where they would spend the night. At the Regency Hotel, Matt paid cash for a single night in a two-bedroom suite.

While Matt and Carol unpacked their bags, they avoided each other and kept to their own bedrooms, placing items in dressers and clothes in closets. The convoluted escape had been difficult enough, but the hardest part was yet to come, and Matt was preparing himself for it. He stepped out into the living room and went to the open doorway to her bedroom. He had already decided to disclose the second part

of Frankie's note, but hadn't yet come up with the right words to say. He blurted out her name before he was ready to speak. "Carol."

Perhaps it was the tone of his voice that made her take the extra time to finish folding a sweater and set it in a drawer before she looked at him.

"I'm gonna be straight with you. I have to hit them first before they get a chance to hurt Rita or Lucy."

"I knew this was coming."

"After that, there's no more worry. I've been promised once the Cascone brothers are taken care of, it's over. There won't be anymore threats to our lives."

She turned away so he wouldn't see the tears in her eyes. "I'm leaving after your father's funeral. I won't stay for yours." She stepped into her private bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Matt was powerless to bring his father back from the dead, and helpless, for now, to remedy Carol's disappointment. He could only put effort into what was possible and urgent. And above all else, he had to survive and protect his loved ones. After he accomplished that, he'd work like the devil in Vegas to win Carol back.

Matt sat on his bed and thought about the last part of Frankie's message, which instructed him to be at the southwest corner of Varick and Houston at nine o'clock sharp. Matt was antsy to do something, anything. There was no way he could sleep, and he wanted to give Carol time alone other than the option of hiding in her bedroom. He thought of something on his to-do list. He removed the contents of his inside jacket pocket and found Lou's card, the one with his home phone number on it.

Matt entered Carol's bedroom and stood by the bathroom door. "I have to go out. Do you need anything?" He waited. "I'll be right back. I just need to make a phone call to Lou. Please don't leave while I'm gone. Please don't do that."

Matt hoped fear alone would keep her from taking off on her own in the middle of the night. Besides, she'd given her word she would stay for his father's funeral.

The hotel was in a good part of town with many pay phones to choose from, but Matt felt like walking, and though the night was cold and cloudy with a threat of rain or snow, he enjoyed his solitary stroll and covered a dozen blocks before stopping at a phone booth.

It took seven rings for Lou to answer in a gruff voice. "Hello."

"Lou, this is Matt."

"Where the fuck are you? Don't you know you're on a hit-list?"

"Lou."

"For chrissake, I thought you had more sense!"

"Lou, shut the fuck up and listen! Tell Rita I'm okay. Keep an eye on my family. They could be targets. Don't worry about finding me." He hung up the phone. Matt had said what he wanted to say and there was nothing more he wanted to hear. He felt a twinge of guilt for the way he had treated Lou, but it passed quickly for Matt had so many far greater things to feel guilty about.

When he got back to the hotel suite, he opened Carol's door and peeked inside. She was in bed under the covers with the light out. Whether she was asleep or not he didn't know. He closed her door and breathed a sigh of relief. Besides the fact she was still there, Matt was glad he didn't have to talk to her until the morning. With no more requisite chores to do, exhaustion spread like wildfire through his body. The day's terrifying events had beaten him physically and tortured him mentally. All he wanted now was to rest. He walked to his room, where he took off his leather jacket and removed his shoes before falling onto the floral print bedspread. The soft bedding and firm mattress held and lifted him as if he were floating on a calm sea toward the isle of serenity.

It didn't take long for Matt to drift into a sound sleep, but it only lasted a few hours. He awoke in the middle of the night, cold, with an acidic taste in his mouth. The kind that comes from not eating all day. He thought of calling down for room service, then nixed the idea as too complicated for his fragile state of mind. He took two aspirins for his pounding headache, brushed his teeth, and stripped down to his underwear, before crawling under the bedcovers. Once again, the kind mattress caressed him, but this time sleep wouldn't come so easily.

His thoughts repeated like a jump-cut horror film on a continuous reel. Again and again, he suffered his father's brutal death, helpless to prevent the small caliber gun from moving close, so close it left flash burns at the entrance wound. He pictured Rita, terrified, running down the flights of stairs, and witnessed her gentle, loving spirit crushed by the sight of their father's bloodied corpse. He shared Lucy's guilt and pain, and regretted that he had lost Carol's trust. He worried Lou would arrest him, and festered over why Frankie hadn't used his capo influence to get him out of the initial jam. He feared for his family's safety, for getting caught and going to prison, and for being killed. He struggled not to confront what had to be done next, but lost, and wondered where two more murders would lead him? He imagined how it would be to run away and live in another part of the country, to start all over. Probably, not in Idaho.

Matt sought to calm himself by thinking of the concerns he had before Robert's death. His preoccupation with getting older, his troublesome attraction to younger women, and his serious consideration of a permanent relationship, at which point, Traci came to mind for she was high on his list of potential mates and had survived the test of time. They shared many memories, plus she was great in bed. He thought of her beautiful breasts, her strong legs and firm buttocks, and how she and Matt had given and received so much pleasure from each other with a minimum of heartache. After hours of wide-awake reckonings, these warm thoughts of Traci led him to find a bit of slumber. When the alarm went off, an hour and a half later, at seven-fifteen, Matt awoke, lying on his side, with a stiff reminder that he hadn't had sex in almost a week. He began the new morning by gripping his erection with one hand and cupping his testicles with the other.

The pleasure it brought him kept the harsh events from beginning as scheduled. While he rubbed his penis to keep it hard, Matt hoped his days of lusting after women weren't about to end. Wrapped in his chrysalis chamber, he fantasized that the next time he came inside a woman it would be more than sex; it would be a thunderous display heralding his liberation from the hellish predicament he now faced. Stroking himself, he continued his flight of fancy until the first tremor surged through his member and sensitized the blushing head of his cock. He let go and turned onto his back, telling himself that when the *teepee* folded, he would get out of bed and go kill another two people. Matt didn't smile or flinch. The mix of silly and serious negated the extremes. He was deadening parts of himself.

CHAPTER 19

The first thing Matt did when he got out of bed was call room service and rush an order of eggs, ham, buckwheat pancakes, hash browns, toast, orange juice, and coffee up to his room. In the time it took him to shower, shave, and get dressed, his breakfast was prepared and sent up to him. Matt showed his appreciation for the timely delivery with a twenty dollar tip. Taking python gulps, he swallowed mouthfuls of food and devoured everything, expanding his shrunken stomach to moderate discomfort.

Before leaving the hotel suite, he left Carol a hundred dollars and a note warning her not to use her credit cards. He wrote that he would call her as soon as he could, and asked that she not leave for Idaho without saying good-bye. He ended the note with an awkward apology for the trouble he had caused her.

By hurrying everything he did that morning, Matt avoided troubling over the portentous day ahead. It also got him to arrive at the designated meeting place, Varick and Houston, with ten minutes to spare. Right on time, Frankie pulled up to the curb in a blue Taurus. *Another fucking Taurus! Where the hell does he get these cars?* Matt swore he would never again ride in a Taurus.

Before Matt had a chance to settle in his seat, Frankie asked, “Did you destroy the note I gave you?”

“I know how to read,” Matt snapped.

Frankie cut him a look. “We got a big day ahead of us.”

“Oh, yeah. What exactly will *you* be doing?”

“Listen wise-ass, you don’t want my help? You wanna take on the Cascones by yourself?”

Matt powered down the window to let the smoke from Frankie’s cigarette escape into the moist morning air.

Frankie crushed his cigarette in the ashtray. “I know this ain’t easy for you. But the good news is after the brothers are out of the way, you won’t have anyone else to worry about.”

Matt screwed a hard look at Frankie. “How can you guarantee something like that? Is there like a fucking Cosa Nostra rule that says if you kill a capo, the only way to absolve yourself is to whack all the surviving sons? Or is that only valid when your own father is gunned down in the street?”

Frankie puffed his cheeks and exhaled. “Actually, that’s part of it.”

“What’s part of what?”

“That your father got killed evens it out.”

“Evens it out with who?”

“The respective bosses.”

“So who else do I have to thank besides Tommy the Merciful?”

“Hey, no fucking names!”

“No fucking names. I forget. What’s it the third commandment? Thou shall not take the name of thy boss thy God in vain.”

“I’m about to stop this fucking car and let your wanted ass outta here.”

Matt saw the entrance to the Holland Tunnel and curled a wry smile. “No, don’t do that. I’m looking forward to another ride to hell in a Taurus sedan.”

Frankie shook his head.

“I’ve been wondering about something, Frankie.”

“What about?”

“Lou told me you’re high up in the family. Practically next in line.”

“I didn’t know Lou to exaggerate like that.”

“Neither did I. So my question is how come you didn’t do more to get me out of the hit on Jimmy?”

“Yeah, I got some pull, but there’s always other guys looking to get the angle. What happened, I’m sorry to say, is I got out-maneuvered by another capo, who won the war of words. He convinced the bosses you were the perfect opportunity for an outside hit on Jimmy. Greed and power run the Mob. Once they got you in their sight, there was nothing I could do.” Frankie noted Matt’s cold expression. “Look, we can go back and forth about whose fault this is, but you know we’re both to blame. So let’s put that aside and concentrate on what we. . . on what *you* need to do today.”

“I got more questions.”

Frankie took a deep breath.

“How does my father’s death even me whacking three made guys?”

“My people took the position Jimmy started it all when he almost killed you by torching the tanker, so your retaliation was understandable. Plus putting the general public in danger like that was very bad press for the Mob, and for that Jimmy lost a lotta face among the other families.”

“It sounds like we’re even at this point. My father and Jimmy cancel each other out. Why won’t the bosses come after me when I hit the sons?”

“You’re right, it is even. But the bosses know the sons are looking to kill you, so you have the right to protect yourself and whack them first.”

“It’s me against made guys. I don’t understand the level playing field.”

Frankie enjoyed telling the details. “This is where I used my influence. I argued that you’re an innocent civilian from the neighborhood who got dragged into this by chance, not by choice. Also working in your favor is the fact that the two Cascones are worthless shits. Everyone knows they’re destined to fuck up the unions and carting, so it’s expected they’re gonna be whacked soon anyway. If you do it, it saves the Mob from putting out an official contract.”

“I need for you to explain one more thing to me.” Matt watched Frankie blink impatiently. “Why did your family trust me with such an important hit on Jimmy?”

“First, like I told you, they wanted an outsider. And the near-death experience gave you a strong motive, so if you’d been found out, people would’ve believed you were doing it on your own for revenge. Second, these older guys know you from when you were a kid. In case you’ve forgotten, you had some rep back then. You were a crazy motherfucker with more balls and talent than any other guy our age who went into the Mob. These higher-ups get to the top because they’re smart, and they’re smart because they don’t forget what they see. They had all sorts of faith in you getting the job done right.”

Matt had a thousand other questions, but was unable to think of any just then. He slumped back in his seat and stared out the window at the passing industrial wasteland. They were in New Jersey now, south of the Tunnel somewhere in Jersey City. The dismal street they drove on soon came to an end, and the Taurus veered left onto a beaten asphalt road. Matt guessed it wound back to the Hudson. Surrounded by tall weeds, the road narrowed and became bumpier with increasing dips, rises, and potholes. Frankie slowed to five miles per hour. *A perfect place to whack or be whacked.*

The thirty-eight caliber that Matt carried in his inside pocket came to mind. He entertained the notion of pulling it out and shooting Frankie point blank in the temple. This caprice indicated the deep hostility Matt felt toward his old friend, blaming him for his escalating troubles and for his father’s death. But these accusations always turned on Matt and pointed him back to the undeniable truth that it was Frankie who aggressively tried to change Matt’s mind about avenging Robert’s death.

Like it or not, Matt needed Frankie more than Frankie needed him. *It’s time to cut the bullshit blame game and get this over with.* “So what’s the plan and when does it happen?”

Frankie checked his watch. “As we speak, a giant crane is rolling onto the construction site next to J.J. Waste. In a few hours you’re gonna climb to the top of the boom, and from there you’ll have a clear shot at the two of them. Bang. Bang. And your troubles are over.”

“Just like that? I see a million things going wrong. How do I get past the workers and security guards? And what about the Cascone crew, do I get a free pass from them after I hit Joe and Vic?”

“No one will be on site. It’s Saturday, plus we called a work stoppage and told the security people to honor the union action by staying clear of the lot. As for the Cascones, I know for sure they’ll be at work. And don’t worry about their crew, they’re not regular wiseguys. They’re a bunch of mutts, who’ll shit their pants as soon as the two brothers go down. They’ll think it’s a Mob hit and stay outta the way.”

“How far away will this crane be? What makes you think I can shoot long range?”

“You’ll be about two hundred feet away. From what I remember, you won’t have a problem at that distance.”

“I haven’t fired that far since I was a kid. I ain’t as confident as you seem to be.”

“We’re gonna make up for lost time. I got two top-of-the-line sniper rifles in the trunk. You’re about to brush up on your old skills.”

Matt noticed the scenery had changed. The winding rough road had thinned to a single unpaved lane, and the tall weeds were less dense, mainly clustered around an increasing number of murky ponds. Abandoned cars and plenty of junk lay scattered and half submerged throughout the foul-smelling marsh. They rounded a clump of tall rushes and were suddenly alongside a wide expanse of open land. In the distance, Matt saw a dozen earthmovers and a fleet of dump trucks working the land, filling and leveling it.

Frankie pointed to the landfill operation. “Progress never stops. In two years, this wasteland will be converted into million dollar condominiums with spectacular views of Manhattan and the Upper Bay. Plus easy access to the City.”

Frankie waited for a reaction, but never got one. Matt slipped into thought, equating progress and capitalism to a long drawn out Ponzi scheme, where the people at the bottom, spurred by the promise of future wealth, supported those at the top. It would take time, but eventually the pyramid would crumble when the impoverished billions of the world reached moderate success and each owned a house, a car, an air conditioner, and other necessities and luxuries. This bulging population of nouveau middle-class would consume the remaining natural resources and pollute the earth beyond its capacity to repair itself. Frankie was wrong, progress will stop because our planet is finite and will someday choke to death on the industrial appetite and excrement of the upward moving masses.

The road ahead disintegrated into random finger trails through the weeds and brush. Frankie steered the Taurus behind a mound of earth, topped by a copse of tall reeds, and stopped, hidden from the landfill operation. Frankie reached in front of him and popped open the trunk. He looked at Matt. “Let’s go.”

Outside the car, Matt sniffed the dampness of salt water and decay, and heard *chugging* from a nearby machine that lay out of sight in the weeds. Frankie lifted a blanket and uncovered two rifle cases in the trunk.

Matt stared at the cases. “What’s that sound?”

“It’s a drainage pump. They’re all over. It’ll mask the gunfire.”

Frankie handed Matt the blanket, “Here hold this,” and removed the two hard cases from the trunk. “Remember how we used rats for target practice. Those fucking Norwegians bled like pigs.”

Matt ignored him. Frankie shrugged and walked down a footpath through tall stalks. With little choice but to stick to his master, Matt followed like a pup. They walked through the rushes for about a hundred feet and came to a long narrow clearing close to the river. Matt couldn’t see the Hudson because the open area was

bordered on all sides by low ridges and high reeds, but he heard the muffled sound of lapping water. And to his left, rising high in the distance, he saw the looming towers of Manhattan lit by the cold blue light of the morning sun.

Frankie stopped at the end of the clearing furthest from the river and pointed to the ground. "Spread the blanket out here."

Frankie set the two cases on the blanket and opened them, revealing identical contents. He took a rifle from its case and handed it to Matt.

"They're both M24s. One of the best sniper systems ever built. It's a six shot repeater with one round in the chamber and five in the magazine. With four backup mags in each case, you can go in with 60 rounds packed. Of course, you ain't gonna need anywhere near that amount, but it's insurance." Frankie pointed to the scope. "Check out the sight. It's an M3A. Magnifies ten times."

Matt raised the rifle and peered into the scope with his right eye. It took some effort to look through the long lens and identify what he was seeing.

"It takes a little getting used to. You'll get the hang of it." Frankie stepped away from the blanket and dug his heel in the dirt. "This is where you're gonna shoot from. I'll measure out a hundred yards and set up some targets for you. The Cascones will be a lot closer."

Matt studied the M24 in his hands. "What's the range on this?"

"It's effective range is eight hundred meters. You aim it right and that gun'll hit it."

Frankie took long strides and counted each one out loud. When he got to *five*, he stopped and looked back at Matt. "Do me a favor. Don't focus on me while I'm out there. With that rifle, it's the same as pointing a .38 up close."

Matt nodded. He pointed the rifle toward the far end of the clearing and searched for something to aim at. He spotted a black object lying on the ground about a hundred yards away and tried to locate it by using the gun scope. It proved to be quite a challenge. The black object was difficult to find and when he finally located what turned out to be a tire on its side, it was tough to keep it in view. The slightest movement caused the tire to disappear from sight. As he struggled to steady his aim, Matt's vision blurred and his arm cramped. *Fuck! This is tougher than I thought.* He sat on the blanket and placed the rifle back in its case. He shut his eyes and rubbed the tight arm muscle while he waited for Frankie to return and advise him how to use the M24 sniper system to its maximum efficiency.

When Frankie returned, he pointed in the distance to an assortment of items he had stuck in the ground or leaned against other objects. The targets included an ironing board, a 12-inch television, a vacuum cleaner, wooden planks, and two-by-fours.

Matt looked through the scope. "I'm having trouble aiming this thing."

"You need to set it on something."

Frankie spotted a seatless wooden chair. He brought it to the mark he had roughed in the dirt and leaned his weight on it until the legs sunk three inches into the wet ground. He waved Matt over. "Bring the rifle."

Frankie sat on the ground, leaned forward, and laid the M24's long barrel across the chair for support. He looked through the scope and aimed at one of the standing objects. "This is how you keep it steady. When you're up in the boom, you'll be able to lay it against the cross braces." Frankie handed the rifle to Matt. "Try it."

Laying the sniper rifle across the chair made a world of difference. With a little practice, and by varying his grip until he found a comfortable tension level, Matt was able to keep a steady aim. It took him six rounds - one magazine - to get used to the kick, and within five minutes, using three more magazines, Matt had hit all twelve targets.

Frankie grinned. "You always were a good shot. Anytime you're looking to change careers. . ."

"You think I like this shit?"

Frankie walked back out to reset the targets and let his friend cool off. The next time around, Matt never once missed his mark, mastering the technique of supporting the rifle firmly in his arms, sighting the target, and squeezing the trigger. Frankie continued to set up the targets, and Matt worked on his quickness until he was able to hit six separate objects in six seconds, consistently.

"Practice makes perfect," Frankie said. "I think you're ready to move on."

A part of Matt wanted to practice forever and put off the real deal indefinitely, while another part wanted to get the double hit over with immediately. He couldn't deny the results he'd just demonstrated, and was confident he'd be able to kill two men at a distance of two hundred feet in two seconds.

"I gotta call Carol and tell her I'll be back later this afternoon."

"There's no time for that now."

"Just a quick stop at a phone booth, that's all."

"I'll call her. You think about what you have to do."

"Frankie."

"Listen to me. You're in a zone, right now. No distractions of any kind."

"Okay! Okay! She's at the Regency Hotel. Room 720. Make sure you call her."

"I will."

"Promise me."

"I promise you. Now let's get moving."

CHAPTER 20

Matt dropped Frankie off at the Newark International Airport, where he'd get a cab back to Manhattan. Twenty minutes after that, Matt rounded the bend near J.J. Waste and Carting and saw the giant crane with its boom rising a hundred feet into the dull gray sky.

The metal plates, on each side of the boom, with the company name, *Lewiston of Teterboro*, were about three-quarters of the way up. The height Matt had been instructed to climb. From there, he'd be able to see over the waste site's wood-slatted, cyclone fence and have a clear view of the low, cinder block building, where the Cascones had their office. In addition, the four, eight-by-four foot, one inch steel nameplates would provide adequate cover while he readied himself to shoot.

Matt left the blue Taurus where he had parked before and snuck toward the crane. Keeping low to the wet and sometimes muddy ground, he took cover behind bushes, tall weeds, and mounds of earth, both natural and machine-made. Slung across his back was a black duffel bag containing one M24 with scope, ten loaded magazines, gaffer's tape, and a pair of thick leather work gloves.

The black and red crane was parked about seventy-five feet from the road and directly faced J.J.'s main gate. It stood in a yet untouched area of the construction site, among brush, tall weeds, and scattered trees. Matt circled behind the base of the crane and climbed onto one of its huge steel treads. He walked along the platform that girdled the red housing, which contained the powerful engine in back and the operator's cab up front, and made his way to the base of the boom. He scanned the area and didn't see anyone. It seemed as good a time as any to begin his climb. He slipped the strap over his head, set the duffel bag down, and removed the work gloves. A car approached on the two-lane road, so he waited and listened to hear if it would stop. It didn't. He slung the duffel bag back over his shoulder and put the gloves on. He looked up at the boom. Its size and scale now even more colossal.

The boom consisted of four corner spires made of thick steel columns, connected and supported by a lattice of three-inch wide braces. The towering structure was locked at a seventy-five degree angle by a pair of spun-steel cables that rose from the engine compartment and climbed three-quarters of the way up, where they attached to the boom. There was also a heavy lifting cable that looped over the top of the boom, at the end of which hung a large ball and hook, safety-chained to the boom. Running up the back, right corner of the boom, from the bottom to the top, were steel rungs, welded a foot apart to form a ladder.

Matt stepped onto the first rung, grabbed another just above his head and began his climb. Other than the occasional glance to check for people, Matt concentrated on his footing and hand grips. With each step and lift upward, he felt the increased pull of the earth. It appealed like a siren song. Made him think how simple it would be if he just let go and allowed gravity to take him. Matt focused harder on his physical connection to the steel rungs.

He was sixty feet above ground, when he felt winded and realized he'd been suppressing his breath while climbing. He paused to take a deep breath. As he did so, a car roared down a side road, adjacent to the construction site. He slid his hands and feet to the far right of the rungs and leaned his body around the corner beam to shield himself. The car continued toward the two-lane road, turned onto it, and sped off. Matt started to pull himself back around the corner beam, when his wet boots slipped from the rung and he clung by his hands off to the side of the steel ladder.

With arm muscles, tight and quaking, Matt swung and twisted his body to face the ladder, but his first attempt was too cautious and his feet never turned enough to step squarely onto a rung. On his next try, he swung and twisted with greater force, this time, one of his boots hit a rung head-on and slid under it just as his left hand slipped off the higher rung. Matt dangled by one hand for a few terrorized moments until his foot found the rung he had missed and stepped onto it. Securing the steel steps with his other hand and foot, Matt rested and shut his eyes and gulped big portions of air. Covered in sweat, he felt his heart pound in his chest, rushing blood to the panicked and hungry regions of his body.

Matt settled himself and opened his eyes. In the distance, he saw a spectacular view of the New Jersey countryside. The panoramic sight with its rolling greenery and blue lakes reminded him why it was called the Garden State.

Matt climbed to a height just above the backside nameplate and stepped onto it. Holding onto a rung with one hand, he leaned forward against the cross-braces and looked through the boom toward the waste site, where he saw the entire cinder block building. It confirmed he had climbed high enough. He also spotted the black Cadillac limousine parked next to the office. There was no activity. No large trucks dumping waste. In fact, there was no one in sight, and the only other vehicles were two panel trucks in the yard near the front gate.

The seventy-five degree forward tilt allowed Matt to rest against the boom and let go of the rung completely. He took off his gloves and jammed them into a small space between two braces and a corner beam. He unhitched the strap, removed the duffel bag from his back, and strapped it over a cross-brace, letting it hang inside the boom and out of sight behind the nameplate. Matt slipped his body in between the crossing steel bars and lowered himself onto a set of interior right-angle braces, where he concealed himself within the surrounding four nameplates.

With his feet planted on adjoining sides of the boom to keep his balance, Matt tried a variety of positions. When he found one he was comfortable with, he leaned

forward and held out his hands, as if aiming a rifle. Satisfied with his location, he opened up the duffel bag and removed the M24 and five magazines. He stuffed two mags in each side pocket of his bomber jacket and palmed the remaining one into the rifle. Matt laid the barrel on a pair of steel braces, where they crossed just above the front side nameplate. He set the buttstock snug against his shoulder, peered through the scope, and located the green door labeled *Office*. The lifting cable wasn't in the way. The view was perfect, steady and clear. All he had to do was wait and maintain his resolve to get this over with.

It dawned on him that he was neither afraid nor hesitant of completing what he was there to do. He wondered if it was because Joe and Vic had killed his father, or because he had already murdered someone and was now a cold-blooded killer with few misgivings about doing it again. Matt censored the distracting thoughts. He was in the proper *zone* and didn't want to fuck with that in any way.

The wind picked up and more clouds rolled in. The darker kind. The increased threat of rain concerned Matt. A downpour or steady shower might ruin the visibility and force him to cancel. The idea of having to return here another day and climb back up this dirty boom was repugnant to him. He would carry out the assault even in the foulest weather.

Though the waste site was dormant, the stench was still potent, and the modulating winds brought it up in waves to where Matt could smell it. He wondered how the Cascones and their workers endured the routine malodorous potpourri of rotting garbage, rancid sludge, and caustic chemical wastes. Did they even notice it? And did the developers of the adjacent property take into account the awful smells from their neighbor when they purchased the land? Matt figured they probably didn't care because of the cheaper price, and more than likely, they too were involved in a similar smelly enterprise. *You let one of them move in and there goes the neighborhood. There goes Central New Jersey.*

Sustaining his anger with examples of environmental destruction was a safe way to occupy his mind while he waited. Unsafe, disallowed thoughts included those regarding Carol, Lou, and how the day would turn out. He tried to block all imaginings that might weaken him, and was successful except for the frequent specter of his sister mourning the death of their father.

From within and striking with the surprise swiftness of a snake, Matt's sinister side tore at him with hurtful visions of Rita. Matt tried to defend himself, but his interior nemesis knew him well and bit where Matt was most vulnerable. Images of Rita, making difficult burial plans by herself, sank Matt into black despair. He'd wipe these pictures from his mind, only to imagine Rita's sorrow as she tried to understand why her big brother had abandoned her when she needed him most. He could hear her raw plaintive voice, praying to God, asking where her brother was, asking if he was dead or alive.

The great guilt stuck its fangs in him and his knees buckled. He gripped the M24 in one hand and reached out with the other to grab onto a brace and keep from

plummeting seventy-odd feet down the boom. He leaned forward against the safety of the corner beam and rested, gathering his strength, refocusing on his mission.

After a few minutes, Matt straightened up and laid the barrel of the rifle back onto the cross braces and looked through the sight. He saw the office door swing open and eight heavily armed men run to the two panel trucks and enter them, four in each vehicle. It happened so fast and there was so many of them that the hurrying faces blurred before his eye. There was no way Matt could've picked out the brothers, aimed at them, and fired off two shots.

What the fuck's going on?

The vans started up and blue exhaust chugged into the heavy air as they idled in neutral. Matt tried to make sense of what was happening. Were they armed and ready for him or for another threat? And if he was their objective, did they know where he was? Matt removed the barrel of the M24 from the cross-braces and held it at his side while he leaned back out of view. He had little recourse but to stay hidden, keep an eye on the vans, and wait for the Cascones to make a move, which came quickly when the front gate rolled open.

The vans sped from the yard and cut straight across the two-lane toward the crane. When they reached the brush, weeds, and trees on his side of the road, they separated and parked fifty feet apart, left and right of Matt's position. His eyes went wild with animal fear when he saw the doors open and the men, with rifles and pistols in hand, take cover in the thick foliage. Glimpses of movement and color in the brush revealed a definite pattern. The two groups were moving forward and encircling the crane. He was now certain they knew where he was.

How did they know? He had been so careful not to be seen. Maybe someone tipped them off? But who? Only Frankie knew. Why would Frankie inform the Cascones? Did he want Matt dead to make sure no one found out about his involvement in Jimmy's murder? This didn't make sense. Frankie could've easily killed Matt earlier in the day at the secluded marsh by the river. Again, he was thinking crazy and blaming his troubles on Frankie. It wasn't him. It was you who fucked up!

Matt had to make up for his mistake of being seen on the boom, but didn't know how. He had lost control and was now the hunted instead of the hunter. To regain the superior position, he needed to attack, to lean forward into the light and pick off the darting bodies below. But he was unable to do so, for he feared hurrying the firefight that would end with his bullet-riddled body dropping seven stories down the boom's interior. He would wait to be fired upon. Perhaps this was a tactical mistake, but since he had little hope of surviving, he settled for a few more minutes of life.

The crunching footsteps below circled and moved closer. Then they stopped. The quiet before the storm, the stillness before death. *A time to pray? Too late for that.* How he had lived his life was his ticket to heaven or hell. Instead of prayer, Matt looked out at the countryside and reflected on how much he would miss the beautiful Earth. He inhaled a deep breath to savor its simple pleasure one more

time. Fortunately, the wind had shifted and the air he breathed was fresh and clean. He thought to thank God for this and for his forty-five year existence on the most wondrous of all worlds. But he couldn't bring himself to do so, and instead, thanked his mother and father.

“Matt! We know you're up there. Com'on down.”

It took a moment for Matt to identify it was Joe Cascone addressing him. The vaguely familiar voice sounded more gravelly, as if Joe had sucked a million cigarettes since the last time Matt heard him speak. It came to him, how the fistfight between him and Joe had started while they waited for the Second Avenue bus near their high school.

Though they were about the same age and knew each other from the neighborhood, they had never hung out together. Early on, they had established an unspoken dislike for one another. On that foretelling afternoon, outside La Salle Academy, Matt watched as Joe checked his pockets and school bag for something misplaced, lost, or consumed. Not finding what he was searching for, Joe turned glum. He spotted Matt, who was smoking a cigarette - a seven-year habit that he kicked during his trip to Europe. Desperate for a nicotine fix, Joe walked over to Matt and asked if he could bum one. Unfortunately for Joe, Matt was in a surly mood after a grueling final class period in which an especially sadistic Christian Brother had roughed him up for not having read the latest assigned chapter of *Moby Dick*. Matt took pleasure in denying Joe's request.

Plucking his pack of Lucky Strikes from his shirt pocket, Matt languidly inspected the contents, then announced he had only eighteen left and couldn't spare to give any away. As expected, Joe called Matt a nasty name - the exact wording now escaped him - and the fight was on. More than likely, a part of Matt was thinking of Brother John when he staggered Joe with a left upper-cut to the mid-section and swiftly followed with a straight right jab that broke his opponent's nose and flooded his nasal passages with blood.

“You got five seconds to show your face or we start shooting.”

Hearing Joe's voice and remembering how he had hated the two brothers when they were kids, transformed Matt's fear and acceptance of imminent death into furious anger. The men scurrying in the brush and hunting him from below were no longer faceless enemies. They were *a bunch of banana goombahs* led by *two fucking scumbag assholes* who were trying to snuff out his life. No way would he let it happen. Not without a hell of a fight. Suddenly, his brain sparked and sizzled with ideas on how to prepare for the upcoming attack.

Matt laid the rifle diagonally across the tops of two nameplates and removed the remaining five magazines from his duffel bag and stuffed them in various pockets. With fifty-four rounds of high bore ammunition packed close to his body, Matt considered how one well-aimed bullet could set him off like a roman candle. Just a passing thought, nothing that would alter his plans. He unhitched the duffel bag from

the cross-brace and crumpled it tightly. Gripping the rifle with one hand and holding the bag with his other, he repositioned himself against the front nameplate.

The seventy-five degree angle allowed Matt to lie back and rely on a single three-inch thick right-angle brace for his footing. He had free use of both hands, plus it was more difficult for anyone to fire a clear shot at him since he lay against the front nameplate, protected by all four steel plates. An aggressor would have to climb onto the treads and move in front of the operator's cab, where the boom attached to the tractor, to view him directly. Matt intended to keep his rifle trained in this most vulnerable direction, but before he did so, he had one more thing to do. More psychological than practical, Matt stuffed the crumpled duffel bag between his legs, under his crotch. With this done, he pointed the M24 down the boom and waited for the Cascones to make their next move.

With no enemy in sight, Matt relied on his hearing. He listened for rustling brush and approaching footsteps. What he heard was the chirping of birds mix with the distant hum of an uninterrupted world, bustling and oblivious to his plight. Then a shot rang out. And all hell broke loose.

The first whistling bullet struck the nameplate to his left and shattered on impact, showering him with lead fragments. Following this, a barrage of projectiles, so intense and long lasting, enveloped him in a screaming, stinging universe of exploding matter. The shock of deafening noise and the chaos of a thousand hot metal slivers, some of which nicked, pierced, and drew blood on his hands and face, battered his senses and terrified him.

Matt grabbed the crumpled duffel bag from between his legs and held it against his head to cover his face and ears as best he could. The sudden blindness increased his helplessness and fear that he was at the statistical mercy of a single bullet finding its mark. The massive, unending, hammering ricochet of firepower caused his brain to spin and his perception to wobble. No longer sure of his balance, Matt had to focus on keeping his feet glued to the three-inch ledge that supported him. He found it impossible to aim the M24 with one hand and merely clutched it in a downward position.

Matt wished he had brought safety glasses with him, and earplugs, and a bulletproof vest, and a titanium protective cup. Most of all, he wished he had done what he first wanted to do. To have killed Nails with his own bare hands, with no help from anyone else. *Fucking Frankie! It is all his fault.*

He lifted the duffel bag just enough to peek down, and saw one of the goons, positioned in front of the operator's cab, pointing a rifle at him. In a panic, Matt squeezed the trigger as he swung his weapon in the sniper's direction. Matt emptied the magazine without hitting his target, but the rapid fire paid off. It rattled the shooter enough that the one round he got off struck to the right of Matt by a good foot and a half. It also forced the sniper to back out of sight, giving Matt the chance to reload. But how?

With the enduring fusillade blasting metal scraps all around him, it was crucial that Matt hold the duffel bag to shield his face and eyes. He needed another hand. He got an idea. Tucking one end of the bag between the nameplate and his upper back, he let the rest of it drape over his head and hang down in front of his face. This freed his left hand to remove the spent magazine, drop it down the boom, and replace it with a loaded one. With the bag pinned where it was, Matt was able to grip the rifle with both hands. He lowered his head to test his view and aim.

He had limited success. His face remained protected when he used the rifle barrel to push the bag out far enough to see all the way to the bottom of the boom, but on the negative side, the duffel bag blocked his line of sight whenever he repositioned the barrel to aim at anything. Matt was practicing how to sight and shift his aim on the blind when he noticed something near the base, poking through the cross-braces, and realized it was the muzzle of a high-powered rifle, pointed straight at him by a figure occluded in shadow. In his mind's eye, Matt was certain the man had been there long enough to get a steady bead on him. As he swung his M24 toward the camouflaged enemy, Matt knew he wouldn't be the first to fire. He could only hope the gunman below was a poor marksman.

Before Matt was in position to shoot, he saw the man recoil, and a burst of matter sprayed out from between his arms. It looked like smoke, and Matt froze in fear, anticipating the pain and shock of a bullet ripping into his body. Miraculously, no bullet hit him. The man had missed. Matt hurried to aim and fire, but stopped when the man fell forward into the light, an ugly, bloody wound in the middle of his back.

“What the fuck?”

Did one of his own guys shoot him by mistake? No way, it had to be intentional. Maybe one of them used the firefight as cover to carry out a personal vendetta? Matt was about to consider more possibilities when he realized no more bullets were hitting the boom. There was still plenty of shooting going on, but none of it seemed to be aimed at him. He was totally baffled.

When he angled his head to listen more carefully to the gunfire, the duffel bag came loose and tumbled down the boom. “Shit!”

Matt refocused on the firefight below and heard a clear distinction between the shots fired from near the crane and those fired from a distance. Since no bullets were striking anywhere close to him, he figured another group had arrived to attack the Cascone crew from the rear, and his attackers were now too busy defending themselves to continue their assault on him.

Matt came up with two possibilities as to who comprised the cavalry that had shown up at the last minute to save his ass. It was either the police or Frankie and his crew. If it were the police, Matt would have some serious explaining to do. On the other hand, if it was Frankie. . . *Hold on. Why would Frankie get involved and expose his connection to me?* This scenario flew in the face of all previous reasoning and planning. Matt had to get a good look at the new guys. After placing

his rifle across the tops of two adjoining nameplates, Matt stepped onto a higher cross-brace to peek down at the combatants, especially those in the distance. The scene was difficult to read because all the shooters were hidden under the brush and trees. But little by little, Matt connected the puffs of smoke from the outer perimeter with the sounds of bullets striking the crane's housing and treads. This confirmed that the new arrivals were firing at the Cascone crew, who had gathered close to the crane in their effort to kill Matt.

Since the outcome of the battle would determine whether he survived or not, Matt was eager to know if the new troops had arrived with superior numbers. He began counting the outer locations where he saw gun smoke, and when his count reached twelve, his spirits rose. He even got a bit cocky and climbed higher to get a better look at how many more rescuers were out there. Though his head was well above the nameplates, he was careful not to lean forward where those nearest the crane might see him. Matt saw smoke rise in the distance, from a new, uncounted position, just as a bullet *zinged* past his head and ricocheted off the boom. He ducked down behind the safety of the nameplate. His heart raced as he tried to figure why one of the new guys had shot at him.

Were they the police, thinking Matt was with the Cascones and posed a threat to them? Or was it Frankie? A much more frightening thought.

All at once, he became aware of the black smoke that swirled up inside the boom. It burned his eyes, nose, and throat and snatched the air from his lungs causing him to cough and wheeze for breath. The acrid smoke was so strong and punishing he had to escape from it in a hurry. Matt lifted the bottom of his leather jacket and shoved the M24 up into it until the barrel protruded out near the collar by his neck and head. It wasn't comfortable, but the rifle fit snug against his chest and wouldn't slip out without him noticing. He retrieved his gloves, put them on, and began to climb higher.

Three bullets struck the nameplate and boom close to him, welcoming his reappearance. He twisted his body through the cross-braces and grabbed onto the outer rungs, using them to climb faster up the backside of the boom. Two more bullets hit the boom in his general proximity, after that there were no more. Matt assumed the increasing smoke and his being on the other side of the boom shielded him from the distant snipers. As for the Cascones, he trusted they were too busy protecting themselves to look up and notice how exposed he was to them.

When Matt reached the height where the guide cables attached to the boom, he paused to look down, and saw that much of the crane and a wide area of brush around it were on fire. By the intensity of the blaze, it was apparent the crane's fuel supply had been ruptured and was feeding the flames. He also observed how the interior of the boom acted like a chimney and funneled the oily smoke straight up. His instinctive retreat to the outside of the boom had been the right choice, and encouraged him to rely on gut reactions when called for.

Screams drew his attention to a man wrapped in fire, running through the brush toward his enemies in a suicidal sprint to end his suffering. Mercifully, someone took pity and cut him down with a burst of bullets from an automatic weapon.

Fear swept over Matt like a plague of locusts devouring all hope he would escape with his life. Looking down at the spreading fire that now engulfed the crane's housing and burned a good acre of brush around it, he envisioned three possible outcomes how he would die. He'd be shot, burned, or, like the screaming man, suffer both.

The growing conflagration lifted waves of hot air and slowly grilled him like a piece of meat on a twelve-story skewer. The blistering heat caused sweat to pour from his body, and dehydration would soon be added to his burgeoning list of woes. But most threatening of all were the flames steadily climbing up the greased lifting and guide cables, which served as burning conduits, transporting the fire closer to Matt. There was only one direction for him to go, and that was up.

Matt reached the last rung at the boom's pinnacle and looked down. The scorched earth below appeared like a war zone. He saw men fall as bullets pierced their skin and body parts exploded out the other side. He witnessed this without judgment or emotion for the intense unrelenting heat tortured and debilitated him, blurring his vision, scrambling his thoughts, and depleting his will to endure the life-death, mind-body struggle to hold on to consciousness and keep his grip on the final rung.

The entire lengths of both guide cables were now burning, and the flicking tongues of the uppermost flames licked the soles of his boots. His hands could go no farther, but his feet could, so he stepped higher until his boots were level with his tail end. This distanced him from the burning cables, but the knees-to-chest position put his genitalia on the front line. He felt as if his nuts were being roasted on an open fire.

Trapped at the summit, Matt had no way to escape the flames from the lifting cable, advancing toward him. In a matter of minutes, the hot grease fire would be in his face. He tried to remove the crude on the cable that was fueling the flames by scraping away the oily muck with his gloved hand, but it only smeared and compacted. This wouldn't stop the fire from reaching him, and burning him, and forcing him to let go and drop into the hellfire below.

Clearly, his time was up, and the most essential choice had to be made. *To be or not to be*. The temptation to end his life was great and the method to do so was close at hand. The torture of fire would soon be upon him, and with the barrel of the M24 caressing his cheek, it would've been quick and easy to set the muzzle under his chin and blow his head off. But the will to live, to see the last light, to breathe the last breath, no matter how foul and fiery, persevered, making life still too precious to give away. Matt wouldn't end it by his own hand.

Perhaps, when his body caught fire and excruciating pain became his total existence, wiping out all memory of life's joys and pleasures with the eternal now of unbearable suffering, maybe then he would curse his decision, his cowardliness not

to take his own life, and he would leave this world hating himself. Perhaps. But the life force within him was too powerful, and the primeval instinct to survive beat back all the horrible possibilities.

He had made his choice and he would die with it. Matt searched for something to sustain him in his fiery death. He thought of the Christian martyrs who believed the torment was but a brief passage to God's everlasting paradise and the Cambodian monks who had spent a lifetime subjugating the physical world. Neither of these would work for him for he wasn't a true believer in the after-life, and he had loved this world too dearly. Matt suddenly knew what to do in his final moments. He would recall the beautiful places, the loving persons, and the precious moments he had experienced while he lived.

Matt closed his eyes and remembered lying in the hot sun on his favorite Formenterra beach. He saw the small cove hidden by limestone cliffs, the lilted blue-sapphire sea and the soft virgin white sand. He saw his young, brown, muscular body entwined in the arms and legs of Helen of Troy. *The fire! Please help me!*

He thought of his mother, the earliest memory of her. It was in Central Park, on a spring Sunday after visiting the zoo. They sat under the shade of a giant tree, where she brushed back his hair and smiled at him as she teased him with a grape, placing it on his tongue and lifting it off before he could close his mouth. They laughed a lot until she finally let go of the grape, and it was the sweetest, juiciest fruit he would ever taste. He was three-years old at the time, and his mother at the height of her beauty.

In like manner, he remembered his father in his prime and how he'd stretch out his mighty arms for Matt and Rita to reach up and cling to his forearms for a giggle-filled ride to the dinner table. Thomas' greatest joy was to come home after a hard day of labor and play with his children. *The fire! I'm burning!*

The hot flames and suffocating heat baked and reddened his skin. Matt was powerless to shield himself from the pain. He cried out for a last bit of relief, and saw the images of Rita, Lucy, Frankie, Lou, Eddie, Traci, Robert, and Carol. He loved them and all that he had experienced. He loved who he had become. With this last declaration, Matt exhausted his strength, gave up his will, and his mind slipped beyond his dominion.

If only he could shed a tear for his terrible loss, but he had no moisture to spare. He opened his eyes and imagined a tear rolling down his cheek and falling through the smoke and flames. It grew rapidly as it descended and gave him hope it would extinguish the vast fire below. Though huge, the tear tumbled unfettered through the boom and its web of cross-braces, until it hit something and shattered and evaporated completely. Matt strained to see what had prevented him from saving his life with his last tear, and saw that the mysterious object reflected the flames like shiny metal would. It was the chain anchoring the lifting hook to the boom. A lightning strike of optimism recharged his body, lifted his spirit, and focused his mind. *Thank you for one more chance.*

Matt tugged the zipper of his leather jacket to free the M24 from its snug position against his chest. He pulled the rifle out and held it in his right hand while he rose higher to bend his body over the top of the boom. With his head pointed downward, Matt peered through the billowing smoke, and as far as he could see, the descending part of the lifting cable wasn't on fire. Rarely did the soupy haze dissolve enough for him to see the connecting chain, but he did catch glimpses of it. Though frustrated by the smoke, he wouldn't rail against it, for while it impaired his vision, it also blocked the view of those who were trying to kill him.

The ground in front of the crane and directly under the lifting hook burned furiously, feasting on a great spill of gasoline. This was a critical problem because Matt's only chance to escape a fiery death would be to slide down the non-burning part of the lifting cable. The earth under him, as he looked straight down, however, was blackened but no longer aflame. For this reason, the chain was a link to his salvation.

With his upper body draped over the boom's summit, Matt aimed his rifle at the obscured chain, which shimmered like an apparition when he was able to sight it through the rippling veils of smoke. For a split-second, the thick haze thinned, and he fired a shot, but the cable didn't swing away from the boom. With scant feedback to help him make adjustments, he fired and shifted his aim, using his weapon like a white cane to probe the darkness. After six missed shots, he removed the magazine, let it fall to the ground, and reloaded a fresh one.

Matt fired three more times with no success. Then, after the fourth shot, as if God had had enough of his foolishness, the cable swung free of the boom. Astounded, Matt watched as the heavy ball and lifting hook swayed back and forth, settling in a straight line between him and a patch of scorched, smoking earth.

Touching the greased cable with one of his gloved fingers, Matt imagined how rapidly he would fall. He estimated the ball and hook to be twenty feet from the ground, so he had to release the cable when he was close to its end and avoid a drop from too high up. The other, even greater danger was if he let go too late, he risked being eviscerated by the hook.

The flames moved closer and the heat intensified, yet Matt was stuck in place, for he knew once he grasped the cable and let go of the boom, his descent would be out of his control. He tried to recall the formula for gravity, but only remembered an object falls sixteen feet in the first second and then accelerates. He removed a loaded clip from his pocket and was about to drop it and count the seconds it took to hit the ground, when a bullet struck the boom just below his feet. Startled, Matt let go of the clip and the M24. As they tumbled and clanged against the boom, he grabbed onto the greased cable with both hands. He felt the squishiness through his gloves and lost any hope he'd be able to slow his descent.

His headfirst position steadily flooded his brain with blood and oxygen, and as he stared down the deep, smoky chasm to the distant ground, Matt became lost in its vertical measure. Dizzy and disoriented, he hesitated to act, until a second bullet

blasted the boom inches from his head. The shattering metal shocked his ears and frightened him enough that he twisted his lower half from the steel ladder and stepped off into space.

His ungainly dismount from the boom launched his body into orbit around the cable. Spiraling and rocketing to earth, Matt clamped his hands tighter onto the steel lifeline and wrapped his legs around it for added traction. As he spun through the rushing air, thick with smoke and burning smells, grease from the drop line slopped under his hands and boots, and splattered onto his skin and clothing. Though stunned by the ground's speeding approach, Matt riveted his attention on the ball and hook that circled under him. Its potential to gaff and gut him like a slaughtered animal was of greater concern than how hard he would collide with the unstoppable earth.

Calculating the diminishing distance to disembowelment, Matt pushed off and released his grasp of the cable just as his feet nicked the weighted ball. The rest of his fall was a blur. Only luck, instinct, or divine intervention got him to land feet first and tumble backward onto the charred field. It may have resembled a perfect parachute landing, but he didn't glide his way down, and the fast hit jarred every bone and joint in his body. It took a few moments for his head to clear and for the shock to wear off, at which point, intense pain and muscle spasms left him curled and writhing in agony.

As Matt lay disabled on the ground, the fortuitous mingling of gray, brown, and black smoke shielded him from both sides of the fierce gun battle. Other than the astounding accomplishment that he had survived so far, everything else looked bleak. He was in the direct line of crossfire with scores of bullets whistling past him, and the other looming menace was the likelihood that at least one of the men hunting him had seen him slide down the cable and was now closing in on him. Matt's feet, legs, and back hurt terribly, and even the slightest movement caused unbearable suffering, nonetheless, he gritted his teeth and forced himself to rise up on his hands and knees. He suppressed howling out and remained motionless on all fours, waiting for the excruciating spasms to subside. They did somewhat, but he couldn't wait any longer. Matt inched his racked body forward and crawled on all fours through the shifting smoke in the vague direction where he believed the blue Taurus waited.

CHAPTER 21

Six-thirty that evening, in sluggish mid-Manhattan traffic, Matt sat in the backseat of a Newark yellow cab and stared out the side window. Christmas was in the air with streets and shops lit and adorned with holy and profane displays, and though still early in the competitive shopping season, the players already appeared haggard from holiday urgency. Looking at the brightly hued, buzzing world outside, Matt found himself dwelling on the religious images, especially the manger scene with the baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and the Three Wise Men following the bright star.

Perhaps earlier in the day, a star at ground level had guided Matt through the smoke, bullets, and brush. It was as good as any other explanation he could come up with since he had no recollection of how he had crawled to safety. He'd been in shock at the time. His memory wiped clean of everything up until he sighted the gleaming blue Taurus emerge from the sable haze of soot and ash. Following that, he recalled driving on Interstate 78 and taking the off-ramp to Central Newark. From then on, his memory improved.

He remembered driving to a blighted area near downtown and finding a strip of rundown motels whose economic viability, by all appearances, relied on the hard work of low-rent prostitutes. It was perfect for temporary shelter among persons who would ask few questions of a man caked with grease and whose maniacal eyes signaled pain, desperation, and *don't fuck with me* with each furtive glance. He pulled into one of the motels that seemed relatively clean on the outside and had few cars parked in the lot.

Before entering the manager's office, Matt removed his badly soiled jacket and tossed it onto the floor next to his gloves. His denim shirt had been protected and looked clean, but it smelled of perspiration, the intense kind that comes from fear. Tilting the rear-view mirror to look at himself, he was aghast at what he saw. A savage demonically emblazoned with mud, muck, and cuts for primitive warfare. He ran his hands through his hair to remove some of the crud and tried to scrape off the splatters of grease stuck to his face and neck. The best he was able to do was thin and broaden the oily smears. Considering the establishment he was about to enter, Matt concluded he had tidied up enough.

The black man in his mid-sixties, behind the front counter, gave Matt one look and took in all the information he needed to know, and never again looked the *crazy Italian dude* in the eye. With arthritic movements, he wrote down the false

information Matt rattled off and palmed the two hundred dollars cash a white man in a jam has to pay for a day's stay at the Independence Motel.

"Does the room have lots of soap and towels?"

"Yessir."

The question and answer were meaningless for Matt knew he would need much more bathroom supplies than even the best hotels provided. "I'll pay extra for another ten bars of soap and ten more towels."

"How much extra?"

Matt was quick with his low-ball offer. "Ten dollars."

The sexagenarian scratched the white stubble on his chin. "Make that twenty and you get to wash up real good."

Peeling off another twenty, Matt gave it to the desk clerk, who then handed over the keys to room seventeen. "I'll have the girl bring the extra soap and towels."

"I'm not waiting. Get it for me now."

The old man raised his eyes just high enough to see Matt's fist on the counter. "Yessir. I'll get that to you right away."

Matt drove the Taurus to room number seventeen, which was located in back, away from the street, just as he had requested. Before exiting the car, he checked around and stared at the front door, pondering the chance of any surprises that might await a stranger with a wad of cash. Matt remembered the .38 stuck under his seat and felt the odds turn in his favor.

Once inside, he switched on the electric wall heater, then stripped naked and inspected the sheets before lying between them for a scheduled ten minutes. When time was up, he had to force his aching body from the lumps and hollows of the pounded-by-the-hour mattress. Along with the soap and towels, Matt carried the .38 with him to the bathroom and began the long process of cleaning up. He went through nine bars of miniature soap and eight towels before he was ready to go out and shop for fresh clothes and more toiletries. He thought of calling Rita and Carol, but decided not to risk connecting them to a New Jersey number on this particular day. If he hurried, it would be just a few more hours until he saw them.

The tattered phone book in the room, though missing a good quarter of its pages, was intact enough to list the Goodwill's downtown address. It took him ten minutes to get to the thrift store where he picked out a blue blazer and matching gray wool slacks, along with a maroon knit shirt, black shoes and dress socks, and a colorful quilt - the only one they had. After paying the wheelchair-nested cashier, who regarded the shopper's soiled pants and shoes with an evangelical smile, Matt went to the dressing room and changed into his clean clothes. Looking more presentable, the next order of business was to find the nearest mall and buy whatever else he needed for his transformation back to respectable citizen. He stuffed the paper bags containing his dirty clothes in the trunk and spread the quilt over the driver's seat to cover the smeared dirt and grease.

After his rushed trip to the mall, Matt pulled into the space in front of room seventeen and saw a young, black woman standing in the doorway, two rooms down from his, smoking a cigarette. She looked like a working girl with a habit and had a snarl on her face as if her pimp had sent her out early to make up for a slim night of profit. She tossed Matt a professional smile until she got a better look at the white man carrying two bulging plastic bags bearing the Target logo, at which point, she turned away and resumed hating the people and circumstances in her life. Matt had noted hers and everyone else's reaction to his physical appearance. By all indications, he had a lot more external and internal grooming to do before he returned to the Regency Hotel and allowed Carol to cast her eyes upon him.

Matt had left the electric heater on high, so the room was hot and dry when he entered it. He removed all his clothes and went into the bathroom, where he made use of the newly purchased bars of soap, shampoo, grease remover, body lotion, antiperspirant, eye-drops, toothpaste, toothbrush, and comb. When satisfied he had cleansed himself of every last bit of stubborn grease, Matt put on new underwear and turned his attention to the room itself. Using 409, he wiped down all the objects and surfaces he might've touched, and even gathered loose hairs to flush them down the toilet.

Before wiping down the Taurus and abandoning it near Newark's main bus terminal, where he got the taxi to Manhattan, Matt burned his clothes in an oil drum fire that a group of derelicts huddled around to keep warm. He also discarded the extra case containing the M24 and six loaded magazines in a huge pile of junk at an abandoned industrial lot. The possibility of someone, especially kids, finding this deadly package caused him some guilt, but he didn't have time to look for a better dumping place. He did, however, keep his side-holstered 38.

As the cab drove onto Interstate 78, leaving Newark behind, Matt felt a fresh appreciation for this and other ruined American cities. They provided an oasis of anonymity for those who needed it just as complete as a remote cabin in the woods. And in his time of desperate need, this haven for the outlaw, the impoverished, the socially and mentally cursed, had succored Matt in its broad bosom. He would never forget this, nor slander Newark again.

It wasn't long before the gray sky turned black, and the great island of man-made illumination glowed in the near distance. Matt gave quick notice to both while he pondered the mysterious identities of those who had arrived in the nick of time to do battle with the Cascones. There were only two possibilities: good guys or bad guys. Whether it was the cops or the Mob, he was grateful to them for having saved his life. On the other hand, he wished he knew which group he had to fear more.

An emergency vehicle with flashing colored lights appeared in an oncoming lane and roared past the cab. Matt turned his head and watched the swirling light-show disappear in the west. It crossed his mind that perhaps the paramedics were on their way to the killing field, except that happened hours ago. Then, like a blinding ray striking a highly polished fact, it hit him. If it had been the police who showed up

at the construction site, why hadn't they arrived with a fanfare of lights and sirens? And if it had been a *cops under fire* situation, the whole area would've been jammed tight with roadblocks, support vehicles, and backup squads. *How come I didn't see this before? I must be more fucked up than I realize.*

Matt shifted his focus entirely on the Mob's involvement, trying to make sense of why they'd attack the Cascones in such an exposed manner. He recalled Frankie telling him it was just a matter of time until the brothers were whacked. Maybe that's what happened, just a lot sooner than Frankie had anticipated. Matt was eager to talk to Frankie and get some answers.

When the taxi entered the Holland Tunnel Matt's spirit lifted, but it did nothing to soothe his injured body, especially his lower left leg, which was extremely tender. The throbbing pain caused him to worry he had fractured his fibula or tibia or both. Checking this out with a doctor would come later. Matt was more concerned with seeing Rita and comforting her, and what he would say to Carol when she asked how his day went.

Thinking of Carol depressed him. He feared he had lost her for good last night. Unable to go back in time and erase what he had told her at the hotel, Matt would, starting now, say and do whatever it took to recapture her heart. If he knew for certain Carol would never discover what he had done today, he'd flat out lie and tell her he had changed his mind about killing the Cascones. But he was afraid to take that chance. Getting caught in one more deception would doom their relationship.

Deciding what to say to Carol dominated Matt's thoughts during the slow ride through Manhattan, and by the time he hobbled down the gold carpeted hallway to their hotel room, he had steeled himself to avoid half-truths and omissions and tell Carol the straight facts. When he reached the door, he stopped to reflect on what he had done since he left her that morning. The target practice, the cold calculated ambush with intent to kill, and the treacherous escape were the deeds he'd have to reveal to her. The truth frightened him.

Matt leaned his weary back against the door and glanced at his watch. It was six fifty-eight. He was tired and hungry, but struggled once more with truths, lies, and their consequences.

If he deceived Carol, he'd be treating her worse than he did every other woman he strove to be honest with. How could he be less truthful to Carol, who embodied his salvation and promise of abiding love, than he was to a fleeting one-night-stand? Perhaps this was the significant difference? Because Carol was so precious to him, she was worth lying to and shielding from the damaging truth. His love for her was so powerful, it demanded he break the rules - even his most profound beliefs. This was one of those rare times when a moral compass ought not to be used to navigate the twists and turns of true love.

Bullshit! That's a candy-ass way out of telling the truth.

With a gentle reminder that he'd been through a lot today and his mind wasn't working right, Matt eased up on himself. He took and released a big breath. *The*

truth! He straightened up, turned around, and unlocked the door. Matt wasn't prepared for what he saw.

In the living room, standing next to each other by the lemon colored couch, Carol and Lou greeted Matt with very different expressions. Matt saw the worry on Carol's face change to relief and noted Lou's general anger become specific contempt.

The detective swept his fierce eyes up and down Matt's length. "What happened to your real clothes?"

Matt had entered the room ready to stand naked with the truth. But with Lou's unexpected presence, he hurried to dress himself in the most accessible deceit and attended solely to Carol. Matt approached her. "I'm okay."

Lou pulled Matt by the arm until they faced each other. "You have a good time in Jersey?"

Matt wanted to look at Carol again, to decode if she had revealed anything to Lou. But that would show she knew something. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Lou glared at Matt. With a sardonic grin, he appeared to enjoy how his stop and start interrogation chipped away at Matt's facade of ignorance. "I heard the Cascones were wiped out. That was some gun battle. Bodies all over the place. How the hell did you get involved in this?"

Lou's knowledge of the events and their connection to Matt terrified him. His impulse was to shout back and ridicule Lou's accusations, but Matt was exhausted, physically and mentally, and feared he might in anger reveal something incriminating, so he kept a stony silence and merely reflected Lou's glare.

The detective's face colored with blood. He grabbed Matt by his shirt. "Is it over with? Do I still have to worry about Rita and Lucy?"

Matt laid a two-hand grip on Lou's right arm and squeezed. Lou flinched in pain just before he threw a left-hand punch that struck Matt's jaw. Knocked backward, Matt stumbled into the end table, but quickly squared himself to fight off Lou, who was advancing with his right fist cocked.

Carol jumped between them. "Stop it!"

Like two sluggers stopped by the bell, Matt and Lou stepped back and unwrapped their fists, holding their aggression for the next round. Lou cut the thick silence with a double-edge farewell. "I'm going back to look after Rita and Lucy. Somebody has to escort them to the funeral home."

Lou's words had more force than any punch in his arsenal. Matt was hit hard, dead center in the gut. "My father's. . . already at Camponella's?"

Lou wrinkled a vindictive smile. "See how you like the silent treatment."

Matt's eyes lit with fury. "Tell me!"

"You want answers, asshole? Call your sister. She's been worried sick about you."

Lou watched his words snuff out Matt's ferocity, making it safe for him to turn his back and walk to the door.

When Lou shut the door behind him, leaving Matt alone with Carol, he wished Lou hadn't departed so soon. Once again, Matt found himself unprepared and confused as to what to tell Carol. He wondered what she and Lou had talked about, what questions she would ask. He even wondered what he would tell her and how much. Matt pried his blank stare from the door and looked at Carol.

It must have been a pathetic expression because she took instant pity on him and delayed her inquiries. "I didn't tell him anything. Go call your sister."

Matt nodded and was about to turn away, when he heard himself ask, "How did Lou find us?"

"I was worried about you, so I called him."

"Didn't you get a phone call saying when I'd be back?"

"No."

His puzzled gaze landed on the lime carpeting. "Someone was supposed to call you."

"I was here all day. I even checked for messages when I got out of the shower."

With another troubling question to ask Frankie, Matt reviewed the growing list as he walked into the bedroom to phone his sister. Sitting on the bed, he pressed the numbers he'd known by heart since he was a kid and remembered that from now on there would be one less person at the other end to receive his call. Rita picked up on the first ring, expecting it was him. Lou had called her when he left the hotel room to inform Rita her brother was okay. She knew about the shoot-out at his studio. Matt assumed it was Lou who told her.

"I wish that fat-ass cop would stay out of my business!"

"Don't say anything bad about Lou. He's been very kind and helpful. He pulled strings to get Pop's body out of that awful Bellevue a lot faster than normal."

"I don't like that he tells you stuff that makes you worry."

"What? The thing at your studio? I read about it in the paper. Even the neighbors mentioned it before Lou did. He only told me after I made him. What's going on Matt? How did you get involved with the Mob?"

"Rita, for your own protection, I can't tell you much. All I can say is I got into this mess by accident. You know I have no interest in being a wiseguy or doing business with them."

"Are you still in danger?"

Matt didn't answer.

"Matt, tell me!"

"I think so."

"Please don't come to Camponella's tonight. It might not be safe. I couldn't bear to lose you, too."

Matt had been conflicted about going. His battered body craved nourishment and rest, yet he wanted to join Rita and share her grief and thank the relatives and friends who came to mourn his father's passing. There was also the fear he might

attract hit-men to the funeral home and put others in harm's way. By pleading with him to stay away, Rita decided for him.

"Okay. I won't come tonight, but I'll be there tomorrow. I'll talk to Lou about getting police protection."

"Don't come to the mass. It's too dangerous. I'll see you at the cemetery."

"The funeral's tomorrow?"

"I thought Lou told you."

"How come so fast?"

"It's what Pop wanted. He's been saying it for years. *Bury me with Ma as soon as I die*. He even made me promise that I'd never lay him out. I feel guilty about this one night in Camponella's, but I did it for the relatives. I had to give them at least one night to come and pay their respect. And it's good that tomorrow's Sunday. It'll be easier for the old ones to make it out to the cemetery."

"I won't get to see my own father."

"Matt. It's a closed coffin. Camponella's son couldn't fix his face. Between what the bullet did and what they do at the morgue. Dear God, his insides are in plastic." Rita composed herself. "You'll be there when it counts, when he goes in the ground with Ma. It'll be easier for the police to protect you at the cemetery."

"I feel terrible not being there tonight."

"Please Matt, stay away from the neighborhood. Do this for me and Lucy. We need you to be alive and well more than anything else in the world. Please don't come tonight."

Matt surrendered a deep sigh. "What time tomorrow?"

"Ten-thirty."

"I love you, Rita."

"I love you too, Matt. Stay safe."

"I will."

When he returned to the living room, he said to Carol, "The funeral's tomorrow."

"Lou told me."

He slumped onto the couch and stared at a wall, rethinking his decision not to go to the funeral home. He looked up at Carol.

She'd been waiting patiently to tell him, "I made plane reservations for two o'clock tomorrow."

A lump rose in his throat and his heart sank in his chest. There was little prospect of persuading her to stay longer, but he wouldn't let her slip from his life without a fight. He was weak, sore, hungry, and desperate for sleep, but he would expend his last ounce of strength to make this a memorable night. Ordering two multi-course dinners with wine seemed like a good place to start.

"Have you eaten yet?"

"I'm not hungry."

He was disappointed by her response and intimidated by the way she flicked her eyes at him. The on and off glances danced like pebbles before a landslide. Matt

didn't know what was coming, but decided to call room service before she buried him with whatever was on her mind. "I'm starving. I have to get something. I'll order you a salad."

Since he was basically ordering for himself, Matt abandoned the idea of a romantic dinner and wound up requesting a premium hamburger, freshly ground from a three-quarter pound New York steak, grilled medium-rare, and set on a hard roll with lettuce and tomato. In addition, he ordered a side of steak fries and the closest thing they had to a malted - a chocolate ice-cream soda. The source of Matt's appetite for a deluxe drive-in meal was a mystery to him. He simply deciphered the rumblings of his stomach. His best guess on the subject was it satisfied a nutritional craving along with a desire for the idealized, carefree days of his youth, when sneaking onto a construction site and climbing atop heavy equipment had been done for fun.

When he hung up the phone, he noticed Carol had left the room. The sound of a toilet flush revealed where she was, it also prompted his own need to pee. After relieving himself in his private bathroom, Matt washed his hands and glanced at the mirror. He didn't like the way he looked, especially his distressed blood-lined eyes and the many small cuts, which gave him the ravenous appearance of a caveman after a failed three-day hunt. Matt noticed his neck had thinned, loosening the skin around it and under his jaw line. It reminded him that his last visit to the gym was a week and a half ago. On the day he had toned his muscles for the upcoming dinner date with Laura. It seemed like an eternity since that consequential day and definitely another life's worth of tragedy and pain.

He returned to the living room, where Carol sat on the couch and watched him favor his left leg. "What happened today?"

Matt had almost forgotten this part. . . the part where he has to describe his day to her. He began slowly, unsure of how much information to reveal. Whenever possible, he avoided details that made him appear more criminal than he pictured himself to be, like his hour-long practice to hit two targets in quick succession with the explicit purpose of mastering the ability to kill two men, seconds apart. But when his recounting became too sketchy, Carol interrupted him for clarification of missing facts and unconnected events. The only inquiries he refused to answer were those that might identify the man who had helped him.

As Matt spoke, covering the time from when he entered Frankie's car that morning to his cab ride back to the hotel, he noted Carol's changing posture and believed he was steadily losing any affection she might've had for him. When he finished with his story, Carol got up from the couch without saying a word and walked to the mini-fridge where she got a bottle of water.

After a long sip, she said, "It sounds like you were set up."

Her straight arrow comment screamed at him the same way the oncoming ambulance had on I-78. All at once, there was no other explanation. This second epiphany within the hour of another glaring likelihood that he would've promptly

spotted with his customary musings, made it clear his mind still wasn't working right. But who had set him up?

Frankie was the most obvious culprit, yet Matt continued to keep a few blank spaces above his old friend's name on his list of possible villains. Matt's top choice remained a competing capo whose motivation was to outmaneuver Frankie.

His long-winded tale to Carol tired Matt and he settled into pensive silence, speculating on Frankie's culpability and the Mob's internal machinations. The deeper he delved into the puzzle, the more difficult it became for him to stay focused, gradually, even basic reasoning proved to be a challenge. His attention shifted back to Carol when she turned away from him and walked toward her bedroom. Matt said nothing to stop her for he lacked the slightest hint of what to say.

When the food arrived, he ate by himself and had no trouble engaging his meal. The red meat and fries, dripping with ketchup, surpassed his expectations and he luxuriated in the contentment of his swelling stomach. His protein starved brain revived, and he began to make plans to rescue the remaining hours he had left with Carol. He was under pressure to work a miracle and change her opinion of him before he went to bed, because starting tomorrow morning all his energy would be devoted to comforting Rita and Lucy and paying respect to his father's memory.

Matt reaffirmed that the truth would be his guiding light in his quest for Carol. It was too late, not only for her but for any woman in his future, for him to rely on deceptions or wishful strategies in furthering a romance. He was too old to play games in order to win a woman's heart and then spend the rest of his life trying to change or avoid her expectations of him. He would rather exist without love and die alone than resort to an afflicted relationship.

So what is the truth? The solitary, unchallenged response stunned him. *I love her.* This simple statement of what he'd already considered to be true unleashed a yearning that seized him by the belly and caused him to quiver like a small animal. The palpable grip convinced Matt that he didn't have to revisit the past and compare his feelings for Carol with those he once had for Maria or Helen or Traci or others. Nor did he have to muddle his mind rationalizing how his recent troubles had primed him to fall in love as a means to escape them. He wouldn't waste precious time measuring or demeaning his love for Carol because the physical evidence was overwhelming. Matt could touch, taste, see, smell, and hear that he was truly in love for the first time in his life.

At once energized and frightened, he prodded himself to act decisively and moved toward her door despite not having a plan. His tortured body ached, and he was embarrassed by his feral appearance, yet he knocked. Matt held his breath until he heard her say, "Come in." He opened the door and entered her bedroom.

Carol sat on a cushioned stool in front of a vanity table and held a wooden hairbrush in her lap. The light was dim, but he was able to see the golden sheen on her freshly groomed hair and paused to delight in her overall loveliness. Even her

dispirited sulk appealed to him with its inexplicable provision of hope that he still had the capacity to affect her.

Matt took a few more steps into the bedroom and stalled there. Apparent that he was having difficulty choosing what to say, Carol lifted the brush and slowly ran it through her hair.

“I’m sorry. I’m having a tough time coming up with the words to convince you I’m not a horrible person.”

“I don’t think that.”

“But you’re afraid of me.”

She looked away.

“You’ve seen me at my worst.”

She faced him again. “It’s so much of what I’ve seen.”

“Give me a chance to show you who I really am. To show you the person Robert liked.”

“No matter what you show me. I’ll always know what’s below the surface. I’ll always be afraid of that.”

His first impulse was to bolster his image, but his *guiding light* led him to agree with her. “I can’t deny it. If someone I love is attacked, I’ll explode with rage and seek revenge. But Christ, I never want to lose that. This world’s no paradise. There’re a lot of sick creeps out there. Even Idaho has its Nazis and skinheads. And you gotta be ready to smash them before they smash you.” He watched her face wilt. “Carol, I’m not some kind of killing machine. I want with all my heart to live in peace. Years ago, I let my hair grow long to let everyone know I believed in a more compassionate world. I put up with ridicule and isolation from friends and family because of that. But I was determined to turn my back on all the anger and violence I grew up with.”

“Why do you let others have so much power over you. . . to make you take someone’s life?”

“No one affects me more than you do. Use your power.”

“What power do I have?”

He almost revealed his secret, but held back, waiting for a more appropriate moment to tell her that he loved her.

Not hearing from Matt, Carol responded to her own question. “The only power I might have is my non-violent belief that we must continue our evolution from primitive instincts to higher levels of consciousness. If we fail to do this, we’ll remain like so many tribes separated by suspicion and hostility. The knowledge we pursue, the goals we set will be driven by power and domination, and our militant technology will recklessly expand and threaten the survival of our species. Each of us has an individual responsibility to evolve and inspire others to do the same. So the only power I see myself having is my ability to steer you back to the enlightened path you’ve strayed from. This may sound elitist but this is what I believe. . . If those who

attain spiritual insight ignore it, our advance will stagnate or even worse go off in a ruinous direction.”

Her words roused his spirit and ignited his intellect. “I’d love to live life that way. But those are the ideals the real world has persecuted and destroyed since the beginning of man. We’ve had countless peace-loving societies in the past, like the matriarchal clans who worshipped the Earth. But we know little about them because they were wiped out by more aggressive opinions. I believe as you do, but where we differ is I feel we have to stay vigilant, strong, and even combative to protect our spiritual progress.”

“Peaceful evolution takes time, a billion blind alleys and failures before it succeeds. It can only triumph through genuine transformation. You can’t fool it by holding onto hate to defend it.”

The enlightened warrior was about to return fire when weariness swept over him. Matt would let her have the last word and save his dwindling energy to disclose his secret. But how? Under the time constraint, there appeared little opportunity for a smooth proclamation of his ardent affection for her. The reeling complexity caused Matt’s head to spin and his knees to buckle. He reached out for the bed and gingerly lowered his sore rump onto it.

“Are you all right?”

Matt shut his eyes and nodded. Behind the closed lids that twitched and sparkled with kaleidoscopic lights, he bounded from thought to thought like a haphazard pin ball in a delirious trek to open his heart to her. Mentally exhausted, he rolled into a hole and stopped. He saw that he had scored high for landing on the *truth*. Reaching deep, he extracted the precious commodity.

“Carol. . . the truth is I’m in a lot of pain, and I need to crawl into bed as soon as I can.”

Her eyes flared with concern. She set her brush down on the vanity and moved to sit next to him on the bed. “Is there anything I can do? Should I take you to the hospital?”

He looked down at the carpeted floor. “No. I just need a good night’s sleep. But before I do that, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“What is it?”

How do I do this? What words do I use?

Say it from the heart! “There’s so little time left before you go, and tomorrow’s the funeral and I need to be with my sister and niece. So I have to tell you this now or at the airport. I think now is better.”

It’s taking too long. Say it!

He looked at her. “I love you.”

He heard his words sound in a distant alien place, where they wailed like three lost orphans, crying to be found, embraced, and loved in return. He thought to send out more words in a desperate rescue attempt, but hardened to their plight and allowed them to survive or perish on their own.

Carol stared at him, her mouth open. “I don’t know what to say.”

A more positive response would’ve been better, yet she hadn’t rejected him altogether. “You don’t have to say anything. I just had to let you know how I feel about you.”

A contracting chest muscle, or perhaps a heavy heart, caused Matt to wince and suck air. He signaled Carol that he was all right by smiling as best he could, but his slight upturned mouth lacked assurance and he soon abandoned it. Having delivered his message, Matt dropped his defenses and allowed fatigue to overrun him. It was now the appropriate time to leave and quickly end the awkwardness between them.

His weakened voice slipped out in a whisper. “Goodnight, Carol.”

He thought to kiss her on the cheek, but decided instead on a total retreat and lifted himself from the pillowy comforter. An angry mob of aches and bruises attacked him as he tried to straighten up, and the assault would’ve toppled him except for a firm hand on his back, which steadied him.

Carol’s soft touch also provided the extra boost of energy he needed to walk to his bedroom, strip down to his underwear, and slip under the covers, whereupon, the soothing mattress enveloped his sore torso and limbs, and he savored the kind relief until he dropped off into a bottomless sleep.

Sometime during the night, Matt became aware of someone lying next to him, embracing him from behind as he lay on his side. He felt the person’s warmth on his back and the weight of their arm resting on his waist. Drowsy from his deep slumber, Matt slowly recalled he had told Carol of his love for her and assumed this was why she now lay with him in bed. The effect of her close presence lifted his limp frame and floated it weightlessly in a serene ether of light air. The delightful sensation was so exquisite he dared not move a single muscle for fear it would shatter his bliss. But as he lingered in her arms, Matt pondered whether to roll over and hug her in return. Before he would do this, however, he’d first have to make sense of why Carol had gotten into bed with him.

Her gentle hold on him seemed like a comforting gesture of friendship, yet he couldn’t dismiss the notion she wanted to stir him sexually. Though an exciting prospect, it frightened him for he believed that in his weakened and pained condition any attempt at lovemaking would result in a pitiful showing. So why disturb this romantic reverie, this nurturing linkage of souls that exuded more intimacy than would an inopportune sex act? Matt accepted her affectionate grasp from behind as the best and closest mingling he could spend with her this night.

On his gentle sail back to the island of sound sleep, he was stalled one more time by a current of doubt. Was she really there in bed with him or was he dreaming it? Matt was tempted to slide his hand down and touch her looping arm, but he decided not to do so for everything felt wonderful the way it was, and no matter the reality, if she were there or not, if she loved him or feared him, it could all change again tomorrow.

CHAPTER 22

It was about noon the next day when the pine box containing Thomas Sasso's bronze casket began its descent into the ground. Everyone's eyes dipped into the freshly dug grave except for Father Joseph who looked up to the sky and recited the Lord's Prayer. Matt glowered at the priest. *What the hell is he looking up there for?* What cold rock or fiery star does this God of his reside on? Why wouldn't He live on the nicest piece of property in the universe? *Earth is Heaven.* If all man-made religions stopped belittling this world as if it were a mere whistle-stop on the way to paradise, it wouldn't be trashed and disrespected so guiltlessly. *Heaven is Earth, dammit!*

Matt chastised himself for becoming upset and returned his attention to honoring his father and supporting family members. Standing between his sister and his Uncle Carmine, he clutched Rita's hand a little tighter and hugged his father's last surviving brother more firmly around the shoulders. For a December day in Brooklyn, the weather was extraordinarily pleasant. Only a few wispy, high clouds shared the sky with the sun, and the blessed warmth was interpreted by most as a clear sign Thomas had gone to a better place. Matt wished he could feel as they did, envying the solace the Church and its ceremonies provided, but as a questioning agnostic he didn't know if his father's spirit had continued on.

Looking around, Matt found much comfort in the large number of people who had come to the cemetery to show their love and respect for his father. Dressed in black and other somber tones, many were family members, like his Aunt Theresa and her children and grandchildren, and his Aunt Marie and Uncle Carmine and their extended families. There were also lots of friends and neighbors on hand, plus a strong contingent of police, whom Matt didn't count as official mourners except for Lou, who would've come on his own time, especially to be with Rita. The shy awkward exchanges between Lou and Rita indicated a budding intimacy. The thought of them getting together gladdened Matt, not that Lou might lighten up on investigating him, but because Matt believed they were two good people who had withstood loneliness long enough.

During the burial service, Matt had placed his weight on his right leg until his healthier limb began to tire. He then shifted his position to settle cautiously onto his tender one. It still felt sore, though a lot better than yesterday and Matt no longer believed he had fractured it. Last night's sound sleep had proved remarkably restorative.

When Matt had first awaked that morning, he immediately looked but found no one lying next to him. This cast more doubt on whether or not Carol had slipped into bed with him. He had continued to think about her while he stretched his spine and tight muscles with light yoga, then reminded himself that today was the funeral and switched focus to his father.

Of all the family flashbacks Matt recalled, his long-time favorite generated its customary big grin. The comic incident occurred on his father's birthday, August fourteenth, when Matt was a three and a half year-old toddler. After waking from an afternoon nap, little Matty walked into his parents' bedroom and heard and saw, what he thought to be, his father hurting his mother under the bouncing white sheets. Matty began to cry, but his parents only noticed him and cut short their stolen moments of daytime lovemaking - probably his mother's traditional gift - when their infant son started whacking the birthday boy on the head with his mother's broom. Matt could still see his mother's worried look turn to tears of laughter and still hear his father's groan as he rolled off his giggling wife. He remembered his mother lifting him onto the bed to comfort him with a hug. Still feel her warm humid body through the steamy sheets, still sniff the blend of perfume and perspiration from that sultry summer day.

His first contact with Carol occurred right after room service delivered two huge breakfast platters. He'd gotten out of bed hungry, and by the time he finished exercising, showering, and shaving, he was famished. So he ordered the food, and when it arrived, he was quick to sit at the dinning table and eat. Carol soon appeared, fresh from a shower, wearing a white terry-cloth robe, supplied by the hotel. She smiled politely while wishing him a *good morning*, then added how hungry she was and joined him at the table. After the brief exchange of greetings, they hardly spoke, conferring most of their attention to the array of food and beverage in front of them.

Matt's determination to respect his father on the morning of his funeral was the primary reason for his silence. The other major excuse was he didn't quite know what to say to Carol. He had expressed his love to her and she hadn't rejected him, so as far as he knew he was in good standing and still had Carol's offer to visit her in Idaho at a later date, when, he trusted, his current troubles would be over.

Another wordless but more significant connection took place during the cab ride to Greenwood Cemetery when Carol took his hand and held it until they reached their destination. This sign of affection increased his optimism that if he cleanly got through the next two hours between the funeral and her flight home he'd have a good chance at a future relationship with her.

When they got to the cemetery, the cab stopped at the end of a long line of cars that began with a black and silver hearse, three flower cars, and eleven limousines. A respectable showing for an ordinary citizen like Thomas Sasso. In addition to the two dozen other vehicles, there were five blue and white cruisers and two unmarked police cars stationed at strategic high points around the perimeter to back up Lou's promise that Matt would be well protected.

Instead of the expected consolation from meeting and greeting family members, Matt felt a great deal of anxiety. They stared at the cuts and scratches on his face and hands, and by their uneasiness and tight utterances, it was obvious they knew he was somehow connected to Thomas' murder and was himself in danger. How much each relative knew was a mystery to him and only his closest male cousins - the ones his age that he grew up with - actually mentioned it, like his Cousin Butch, the injured fireman, who, with scarred lungs and shortness of breath, offered his assistance in taking revenge and helping Matt defend himself. But this was the last thing Matt wanted to hear. The thought of another family member's blood on his hands made him visibly tremble. He sternly refused his cousin's offer and moved on to meet the other mourners who waited nearby to express their condolences.

Carol closely followed Matt as he met and spoke briefly with scores of individuals. He made no attempt to introduce her. Not knowing her reaction to walking through a cemetery so soon after her own tragic loss, he feared too many introductions would be a burden on her. Besides this genuine concern for her feelings, having Carol take part in the conversations would've slowed him even more in getting to his sister, whom he wanted desperately to embrace.

When he finally reached Rita, he held her for a long time. She cried in his arms and whispered urgently in his ear. "Please be careful, Matty. Don't do anything crazy. I can't lose you, too."

Her plea suggested Lou had told her something about yesterday's shoot-out in New Jersey. Matt spoke to calm her fears. "I'm not about to leave you and Lucy alone in this world. Believe me."

As he continued to hold Rita and say encouraging words, he noticed Lucy had stepped away from them. This was the first instance since he had arrived at the cemetery and begun observing them from afar that Lucy had left her mother's side. Matt couldn't figure why his niece might be angry with him and sought to read her expression to understand why she was avoiding him. When she finally brought herself to make eye contact, Matt saw her try but fail to display a convincing smile. This puzzled him even more until Lucy shifted her sad gaze to Carol. Matt guessed his niece felt guilty about Nails' suspected involvement in Robert's death. He wouldn't impose a meeting between Lucy and Carol at this time, but he definitely wanted Rita to befriend the woman who meant so much to him.

He released his hold on Rita and motioned toward Carol. "Rita, I want you to meet Carol. Robert's sister from Idaho."

Rita's eyes widened and her chest heaved as her sadness turned to sorrow for Carol's loss. "I'm so sorry about Robert. We all loved him dearly."

"Thank you. Robert told me how kind and generous you were to him. It's a great comfort to know he had loving friends here. As for your own loss, I'm truly saddened by it and can only offer you my deepest sympathy."

Their eyes moist with tears, Rita and Carol moved closer to hold one another. The sight of them knotted together rushed blood through Matt's body, and when the fluid surge hit his brain, Matt reeled, swept away by an exhilarating premonition that what he saw before him symbolized what was to be. Two of the three most important women in Matt's life had immediately taken to each other. This brightened his mood enough that he smiled for the second time that day.

As for the third woman, Matt turned and looked at Lucy, his slight grin nudging her to take joy, as he was, in the affection between her mother and the woman he loved. His evident cheer helped her to grow her own smile. Lou, however, who had joined Lucy and stood by her side, maintained a rigid, cryptic frown that troubled Matt. So much so, he quickly averted his eyes from the rumpled detective. Matt swung his attention back to Carol and Rita and observed their amiable coupling, but he no longer felt the enervating sanguine flow. He knew why. Lou's hard look was an ominous sign. The detective hadn't come up to greet him like everyone else had. Clearly, Lou had something terrible to tell him.

When Father Joseph finished with his final blessing of the deceased and burial site, family members threw flowers onto the pine box. Through shimmering tears, Matt saw his red carnation land squarely where he had aimed it and in a ludicrous way the perfect toss brought him a bit of solace. He thought how silly he was, so unattached as to allow a simple random oddity to relieve him from the brutal death of his father, which he himself had caused. A keen chill sliced through him and Matt shuddered. *Enough! Let it go. Be silly. Be dumb. Be unattached. Do whatever it takes to get over this. I'm not that strong.*

Matt realized Rita was tugging at his arm. He turned and saw her attention was fixed on the family and friends, who gathered around them. She appeared tense. "Victor Camponella said he had another funeral after this and asked that we get everyone back to the cars as soon as possible."

Hearing this triggered an explosion inside Matt and a powerful heat rose up, reddening his skin and fouling his mood. He fought to contain the raw ire in his voice and tightened his throat, squeezing the words out. "I don't want anyone rushed away from here. We'll leave when it's convenient and appropriate."

By her frightened look, Matt knew he had failed to mask his anger, and abruptly silenced himself. Certain that Rita had gotten the message, Matt next intended to personally deliver it to the penny-pinching funeral director.

He spotted the garrulous mortician, who was grinning like a fat feline while making small talk with Father Joseph, and took a step in their direction. Rita grabbed Matt's arm and held him back.

"Please don't cause trouble here."

Her earnest appeal stopped him, but he continued to glare at Victor, who seemed to sense the heat of Matt's hot bore and turned toward it. Unnerved by Matt's burning look, Victor Camponella stumbled over his own shifting feet as he hastily

left the priest and walked off toward his drivers, leaving Father Joseph perplexed by the funeral director's sudden departure.

This was one of those occasions when Matt was glad he still had the capacity to scare the shit out of someone without saying a word. He felt completely justified in this case because of the outrageous request by *this fucking, money-hungry prick asking that my grieving family rush off after having just buried our beloved father*. A pulsating pain rumbled through his stomach and the fury re-ignited. He tried not to look at Rita, but he couldn't help notice the skin bunch around her eyes as they narrowed, mesmerized by his growing ferocity. For Rita's sake, he had to get rid of the anger.

Matt took a few deep breaths to calm himself. "I'm okay. I got a little upset, but I'm over it, now. Talk to your aunts and uncle. I need to spend some time with Carol before she leaves. After the airport, I'll go to the apartment and visit with you and the rest of the family."

"That would be nice. Lou said he'd protect you there."

"Lou's a good man. I hope you two get together someday."

Rita's face flushed with color.

"I'm sorry. I should be more careful what comes out of my mouth."

She put her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. "I love you, big brother. Go take Carol to the airport. I'll tell everyone you'll come by later."

Carol had settled among some trees that dotted the rolling landscape, where she warmed herself in the broken sunlight under the boughs of a leafless maple. As he walked up the slight hill to where she stood, Matt tried to understand why he'd gotten so incensed. He still believed he had good cause to be upset with the funeral director, but not enough to physically attack him, which might've occurred if Rita hadn't stopped him. And then there was his strong reaction to Father Joseph for simply lifting his eyes to the sky. Was his anger a result of the guilt he felt for his father's death? To some extent. But it didn't seem to be the main reason for his short-fuse temper. Matt scanned the various groups and individual mourners as if the answer might lie on one of their faces. Then it came to him, ironically finding what he was looking for in a face that wasn't there, a face he needed to see so desperately he imagined it.

Where was Frankie? His onetime best friend should've come to the cemetery and paid his respect to Matt's father. It would've been the perfect setting for Frankie and Matt to meet without raising suspicions, where they could've talked in private about consequential matters. This was the cause of Matt's rage. Frankie had passed up an ideal opportunity. He had *fucked up* and left Matt feeling as if he'd been abandoned by the one person who could answer the many questions troubling him. *Who were the surprise gunmen who showed up yesterday and killed the Cascones? Why did they shoot at me? Was it an accident or done on purpose? Who should I fear now that the Cascones are dead? Am I still being hunted by the Mob?*

Approaching closer to Carol, Matt had to put all the questions, bitterness, and frustration on hold. In a matter of seconds he'd be speaking to her, so it was time to be on his best behavior with the purest, kindest, most loving disposition he could muster and maintain for the next couple of hours. He told himself he could make the transition, and he did.

His easy manner seemed genuine when he spoke. "I guess you're anxious to get to the airport?"

"I'd hate to miss the flight. But you don't have to rush off and leave your family on my account. We can say good-bye here, and I can go to the airport by myself."

"I already told Rita I was taking you to the airport. It's what I want to do."

Carol smiled. "Thank you."

They began a slow amble toward the waiting taxi and with each step and every heartbeat Matt became more aware that time was running out. Carol would soon be gone and all he had from her was an invitation to visit, which had been given long ago, prior to so many awful events. Had she changed her mind since then? Needing to know this before she got on the plane, Matt came up with a roundabout way to talk of Idaho. "One of the reasons I wanted this time alone with you is to try and convince you to stay longer."

She was quick to shake her head. "I have to get back."

"Is Idaho that special?"

This time Carol lowered her eyes and deliberated longer. He could hear the wheels spinning in her brain, and suddenly his circuitous approach seemed as subtle as a SWAT team.

She looked at him. "Come see for yourself."

His heart jumped to his throat, choking him with emotion. Matt felt his cheeks warm and envisioned their scarlet cast. He almost turned away with embarrassment, instead he allowed her to see how much she meant to him. Her eyes sparkled.

His growing impulse was to curl his arms around her and dot her with small kisses, but he held back for he was shaking inside and feared he'd do something inappropriate, something that might render null and void his reissued ticket to Idaho. Selecting a more careful course, Matt unfolded a wide grin and led her by the hand to the taxi at the top of the hill.

Their spirited stride, locked fingers, and joyful arm swing reminded Matt of a more carefree day, when he and Julie Parretti, his fifth grade sweetheart, had snuck away from the rest of the class on a school outing to the Bronx Zoo and walked hand in hand for the first time. That's what Carol was - she was his sweetheart. The special girl he'd been waiting and searching for all his life. Suddenly, the pain, sorrow, hatred, distress, and every other hurtful sentiment and sensation were gone. The opiate of love was flowing in his veins and he was walking on air with his angel.

It was all so preposterously blissful until a growl from behind, "Hey, Matt," brought him back to reality, and he knew that Lou was about to reveal the terrible news he'd been holding onto.

The detective's set jaw and withering look were further proof that an unpleasant exchange was about to take place. Matt replied with a measure of coolness. "Lou."

"Can I have a word with you?"

"I'm on the way to the airport. Can't it wait?"

Lou made no attempt to hide his simmering hostility. "I been waiting."

Matt turned to Carol. "I'll just be a minute."

As Lou walked ahead of him, leading the way, Matt tried to prepare for whatever accusations might be leveled at him.

Reaching a point beyond earshot of Carol, the grim-faced detective stopped, turned, and posed a familiar question, the same one that had been haunting Matt. "How come your good friend didn't show up for your father's funeral? That's a sign of disrespect."

The contemptuous manner in which Lou asked the question implied he had more information than Matt had, so he played dumb. "What good friend?"

Lou snorted and shook his head. "Frankie Mazzarino. You think I haven't figured it out yet?"

"Figured what out?"

"That you helped him knock off the Cascones so he could become the new Garbage King."

Lou's unexpected news flash sent Matt into a state of shock. His brain short-circuited, and instead of thoughts and reasons, Matt's gray matter throbbed with images of Frankie and buzzed with his lies. Even with Matt's cognitive faculties in desperate need of repair, he understood that he'd been grievously wronged and would spend days, months, and years coping with how badly he'd been fucked.

It was impossible for Matt to hide his shattered condition. His unfocused, wandering eyes and rapidly deflating posture were easy pickings for a seasoned clue gatherer like Lou.

"What I haven't figured out is why you're involved. Was it for money? Some goddamn thrill?"

Matt's lungs constricted like frozen steaks, thinning his voice. "How do you know he's the new Garbage King?"

"The words out. All the union guys know who the new boss is."

Anguish flared in Matt's eyes, and it was Lou's turn to be shocked. "Holy shit! Don't tell me you didn't know what the fuck was going on?"

Matt turned away. "I gotta go." But his knees failed him, and he stumbled as he retreated toward Carol.

Trailing close behind, Lou pleaded, "Help me nail the bastard."

"There's nothing more to say."

"He reamed you. Played you like a sorry sucker."

Matt stopped and faced his tormentor. "Arrest me or leave me the fuck alone!"

"You're in a jam. You know too much. Frankie's gotta kill you. Don't you see that?"

Matt shut his eyes and shook his head.

“You need my help.”

Opening his eyes, Matt spoke in a weary but resolute manner. “There’s only one way you can help me. Take care of Rita and Lucy.”

Lou saw that Matt was dead set on keeping his secrets and didn’t follow when Matt walked off.

Without acknowledging Carol, Matt snapped a curt command to the Pakistani cabby. “JFK. United. Let’s go.”

By his grave expression and demeanor, it was clear that his talk with Lou had deeply disturbed him, so Carol gave Matt plenty of space and quiet time to brood over what had been said. The light Sunday traffic on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway allowed the driver to exceed the speed limit while Matt and Carol rode in silence. Unlike the ride to the cemetery, there was no attempt or inclination to hold hands.

Frankie consumed Matt’s thoughts, so much so he was equally unaware of the passing scenery as he was of the woman sitting next to him. Analyzing every detail he could think of, Matt struggled to understand how he’d been set up. When did it begin? When did Frankie decide to involve Matt in his scheme to become the new Garbage King?

Matt revisited the night Frankie had tailed him into the alley, wondering if that was part of the con. Or did it begin later when Robert was killed and Frankie saw it as an opportunity to use Matt’s rage against Nails to dupe him? No matter when the plan was hatched, Frankie was responsible for his father’s death. Matt hated him for that, and he was going to kill him for that.

Carol could no longer endure the tension and suspense crowding her. “What did Lou say to you?”

Her voice brought him back outside himself and he felt bare and vulnerable without the cover of hatred. He wanted to return to the fury inside, but Carol was important so he answered, keeping it brief. “He wants information on someone. I can’t get involved with the police.”

“Lou and Rita seem close. Maybe you can trust him.”

“I can’t trust anyone!” He watched her recoil. “I don’t mean you.”

“Are the police going to find out about you?”

He raised his index finger to his lips and glanced at the driver. He spoke in a hushed voice. “No.”

“Come with me now to Idaho.”

An audible sigh escaped from his chest, and he embraced her, whispering in her ear, “I’ll be there soon.”

She pushed away to look at his eyes. “Don’t say that if you don’t mean it.”

“I have to take care of a few things first.”

“What things?”

He looked away from her and said nothing.

She grew angry enough not to care how loudly she spoke. “More revenge? More killing?”

It hurt him to see how wounded Carol was. “I need to find something out.”

“And then what?”

Once again, he was unable to respond, and once again, she berated him, “You’ll never change. Violence comes natural to you.”

“No! It doesn’t. I’m in pain over this.”

“So am I.” She turned away to keep him from seeing the tears roll down her cheeks.

Matt was powerless to comfort her for he was unable to promise what she wanted. His intestinal seething was visceral proof, the most valid kind, that revenge was more important to him than Carol was. Matt’s heart had been poisoned by hate. No way could he allow Frankie to go unpunished. That was the end-all, bottom line.

Rushing along the Belt Parkway, the taxi crossed over the borough boundary into Queens. They would soon be at the airport and Matt had hardly given Carol a thought since they last spoke. He’d been dragged back to examining various scenarios involving Frankie and arrived at a number of theories, one of which was especially blood-boiling. Matt strongly suspected that Frankie’s surprise appearance the night Robert had been killed was no coincidence. He didn’t know how his friend, the capo, had done it, but he now believed Frankie was responsible for Robert’s death.

The yellow cab passed under a huge, green welcome sign for JFK International Airport. In the distance, Matt glimpsed the white winged, space-age United Airlines terminal, and like ice water down his back, it jolted him to the fact Carol would soon be gone. What could he say to salvage their last moments together? His hurried inquiry resulted in nothing fresh or new, just the same old tired appeal for Carol to trust him to take care of what he had to do and wait for him to show up when it was over with. He came up with a few more pathetic schemes before noticing how everything around him was moving at a much faster pace than he was.

Suddenly, the grinning, dark skinned cab driver was opening Carol’s door with her suitcase in his hand. Snagged in a sluggish time warp, Matt watched as she slid out of the taxi, took her luggage, and walked off without saying a word. Matt dug into his pocket and isolated three fifties, which quickly wound up in the cabby’s callused palm. By the time he’d shaken loose of the grateful driver, Carol was already through the sliding doors and inside the terminal. Matt lumbered to catch up and walked alongside her, breathing deeply to replenish the air in his lungs and revive the courage in his heart.

He fought the impulse to speak merely to fill the silence between them, figuring he still had an hour left before her departure to conjure up a uniquely persuasive argument that would magically restore his happy-ever-after fantasy. To find the essence of what to say, Matt calmed himself and narrowed his thoughts, tuning out the flurry and clamor of the pedestrian crush surrounding him. His sharpened focus easily pinpointed, once again, what mattered most to him. He loved Carol in a most

extraordinary way. Matt firmly believed he had found true love, that most rare and prized union between two people. This was his cause, his message, the one he would special deliver, again and again, until she boarded her flight.

He was so preoccupied in thought that it came as a surprise when he noticed they had joined a line of people, and what he saw next took his breath away. A few yards ahead of Matt and Carol loomed a secure barricade of scanners, conveyor belts, and metal detectors, which kept people with guns from getting onto airplanes.

Up to this moment, Matt had forgotten about his side-holstered 38. He'd gotten so used to it, having carried the weapon for self-defense since they'd abandoned his studio. He grabbed Carol by the arm and pulled her from the slow moving line.

She glared at him, but said nothing, waiting for him to speak first. He swallowed what little moisture was in the back of his throat and sheepishly confessed, "I can't go any farther. I have a gun on me."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then looked at him with the cold gaze of an ancient statue. "Then we'll say good-bye here."

Her drone acceptance of their imminent parting wounded him deeply. Matt stared at her lifeless eyes and willed her to show some emotion. Even hatred would've been better than nothing at all. But she resisted and maintained her indifference to him. Gravely unsettled by this, Matt experienced an odd fluctuation of weight and emptiness in the pit of his stomach, which grew into the buffeting aches and tremors that move in when love packs its bags and walks out the door.

Matt continued to stare, begging for a glimmer of life in those amazing blue eyes. Of all her physical charms, her luminous eyes were his favorite for they would outlast everything else. He'd still love her eyes when the skin on her body wrinkled and sagged with old age. And if her mind were to fail and she could no longer recognize him, he'd still be able to peer through the sky blue windows to her soul and recall the great love of his life.

Matt needed to see her eyes smile at him one more time. *Right now!* He'd invested so much in them. They'd become his guiding lights. *You can't hold them back from me!*

But she did, and it tormented him. Believing that simply stating his love for her would no longer affect Carol, Matt chose an alternative, still truthful but less honorable, tactic. "Someone's been setting me up all along."

Exasperated, she barely replied. "Can't you let it be over?"

"I think he killed Robert."

Carol was stunned by the revelation, and a full life of memories and emotions sparked in her eyes. "Let it go."

"How can you say that?"

"It isn't easy! He was my brother! But I can let go. He was just your assistant, why can't you?"

"You know he meant more than that to me."

"Don't use Robert as an excuse for more killing. It won't bring him back!"

“I can’t just walk away.”

“Yes you can. You told me you learned different.”

Hearing his own words used against him, Matt was at a loss to counter them.

Carol yelled in his face. “You lied to me!”

Matt accepted her wrath. He had re-ignited her feelings for him only to hurt her again.

Exhausted, Carol looked at him with profound sadness. She lifted her hand and touched his hair. “Don’t let it get too long. It’ll give the wrong impression.”

She turned to walk away. Matt resisted the painful reality that he’d lost her forever. “I’ll come out in a few days. We can make things work.”

Carol stopped and faced him. “No. You’re not what I need in my life. Please. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

Her eyes welled with tears, but that was as far as she let them go, and none flowed past her long curled lashes. There was nothing more Matt could say or do after he heard her earnest plea for him to release her, so he backed off and allowed her to go without further interference.

CHAPTER 23

Matt was fortunate to get a taxi back to Manhattan with a driver whose native tongue was English and had lived in New York all his life and knew the Lower Eastside like the back of his hand. Matt was free to lose himself in thought without having to worry if the cabby knew how to get to Grand between Mulberry and Mott. The destination that slipped from his mouth when he entered the cab and which he later realized was equidistant between his family's apartment and Frankie's club. Carol's appeals had weakened his determination to kill Frankie and confused him about which of these two locations he would visit first. For this he needed time to think.

Back in the passenger terminal, Matt had waited and watched as Carol walked through the phalanx of security devices and beyond until he lost sight of her in a moving mass of travelers laden with carry-on luggage. He stood there feeling heartsick because of the abrupt way he and Carol had parted. Though he had only known her for a short time, he was convinced she was the real thing, his best chance so far for true love and maybe his last. An outsider might've viewed it as an impetuous fling of the heart, but to Matt, it contained enough promise that he was ready to sacrifice his other wants and needs and work as hard as he could to perfect a covenant with Carol. To Matt, it was puppy love at forty-five, the giddy optimism that life would be happy and beautiful with her by his side. This idealized affection had already inserted itself like a transplanted organ and taken on bodily functions. So when she left, full of gloom and finality, this vital part was ripped out of him and the bleeding caused the color to drain from his face. Matt exited the great bustling hall like a dying man. An outsider might've looked down at his feet, expecting to see a blood trail.

The taxi zipped along the Belt Parkway, past the two and three-story, tightly bunched, wood frame houses with strips of green fore and aft that represented a lifetime of labor for many of Brooklyn's blue-collar, middle-class families. Matt gazed at them with a numbness that gave no consideration to those other lives out there. He didn't know exactly what he was going to do about Frankie, but more than likely he'd soon be placing himself in danger. This probability caused him to worry about Rita and how devastated she would be if he were killed. He stopped himself from fully imagining her suffering because he was unable to do anything about it. The emotional pull toward revenge was growing stronger as time and distance between him and Carol lengthened. Matt took some comfort in knowing Lou would

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take care of his sister and niece if he were to die, and for this he felt intensely grateful to the man who was trying to arrest him for murder.

These concerns regarding Rita, Lucy, and Carol were fleeting and dispersed within the great volume of fierce attention he gave to Frankie. Matt poured over the details of what he had come to know from first-hand experience and from other sources. The more he tried to comprehend how he had been set up, the more his sense of Frankie's evil genius grew, and Matt came to believe the capo had a hand in initiating the long string of bad luck events that began with the fire by the docks.

Why was I chosen as a fall guy? Matt racked his brains over this, going back to when they were kids to analyze Frankie's odd behavior and search for lingering animosities Matt might've overlooked. He remembered how Frankie often started fights and what a sore loser he was when things didn't go his way. He recalled an especially mean-spirited attack by Frankie against him when Matt had a fractured right arm in a sling. It was a despicable act by anyone's standards, so much so that Lou and Eddie got involved and wrestled Frankie to the ground until he cooled off. And then there was that weird violent homosexual activity Frankie was drawn to. Matt wasn't sure what that might have to do with all of this, but it was another indication there was a lot of strange stuff about Frankie that Matt didn't understand.

The traffic remained light and the cab kept a steady fifty-five miles per hour on the BQE. In the changing distance, Matt saw the black stone towers of the Brooklyn Bridge and estimated he had about fifteen minutes left before he'd have to make his fateful decision of whom to visit first. A little earlier, he had used the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in a similar way to gauge his countdown. This second use of a New York bridge as a landmark in time reminded Matt that for most of his life he'd been surrounded by water. He wondered how the ever-shifting weight of the adjoining liquid world had affected him. Of the four basic elements in ancient lore, water was regarded as the most emotional because of its depth and fluctuations. On the surface, Matt's need to avenge his father's death appeared to be the strongest force driving him toward confrontation, but Matt had lurking suspicions there were other reasons for his obsession to get back at Frankie.

If survival was the primary instinct, why didn't he just walk away from the fight? Matt's body stiffened like an army against this pacifist notion. The uproar was to do battle, to remove the bitter taste of humiliation for having been so easily conned and grievously wronged.

Frankie's attack had been personal. What Frankie did destroyed Matt's unvoiced but abiding belief that his unique mix of sophisticated knowledge and street smarts had made him uncommonly wise and perceptive. Until now, he had thought himself foolproof. Matt couldn't surrender the feeling that his life, his being, his identity had been degraded, purposely manipulated by someone he'd always considered inferior. Matt passionately hated Frankie for this, and dwelled on how villainous his boyhood friend had always been.

But were anger and contempt sufficient reasons to continue the aggression? Shouldn't he have more righteous ideals for him to place his life in danger? *What about honor and self-respect?* These were the virtues that had sustained Matt as a kid growing up in a dangerous environment. His young will to defend himself from all forms of attack was the cornerstone of his later manhood, characterized by internal and external fortitude. This wasn't a distant war like Vietnam that he could protest against. This was face-to-face combat to save who he was. If he walked away now, he would always question if he had gotten soft like Frankie had said, if the years of comfortable living had turned him into a coward.

A red light stopped the cab on Mulberry Street at the corner of Canal. Matt looked out the window at the many Asian-Americans strolling the sidewalk. He was drawn to the dark-eyed, black-haired children whose wide faces beamed with delight and future promise, and compared them to the stern, weathered faces of their parents. It made him think how time and circumstance both give and take, but over the years mostly take.

These durable immigrants were steadily occupying the old Italian neighborhoods and their stories would be similar in many ways to his. Matt spotted two boys, about eleven years old with lean Southeast Asian features, walking on their own, playing pranks, and causing mischief. They jostled each other and bumped into elderly ladies with shopping bags and took advantage of busy merchants by stealing apples and other easy to conceal items. Matt wondered if they would always be friends or become strangers or grow to hate each other and even try to kill one another.

A block farther, after thanking the driver with a crisp fifty, Matt got out of the cab and walked directly to Frankie's club.

With his hands stuck inside the pockets of his black leather, three-quarter coat, Matt moved at a steady unhurried pace. Clouds had moved in and darkened the afternoon skies. He wondered if he would leave Frankie's club alive and see the nighttime. A shiver vibrated through his body like a cold plucked string on a frozen harp. A reaction to both his rising fear and the falling outside temperature. There was little he could do about the fear other than to use it to keep his mind active. As for the cold, he lifted his shoulders and hunched forward, contracting his chest, closing the space between chin and collar to block the chill.

Matt paid random attention to his surroundings and the people on the street. He was busy anticipating the situations and dangers he would soon face. What would he see when he opened the door to Frankie's club? What did it look like inside? How many doors and hidden areas? How many men would be inside? How many men would it take for him to cancel today's encounter and wait for a better opportunity? Three - four - five? Five guys would be too much, for sure.

Shapes passed him on the street and Matt was aware some had paused to look at him. Whoever they were, he figured they knew he had buried his father today and were curious why he was outside in the cold, walking alone. He tried to imagine

what he looked like to others. After considering a number of images, he kept coming back to the deranged insect with its antennas ripped out.

Matt went through his list of possible scenarios and each one led to the same inescapable question - what level of violence was he ready to commit? A severe and very bloody beating or outright murder? Considering how vengeful he felt toward Frankie, Matt didn't know if he'd be able to stop himself from going for the maximum retribution.

As he neared Frankie's club, the outside world became more dangerous and Matt paid more notice to the people he saw in the street. He scanned faces and postures for hints of who might be a lookout or threat. This heightened awareness would overcome any fatigue, but he worried about the punishment his body had received yesterday. His biggest concern remained his sore left leg and whether it might give out in a rough and tumble fight.

Matt was trying to think of everything, to cover all the bases at once, yet he never slowed his step to give himself more time. He had a mystical sense of an ongoing timeline that he had unawares latched onto and was prepared to put a certain amount of trust - even faith - in allowing his instincts to guide him. Besides, righteousness was on his side and that must count for something in influencing the Fates.

Matt found himself relying more on mythological gods and goddesses and innate spirituality than on a single-divinity. Though he had cried out for God's help, when he roasted atop the giant crane, now, in relative comfort, he couldn't bring himself to ask for more favors. Ever since his father's death, it hadn't been so easy for Matt to talk to God.

At the corner of Mott and Grand, Matt stopped to look for Frankie's Cadillac and saw it parked in front of the club just as it had been the last time Matt was here. A peptic geyser opened up and spit acid into his stomach as he recalled the day he had chickened out and allowed the two hoodlums in the doorway to thwart him from taking control of his destiny. He should've pushed past them and screamed out for Frankie and all to hear that Nails shouldn't be harmed. Matt put a hand on his belly to quell the sick feeling. If only he had shown some courage that day and loused up Frankie's con job, then he wouldn't be feeling like such a pitiful dunce right now. The awful memory of that lost opportunity angered Matt, and the words one of the hoods said in jest that day came back to him, and he hoped Frankie's liver was inside so he could maul it with kicks and punches until it burst open and marinated his guts with bloody toxins.

Matt checked the street for any goons that might be hanging out in doorways, but saw none. He steeled himself for action and started walking, determined that this time he wouldn't be turned away from entering Frankie's hangout. His first challenge came when he crossed Mott Street, where he was greeted at the corner by the warm, sweet smells coming from Margie's Bakery. They filled his nose and chest and made him think of Rita and Lucy and all his aunts, uncles, and cousins,

gathered in the apartment, just two blocks away, eating good Italian food and telling cheerful stories about Thomas Sasso's life. In the back of their minds, they were all waiting for Matt to show up and add happiness to their sad day. Instead, he was on a gray, cold street, packing a gun, intent on revenge. A mission that might devastate them even more. His feet faltered, and he staggered to a halt.

The light from the bakery lit the back of his head when he turned away from the festive display of colored Christmas lights, angels, and snowflakes that dangled above the fresh pastries and seasonal breads. He coughed to flush the scent of hearth and home from his lungs, expelling it like a mouthful of exhaust from a city bus. Just three tenements away from Mazzarino's Social Club, it was too late to let anything soften him. He moved on.

Matt squinted through the blocks of thick green glass that framed the club's entrance, but was unable to detect any movement inside. He checked the street before unbuttoning his jacket, then slid his right hand across his waist, until he felt the .38 back holstered on his left hip, and undid the leather safety strap. He took a deep breath, placed his hand on the brass door handle, and pressed his thumb down on the latch. The lock *clicked* and the thick wooden door freed itself from the steel frame enclosing it.

His heart drummed for battle while beads of sweat formed ranks along the top of his forehead. Matt wasn't aware of pushing against the door, but suddenly he was inside, locking eyes with Ronnie Balls, who sat alone in the middle of the large room at one of the eight small card tables. The only other person in the joint was the very tall bartender, who busily wiped the copper espresso machine at the far end of the long wooden bar. Without giving Matt the slightest hint of recognition, Ronnie turned his attention back to the Racing Form that he held in his hands. They'd know each other as kids but hadn't spoken in over twenty years. Matt didn't recognize the bartender at all.

Mazzarino's Social Club occupied one-half of the well-maintained tenement's ground floor. The club's main room was rectangular and had a black painted wood bar to the right of the entrance, running almost the full length, front to back, of one wall. The worn, black and white checkered tile floor rose and dipped in places, and the other three walls were decorated with Italian landscapes painted in light pastel colors. A few scattered holiday items, like the six-foot naked fir tree in the far left corner and the skimpy string of multicolored lights behind the bar, suggested a greater decorating effort would soon follow. The spacious room was brightly lit and had a long mirror running the length of the bar, which made Matt more confident he'd be able to spot a surprise threat.

The bartender stopped what he was doing at the espresso machine, dried his large hands, and began moving toward the end of the bar closest to Matt, who, feeling a bit more secure, shut the front door behind him. Matt surveyed the room as he slowly walked to the bar. He kept a wary eye on the two men, the front door behind him, and the two doors - one marked *Restroom*, the other *Private* - at the far

end of the room. There was also the danger of someone springing up from behind the bar, so Matt angled away from the front of the bar, where the chrome and red leather stools were gathered, to go stand at the near end, which provided a better view of what was behind the counter.

When the bartender got closer, Matt noticed that besides being tall he was also powerfully built. “Can I help you?” The big man had an unexpected calming manner about him. *A little too calm.*

“I’m looking for Frankie Mazzarino. Is he here?”

“He just stepped out. He should be back any minute.”

Matt gave a slight nod without altering his poker-face expression. *That’s good news, if it was true.*

“Can I get you a drink while you’re waiting?”

A scotch on the rocks tempted him, but Matt needed to be on edge to stay sharp. “Maybe later.”

“Let me know when you’re ready.”

The bartender backed away as smoothly as he had spoken. He retreated half the length of the bar and stopped to ring open the polished stainless-steel cash register. Matt watched the big man to make sure a weapon didn’t suddenly appear in one of his large fists. As the bartender began emptying the trays to count the bills and coins, Matt turned his attention to Ronnie Balls, who was engrossed in his betting plans.

Ronald Barbaccia got his nickname when he was thirteen years-old and ran into a burning apartment in his building to save a two year-old girl from the flames. For his bravery, in which he suffered a badly seared left arm, Ronnie was immediately proclaimed a hero by the entire neighborhood. The complimentary handle, *Balls*, was bestowed on him and like a war medal it brought him respect throughout the years. Before that pivotal incident, Ronnie had always been a shy, quiet kid, often lost in his own thoughts, and even made the honor-roll every month. All that changed, however, when he became known as Ronnie Balls and began to emulate the tough-guys on Elizabeth Street, who accepted him into their crowd.

Whenever Matt ran into Ronnie on his visits to Little Italy, he always saw the soft kid inside the wannabe thug. Matt had some sympathy for him, feeling he was trapped in a false persona and didn’t know how to escape. And the years seemed to have proven Matt’s suspicions for Ronnie was aging badly. He’d lost most of his hair even though no one else in his family was bald and his sallow skin was blotchy and sagging prematurely. Even now, here in Frankie’s place, knowing Ronnie was a made member of the Mob, Matt didn’t fear him.

Ronnie let out a groan and set the Racing Form down on the table. He shouted to no one in particular, “I keep looking at these fucking numbers like they’re tea leaves. Like they’re gonna tell me the future.” He got up with a disgusted look and approached the middle of the bar. He rested one cheek on a barstool, placed his

elbows on the bar, and glanced over at Matt as if he'd just noticed him there for the first time. "You're Matty, right? Matty Sasso."

Matt nodded. "How you doing, Ronnie?"

"I'd be doing a lot better if I stopped flirting with the ponies."

Matt cracked the expected smile, but didn't add anything.

Ronnie turned his attention to the bartender, who was now grabbing handfuls of coins and stacking them. "Big Moe, you look like fucking Scrooge over there counting his pennies."

The bartender ignored him, so Ronnie turned to Matt, shot him a devilish grin and raised his brow. "Fifteen, forty-five, seventy-three, thirty-six, eighty-nine, hike."

The bartender lost count and looked at Ronnie. "Is that how you got your name, from being a fucking ball breaker?"

Ronnie smiled and winked at Matt before responding to Moe. "Get your priorities straight. First you tend bar. Then you play accountant. Now get my friend over there a drink."

"He said he don't want one."

"Have a drink, Matty. Something to warm you up."

"No thanks, Ronnie."

"It's freezing outside. Have a shot at least."

Matt lied to get him off his back. "I had too much the other night. I'm laying off the booze for a while."

Ronnie had a lopsided look, like he couldn't relate at all to Matt's way of thinking. "Have a club soda, then." Not hearing a refusal, Ronnie turned to Moe. "Hey Scrooge, put the fucking coins down and get the man a club soda."

"You want I should warm it up for him?"

Ronnie got a good laugh out of that. Even Matt smiled for real until the seriousness of the situation came back to wipe it off his face. He thought how these Mafia goons, when they're not out killing and plundering, act like idiot teenagers, spending most of their time in horseplay and moronic chatter, making fun of each other. He remembered doing this same sort of annoying shit when he was a kid. *These jerkoffs never grow up.*

As Big Moe approached, carrying a glass with ice and a small bottle of club soda, Matt stepped away from the bar, out of reach of those long, muscular arms.

Setting the bottle and glass down in front of Matt, Moe smiled, "This one's on the big-spender over there."

Matt took a step forward, lifted the bottle of club soda and toasted from afar. "Salud."

Ronnie responded, "Salud." He glanced up at the clock on the wall behind the bar and griped to Moe. "When are you gonna get that fucking clock fixed? How the fuck are people supposed to know what time it is?"

Moe rolled his eyes as if he'd heard this complaint a hundred times already.

Ronnie turned his attention back to Matt and affected a polite manner. “My good man, would you happen to have the correct time on you?”

Matt put the bottle down on the bar, raised his left arm, and lifted the sleeve of his jacket with his right index finger to read his watch. With startling swiftness, Big Moe thrust his massive hands out and grabbed each of Matt’s wrists, pulling him hard against the bar. The sharp blow to his mid-section caused Matt to lose his breath, and the room spun around him.

When things stopped spinning, Matt became aware that both of his wrists were shackled in Big Moe’s iron grip and another pair of hands were traveling over his body and under his coat. It didn’t take long for the .38 to be discovered and removed from his side holster.

“Hey Moe, look at this. He forgot to check his gun at the bar.”

“Gee, that’s a serious offense, Matty. Now, we gotta make a decision. Run you outta town or hang you right here.”

Sadistic laughter echoed in Matt’s ears as Ronnie resumed his search, foraging everywhere, even patting and groping parts traditionally out of bounds except for medical personnel and Matt’s intimate female friends. When the intrusive digits finished their exploration, five of them curled up and delivered a stinging jab to Matt’s left kidney, sending a shock wave of pain up his spine. His knees buckled and Matt slumped over the bar. With his hands still imprisoned in Big Moe’s grasp, Matt’s helplessness seemed total and his insides rumbled with a spreading terror. *They’re going to kill me.* Matt tightened his bowels to keep from caramelizing his underwear.

Ronnie moved closer, his hot breath blowing in Matt’s ear. “For a college boy, you’re pretty stupid.”

The whispered derision dripped with personal contempt, a strong indication Ronnie had long been aware of Matt’s disrespect. And it got the point across. Not only did Matt now fear Ronnie, he also knew he’d underestimated his cleverness. *A nerd inside a thug* now seemed like a very dangerous combination.

Ronnie sidestepped away. “One move, Matty, and I’ll drop you right here.” His next commands were to Moe. “Okay, let him go. Buzz Frankie, and lock the front door.”

Moe released Matt’s wrists and slid his huge paw under the bar. Matt guessed he was signaling Frankie in the back room. The big guy then moved to the near end of the bar, lifted the hinged counter top, and quick-stepped to the front door. Matt heard the lock turn and the bolt slide into the steel doorframe. He fought off the panic that his precious life would soon end by believing he would figure a way out of this yet. He swore to himself that as long as he had breath, he’d stay vigilant. Matt was terrified but thinking rationally, and gathered strength in knowing this.

From the corner of his eye, Matt located where Ronnie stood and estimated the distance, visualizing how a sudden attack would pan out. The odds were poor. Ronnie had a gun in each hand, Matt’s .38 and his own personal piece, so even if he managed

to knock one gun away, that left the other. Matt wrestled with the unknowable future, whether this would be his last chance at a surprise strike or should he hold off for the possibility of a better one. His delay made the question moot as Big Moe entered the picture by Ronnie's side and took possession of one of the handguns. The back door, marked *Private*, opened. Matt raised his eyes toward the *creaking* sound and saw Frankie standing in the doorway. The capo, in all his glory, dressed in a high-gloss, blue silk suit over a black Italian knit, affirmed his dominance over Matt with a sickening sneer.

When Ronnie ordered him to *get up nice and slow and go to the back*, Matt lifted his chest from the bar and began walking the length of the club's main room to where Frankie waited. Passing the chairs and tables, Matt considered them weapons in an escape attempt. But to make his move now, going against three guys and two guns, amounted to straight-up suicide. Matt took a breath to quell the nausea bubbling in his stomach.

This latest premonition of certain doom worried Matt as if it were a white flag that he'd given up hope. *No! I'll make my move when the odds are better or when I think they're about to kill me or . . . after I get some answers.* Matt suddenly realized how vital it was for him to know why he'd been set up and used like a patsy. This inquisitiveness was as powerful and fundamental as his need for revenge. The opposing polarities of mind and body, reason and emotion, curiosity and bile, had created enough magnetic power to draw him straight into the snapping jaws of his enemy. *For a college boy, you're pretty stupid.* He now understood that he had to postpone his last chance assault until he got his maddening questions answered. If he died before that, it would indeed be a tragedy.

By the time Matt reached the door to the private room, Frankie had stepped inside and settled on a large oak desk, his feet on the floor, his hands in his lap. The amused intimidator pointed with his chin to a heavy, wooden office chair in the middle of the room. "Have a seat. I been expecting you."

Matt noticed a pair of long-handled shovels in the left near corner as Ronnie pushed him forward into the room. The chair had rollers and moved easily on the tile floor, so Matt had to grip the thick arm rests to steady himself when he sat down. He slowly raised his eyes to look at Frankie, but was distracted by the sliding door bolt and the sound of footsteps stopping directly behind him. Matt felt Ronnie's heavy presence and never lost track of where he was, pinpointing the *squeaks* from Ronnie's leather-soled shoes.

Frankie asked, "What's on your mind, Matty?"

"Why'd you set me up? Why me?"

"I wanted to show you you're not as smart as you think."

"You been holding a grudge all these years because I stopped hanging out with you?"

"Nobody likes to get dumped." Frankie twisted a half-grin, melding three faces - friendly, mocking, and menacing - into one. "The real reason was strictly business.

I knew I could count on you to get the job done. You got valuable skills, Matt. And I knew all the right buttons to push.”

“You killed Robert!”

“Yeah, I had it done.”

Matt lifted from the chair. “Did you kill my father, too?”

Ronnie slammed the gun grip against the crown of Matt’s head. He slumped back, stunned, yet aware that liquid seeped through his hair and trickled down his neck.

“I wouldn’t hurt Thomas. I always liked him.”

“But you made sure the Cascones knew I whacked their father.”

Frankie shrugged. “I spread some rumors.”

“You might as well have pulled the trigger, you ice-hearted prick!”

Frankie rushed forward and smacked Matt across the mouth. “Don’t call me no names!”

The slap stung more than it hurt. Matt burned Frankie with a fiery, hateful look. *I’m gonna kill this motherfucker.*

Frankie shifted his weight, side to side, as he shouted in Matt’s face. “You want answers? I’ll give you answers. All the fucking answers you want! Let me clearly illustrate how smart I was, and what a fucking schmuck you were. The tanker by your place was an unexpected gift. I was looking for a way to make Jimmy look bad. He’d already done a number of dumb-ass things, and all I needed was one more fuck-up for a couple of the bosses to give me the qt go-ahead to make my move on Mr. Junk. When the tanker broke its rear-axle by the docks and the driver deserted it, that was my golden opportunity. I got so excited I torched it myself. Later that night, while I was watching the evening news, enjoying the results of my handiwork, I saw firemen take that fucked-up model out of your studio. I laughed out loud, knowing I had blown your night. I surprised myself by how much I enjoyed depriving you of that sweet young pussy and shrinking your dick down to size. It made me think that in some way I envied your life. So I thought about it some more. You don’t have to put up with the aggravation, the constant looking over the shoulder, suspecting even your best friends just to keep sharp and survive another day. What you gotta put up with is a great reputation, raking in the dough, and a surplus of young women. Hey, fuck now. What life sounds better to you?”

Frankie laughed at his own question without looking happy. “I would’ve left it at that, but the next night I heard about you duking it out with some tattooed, heavy-metal, head-banger and all of a sudden the pieces of a grand scheme fell into place.”

Only Matt’s cold eyes moved as he tracked Frankie’s face wherever it went.

Frankie laughed again, this time he enjoyed himself. “I remember how you used to try and explain the Vietnam War to me like I was a fucking retard. And then there was that environmental crap you used to preach about. Coming back to the neighborhood, acting so fucking superior like you had to educate me to how the rest of the world thought. Maybe you were trying to save me out of old friendship, and

figured I deserved one last shot before you gave up on the moron. You pissed me off. And I held it against you all these years without even knowing. It was time for some payback. To be a pigeon on your statue and shit all over your high-minded ideals.”

Frankie stopped shifting and stopped directly in front of Matt. Six feet apart, they locked eyes.

“I had to slow you up that night. The night I ran you down in the alley. While we were busy chit-chatting and reliving our youth, three of my guys were inside your studio crucifying Robert.”

Matt felt himself leaning forward until he heard a *squeak*.

“I had Nails’ sorry ass dragged to your studio. He had no fucking idea what was going on. One of my guys whispered in his ear to get the fuck outta there quick before they changed their mind about killing him. Then they threw Nails against the fence so you’d see him get up and run away. It worked fucking perfect. You don’t know what a good time I had that night fucking the smart guy over. And so easily too.”

Matt clenched his jaw. “What if I hadn’t gotten so crazy and wanted Nails dead. . . if I’d just settled for beating him to a pulp with my bare hands?”

“You actually bought yourself some time. And I gotta compliment how you filled it with some kick-ass, intense moments. But if you hadn’t gone along with the plan that night, I would’ve had to stop you from finding out Nails didn’t kill Robert, and there would’ve been two homicides at your studio for Lou the gimp to figure out.”

“All this so I’d do Jimmy.”

“And later on you were the bait for the Cascone brothers.”

“I was the bait.”

“Damn good bait.” Frankie’s voice changed. “You got valuable skills, Matt. How the fuck did you get away from us at the construction site?”

Matt sensed increased danger a split-second before he heard the first *squeak*. Frankie’s face turned cold stone unearthly. “That ain’t gonna happen this time.”

Matt heard the second *squeak*. Plotting speed and course, he had to act before he heard the third.

A breeze tickled Matt’s neck and a shadow came over his head. Slumping forward, Matt drove the heavy wooden chair back into Ronnie, who was advancing with a garroting wire in his hands. The chair rammed Ronnie’s knees and knocked him off balance. He groaned as he fell to the floor and landed on his side. A .38 special squirted from his jacket pocket.

Matt continued forward and head-butted Frankie in the gut. The surprised capo was knocked backward into the large oak desk and wound up on one knee. Matt turned his attention back to Ronnie, who was reaching for the .38 on the floor. He darted toward him and managed to kick the gun away just as Ronnie was closing his fist around it. He then grabbed one of the long-handled shovels and brought it down on Ronnie’s head. The sound of cranium convinced him he had delivered a solid

blow. He used the shovel to bat the .38 away from Ronnie's outstretched, immobile arm, then swung the shovel several times at Ronnie's groaning mass. "You were gonna bury me, you cocksucker!"

Suddenly, Frankie blurred past him as he rushed to grab the handgun from the floor. Too far away to beat Frankie to the gun, Matt lunged with the shovel and used it to trip the fancy-suited capo, who smacked the ground hard, short of his goal. With the shovel knocked from his hand, Matt was weaponless when he jumped onto Frankie's back.

Frankie bucked immediately, and the violent arching tossed Matt off to the side. They lay on the floor, grappling with each other, swinging their fists and kicking their legs. Little by little, Frankie climbed on top of Matt and straddled him between his massive thighs, holding him down with his weight. They each had their hands around the other's neck. It was choke or be choked. Looking up, Matt saw the blue silk suit had busted at the seams around the bulging arms and shoulders that were steadily squeezing the life out of him. Frankie's rough paws pressed down on his Adam's apple. The pain was awful and a sickening grogginess came over Matt, who was losing the struggle.

Frankie had enormous strength, while Matt had been weakened by recent events. "I told you, Matt. You're not as tough as you used to be. You can't beat me no more."

Matt's eyes rolled upward and his vision dimmed. With the room growing dark, he believed his life would soon be over. He gathered every scrap of strength from his tortured body and pushed and twisted his hips until Frankie tipped to the side and hit the floor at arms-length. But this last effort completely exhausted Matt. From now on, he would be easy pickings, like a lamb to a lion.

Frankie crawled onto Matt's back and pinned him to the floor with his body. It was near impossible for Matt to breathe with two-hundred-plus pounds on top of him and thick hands squeezing his throat. Matt thought to reach behind and grab some flesh to claw or pinch, but he didn't have the strength to make it hurt.

Matt was losing consciousness when he heard something, felt Frankie's breath and lips brush his ear. Frankie began to move against him. A slow, circular motion. He felt Frankie's groin dig into him, a cock grow hard against his buttocks. Then Frankie murmured loudly enough for Matt to hear what he was saying, and Matt would've been totally shocked if he weren't so near to death. "I loved you, Matty."

Floating toward his demise, Matt saw faces move past him. They were family, friends, lovers, and then strangers because there were so many and Matt couldn't fill in all the images. He heard a noise. He guessed it was Big Moe pounding at the door.

Matt liked that he had gotten his answers. And now, where he was going, there was a good chance he would soon learn a lot more. Like if there was a God or not. *Fucking awesome.*

The door burst open. Splintered wood and cracked plaster hit the floor. Matt saw Big Moe tumble into the room, get up, and kick at him. A surprising relief came over him as the kick passed above his head. From the corner of one eye, Matt saw Frankie lying alongside him, and Big Moe was mad and kicking Frankie.

Matt wasn't sure if it was Big Moe or Frankie doing the talking. Then, it didn't sound like either one of them. The wrinkled suit gave it away. *Lou!*

The raging detective, in all his ruffled ferocity, kicked Frankie's squirming torso as it slid along the floor to get away.

Lou yelled, "You fucking pervert!"

Frankie stopped moving so Lou stopped kicking. He turned to Matt. "You all right?"

Only Matt's mouth, still pressed to the ground, moved. "Yeah."

Lou turned back to Frankie and used his foot to uncurl the fetal made-guy. Frankie stared at Lou's shoes. "You take me down, he comes too."

There was a smile beneath Lou's contempt. "You got something to confess, Frankie?" The detective unfurled a piece of white paper and flashed it in front of Frankie. "This is a gambling raid."

With one eye, Matt watched how Lou and Frankie stared at each other. The small room crowded with men wearing uniforms.

CHAPTER 24

On Wednesday, three days after the confrontation with Frankie, Matt was on an overnight flight to Boise, Idaho. The sun had just pulled away from the horizon, and with a cloudless sky, the Rocky Mountains were bathed in a glowing blue light that showcased their purple mountain majesty. The tall spires - *dearer to God than all the cathedrals in Europe* - were completely covered in snow, and in two months, the virgin snowpack would blanket everything down to the rolling hills and highland plains.

Matt had his nose and forehead pressed against the window, absorbing what he could of the breathtaking beauty passing under him. He knew the 737 was somewhere over the Continental Divide and marveled at how this enormous reservoir of captured precipitation would steadily melt and feed the creeks, mountain streams, and mighty rivers that reach the Pacific by way of the Snake and Columbia Rivers and the Gulf of Mexico by way of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. He reflected on this magnificent system and how it watered one-half of the contiguous United States, and it made him think of God.

Flying over the Rockies at dawn bolstered the forces within Matt that believed in the existence of an all-powerful Supreme Being. Clear evidence of an absolute intelligence was passing before his eyes. *A God with a plan*. Matt didn't venture any further in his contemplation of the Divine. He still wasn't ready to warm up to the God who had allowed his father to be killed.

The awe inspiring vistas outside his window brought back memories of his odyssey out West some twenty years earlier. Matt had spent a wondrous and creative month in this part of the country when he visited Yellowstone and nearby Grand-Teton National Parks. He could see himself moving out West someday.

Matt had been glued to his window ever since the captain's voice pointed out the two federally protected, pristine wonders. Up until then, he'd been thinking about Carol, reviewing how he had gotten here.

Right after Matt had realized he wasn't going to die, while his face was still mashed to the floor in Frankie's office, thoughts and visions of Carol rushed to his brain. Since then, these musings had continued and increased to where he'd gotten dizzy and exhausted from debating whether to leave her alone for good or make one last attempt to visit her.

Matt had hurt her in an awful way and was ashamed to ever see Carol again. Sealed in his memory was her wounded expression at the airport, when he told her he had a gun with him. Her bright blue eyes dimmed and hardened with his latest betrayal. There was no mistaking the *good-bye forever* look. But even with this certainty, Matt was unable to commit to never seeing Carol again. He couldn't simply forget the woman he loved, and would continue to torture himself with regret if he didn't try at least one more time to regain her affection.

Blocked by this emotional impasse, Matt chose a middle course in which he would advance toward Carol until he knew for sure he should stop, until he felt in his heart it wasn't right to go on. In three days, little-by-little, step-by-step, Matt had purchased the plane ticket, planned and packed for the trip, coaxed himself onto Delta flight 414, and settled into window seat 39-A. Though each advance had brought him closer to Carol, he remained puzzled as to how far he would get. Matt continued to plod along clutching his rules of disengagement.

Last Sunday, after the battle of the chokeholds, Lou had escorted Matt to his family's apartment. On the way, the detective explained to Matt, who was still groggy from his near-death experience, how he had figured Matt to go straight to Frankie's joint and stationed an undercover cop outside the club. Lou was notified as soon as Matt showed his face by the corner bakery. It was Lou pounding on Frankie's door. Not Big Moe. Lou saved his ass. *Fucking literally*. This revelation took some more air out of Matt's puffed-up notion of himself as being complex and somewhat mysterious now that two old friends had read him like a comic book.

When Matt arrived at his family's apartment, Rita ran to him. She cried and hugged him for a long time. By his raspy voice, bruised neck, and overall roughed-up appearance, Rita knew he had been in a violent struggle. She didn't want to let him out of her arms, and for the rest of the time he was there, she kept him in her sight. No matter whom Matt talked to he sensed her eyes upon him, and whenever he glanced in her direction, she was always looking at him.

That night, the spacious apartment seemed small with the large gathering of relatives and friends, who had assembled to eat, drink, and comfort one another. It was an earnest mingling of hearts and minds, slightly diminished by the awareness that each guest had questions they wanted to ask Matt, but didn't. Nonetheless, he felt blessed to be among so many people he loved and who loved him in return. Their company had a warming effect on his body and spirit. Just what he needed at the time. *Perfect*.

After the visitors had gone and Matt was about to leave, Rita and Lucy pleaded with him to take care of himself. Matt promised he would and said his final good-byes. The familiar door closed behind him, and once again, he was alone with his thoughts, most of which were of Carol.

On Monday, Lou called to tell Matt he had warned Frankie nothing better happen to Matt or he would make it a personal vendetta to get Frankie one way or another, legal or not. He had even threatened to harass the bosses until Frankie became a clear liability to them. The other reason Lou called was to strongly suggest he leave New York temporarily. For Matt, this piece of advice had been the clincher for buying the plane ticket.

With his carry-on luggage in hand, Matt walked briskly through the Boise Air Terminal, pausing once to purchase a postcard that caught his eye. The picture on the front showed a proud farming couple in their seventies, smiling at a huge prize-winning potato.

Twenty minutes later, Matt drove a rented Chevy Blazer, north on Highway 55. The guy at National Car Rental had told him the 4x4 came equipped with studded tires and a set of snow chains in the rear compartment. Since Matt didn't know what to expect, he had gotten their best vehicle for slippery roads.

After driving for an hour, Matt noticed how the forest had thickened around the tight two-lane as if he were passing through a green and white tunnel, sporadically lit with glittering rays of sunlight. Fortunately, the road had been plowed and there was little snow on it, unlike everything else around him. The ground below the tall trees was covered with snow, three to four inches deep, while the branches of the Douglas firs, spruce, and white pines held fresh white powder.

He wondered if there would be more snow in Cascade, which, by his revised calculations, was an hour away. Five miles outside this small town is where Carol lived. She had described her house and property to him during their walk through Lower Manhattan. She had told him her back acres overlook the Payette River and Cascade Reservoir - *her beautiful mirrored lake* - and from her front porch, a spectacular view of the Salmon River Mountains soaring to the sky.

When he reached the north end of Cascade, Matt saw the sign to Warm Lake and turned right onto a smaller road that traveled northeast toward the mountains. The plows had worked for about a half-mile. From that point on, the studded tires were a definite necessity on the snow covered, winding route. Matt hated the idea of slowing down, but after skidding on a couple of curves, he reduced his speed to ten miles per hour. Being so close to where Carol lived had increased his urgency to find out how far he would venture and how his journey would end.

Once Matt calmed himself and accepted the slower speed, he marveled at the winter wonderland surrounding him. Every bit of ground, rock and boulder was covered white. Even the few tire tracks in front of him had been replenished and appeared like soft hollows in the road. The tall trees were flecked with snow and their winged branches were laden with it. And hovering above the ivory landscape was a pure blue sky, so intense it looked as if it had come from an artist's palette.

The houses were few and far apart so it wasn't difficult to find the mailbox with Carol's address on it. Parked next to it was a Ford Ranger with a hard shell over the cargo box and snow-chains on the tires. Matt couldn't see her place from the road.

The long driveway, only apparent by the slit through the dense trees, coursed upward and vanished at the top of a small hill. Matt drove another hundred yards and parked the Chevy Blazer at the first turnout. He then doubled back on foot.

Matt walked along the side of the road until he was about fifty feet from the pickup, at which point, he decided to cut through the trees so as not to leave footprints on her driveway. His first step off the road sank ten inches into the snow, sending the powdery frost up his pant leg and over the rim of his work boot. An instant chill gripped his left leg. Extracting his iced limb, Matt brushed away the snow, then unlaced his boots and stuffed his uncuffed jeans into them.

It wasn't an easy ascent, and his cold soggy foot made the slow going even more unpleasant. After struggling up the rise through the deep snow and thick woods, Matt came to a clearing and saw a house in the middle of it. Even if he hadn't seen the address, Matt would've guessed by the extraordinary colors it was Carol's home.

He moved closer and positioned himself behind a massive fir that stood thirty feet from the house. It was one of a half-dozen variety of trees scattered throughout the clearing. Matt improved his lookout spot by crunching down on the snow around him until he had made a hole to stand in and keep the icy wetness from his numbed legs.

The clearing was surrounded on three sides, north, south, and east, by the forest, while to the west, the back of the house had an unobstructed view of the valley below and the mountains beyond it. There was a grenadine gazebo at the back end of the clearing, where, Matt assumed, Carol has her best view of the Payette River and *her blue mirrored lake*.

About a half-foot of snow laid atop the sharply pitched, double-faced, slate roof, except at the crest's center where it had melted from the heat of the stone chimney. Above the flue pipes, which lifted gray smoke into the crisp cold air, was a miter painted the same grenadine as the gazebo and picket fence that surrounded the house, front yard and garden areas. The house was multi-hued, primarily subdued shades of blue. It was designed to move the viewer's eye around it as if it were a painting. There was a definite plan to it.

Using his knowledge of color theory, which he had studied to perfect his photography, Matt analyzed the abstract relationship of the grenadine objects. He surmised the fence was like a free-floating frame and base of an enclosing pyramid whose subtle apex was the miter, and the distant gazebo, outside the fenced area, created a dynamic that both extended and pulled apart the triangular design. After thinking about it for a while, Matt saw the gazebo as a reminder for Carol to step outside herself and look at the other realities around her.

Whether or not this had been her plan, Matt enjoyed examining her artistry, and delighted in the playfulness of her colorful world. He wished he could've looked at the house and property from all angles (and all seasons), but he didn't want to chance being seen. Not yet. So he settled for his one view of the north and east sides of Carol's cozy, two-story home.

His eyes jumped from color to color and object to object, from the predominant pale aqua clapboard siding to the other pastels: the chalky pink corners, the light periwinkle fish-scale break, and the lavender-blue front porch. Woven throughout were dusty colors and earth tones on the copper door and rust fanlight over the main entry, the sable front steps, and the golden beige window frames and rosy taupe jambs of the twin gables facing front and east toward the immediate mountains. There were also strong colors, sparingly used for effect, like the lemon-lime gingerbread trim under the eaves, and the black frames on the roundel near the peak of the roof and the large window below on the addition to the main house that faced north toward the diffuse light that artists prefer to work with.

Matt was looking at the warm glowing light in the lower front windows, probably from the fireplace, when movement in the darkened addition caught his attention. It was difficult to tell what he was looking at, until the light came on and there was Carol seated on a tall stool, her head turned in his direction as she searched for something on a utility cart. Behind her, a drafting table made of pine and locked upright at a 60-degree angle. The small spotlight reflected off the angled surface, and once again, her hair was radiantly backlit. With her head centered in the spreading light, it appeared as if there was a halo around her face. *God, she is lovely.*

What's with the repeating backlight? It's so corny, it must mean something. Yeah. I'm crazy about this woman.

"But I can't go near her," Matt whispered. *She's got this lovely home, a passion to create, a beautiful life. I have no right to fuck that up just because I fell in love with her.*

Carol straightened up and turned toward the drafting table to which she pinned a sheet of bright white paper. Her golden hair glowed even more in the intense reflection. He blinked and suddenly felt his body grow weak. The more beautiful she looked, the more it hurt him to look at her.

The pleasure of seeing her face had been overpowered by the sadness in Matt's heart. He knew his journey would stop behind this tree. He would go no farther. Not now. Not today. He would not venture into her warmth. He would remain outside in the cold, colorless world, until he resolved his self-doubts, until he was certain he'd been exorcised of the need for revenge and murder.

There was only one way to prove himself worthy again. He had to go back to New York to do this. His chest heaved as he reconciled that he must go now, for the sooner he purified himself, the sooner he'd return and walk through her grenadine gate. Matt took a long last look at the idyllic house and his ideal woman inside. He wanted them more than anything else in the world. "I'll be back, soon. I promise." With a heavy heart and tears flooding his eyes, Matt turned and retraced his steps in the snow.

Three days later, Matt regarded the clouds over Western New Jersey as they slowly moved toward him. He saw distant lightning strikes and heard low rumbling

thunder. Inside the puffy cloud formations, Matt found a blue house in the middle of a snowfield, and thought how wonderful it was that Carol was a gifted and dedicated painter. She was perfect for him. He didn't want a woman to need him too much. She should crave her privacy to explore the mind, the senses, the world, and not have to worry about her partner's trust and support. Matt wasn't afraid of an independent woman. He preferred it and would nurture it.

Exactly a week after his terrifying escape from the flames, Matt was back up on the charred boom, thinking of his independent woman out West, with an M24 pointed at J. J. Waste.

Earlier that morning, Matt had found himself wide-awake at four o'clock and got out of bed to consider the new day. He proceeded directly to the mighty question he'd been wrestling with for the last three days, and relying heavily on his physical condition, he came up with an answer. He felt strong and believed today was the day he had what it took to do what he had to do.

After eating a hardy breakfast, Matt dressed warmly, putting on jeans, work boots, a heavy sweater, an old woolen jacket, and a pair of suede utility gloves. He then took a short cab ride to mid-town, where he rented a plain gray Econoline van and drove straight to the pile of junk in Newark to reclaim the M24 and six loaded mags. When he got there, it was still early, quite cold, and nobody was around, so he had no problem digging out the case. Matt placed it in the back of the van, and drove to a K-Mart, where he bought a duffel bag, rope, gaffer's tape, and an extra pair of leather work gloves.

He hadn't a clue as to whether or not Frankie would show on this Saturday morning. The forecast had predicted heavy rain and there were plenty of good football games on TV, but Matt had a hunch the capo would make an appearance, so he waited in the same spot, alongside the two-lane, where he had parked twice before.

At around 10 o'clock, Matt was staring at a strip of yellow crime scene tape, snagged on a bush and rippling in the wind, when he spotted Frankie's silver-gray Cadillac glide past. Matt watched as the car entered the recycling plant. When the gate closed behind it, he withdrew from the van, hefted the duffel bag and its contents over his shoulder, and slinked toward the sooted, giant crane. He knew what to expect this time so his climb up the boom's ladder went smoothly.

From his roost, Matt had carefully watched what little activity took place in J.J.'s yard. It was totally quiet now, with no one in sight, and that's why his eyes had drifted toward the clouds in the West.

Frankie hadn't shown his face since Matt began his surveillance of the yard. With the Cadillac partly hidden behind the cinder-block office building, Matt assumed Frankie was inside and would eventually exit the green front door, where Matt's weapon was loosely aimed and what he always kept in his peripheral vision.

The reason Matt was back up on the boom was to get Frankie in the cross-hairs of his sight and *not* pull the trigger. If he passed this extraordinary test, Matt would

redeem himself in his own eyes and possess the moral justification to go back to Idaho and knock on Carol's door.

Isn't her love what I want most in life? Convinced that it was, Matt assured himself he could have it. All he needed to do was relinquish the consuming hatred against Frankie and the fair-haired lady would be his. Matt struggled to make it a simple matter, a no-brainer, but the vindictive impulses were resilient. At this *late* hour, poised in potential ambush, he still didn't know if he'd lose control of his trigger finger.

A mail truck rounded the bend and slowed as it approached J.J.'s front gate. The mailman got out and pushed letters and papers through a slot in the fence. Before he drove off, he *beeped* the horn twice. Moments later, the green door opened and a hefty guy, whom Matt recognized as one of the gunmen at his studio, walked out to retrieve the mail. After the man re-entered the office, nothing happened for another twenty minutes until the green door opened again, and out stepped the new Garbage King into the waning daylight.

Frankie noticed the looming, dark clouds and stopped to regard them for a few moments. He popped a cigarette into his mouth and lit it before moving farther from the low building, where he slid his hand into the side pocket of his blue down parka and pulled something from it. By this time, Matt had set his sight on Frankie's face and watched him read the postcard Matt had mailed from the Boise Air Terminal, prior to his return flight. Matt whispered the words he had written on the back. "Peace, brother."

Through the scope, Matt saw Frankie grinning at the postcard. It was a grin without warmth. Suddenly, the sky grew noticeably darker. Then a bright flash briefly lit it. Roaring thunder soon followed. A more serious expression came over Frankie's face. To Matt's great surprise, the capo lifted his head and looked directly at the boom. Through the scope, it appeared to Matt as if they were staring at each other just twenty feet apart.

Matt knew fear when he saw it. He could barely detect it, but he was pretty sure it was there. Then a second brash bolt illuminated Frankie's face, lighting the alarm in his dark eyes. That's when the animal inside roared. . . when his reason failed him. . . when Matt squeezed the trigger.

Romance, true love, spirituality, morality, intellect - they never had a chance. Powered by hatred, the primitive brain had covertly taken control, and through guile and manipulation had masterminded every thought and deed that had gotten Matt to climb back up the boom. The clandestine, irreversible plot had always been to exact revenge on Frankie.

Emerging from his shock, Matt began to comprehend he'd just killed his third man. Looking through the scope, he saw Frankie's lifeless torso and splayed limbs knocked back against the cinder block building. The lone bullet had ripped a chunk of bloody matter from the capo's mouth and left cheek.

Matt quietly addressed the half-face, half-gore, propped against the white wall, leaking its contents onto the gravel yard. “We both lose, Frankie.”

Matt kept his rifle trained on the green office door to see how Frankie’s men would react to the sniper attack. But nothing happened. He waited a good five minutes, and nobody appeared. Matt guessed the gunshot had been perceived as another thunderclap. Lucky him. He accepted his good fortune and placed the M24 inside the duffel bag. When he climbed down the boom, Matt was more careful to concentrate on his hand and foot placement. He wasn’t feeling well. There was no longer any doubt he had lost Carol forever.

The fantasy of letting go of the ladder fluttered through his mind, but Matt would never give up life. Good or bad, with or without Carol, it was too precious. Death would come soon enough and hang around forever. About halfway down the boom, Matt felt the first heavy raindrop, a few minutes later the downpour began.

CHAPTER 25

Three months after shooting Frankie, long past the holidays, Matt toiled by the Hudson River, working to clean up the nearby waterfront and piers. Focused on the heavy-duty broom he pushed in front of him, Matt shoved broken glass, squashed cans, and other refuse toward a growing pile of garbage. Behind and above his head hung a sign, nothing fancy, blue letters on white - *Neighborhood Clean-Up. Please Join In.* The banner was tied to a new 12-foot chain-link fence that protected the pier directly across West Street from his studio, not far from the still visible burns and charred cobblestone from the torched tanker.

The sky was mostly gray, with a distinct feel of snow in the air, which Matt relished, as he and twenty-three other men and women cleaned up the adjacent riverfront to live up to their part of the handshake deal that Matt, as founder and representative of the Neighborhood Renaissance campaign, had made with the Mayor. Most of the gathered workers both lived and owned businesses in this isolated nook of Manhattan, and they had promised to do the manual, detailed labor as soon as the City used its municipal muscle to haul off the auto wrecks, discarded appliances, and other heavy junk. It had taken the City crews a week and a half to do their part, and when they had finished, the unobstructed view of the river was inspiration enough for the neighbors to jump into action. You could see it in their eyes that their hearts were into it also. Besides the benefit of a cleaner neighborhood, they were forming social bonds. An essential part of humanity that hasn't fared well in the modern age.

Matt swept large piles of dirt into an imaginary center building a higher, more compact hill of debris. He was so intent, circling, stalking, pushing forward like a dog herding sheep, that he didn't notice Lou cross West Street and walk up behind him.

"I saw you on TV a couple of times." Matt turned and Lou added, "You're getting better."

The smirk on Lou's face reminded Matt that his early public appearances hadn't gone over too well. Even his supporters had advised him to be less strident and soften his criticism of *those foot-dragging politicians*. Matt leaned the broom against the chain-link fence and removed his work gloves. "I learned a few lessons."

A passing driver honked encouragement and exchanged waves with the clean-up workers. Lou viewed the gleaned over areas and nodded, impressed with the effort. "You always had a talent for getting things done."

“I also got a talent for knowing when cops are around. Are they tailing me or protecting me?”

“They’re watching out for you.”

“Why the special treatment?”

“I feel partly responsible.”

“How’s that?”

“A while ago, I interrogated Frankie regarding a murder case.”

“Mikey Tan?”

Lou raised an eyebrow. “How’d you know?”

“Frankie told me.”

“So I started digging pretty deep, getting heavy with him, and he got tired of it and lashed back at me with a personal attack. . . which I didn’t handle too well. I wanted to punch the shit outta him. Instead, I used you to belittle him.”

“What’d you say?”

“I told him what a punk he was. That I’d know him since he was a kid and his wiseguy crap didn’t fool me. I brought up examples of how he’d gotten his ass kicked and how he’d always been a follower. And every instance I threw at him, it always turned out you were either the guy who’d kicked his ass or had been the real leader. I could see the resentment in his eyes, and I didn’t let up. I really played it. That may have led him to fuck with your perfect life. I shouldn’t have lost control when he insulted me.”

“I’ve been thinking about him. . . when he was a kid. How his wacko father always screamed at him and hit him with the strap for no reason.”

“Frankie’s mother was no prize either.”

“Both ice-cold. Probably what screwed him up sexually. Why he was so drawn to getting blowjobs in those trucks.”

“You know what his preference was?”

“Sexually?”

Lou nodded. “Teenage boys from behind.”

“How do you know that?”

“I got my sources.”

Matt shook his head. “Between you fucking cops and robbers, no secret is safe.”

Lou smiled and glanced at the water, whereupon the smile faded. “You ever think about that bum down there?”

Matt faced the river. “Sometimes.”

“Frankie was always causing trouble.” Lou turned toward Matt. “So what was it, revenge or self-defense?”

“You wearing a wire?”

“I ain’t after you, Matt. I know Frankie got your father killed. If someone hurt my mother, I’d get the bastard who did it.”

“Revenge or self-defense?” Matt shrugged. “You figure the proportions.”

They looked at the river again and were quiet until Matt broke the silence. “I study things so hard. I try to consider every angle, make sure of every detail. And I still missed the most obvious clues right in front of my face.”

“You were blindsided. It happens. Even to the best detectives.”

Matt fixed his attention on the floating garbage. “You believe in sin?”

“Yeah. I believe in sin.”

“Think you can recognize it when you see it?”

“Most of the time.”

Matt pointed at the slime and debris floating on his *mirrored lake*. “What do you think that is, mortal or venial?”

Lou gave him a sideward glance. “You gonna become a radical tree-hugger who knocks off every new Garbage King that comes along?”

Matt grinned at the latest suspicion cast upon him.

“Because there’s no stopping it. Too much money involved. You’d be up against organized crime, the corporations, and the government.”

Matt bristled. “Yeah, it’s in our national interest to poison the planet. How do we get such brilliant leaders? They’re fucking killing us.” Matt gestured toward the water. “Christ, we used to swim here.” He got on a slow boil. “You know, at one time we had societies that believed Nature was sacred. But they were wiped out by Christian aggression. It’s unconscionable how none of the Western religions consider it a sin to foul the Earth. To me it’s obvious it should be a sin. Of all the matter in the universe, this unique jewel from God is the one heavenly body sustaining our life-form. The Earth should be cherished like a sacrament. Its desecration sacrilegious. God is underground. Below the surface. Surrounded by cancerous swamps!”

“Holy shit, you’re worse than I thought. You’re a fucking religious fanatic.”

They chuckled together. Feeling more comfortable with Lou, Matt asked, “When Frankie insulted you, did he mention your war injury?”

Lou made light of it. “You see, Matty, it’s all fair. Even cops don’t get to have their secrets.” Turning somber, he added, “If I had it to do over again, I would’ve spent the war years in Sweden playing with myself.”

“You know I have my own regrets.”

“Sure, we’re comrades in remorse. That’s why I can open up to you. I never admitted my bitterness about the war to anyone else. It took me a long time to even admit it to myself.”

“So how are you and Rita getting along? You wanna be more than friends with her?”

Lou responded guardedly. “Yeah. I like Rita a lot. I’ve liked her for years. I even met her before Eddie did by two days.”

“I remember getting hot at the two of you for arguing over my kid sister.”

“Lately, me and Rita have been talking seriously. . . about things.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“I asked her to marry me.”

Matt's eyes widened. "What did she say?"

"Yes."

Matt hesitated before asking, "Does she know?"

"Yeah. I told her. It took me a while, though. I wasn't sure if she liked me or not.

But we started kind of smiling at each other all the time and feeling embarrassed for making the slightest mistake. This one time, I was helping out in the kitchen, showing how domestic I could be, and I dropped the whole damn salad on the kitchen floor. Rita comes in to get the bread, slips on the olive oil and lands right on her. . . backside. I wanted to die first and then crawl in a hole. I swear my face was throwing off heat." Lou laughed when he saw Matt giggling. "I went to pick your sister up and I wound up falling right on top of her. Like I was some fucking sex maniac, suddenly unleashed of all civilized restraint. There we were on the floor, slipping and sliding in olive oil. I tell you, it was not a pretty sight. Embarrassed? I was redder than the fucking tomatoes."

Matt laughed hard and raised his hands for Lou to stop telling his funny story. "Sounds like love to me."

Lou's back on track. "Right, that's why I told her about my inabilities. I mean you gotta be sure first. You can't go out and reveal your deepest secrets just because a pretty woman's nice to you." Tears welled in Lou's eyes. "She said it makes her love me even more."

"That's Rita for you." Matt extended his hand. "Congratulations, brother-in-law."

Lou smiled sheepishly as he clasped Matt's hand. "You think Eddie would mind me marrying Rita?"

Matt's expression changed as if he'd just heard a voice. "You hear that?"

Lou snorted, "Hear what?"

"It was Eddie. He sent us a message."

"Oh yeah, what'd he say?"

"He said, what took you so long, you asshole?"

Lou laughed. "That was his favorite word. Everybody who pissed him off was an asshole."

Their eyes met and the intimacy caused them to look away. *Feels like love to me.* Matt drew Lou close and hugged him.

When they stepped apart, Lou asked, "So what about you, you got plans for Carol?"

The question caught Matt by surprise.

"There's gotta be some clean rivers in Idaho."

"I fucked up. I failed the test."

"She gave you a test?"

"It was a self-exam."

"Change the passing grade."

Matt saw Lou was serious. He shook his head. "She doesn't want me."

“You sure of that?”

“We’re too different.”

“Opposites can attract.”

“If you’re talking small difference.”

“So yours is big?”

“She wants to evolve while I’m holding back the species.”

“Sounds big. But what the hell are you talking about?”

“She’ll take love over hate any day.”

“Women can do that better than we can. But they ain’t exempt. I’ve seen some very vicious homicides committed by women. The main difference is they rarely kill a stranger. Which, in my opinion, goes back to our primitive roots when the male was the hunter and protector, using his aggression outside the home. On the other hand, the female was more domestic, mostly taking care of the children. But if you ever fucked with her cave, she’d slice your heart out and turn it into baby food.”

“We set such high standards to fall in love and trust someone. But when it comes to hate and suspicion, we’ll let anyone in the door.”

“I feel like I’m learning how to love all over again.”

“Yeah? Maybe you can teach me.”

“That would be a first. You learning something from me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You were always so damn sure of yourself. So thick-headed you never listened to anybody else’s opinions.”

Matt took it well. “Hey, don’t hold back.”

“In regards to Carol, I think you gotta listen to what your heart tells you.”

“I know what you’re saying, but it’s over. Done with. I respect Carol too much to impose myself on her again.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. She seemed like a real nice lady.”

Matt turned toward the river and watched it as he spoke. “The way things work out. The best woman in my life comes along when I’m least able to hold onto her. It’s those pranksters. The fucking Fates. They love a good laugh.” He looked up at the gray sky and shouted, “Ball busting harpies!”

For want of something to say, Lou chimed in, “Timing’s everything.”

The nutshell summation brought Matt to snap out of his bitter mood. “So what are you saying, I need a better watch?”

They looked at each other with smiles on their faces. Matt spoke first. “Lou, I keep lists in my head. I got this one of my female companions, and I don’t know who’s at the top. But on the friend’s list you stand alone.”

“Same here. I feel reconnected to you, like all those years in between never happened.”

Matt had a burst of energy. “We gotta do more things together. What do you like to do? You like the museums? Movies?” All at once, the excitement spent itself. “Ah, fuck it. Never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Louder. “What?”

Louder. “Nothing.”

“Asshole.”

They laughed, after which Matt turned apologetic. “I’m sorry I didn’t visit more over the holidays. I needed time to be alone. I tried to explain to Rita. I hope she understood.”

“She did.”

They both noticed white flakes landing on each other’s hair. Lou looked up at the falling snow. “I better get rolling. See what’s up with the weather.” He shook Matt’s hand. “Take care, buddy.”

“You too, bro.”

Within a half-hour, the steady snowfall blanketed everything and put a stop to the waterfront clean-up. Matt set his push broom aside and regarded his mountain of debris with satisfaction. He heard the shouts of fellow workers who called out and waved to him as they departed for the warmth and comfort of their homes. He responded and waved back, but unlike them, he chose to linger outside and enjoy the fresh snow dropping all around him. It was the real deal - a late winter storm that would bring enough white stuff to cover the City and make New York exquisitely beautiful until the morning rush hour.

Matt turned to look at the river and noticed how the snow had stuck to much of the floating debris. Which was once putrid, now glittered like floating islands of ice crystals, spinning, swirling, dancing downriver. What was the significance of this seemingly purifying event? That life would regenerate no matter how horribly man degraded the environment? No, this was just face powder, merely make-up on the abscesses, boils, and pustules of the grimy city underneath.

And what of the terrible challenges and suffering he had recently endured, what were their significance? Had Robert and Matt’s father been sacrificed for nothing? Shouldn’t he have learned something from these awful tragedies? A lesson, moral, some important answers? And why had he met the love of his love only to lose her so quickly?

These were the questions that had occupied much of Matt’s thinking ever since he had finished with Frankie. One unsettling conclusion was he’d been punished for squandering his life on excessive corporal pleasure. This was just a guess, nonetheless, it had lowered his lustful desires and kept him from visiting Bumpers and from having sex for the past three months.

On the positive side, Matt had renewed his friendship with Lou and his niece, Lucy, and Rita and Lou would soon be married. The only other plus Matt thought of was he’d begun talking to God again, though he hadn’t had much to say to Him since his father’s death. But neither was God making it easy. He was doing his usual thing

and keeping quiet. Or perhaps, as Matt sometimes suspected, God was screaming right in his face, and Matt was missing it.

Either way, Matt believed God should make it easier for people to know what's expected of them. But if God chose to remain silent, so be it. Matt would accept it and not retaliate like a six year-old by not speaking in return. Eventually, Matt would again converse with God whether or not he received answers. After all, he sometimes spoke to his dick, and it never responded, though it always made its needs known.

Matt was wondering how his dick got into the conversation when he saw a tall, sleek woman walking toward him. She wore a green down vest over a brown flannel shirt and black jeans, allowing him a good look at her slim curves. Matt had noticed her in the distance while she helped in the clean-up. As she got closer, he saw that she was probably in her forties and strikingly pretty, with lively dark brown eyes and long, thick, lustrous black hair, which was tied in back.

When she reached him, she extended her hand. "Hello. My name's Helena Stavos. I'm a big fan of yours."

Her eyes sparkled as she thanked him for being the driving force behind the clean-up campaign, and her features and manners grew even more attractive as she proceeded to tell him she had long admired his photography, praising in detail his Western landscapes and early chiaroscuro technique. He felt his cheeks warm by the time he asked what she did. And when she told him she was a sculptress, Matt recalled knowing her name and seeing some of her work, and remembered he had been truly impressed by it.

Time and place receded as they spirited from one topic to another. They quickly discovered they were both native New Yorkers, self-employed, and passionate about art, who loved to travel and eat gourmet meals at home, and neither one had ever been married. They smiled a lot, and their eyes danced, taking turns looking deeper at one another. He sensed the rising heat and magnetic pull. The two elemental components of the magical spark that sears someone into your heart. Then all at once, he felt afraid.

Matt worried it was too soon. He wanted more time and space to rest and prepare before life became intense again. But how could he pass up a sweet natured, lovely woman, close to his own age, with a nice frame, and eyes that would still be beautiful when she grew old?

He heard her say, "Remember when you were a kid. . . how you felt on a snow day like this?"

Matt noticed the ubiquitous whiteness again, and spoke excitedly, "We'd all go wild. We'd go looking for city buses to hold onto their back fenders and let them pull us through the snow. There were usually four of us, and we'd use our rubber boots like skis, and play *chicken* to see who'd be the last to let go." Matt checked her reaction. "I guess I shouldn't be advertising what a dumb street kid I was."

Helena suddenly broke into a run to slide in the snow. She slid ten feet before falling on her butt. They both laughed. As she sat in the snow, she yelled back to him. “I wish I had a sled right now.”

Matt was still chuckling when he said, “I have one.”

Twenty minutes later, the heavy snow was still falling, and Matt and Helena sat on a sled at the top of a hill, anxiously looking down a steep street, just south of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. He had purchased the oak and steel sled, circa 1950s, about ten years earlier as a prop for a Christmas photo shoot. That same year, after a blizzard had dumped a foot of snow on Manhattan, Matt thought about taking the sled out for a ride, but never did, and it sat in his prop area ever since, unused.

The runners on the Lightning Guider were painted bright red and the blond slatted platform was long enough to accommodate the two of them. Helena sat in front with her feet planted on the steel prow, while Matt, clutching the guide rope, sat behind and straddled her between his legs, his feet solid against the wooden steering bar.

Without taking her eyes off the steep drop in front of them, she asked, “Are you sure about this?”

“No.”

They both giggled nervously before she asked, “What are the chances of a car crossing the intersection?”

“We haven’t seen one yet. Who’d be crazy enough to drive in this weather?”

“Who’d be crazy enough to sled down this hill?”

“You up for it?”

“This is a game of *chicken*, isn’t it?”

“The grown-up version.”

“You got an escape plan, just in case?”

“Always.”

“Let’s do it.”

From the crest of the downtown canyon with its narrow, splendid view of the Hudson, Matt grabbed a last look at the easy flowing river as it shimmered through the floating, fluttering, sparkling flakes of snow. The purified landscape seemed complete with a half-foot of ivory crystals covering every square inch on the ground and a bright rippling veil glistening across the sodden sky. Matt took a deep breath to inhale the invigorating atmosphere, then dug his hands into the snow and pushed the sled forward, tipping it over the brink. Helena shrieked.

Slicing through the snow, the sled gained speed and they were soon rocketing downhill. The wind and swirling flakes flew against their face and eyes. The soft icy pelting more bracing than punishing. Helena wrapped her arms ever tighter around his legs and pressed her hips into his groin. She continued to squeal, an exhilarated mix of delight and trepidation, her eyes glued to the rapidly approaching cross street.

In the great rush of excitement, Matt carried a bit of guilt for not telling her the cross street had been closed to traffic, for the past week, due to sewer repairs. He had even checked from a distance, as they crunched their way to the summit, to make sure the barricades were still up. Matt considered this a harmless fib since he was merely showing off, trying to impress his new girl with a show of juvenile machismo.

Whistling down the icy slope with *Helena of Tribeca* - a name he'd secretly given her - Matt was building lasting memories. Technically, this was their first date, which made him feel like a kid again with all five senses vibrantly alive. Gripping the rope in front of her, he felt her body expand and contract with each rapid breath. His face jutted forward and brushed against her tingling rosy cheek as her yelps and groans echoed in his ears. Her hair whipped his face and he tasted the strands that entered his open mouth, all the while, inhaling the fresh aroma of her damp glowing skin. It was a delight to have her in his arms, and he grew hard against her.

Helena screamed louder and squeezed his legs tighter when they shot past the intersection. They continued onto the next block, which was less steep, and slowed to a moderate coasting speed. They both laughed, flushed with wild relief. He felt her catch her breath and relax her muscles. She was still snug against him, and he was sure she felt his erection, but there was nothing he could do. He was already sitting at the very edge of the sled's platform.

Suddenly, Helena turned and kissed him on the mouth. She was smiling, giving him permission to rub against her for three minutes. It was their first dance, and the nuns and priests weren't watching.

Thank you.