

Chapter One

The railroad trestle's iron framework had rusted in spots over the years but it still did its job, straddling the gap between the tracks at a right angle to an embankment and, across the river, those that led into a tunnel in a mountain beyond the bank. Fifty feet or so downstream from the trestle, the embankment fell off into a park. And the park had a paved boat landing on the downstream side of a jetty made of enormous rocks, which looked as though they'd been thrown there by the same giants who'd carved the blocks of stone that served as the trestle's feet on each bank.

The younger of two men stood near the tip of the jetty, where the current was rough. The older man's line was cast near the boat landing, in the water that owed its tranquility to the jetty's calming influence on the river's wild current.

"That's ten for me," said the old man as he reeled one in.

"Yep," said the young man, preferring not to add more to the only conversation that had passed between them in what seemed like hours.

The young man listened to the sounds of the summer night: the scampering in bushes, the swaying branches of evergreens as the wind hit the forest near the park, the chirping everywhere, the never-ending splash of water pouring on the smooth rocks of the riverbed. Soon the sounds would all be drowned out. He looked at his watch. It was 7:36 p.m.

A train would pass the railhead at Indigo Creek at about

8:10 p.m., or 8:20, which would bring the train to the trestle at 8:30 or so. That's what he had been told last night when the plans were made.

He felt a mosquito bite him on the left side of his face, and he slapped in revenge. And as he inspected his left hand, there was just enough daylight so he could see a bloody speck which was all that was left of the mosquito that had bitten him. Soon it would be dark, and that was part of the plan too.

With his latest catch trying to flop itself free of his left hand, the old man walked toward the shore, down the jetty, to a spot of earth where his chain stringer was fastened to the trunk of a sapling. Using his free hand, he unhooked the stringer and pulled it from the water. At the deep end of the line, the fish were dead. But at the shallow end, the latest-caught fish still struggled against their gill hooks.

The young man watched out of the corner of his eye. He thought: If everything goes according to the plan, those fish have a better chance than the man who caught them.

Adding a tenth fish to the stringer, the old man submerged it again and fastened it to the sapling.

The young man checked his watch again and discovered that a couple minutes had passed since he last checked it, and there was still plenty of time before the train came.

The old man said, "You sure are checking your watch a lot. You in a hurry to get out of here, son?"

"Nope," said the young man, but that sounded too short, so he added, "Just making sure I got time to catch my limit before

the park closes."

"Park closed a couple hours ago."

Last night, no one had bothered to mention the park's closing hours. It must not have been important, then. Yeah, someone would have mentioned it, if it made any difference.

The old man said, "How many you catch so far? Eight?"

"Nine."

"Why don't we see who can catch your tenth one first? Loser buys the first round back the Blue Ox."

"Okay. You're on."

"Something wrong, son?"

"Nope."

"All right. I'll give you a head start."

"Okay."

"You might stand a chance if you use eggs instead of them lures."

The young man said, "Using an egg hook takes all the challenge out of it."

The old man chuckled, and shook his head.

The young man thought: He doesn't suspect a thing. He probably thinks he makes me nervous. No, actually, he should think it. He does make me nervous, and he knows it. He loves it. That's why he doesn't suspect anything, the idiot. This is too easy.

He cast his lure into the current, let it drift and steadily cranked the handle on his reel. He didn't care if he had gotten the technique right, or whether he ever caught

another fish in his life.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder, and pulled away. He hadn't even heard him approach. Christ, he was nervous.

The old man said, "Maybe you should forget about being such a good sport, and start thinking about being a winner for a change."

"Yeah, maybe you're right."

The old man patted his shoulder, then went to the picnic cooler they'd brought along. He lifted its lid, grabbed a beer, opened it and took a gulp. He said, "Get a bite yet?"

"Hell yes. But it wasn't a fish."

The old man laughed. "Me too," he said.

The intervening silence was too long, and the young man felt pressured to speak. He said, "If I was using egg hooks, he would have swallowed it and we would be on our way home now."

His words fell flat. They were silent again.

After a while, the old man said, "All right, son. You had your chance." Finishing his beer, the old man crushed the can with one hand, and tossed it toward the picnic cooler. Then he baited his tiny egg hook with one red salmon egg. He cocked his pole slightly to the side and gently cast into the calm.

The young man reeled in his lure, and set aside his pole. His mouth was dry. Ignoring the contest for a moment, he put down his pole and stepped to the jetty's edge. He crouched, rinsed his hands, cupped them, filled them with water and drank until he was full. He splashed water on his face, and did it again, until he felt the front of his flannel shirt cling to his

chest, and realized that he'd soaked himself.

Now he didn't feel nervous like before. He was overcome with an exhilarating type of calm that wasn't new to him. He had felt it on other occasion when he was being put to the test: Suiting up as a starter for the first time in a basketball game in high school, making his first parachute jump in the army, touching Maya, Friday night (It was far from his first time for touching a woman, but none of them had been like her before, not even close.)

Until this point, he hadn't doubted he could do the job. But now his conscience seemed to be going through the motions of trying to convince him that he should change his mind while there was still time. Just minutes ago his thoughts were on the train speeding toward the trestle. Now conscience was a gang of bandits on horseback, galloping alongside the train, trying to jump on and bring it screeching to a halt.

The evening had gotten strange to him. Here was the jetty. He'd been fishing off it for most of the day. There was the same sullen railroad trestle, but now it was different, like watching a movie, only he was in the movie. He felt disconnected, like a spirit possessing the body of someone else crouching by the river.

Then his thoughts really started to get away from him.

Into his head popped a picture of a table welded out of thick, squared bars of metal painted white, with padding on top, and wide, leather straps. There was a man struggling, kicking, flailing, fighting a team of uniformed guards. Shortly after

the citizens of the State of Oregon had voted to reinstate the death penalty, he had seen the table in a photograph on the front cover of The Ledger Guardian. His imagination had filled in the details. This was the young man's private image of what an execution would be like here.

He shivered, although it was summer. Then he picked up his fishing pole and pretended to get back into the race to see who could catch the next fish. But delinquent thoughts assaulted him once again, as he considered the consequences of what he was about to do.

He remembered a documentary film, a very disturbing one that he'd watched as part of a philosophy class in college. The film was about a black man on death row in the south. The condemned man asked for shrimp cocktail for his last meal. The next day, as the condemned man was escorted to the gas chamber, the warden asked him whether he had enjoyed the shrimp cocktail at his last meal. And the warden wasn't kidding. The warden was trying to be friendly to a man whom he was about to kill. In the discussion that followed the film, the young man had made a big deal out of this. He had argued that the warden shouldn't have tried to be kind. He should have been cruel. The warden should have tried to make the condemned man hate him, because hatred would have given the condemned man courage to face his death. Being nice to someone you're about to kill is disgusting, demented. Do you want to kill him or not? Do you hate him or not? Is he your enemy, or isn't he? And if isn't your enemy, then why are you killing him? For the good of

society? For the good of society, you're giving a man shrimp cocktail, and then asking him if he liked it, moments before strapping him to a chair and asphyxiating him? Shit! And that had been one of the first times the young man could remember when other people began to look at him like he scared them, like he was really crazy.

Thinking about the death penalty was no way to prepare yourself to kill a man. He would have to think about something else.

There was a bite but no catch. He reeled in his lure and cast it farther into the current this time.

He silently shouted to himself and answered back.

You won't get the death penalty. They only give the death penalty for certain types of killing. But what type of killing was this going to be? He planned it, so it wasn't manslaughter. He had a motive, the oldest one in the book. No, jealousy was the oldest motive in the book. Cain didn't kill Abel for a woman, for money, for hatred.

Was this for a woman? Was it for the money? Hatred? All three? Could you have three motives for one crime? Could you have a hundred? No, the trial would last too long. Hell yes there would be a motive. But they knew nothing about his real motive. He didn't know it himself. Was there ever one thing you could point to and say this thing here caused that thing there? Casuistry was a waste of time. Casuistry could paralyze you. For want of a nail the shoe was lost. But there wouldn't have been a horseshoe without a blacksmith. Sometimes you just

did things, and thought about the reasons later.

Was there an opportunity? That part was easy. To prove that he had an opportunity, there were dozens of people: the gas station attendant, the checker at the Food-Mart, Bob at the bait shop, and those curious people with their children in the park this afternoon. "Yes your honor," they would say. "I remember him. He was drinking beer in a state park, in front of my children, on a Sunday. The sign right there in the park says you ain't supposed to do it, but he didn't care. He ought to be ashamed of himself."

If you wanted to kill a man, you had to think about the basics. You couldn't let your thoughts get away from you. It's now a quarter after eight. In another nine minutes the train will pass the railhead at Indigo Creek. Take aim. Use both hands. Squeeze the trigger, don't pull.

The young man said, "I just got a bite. Took my bait." And then he thought that he should say something else, try to sound relaxed. "Just missed catching a big-old rainbow. He's playing games with me, but I'm going to win."

The old man laughed. He said, "Yeah, sure. Then you woke up."

Wasn't the death penalty better than dying of cancer? With the death penalty you get one injection, and it works every time. Beats the hell out of chemotherapy. And they don't bill you for it. You're dead. They don't bill your next of kin, either, like in China where they charge your family for the bullet. Here you lie on a nice, padded table. You get a shot

that sends you to sleep, and the alarm never rings again. That would be no great loss.

He felt a trickle of panic. He had lost focus again, and his thoughts had strayed far from the basic steps upon which he should have been focusing his attention. He looked at his watch again.

He wondered what would happen if the gun's safety switch was turned wrong. He had never fired the gun before, so how did he know if he had set it right? What if he pulled -- no, squeezed -- the trigger and the safety was on, and nothing happened, and the old man came after him? Would there be time to turn off the safety, aim and squeeze the trigger again?

It didn't make any sense to think like that. You could really drive yourself nuts, thinking like that. There would be plenty of time. He would make sure there was plenty of distance between them, just like the plan. Take aim. Squeeze the trigger.

He wondered how it would feel for the old man to be shot in the head. What would he think about as it happened? Would he think at all, or would his soul pop off like a lightbulb? Would his field of vision get fuzzy, and then disappear into a little white dot, like those old black-and-white TV's when you turned them off?

The young man's stomach grumbled as if to protest its attachment to a man foolish enough to have such thoughts at the moment when he was supposed to have been steeling himself to commit murder. *Conscience doth make cowards of us all*, he

remembered from English literature in college. The young man turned, got on his hands and knees, and vomited.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and saw the old man smiling down at him.

"Chumming, huh?" said the old man.

The young man tried to answer, but was interrupted to finish what he'd started. And after he thought he was done, his stomach grumbled again. And when there was nothing left to come up, his body put him through a painful dry run, just to be sure.

"Did you have a rough night, last night, son?" said the old man.

"Yeah, it was pretty rough. Too many beers. That must be it." The young man stood. His legs felt wobbly.

The old man said, "Have another beer. That will help. Hair of the dog." He opened the picnic cooler, grabbed a can and tossed it to the younger man, who caught it, opened it, took a sip and raised the can in a beer-drinker's salute. It was just like a beer commercial, thought the young man. He said, "Here's to the best of times."

The old man smiled and held up his can to return the toast. He said, "What's your hand shaking for, son? You ain't afraid you're going to lose, are you?"

"No sir. Not at all. I'm going to win."

"We'll see about that."

"Yeah, we will."

Silently, the young man prayed for the first time since he couldn't remember when. It must have been when he was in the

army, the last time he prayed. *Our father who art in heaven, hall-o-wed be thy name.* No -- That's not the right one, he thought. The twenty-third Psalm is what I want. *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. Something about green pastures, and still waters.* The young man paused, and -- for the first time that evening -- noticed the roar of the distant rapids, which had been there all along. He continued his prayer. *For his name's sake he'll guide me in the right path. Yea though I walk through a valley dark as death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy staff and thy crook shalt comfort me. Thou prepest a table for me in the sight of my enemies.*

Once again, the young man thought of the white table with the thick leather straps. Why can't they do it the Chinese way, the brave way? The lethal injection is cowardly. The Chinese do it right: They march you down the hall, and -- blam! That's how it would be for the old man. He wouldn't see it coming. One minute he would be happily fishing, living the beer-commercial life. And the next minute there would be no next minutes.

But it didn't make any sense to think this way. He should focus on the basics. Do the job. Throw the body in the river.

The body goes aground, downstream. Someone finds it. The police identifies the corpse. The whole mounted cavalry comes charging through my door with a list of questions longer than the book of Leviticus.

I'll plead the fifth amendment.

But I'll talk in court.

I'll have my story straight by then.

No I won't. Nobody can straighten out a story like this one. I'll be the prime suspect. Who else would it be? I'll have no alibi. There hadn't been enough time to think of an alibi. And if I'm coming unglued now, I'll melt in court. The prosecutor will take apart my story in two minutes flat.

No, forget all of that! Thinking about the investigation now, is like . . . it would be like deciding what color to paint your apartment after you just got evicted. By the time they find the body, I'll be a thousand miles away with Maya. I'll taste every brown-skinned inch of her. We'll sweat together. We'll bathe together. We'll stroll on beaches. She's been to Mexico before, she said. Not like the states. It's got soul.

The young man felt like he needed to vomit again; but he kept it down, this time.

Still waters, thou preparest a table, where was I? Oh, yeah. Thou anointest my head with oil, and my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me.

And although it was probably the last thing he should have been thinking at the moment, the young man remembered singing songs at church. The organ and piano, the trombone, trumpet, drums and bass guitar played. The words of the song were scrawled clumsily on a transparent piece of letter-sized plastic, put on an overhead projector. The projectionist put it wrong-side up. In the pews, Sister Barb Seebloom laughed like a fat lady at the circus, causing a bleat here and there among the flock. The projectionist looked at the screen, and fixed the

mistake. What was the use? Everyone knew the words: *Surely goo-ood-ness a-and mer-er-cy shall fol-ol-ol-low me -- all the days, all the days of my li-i-i-i-ife.*

And then the young man remembered Pastor Fleese with his "leper colonies in The Philipppines." Shit, he could have fed them all for a year if he pawned his gold watch and the golden cross on a golden chain around his neck. Pastor Fleese was the shepherd of the flock, and I was one of his little sheep, with the rest of the boys, in front on the minister's right. The little girls sat on the left.

The boys made funny noises on the vinyl upholstery of the church pews; and they hurt themselves trying not to laugh in the middle of the church service. They had silent conversations via song titles in the hymnal:

Q: "Shall We Gather At The River?"

A: "Let's Wait Until The Sunrise."

But sometimes he couldn't ignore the sermon, especially the one about the sparrow. The sparrow sermon was burnt onto his brain like a cattle brand.

With only a few minutes left before the train arrived, the young man remembered the sparrow sermon.

"Brothers and sisters," Pastor Fleese said in his holy-roller plaint. Picture yourself on the beach, with the sand unto the left and unto the very right of you, as far as you can see on either side of you, and the waves crashing on the shore." He talked like the King James Bible, even when he wasn't reading from it.

Pastor Fleese made the sound of crashing waves, with his mouth on the microphone: Cussshhh, kuuu, kuuuh, cussshhh.

"Sister Neilon?" he said. "Sister Neilon? Play that song." Pastor Fleese sang until Sister Neilon found the key. She started on the wrong one and guessed a couple times, always, before she found the right key, and the congregation sang along: *"Ju-ust as I a-am withou-out one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, a-and that you bi-id me come to thee-ee oh lamb of Go-od I come, I come."*

As the congregation hummed the tune -- Hmm-mm as I hm-mm without one hmm -- Pastor Fleese continued, "The sun sets, beyond the ocean, out on the horizon -- brothers and sisters -- and you reach down and take a handful of sand. And then from heaven above, God sends a sparrow. And -- brothers and sisters -- that sparrow takes one grain of sand from your hand. He takes that grain of sand in his little beak, he flies to the moon, and he drops it there. By the strength of God -- brothers and sisters

-- the sparrow returns, and takes another grain of sand from your hand. And if years, decades, centuries and millenniums pass before that sparrow can move the grains of sand that you can hold in your hand, then how long would it take the sparrow to move each and every grain of sand on the beach? I'll tell you how long, brothers and sisters. If that tiny, little sparrow with his tiny, little wings moved each and every grain of sand from all the coastlines of every continent and island, and if that sparrow moved every grain of sand on the planet, and

if he'd moved them back and back again, not one moment of eternity would have passed for those in heaven singing the praises of the Lord, and for those in hell, brothers and sisters."

Sister Neilon caught a fat little finger on a sharp note, on cue, and stopped playing. All the children squirmed. Pot roasts baking in ovens back home were forgotten for a moment. Pastor Fleese continued, reaching for the laminated crossbeams, raising the ready-to-wear shoulders of his polyester leisure suit, like a pop-star version of Moses calling down plagues upon Egypt.

Pastor Fleese stood silently, until every soul was squirming in his pew. And Pastor Fleese continued, crying, rasping in spirit-filled agony, "Not one moment of eternity would have passed for those in heaven singing the praises of the Lord, and for those in Hell, brothers and sisters."

And -- WHACK! -- Pastor Fleese smacked his Bible on the pulpit. "If that sparrow moved every grain of sand on the planet, and if he'd moved them back and back again, not one moment of eternity would have passed for those in heaven singing the praises of The Lord, and for those in hell, brothers and sisters.

"WHACK -- 'In hell, brothers and sisters!'

"WHACK -- 'Bound up in chains.'

"WHACK -- 'Tormented day and night.'

"WHACK -- 'Their flesh being burnt . . . '

"WHACK -- 'in the lake of fire.'

"WHACK -- 'for ever, and ever, and ever.'

And then the deacons passed the collection plates, and -- WHACK -- Pastor Fleese got a closet full of leisure suits, a gold watch, a color TV and a big, white Lincoln Continental, all on the back of that little sparrow.

And then far away, getting closer, came the blow of a train's whistle. The trickle of panic in his veins had turned into a flow. There was no time to think now.

He finished his silent prayer. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever and ever.* Amen.

He wished he had a candle to light, to give his prayer a boost on its way to heaven. The old man's back was turned. The young man crossed himself. He wished he were still a Catholic, instead of a Pentecostal, so he could go to confession for what he was about to do.

The young man thought about Maya and the things she'd said to him on Friday night. He remembered the smell of the air between them. He remembered how he had amazed himself with the softness of her black hair, and the warmth of her brown skin, until she made him stop, and they sat, staring. It had been too dark to see what she meant by the look on her face. But he would see that look again, and this time he would have the rest of her.

And then he heard the roar of a freight train getting closer by the second, and its whistle blowing louder, higher. He needed a trip to the outhouse in the park.

Then he was at church again, singing another song. Backwards and then frontwards, the words appeared on a screen, scrawled in wretched letter blocks, in unsteady felt-tip pen. He whispered, "God help me!"

In the Pentecostal church of his imagination, the congregation began to sing a song that the young man would have rather forgotten.

He thought of Maya, and what she'd said. *If he did it for her, he would find the strength.*

The sound of the approaching train drowned out all the other sounds.

The old man's lips moved and he pointed to the trestle. The young man smiled and nodded. There were twenty feet between them.

This was going to be easy. He took two steps, opened his tackle box, and removed the flat container where he kept his lures, and which concealed the 38 caliber automatic that had been given to him for the job.

And then the whole world was the sound of a train's engine, and the blast of its whistle. The trestle shook. The train's freight cars clanked and rattled on the track above, and you could hear the muffled sound of a whistle blowing deep in a tunnel in the mountain, on the other side of the river.

Chapter Two

Friday before last was the third round of a bout that ended

in a knockout. Thane Thorsson was the loser. On Saturday he awoke lying on a carpeted floor. He was naked but this wasn't such a bad thing because it was June, one of the hottest on record.

He opened his eyes to find himself in a gloomy little living room, which was made to appear even smaller and gloomier by its imitation knotty-pine paneling. On the wall was a set of pictures of waifish children whose heads were necessarily big in order to accommodate their saucer-like eyes, which gave them an otherworldly, depressing look. The girl waif held a puppy who also had the eyes. Thane had seen these paintings before, and had hoped never to see them again. And there was a tapestry of the kind Thane had seen for sale at the five-and-ten-cent store. But he'd never been in the home of someone who owned one. The tapestry depicted a group of man-like dogs, smoking cigars and playing billiards.

He sat up and then he didn't care where he was, as he discovered a woman lying beside him, sleeping soundly, covered with an Afghan like the ones Thane's mother made. The Afghan failed to conceal the woman's body which was otherwise naked. The hair on her head was blonde. She looked younger than Thane.

Thane yanked off the Afghan.

Mother nature was having a good day when she made this woman's body. Thane wondered what he had done or said last night to deserve her. He couldn't resist touching her. And then he couldn't resist doing more.

She stirred. With her eyes still shut, she twisted her

lips into a grin. She squirmed and arched her back. She said, "You're the best, Slappy!"

Who the hell was Slappy? "Slappy" sounded like a cartoon character or quite the opposite, maybe one of those tattooed amphetamine dealers who hung out at The Blue Ox these days. They liked to grind their teeth, and they had names like "Tweaker," "Goofy," "Wizard" or "Slappy." Now Thane's sex drive was in park. He would have to think about this.

The bathroom was small and cluttered. In the shower hung a red negligee with white frills. A gathering of cosmetic gear surrounded the sink, which badly needed to be scrubbed.

Thane looked in the mirror. His face was swollen. The skin looked as though it had become middle-aged overnight, and his eyes looked twice their age, which was twenty six. He reminded himself of Senator Bundleweald in the photos published in The Ledger Guardian last fall, after the senator was questioned by the police following an incident involving a motel and an under-aged campaign volunteer.

Thane took a hot shower, and scrubbed off the stickiness of a sweaty night. Then he turned the water to cold, all the way, and pranced in place, dancing an impromptu native-American rain dance and making sounds to go with it. Out of the shower, he dried and combed his hair; this improved his looks, although his face was still slightly puffy. Now he reminded himself of the slick Senator Bundleweald of the campaign commercials on TV. It was an improvement of sorts. He wrapped a towel around his waist and took the several steps from the bathroom to the living

room.

There was a flash and the whir of a tiny motor. There was the blonde, already dressed. She sat on a love seat which served as a couch in her tiny living room. Holding a Polaroid camera, she removed a snapshot and waved it in the air to dry it.

Thane said, "What's up with the snapshots?"

"It's for my photo album."

She lit a cigarette and crossed her legs. The night had done nothing to damage her looks. She wore blue jeans, tapered at the ankle, and a denim-blue work shirt, unbuttoned low enough so Thane could see there was nothing between it and that which it flaunted. Over it all she wore a silver and turquoise necklace that looked like a souvenir from an Indian reservation. Her footwear was a more run-of-the-mill fetish: black leather, high heels on pink socks with frills at the ankle.

She said, "You don't remember?"

He stood dumb, trying to imagine what she was talking about. Thane was not thinking fast today. All of the drinking he'd done in the past several days had flooded his brain. His thoughts were like cargo ships drifting through a dense fog.

She said, "Do you remember my name?"

"Yes, um."

"I don't think so."

"So what is it?"

"Give me yours, first."

"Hans. Hans Hansson."

"Glad to meet you, Hans. I'm Miss America."

Like the new-age necklace and the slutty shoes, her looks and voice didn't cohere. Why was she speaking like she hated him, if she'd obviously liked him well enough to take him home and sleep with him, and do whatever else they might have done?

At first he felt foolish, like a boy, standing there wrapped in a towel. But in the foggy harbor of his hungover head, a ship pulled into dock. Upon a moment's reflection, foolish was not how he felt to be standing there, half naked, fresh from the shower, being spoken to harshly by a buxom young woman in high heels.

She couldn't have ignored it, and she didn't. "Wanna do it again?" she said, and contorted her lips into a pornographic grin.

"Sure. Yeah. Okay," he said.

"Come sit down."

He didn't hesitate. He helped her out of the necklace and blouse. On her right hand and wrist she wore rings and bracelets that matched the necklace. Her long fingernails were painted red. So were her lips.

Pausing long enough to speak, she said, "How do you want me?"

His lust emboldened him. His voice was nearly a growl. "I want you . . . like a parched forest wants the rain."

"No, you dork! I mean how do you want to do it?"

"On the floor, doggy style!"

It didn't take long before there was nothing left to do,

and they collapsed together on the carpet. He tried to cuddle with her, but she didn't want it, so he went to the bathroom and obeyed a sudden urge to vomit. Then he washed himself again. When he returned to the living room, she stood, still undressed, smoking a cigarette, waiting for something more.

He said, "Do you have a beer."

"Beer for breakfast. Jeez, you frat boys are all alike."

"I was at the college, but not in a fraternity."

"Why not?"

"Why?"

"Guys like you join a frat."

"Guys like me join the army."

She gave him a dirty look. "Try the kitchen. Bring me one, too, Mister Hans Hansson." She went to the bathroom, and ran the shower.

The kitchen was an unappetizing mess, but it gave Thane a better fix on his position. This was the land of wheat flakes, prepackaged sugar donuts and macaroni-and-cheese that comes in a cardboard box, and tastes like one. Here you cooked but you didn't clean. You dirtied all your dishes, then you moved. Joyously, Thane found a six-pack of Cascade next to a half-full jar of strawberry jam without its lid, and a quart of milk with a use-by date for last week.

He brought a couple cans of beer back to the living room and -- there was no way around it -- said he was very sorry but he must have been awfully drunk last night and couldn't remember much of anything. And for the second time that morning, he

asked her name.

Wet from the shower, she made a show of drying while he watched. She said, "That's probably not all you don't remember about last night."

Once again he wondered why she was being so rude to him, after taking him home and letting him do the things he'd done to her. He said, "Where are my clothes?"

She said, "Money first, babe."

Money? She loaned me some money to buy beer -- That must be it, he decided. "How much is it?" he said.

"Three hundred dollars for an overnight, and then another hundred for this morning."

"What did we drink?"

She said, "Oh, yeah. You owe me two eighty-nine for the beer, but let's call it an even four hundred."

The prow of a ship poked through the fog. He said, "Do you mean to tell me that you're a prostitute?"

"No," she said. "You swept me off my feet. I was enchanted by your animal magnetism, and all those fascinating stories. Of course I'm a goddamned prostitute! Do you think a woman like me would sleep with a guy like you for free?"

He said, "If I agreed to three hundred, then I was drunk and you should have known better than to take me. I don't have three hundred, let alone four hundred. Besides, I don't remember any deal."

She said, "Nice try. Why don't I call Slappy? You'll pay him if you won't pay me. Have you ever had a broken leg, Thane?"

How about two broken legs?"

From a hand-tooled leather bag, she removed a cellular phone, and pushed its buttons.

Thane said, "Okay! Damn! Let me get dressed first! Where's my clothes?"

She said, "In there," and pointed to the door beside the one to the bathroom.

As Thane went toward the door, she said, "By the way, Thane. I know where you live."

"Prove it," he said.

Her voice was soft now, as though she were speaking to a child. She said, "What did I just call you, Mister Hans Hansson?"

The ship's foghorn blew. He said, "You looked through my wallet while I was in the shower."

"Very good, Thane. A little slow, but not bad."

He said, "That's an old address."

She said, "There's no change-of-address sticker on your license."

"I haven't notified the DMV. I just moved."

"Slappy will be the judge of that. Besides, you've got a student-body card. He can find you through the college. That's easy."

"I graduated."

"I know your kind. You guys are all the same. You won't be hard to find, Thane."

He went to her bedroom and found his clothes. First, he

inspected the wallet. The money was all gone but his driver's license, bank card, library card and student identification were still there. As he dressed, he got an idea. Returning to the living room, he said, "Don't forget to tell Slappy about the twelve-gauge shotgun I keep in my closet."

The look on her face said she didn't buy it. She said, "What kind of shotgun is it?"

"Twelve gauge, I told you."

"I mean what make? What brand?"

"What do you think?"

She said, "You're bluffing."

"Slappy will just have to call my bluff, then, won't he?"

She said, "He will. You can bet on it."

"If the shotgun in my closet doesn't work, I know where to get one that does. And some of my best friends are cops."

"All of my best friends are cops."

He would have to pay her soon. You didn't want to be on the bad side of the Miller's Hole police department. He said, "I'll pay you. I've got a credit card."

"What kind of credit card?"

"American Access."

"You're lying. What's the credit limit, and the expiration date?"

"Goddamn, girl! You should have been a cop, yourself. Look! I'll go get my credit card, and come back here and we'll settle."

She said nothing.

He took her name, Brandee, as well as her address and phone number. And then there was nothing to keep him there. Doing his best not to appear too anxious to leave, he promised to return.

Outside her front door, he no longer pretended to fend off his anxiety. Not only had he spent the night in a trailer house, but he had spent the night in a trailer house guarded by a pit bull terrier, who now whined with frustration, and struggled with all his might to make his chain two feet longer so he could clamp his jaws onto one of Thane's legs. The trailer's yard was surrounded by a cyclone fence with a gate. Exiting the gate, or even stepping off the front of the stoop, would put Thane within biting distance of the terrier. Going back inside began to seem like a desirable alternative, but at last he got a better idea. He stepped off the side of the stoop, crawled behind an unkempt shrub, ran and vaulted the fence.

The trailer park was full of fences and guard dogs. Thane saw a Doberman, cool in the morning sun, happy for his short coat, sitting half-out of his dog house. Farther away from Brandee's place, Thane sympathized with a Great Dane who looked as though he wanted to be somewhere else. What godforsaken part of town was this, anyway?

Then he found a bus stop. And for the first time he could remember, Thane was glad to see a bus. And then he remembered that he had no money, nothing at all, not even bus fare. A lonely man who looked like some sort of roustabout at a carnival

offered to pay Thane's fare. Thane couldn't refuse the offer or the unspoken condition behind it: That he would have Thane's undivided attention for the rest of the long ride to downtown Miller's Hole, where Thane would use his transfer to catch another bus to the outlying neighborhood where he lived.

So Thane made the most of it, nodding politely, throwing in a word here in there to repay the kindness of this talkative stranger. And he reminded himself that everyone has a story, and wants to tell it. Thane could think clearly enough to count the days now. And his attention gradually became fixed on his hangover, which had been put on hold for three days and was justifiably angry.

Thane wondered where the days had gone, and what he had done on his drinking binge. Much of the past several days was completely erased from his memory. He could only remember parts.

And he wondered where he was going to get four hundred dollars to pay Brandee the prostitute, with a leg-breaking pimp named "Slappy," and half the police force eating out of her hand or God only knew where else, when he didn't even have the cash to repay the babbling wretch who had loaned him the fare, and who now went on and on like he was getting paid by the word. Thane hadn't been lying to Brandee about the credit card, but he had declined to mention that the card had reached its limit last month, and he had no idea how he was going to make the payment.

Chapter Three

Before college, Thane had served three years as an army infantryman, where he'd earned the entitlement to a monthly \$755.00 check every month, tax free, as long as he was enrolled full time at the college. These entitlement checks had lasted until spring term of his senior year. While Thane was at the university, the Veterans Administration had also provided him with a work-study job, at minimum wage, which was also untaxable. And since he received no parental support, and his taxable income was zero, he qualified for a grant that completely covered tuition.

He had sent out graduation invitations in late April. But the \$300, or so, that he had reaped from these invitations was gone now; he assumed that part of it had been spent on the three-day drinking binge from which he had just now begun to fully recover, after a full day and night of drinking nothing stronger than cola.

Five days ago, on June 6, 1990, Thane graduated from Mossy Stone State University, with a Bachelor of Science in engineering. Today his rent was six days past due.

But that wasn't the only reason he wanted to get to work, Monday morning. He also wanted a way to pass the time while he waited for the letter he had been expecting since fall of term of his senior year. Things would change when the letter arrived. He had faith in this. Secondly, he needed some time to figure out how to fix the Brandee-Slappy problem. Lastly, it was summer and he wanted to get outdoors.

He could build things. He could fix things, and he could work as hard as the next guy. So, on that hot Monday morning, he donned his blue jeans, army boots and a T-shirt with the crest of a prestigious engineering school back east, which he hadn't attended but wouldn't mind if you thought he had. And he got on his mountain bike and rode toward the employment division, dreaming of a job that would pay him by Friday, and a date for Friday night

At the employment division, Thane stood in line with a lot of worried men and women. Some of the men glared at each other as if only one job were up for grabs, and the one with the best glare would get it. After standing in line for nearly three quarters of an hour, Thane found himself face to face with a woman who was nothing like the kind he had hoped to meet here; and she appeared to be even more worried than the people in line, although she had a job and they didn't. She handed Thane a sheaf of papers, and pointed, sticking her finger a couple inches from his nose. She said, "You need to fill these out and then you need to get back in line." And he was overcome with a very powerful urge to slap her. But he had never slapped a woman, or a man, in his life, and he decided that this would be a bad place to start. For a moment, he toyed with the idea of calling her a bitch; but he decided against it, reminding himself why he had come.

Filling out the employment questionnaire, he wondered if he was supposed to include his experience caddying at the country club, delivering the Ledger Guardian, washing dishes and working

as a clerk at the college. Yes, he decided; that was work experience. You had to be sharp to caddy well; and you had to have tenacity, and organizational skills, to deliver a paper route and collect the subscription fees every month. Washing dishes was hard work; being a good records clerk wasn't easy. Any employer would appreciate the initiative he had taken and the determination he had shown. Yes, any employer, would look favorably upon his work experience.

The section for military experience made him feel special, and he got a kick out of writing a synopsis of all the things he had done as an army infantryman. And he had no doubt that anyone would be impressed with his military training.

A question at the end of the form requested that he check the box that most closely described his ethnic heritage. Thane noticed that the brown-skinned people got custom-made boxes like "Hispanic," "Asian" and "Pacific Islander," while all the different kinds of white people -- Germans, English, Irish, Swedes, Poles, Russian, French -- were crammed together into one box labeled, simply, "white." Thane didn't check the "white" box. Instead, he checked the box labeled "other." On the space next to it he wrote, "Anglo, Slavic, Nordic, Celtic." And then it occurred to Thane that whoever designed this form knew exactly what he or she was doing when they didn't subdivide the white race into more specific categories. For Thane, there would have been no single box he could have checked other than "white."

After completing the questionnaire, Thane waited in line

for another half an hour to be instructed -- or ordered, he felt -- to read the postings on three-by-five index cards, on a series of bulletin boards, each representing a caste of the town's system of labor.

The first board was labeled "professional." Among the listings on this board, he found two openings for jobs in engineering. The first was in the field of circuit board manufacture, but Thane didn't have the five years' experience that the job required. Typed neatly on the unlined side of an index card, the second announcement listed an opening for an engineering position at the physical plant at the college. He amused himself with the thought of returning to the college as one of the maintenance men in blue shirts. The babes would really go for that, he thought. But the last thing he wanted was to return to the college after he had just gotten out of there. Besides, he wasn't here to look for a career, but to find a job that he could start immediately. Today he needed to find something to keep him busy for a month or so, until the letter came.

At the "labor" board he stood next to a chubby person of indeterminate sex, who said, "Courthouse is lookin' for a janitorial. Didn't you ever did a janitorial?" The voice didn't make it any easier to tell what this person was.

Thane said, "Yes, I'll look into it. Thanks." And he received a dirty look before he or she waddled away, with its flesh heaving under a pair of purple, polyester pants.

He had met some very strange people since he graduated. It

would get better, he promised himself.

He took his time reading the rest of the cards on the "labor" board. A cafeteria at the federal building needed a dishwasher; of all the cards he'd read so far, this was the first that listed qualifications he had actually gotten; but he decided that washing dishes was below his dignity, now that he was a college graduate.

On the institutional yellow cloth of the bulletin board marked "skilled," Thane found qualifications that he didn't have: certification to operate a forklift; typing speed of eighty words per minute (for a job as a records clerk at the Pine County Courthouse).

Thane paused to "size up" the competition, among which was a bearded man whom Thane gave the nickname "Mister GTF" (Graduate Teaching Fellow), which is what he would have been at the college. Mister GTF stood transfixed at the bulletin board, reading through round lenses on wire frames, out-qualifying else. He wore sandals and an artsy Native-American kind of shoulder bag, out of which Foucoult stuck his bald head on the cover of a paperback. Mister GTF wants the world to know he reads Foucoult, whoever that is, Thane thought, and he tried to start a stare-down contest, but it didn't work. Mister GTF was somehow exempt from the normal give and take of the employment division. Because Mr. GTF was so sure of himself, people didn't bother him, even though he was the only latter-day hippy intellectual in a room dominated by the pickup-truck and gun-rack set.

Mr. GTF removed a thumb tack and ran off with the records-clerk posting, ignoring the small sign that read, "Please don't take the cards down." Thane thought: Rules are for people who don't read Foucoult. Thane was offended down to the spit-shine on his army boots.

There was a tribe of bearded lumberjacks in logging boots, putting years on the carpet in one afternoon. They were gathered around the bulletin board entitled "wood products." Thane didn't have to guess what was listed on this board: it would obviously hold announcements for whatever openings remained in the mills that manufactured lumber, beams, posts, plywood, particle board, doors, window frames and anything else you could make from trees, upon which the local economy once thrived.

One of the lumberjacks scanned the room, eyeballing everyone without fear of reprisal. He locked eyes with Thane, who looked away, losing the contest.

Thane remembered a verse from The Bible, which had troubled him all his life: *I would that you were hot or cold, for the lukewarm shall I spew out of my mouth.* The lumberjacks were hot, Mister GTF was cold, and he was lukewarm, Thane decided. It was time to heat things up. He had just as much right to the board as they did. So he pushed his way through the thicket of flannel that guarded the way to the "wood products" board. One inch short of six feet tall, Thane was the midget among them. He looked like one of their sons.

He felt an arm around his shoulder.

"Now here's a woodsman for you, boys," said the voice from above.

Thane liked the voice. And his scalp tingled in response to the touch of a fatherly hand on his shoulder, a sensation that was boosted by the adrenaline that had come with rubbing elbows among these monsters of the forest.

Another one said, "He looks like one of the front-office guys, if you ask me."

"No one asked you," someone said.

"Engineer, probably," another one said.

"Yeah," Thane said. His voice was nervous. "That's right. I'm an engineer."

A third lumberjack said, "So was my cousin at the big mill. He was an engineer. He had fifteen years of service. Now he's a maintenance man at the city.

"Damn good job, too," another voice said, from among them.

"Yeah, but it ain't a good job after you've been an engineer at the big mill. My uncle used to take trees and turn them into boards. Now he changes light bulbs. He ain't what he used to be. It takes its toll on a guy, to go down in the world like that."

"Wouldn't complain if I was you."

"Get into computers, son," said the man whose fatherly hand still rested on Thane's shoulder.

"Yeah, give the japs a run for their money."

There was laughter among them.

"I heard they've got an opening for an engineer, over of

the professional board," said the man with the paternal hand.

Thane said, "I saw it."

"Why not get an application?"

One of them said, "Nah, it's at Infotron. California Company. My nephew went over there. He's an engineer too. Just graduated from Oregon State. At Infotron, you gotta be Chinese and ivy league, or they won't hire you."

There was more laughter but Thane didn't like it this time. All of a sudden, he realized that he needed to go to the restroom.

"What's your father do, son? I'll bet he's got connections over at the country club," said the one with the omnipresent hand, which had suddenly gained weight.

Thane said, "I used to caddy at the country club." He ignored the question about his father.

"What's your father do, son?"

There was the question again. Thane hated that question.

Thane said, "I've got to go." And he did.

And one of them wondered aloud what the hell was the matter with him.

Chapter Four

Tuesday started the usual way. Thane showered, dressed and went straight to the mailbox. There was no letter, only a booklet of coupons that entitled him to -- among other things -- as many as half a dozen six-ounce cans of "Capn's Choice" tuna

fish for 89 cents a can, at the local FoodMart. A similar coupon booklet from the SaveMart proclaimed a "Bargain Bonanza," which included canvas work gloves for \$2.98 a pair -- limit three pair per customer -- at the "Super Summer Saver Sale." Tomorrow Thane would look for the letter again. That's how it went.

And then something happened that made Thane think he might have gotten some good luck.

"You're a little late on your June rent, Thane."

Thane turned to see Mr. Gutfreund, the landlord who also wore the cap of maintenance man, which was white with blue pin-stripes and matched his workman's overalls.

Mr. Gutfreund held a pipe wrench, and tapped it against the palm of his left hand.

Thane said, "I've been meaning to talk to you about the rent, Mister Gutfreund. I was wondering if it would be possible for you to give me some kind of a grace period, sir."

"You already had your grace period. It ended yesterday."

"Mr. Gutfreund," Thane said. "In all the years I've been here, how many times have I missed paying the rent on time?"

Mr. Gutfreund removed his cap and scratched his head. He said, "My wife does the books. You've been here how long? Two years?"

Thane said, "Four years, sir. I've been here since my freshman year Mossy Stone State. And I've paid the rent on time every month since then, except for this month."

Mr. Gutfreund pondered this for a moment. He said,

"You're out of college now, aren't you?"

"Yep."

"What are you doing for money?"

"I'm trying to get a job, just like everyone else. I was at the employment division yesterday."

Mr. Gutfreund laughed at Thane. It was the laugh of a big man at a small man, of a landlord at a renter, of a man with a pipe wrench in his hand at a man with tuna-fish coupons in his hand.

Thane felt his face flush. He said, "If you've got any better ideas, I'm all ears."

And, as it turned out, Mr. Gutfreund did have a better idea.

That afternoon, following the instructions Mr. Gutfreund had given him, Thane rode his bike north on Hornburg Road, past the city-limit sign and east on Meadowlark Drive, which was a gravel road. He rode for five minutes before he heard the approaching crunch of tires on the gravel behind him. He turned to see a pickup truck pulling a cloud of dust. The truck drove alongside him and idled its engine.

In the rear window of the truck's cab, Thane a gun rack that held a fishing pole. The driver wore a bright blue baseball cap with "Arnie's Feed & Seed" in yellow letters.

"Is there any good fishing around here," Thane said, pointing to the fishing pole.

Ignoring the usual pleasantries, the driver said. "Are you the one that Jacob sent?"

Thane said, "Jacob?"

"That's my brother."

"Oh, yeah. I didn't know Mister Gutfreund's first name, yet."

The driver laughed, just like his brother. He said, "Can you build a fence?"

"If a man can't build a fence then what can he do?"

And there was the laugh again. It was a laugh that made Thane wish he didn't have to get into the truck.

"Name's Joshua," said the driver.

Thane introduced himself.

"Come on, then! Throw 'er in the back," Joshua said, pointing to the bicycle.

Thane put his bicycle in the truck's bed and climbed into the passenger's seat. Joshua put the truck in drive, spun the tires on the gravel, and sped the truck down the gravel road.

Joshua had done a day's work or two, it appeared. He had the build of a man who might have bucked a few bales of hay in his time. His lower lip bulged with chewing tobacco, which he spit into a paper soft-drink cup from the QuickMart.

Joshua noticed Thane was watching him. From the dashboard Joshua took his bag of chewing tobacco. "Want some?" he said.

"No thanks," Thane said. "One bad habit's enough."

"What was that?"

"Cigarettes," Thane said, patting his shirt pocket where he kept them.

"Punk," said Joshua, under his breath.

"What was that?" Thane said.

"I said I thought I smelled a skunk."

Thane said, "I don't smell it."

Joshua chuckled.

Thane said, "Maybe you're just extra sensitive, or something."

"Did you come to work or to talk?"

"I came to work. I came to talk. A little bit of this. A little bit of that. Know what I mean?"

"Boy, Jacob sure does pick some winners."

Now Thane didn't want to work for Joshua. He wanted to ask him to stop the truck right here, so he could get out and get his bicycle and go find something else to do for the day. But he kept his head. It didn't make any sense to start off with a bad attitude, especially when this job was going to keep him from getting evicted from his apartment. He would have to do his best to like Joshua and whatever else was involved in the job. The best thing he could do now was to concentrate on the job, and forget everything else. That was one of the things he'd always loved about work: It let you forget yourself.

Joshua put a couple more miles on the truck before the gravel ended and a field began, near the woods at the base of a hill. There sat a camping trailer between the hill and one side of a wooden fence made of new lumber. Just beyond the trailer, three horses grazed in a pasture enclosed by a barbed-wire fence. A barn sat gray and neglected near the woods. Beyond the trailer, dozens of cattle grazed in a field whose barbed

wire fence extended for hundreds of yards.

The driver stopped the truck, killed the engine, got out and slammed the door. "Let's go!" he said. They walked to the front of the truck.

Joshua said, "See those horses over there?"

"Yes sir."

"They're going in this pasture, once we get the fence built."

"You live here?" Thane said.

Without responding, Joshua bowed his head and walked to the back of the truck, and Thane took this to mean that the hired hand should speak when spoken to. He would just have to do less talking. That's all there was to it.

Thane took his bike from the back of the truck while Joshua unloaded a post-hole digger, a fat ball of string and a plastic jug filled with water. Joshua said, "Go ahead and start digging the holes," and handed Thane a tape measure. "I'll be back later."

"Yes sir."

"Name's Joshua."

"Right, Joshua."

"Know how to dig a post hole?"

"I'll figure it out."

"You go to Mossy Stone?"

The ivy-league T-shirt hadn't fooled Joshua. Thane said, "Four years' worth."

This was a very funny answer, one would have guessed from

the way Joshua laughed.

Thane said, "Got my degree in engineering."

Joshua said, "Good, good. That's very good. We'll see if you can engineer a fence."

Joshua climbed into the truck's cab, gunned the engine, spun up a cloud of dust and drove away.

Digging fence-post holes looked easy, but it wasn't. Before long, Thane was thirsty, and glad for the water, which tasted as if it had come from a rubber hose.

At first Thane worked too fast and didn't get much done. After a while, his stomach began to growl. He hadn't brought a lunch, but he wanted a lunch break, so he could at least sit in the shade for a while. But he soon discovered that working was the best way to pass the time, and to keep his mind off eating.

After a while, Joshua returned. He got out of the truck carrying a shopping bag, which he gave to Thane. "From the wife," Joshua said. Thane salivated in anticipation of a homemade lunch.

But the boss wanted to talk shop before Thane had a go at the contents of the shopping bag. Joshua inspected the post holes and spoke about the work Thane had done so far. "You're trying too hard. Let the tool do the job it was made to do; just guide it along. You're trying to dig too fast. You've got to dig at the speed that the ground wants to be dug."

Thane wondered how Joshua thought he knew this. Then he realized that the old man had probably built a lot of fences in his life, and knew about beginner's mistakes.

Joshua drove off, again. Thane walked to the forest, sat under a tree, and opened the brown paper bag. The food smelled like Sunday dinner. He removed a hot bundle, wrapped in aluminum foil, and found a thigh and a breast of fried chicken. There were two hot muffins to go with it, and pats of butter in plastic wrap. There was also bean salad and chocolate pudding. And after eating it all, he began to feel sleepy, which brought him to the meal's last course: a small thermos full of coffee.

When he returned to work, he was too tired to do things the hard way. He took Joshua's advice, and the digging went smoother. Now he didn't waste his energy. He dug at the speed that the ground wanted to be dug. The afternoon passed quickly.

Then Joshua returned, and drove Thane and his bike to the main road.

"You all right?" Joshua said.

"So far, so good," Thane said.

"Can I count on you for tomorrow?"

"Yes sir."

"I'll meet you right here at Eight O'clock sharp."

"I'll be here."

"You ain't going to flake out on me, are you?"

Now it was Thane's turn to laugh. He said, "I'll be back tomorrow to see if your wife is going to make me another one of those lunches. You can tell her I said so."

Joshua said, "Thank you very much, Thane. She'll be glad to hear it. I try to give her a compliment, but she says I'll eat anything, and it don't count coming from me." And Thane

wondered why Joshua had become so articulate, all of a sudden. Maybe he opened up a can of talk juice for his lunch.

Tuesday morning, Thane woke to the sting of sunburn, and ache in the muscles of his arms and shoulders. The bottom of his left foot was sore from stomping on the post-hole digger. And his hands were blistered. On the way out, Thane took a detour and stopped at the SaveMart where he spent \$2.98 of his dwindling cash on a pair of the canvas work gloves that had been advertised in the "Super Summer Saver" catalog. He wondered if Joshua would think he was a punk for wearing them. Thane didn't want to be a punk; but more than this he didn't want to feel his bare hands against the wooden handle of the post-hole digger.

When he got back to Joshua's ranch and started digging again, his hands hurt even with the gloves on. But he forgot all about the sunburn and the aching shoulders and arms. And after a while he didn't notice the pain in his hands either.

In the afternoon he had another one of Mrs. Gutfreund's lunches: a hot meatloaf sandwich on home-baked bread, coleslaw and jello salad. Thane ate ravenously, much faster than the food wanted to be eaten. Then he sipped the coffee and stared at the hills in the distance, with their brown spots where the timber had been cleared.

On Wednesday the digging was done. (And the gloves from Save Mart had holes in their palms, which rendered them useless.) On Thursday and Friday, Thane and Joshua stood the posts and hammered the slats into place. Thane struggled to keep up with Joshua, who was eager to finish the fence. Thane

wondered how an old man could do so much work. On Friday morning, they stood and admired their creation: a brand-new corral fence. Thane felt like a capable man who could "hold his own" in the "real world" that they'd talked so much about last year at Mossy Stone State. And he had something to show for the work he'd done all week.

Joshua might have said nothing all afternoon, but Thane couldn't stand the silence between them.

Sappy with pride, Thane said, "I think they'll like it."

"What's that?" said Joshua.

"The horses, sir. I think they'll like their new home."

Not given to sappiness, Joshua said, "Sounds like you know something about horses."

"Yeah. I know a thing or two about them."

Joshua nodded and was quiet again. You could always count on Joshua to be quiet sooner or later, Thane thought. And after they'd just stood there silently for a few more minutes, another truck arrived with two ranch hands, capped and booted like their boss. And like their boss, they chewed tobacco and spit like major-league baseball players. Thane was the rookie on the team.

As the two young men climbed out of the cab of their truck, and approached him, Thane got a memory flash of a fight in the parking lot at a roadhouse in Laredo, where he had drunk a quantity of Tequila and some Mexicans had played a game of pinata with Thane as the donkey. Now in Thane's stomach and legs, and all the muscles that counted, he felt like Laredo all

over again. The memory was so strong he could nearly taste the dust of it. He felt the familiar urge to bolt, followed almost immediately by the even stronger urge to stand and take what was coming.

For one reason or other, Thane decided, his defensive response was too sensitive today. These guys were on his side. Thane assumed he was about to partake in some kind of a breaking-in ceremony for the new guy. This didn't bother him. He'd been the new guy before and he knew the routine. And if these guys were here for reinforcement when Joshua told Thane he wouldn't be getting paid today, Thane was familiar with that routine, too, from a job he'd done during the summer between his separation from the army and his first year at college. But Thane doubted that old Joshua was the type to deprive a workman of his wages.

Joshua said, "Meet my sons, Thane. This here's Jeremiah, and this is Jonathan."

"How ya' doin', guys?" said Thane, and grappled grips with them. And then they all stood there like a hunting party.

Thane said, "All right, guys. Bring it on!"

"What's that?" said Jeremiah.

"The next job. Let's get it done."

Jonathan spit on the ground and said, "You know how to ride a horse?"

Thane would have answered yes on the grounds of a rent-a-horse at summer camp where Thane and his friends had ridden in a plodding train of trail horses, nose to rear-end, through a path

in the woods, but Joshua answered for him. He laid his hand on Thane's shoulder, and said, "Sure he knows how to ride a horse. Thane here's a buckaroo from way back. Ain't that right, Thane?"

"I wouldn't say a buckaroo, exactly."

Jeremiah and Jonathan went to the barbed-wire corral near the trailer and saddled one of Joshua's horses. The horse was an Appaloosa stallion who looked like he belonged in a cowboy film underneath an Indian brave on the warpath. "A thing or two" was, indeed, all he knew about horses. For example, he knew that the horse from summer camp hadn't pranced around with its tail erect. He also knew that the one at camp had been fatter, less energetic than this one, who liked to jerk his head and charge at the fence, ready to jump at any time. No, this horse was nothing like the eight-dollar-a-day one that Thane had ridden at summer camp.

For Joshua and the boys, Friday was more fun than the state fair. The horse had a pretty good time too, pretending he was the bucking bronco at a Rodeo.

In Texas, Thane had rode the bucking bull at a roadhouse called "Willie's." Now Thane tried to remember all the tricks he'd learned there. All the tricks he'd learned at Willie's had worked fine on a mechanical bull, but they weren't much use on a real-live stallion. Riding Joshua's Appaloosa was a whole different experience from the bucking bull at Willie's.

First of all, the bucking bull had not seemed so angry at having a fully-grown man on its back. Secondly, its mechanism

could be sped up or slowed down depending on the experience of the rider or the whim of the man at the controls. (Thane had stayed on through the high end of the tenderfoot level, between dude and roughrider, several notches below buckaroo. And then he had been thrown and landed on the mats.) But the Appaloosa's controls were out of order, stuck on buckaroo. The mechanical bull had only known one tune, which it could play fast or slow in several different keys, but this horse was a jazz musician, accomplished at the art of improvisation. Lastly, the floor underneath the bucking bull had been covered with foam-rubber mats. But the pasture in which Thane now laid was covered with horse manure, which looked soft but was hard when he landed on it.

If this had been a rodeo, Thane would have finished last. The stallion threw Thane and trotted around the barbed-wire corral, jerking his head as though he were pleased with himself. Something about the horse's gloating, and the horse manure in his face, made Thane hate the horse. And the hatred gave him courage. Picking himself up, he got back in the saddle again and again and again. And by virtue of the fact that nothing was broken and he could still climb on and get kicked off again, Thane at last rode the horse into the corral that he and Joshua had built, and his audience of three applauded him. And he didn't hate the horse anymore. They were like old friends now.

Joshua and the boys slapped him on the back and told him he was all right. And coming from them, "all right" sounded like a very good thing to be.

Then they drove him to the main house, where they washed with a hose in the back yard. Jonathan, who was about Thane's size, loaned him a clean pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He said his mother would wash the dirty ones, and that Thane could get them next week. He was returning, wasn't he? Of course he was, if they wanted him, Thane told them. And then Joshua handed him a brand-new cap with "Arnie's Feed & Seed," like theirs. Thane was one of them now, and there was beer to toast their newfound comradery. Thane had been sober for five full days now; but once he drank a beer, the drinking blood was roused in him again and he had a couple more cans, as they all sat at a picnic table in the back yard. Sitting with his back to the house, Thane didn't get a good look at it, but he noticed that all the curtains were drawn and the place appeared to shut and vacated, although the grounds were well groomed.

And when they had finished a twelve pack of beer between the four of them, the party was over. Although it had already been asked and answered, Joshua asked if Thane could return next week. Thane didn't have any plans, so he promised to return. Had Thane ever whitewashed a fence? Thane told him that it didn't take any special talent to whitewash a fence. Joshua said he wanted to get it done before it rained. Then he would have plenty of time, Thane said. It wasn't supposed to rain for a while.

Once again, Joshua drove Thane and his bike to the junction of the main road and the gravel. Then Joshua gave Thane \$70 in cash.

Was this what you got for a week's work? "Minimum wage?"
Thane said.

"That's right."

Thane did the math: Thirty two hours at \$3.75 an hour was -
- thirty times three was ninety, plus two times three was 6;
that made ninety six plus seventy-five cents times ten was seven
fifty, times three was \$22.50, plus two times seventy-five cents
was one fifty, so twenty four plus ninety six was \$120. Thane
said, "Thirty two hours at minimum wage is \$120."

Joshua said, "Then there's taxes, son."

"Fifty dollars worth?" Thane did some more math. Fifty
divided by 120 was -- Twelve went into fifty four times. Thane
said, "Do you mean to tell me, Joshua, that you took out more
than forty percent of my pay in taxes?"

Joshua said, "I had to charge you for the food."

"What do you mean you 'had to' charge me?"

"I couldn't let you have all that food for free, could I?"

"No. Of course not," Thane said. "But you could have told
me before you charged me for it. I just assumed it was part of
the deal."

"If you want to assume something like that, it ain't my
fault. I can't afford to give away food."

Thane said, "Forget the food, then, but I don't know if I
like getting paid in cash. Shouldn't I get a statement?"

"Look, son! Do you want to be a bookkeeper or a buckaroo?"

"I want to be a man who gets an earnings statement with his
pay, to make sure his employer don't deduct too much money by

mistake."

Joshua shut off the ignition, killing the truck's engine. He cracked the knuckles of his rancher's hands. He glared at Thane and grinned, taking great pleasure in having the upper hand.

Thane thought: His brother gets a kick out of having you over a barrel, too. This must be a family thing. Winning the stare-down contest was impossible, so Thane felt like he had to say something. He said, "It ain't asking for too much to get an earnings statement with my wages, so I can check the math. Know what I mean?"

"There ain't nothing wrong with my math."

"I didn't say there was, but . . . "

"They sure didn't teach you much at that college, son. Goddammit now, I try to do you a favor, give you a job, feed you, stand you a few beers, and you're complaining about it. Shoot, son! What's the world coming to?"

"Thanks for the beer. You charged me for the food, so I won't thank you for that, except to say it was a pretty good bargain at five dollars a day. But there's one thing I want you to be clear about, sir. By giving me a job, you weren't doing me a favor. You were hiring me. It's an agreement. I give you a week's work and you give me some money for it. It's an exchange, not a favor."

Joshua said, "Hiring you is a favor, because my brother said you needed some help."

"Needed help? I told him I was looking for a job to tie me

over. I would've found something at the employment division. I only went there one time. I would've gone back."

Joshua said, "There's a hundred guys I could've hired who are twice your size, who could've finished the fence in a day, instead of sitting out there sipping coffee in the shade, taking their time, making sure the job would last a week."

Thane wondered how Joshua knew that Thane had taken his time drinking coffee one day. Someone must have been in the old camping trailer, watching him. Thane said, "This is absurd."

"The hell it is. You seen what it's like at the employment division. And all them boys got families to feed, too."

Thane thought of informing Joshua about the law that said he couldn't discriminate based on marital status; but he decided that this didn't make any difference because Joshua had given him the job, and no discrimination had taken place. And since this job was almost certainly off the books, what difference did any law make, where this job was concerned? You can't argue with this, Thane decided.

Joshua was the winner and he knew it. He loved it. He said, "Will I see you next week?"

"Yeah, sure. But I'll bring my own lunch."

Joshua laughed at him. He said, "Same time Monday morning. Okay, son?"

"Yes sir. I'll see you then."

On the way home, Thane deposited \$40 in the bank, and kept \$30 for himself.

Back at his apartment, Thane checked the mail, which held

nothing but the usual junk mail, and a telephone bill for \$18.95. There was no letter.

Thane showered and donned his good jeans and belt, his brown cowboy boots, which he kept shined, and a white oxford shirt that he had pressed one night out of boredom.

Then he took care of the utility bills: \$14.37 for electric, \$6.29 for gas, plus \$18.95 for the phone bill came to \$39.61. And with the money left over, he was nearly \$180 short of the \$210 he owed the landlord for June's rent, and June was halfway gone. At the rate he was going, he would be able to pay his rent in a month, if he didn't eat. By that time, rent would be due for July. And this was to say nothing of Brandee and Slappy and the inevitable bill for the recently maxed-out credit card with which he had promised to pay for Brandee's services.

But this was Friday night. And at last he told himself that he shouldn't be thinking about these things on Friday night. He thought about The Blue Ox, and remembered that he owed money there. And because he was a man of his word, he couldn't very well have neglected to pay it. Besides, what difference did it make if he had a couple more glasses of beer while he was at it? At eighty-five cents a glass, he wouldn't go broke having a few glasses of beer.

After all, he had been sober for a week and that was long enough. He owed it to himself to drink some beer. Why not? It wouldn't be like last time when he had been drinking on an empty stomach. This time he had eaten well, all week long. And now he had money, so he would eat again tomorrow. He wouldn't let

himself go on a binge like he'd done last week. That was commencement week and all the graduates went on a binge. This week would be different.

Thane went to The Blue Ox and paid his tab which came to \$25.75. He had \$4.25 in his pocket, a clean shirt on his back, a beer on the bar and a job lined up for next week. And he had nothing to worry about, except Brandee and Slappy, who seemed far away now. And the letter. The letter would come. Sure it would. As he sipped his beer, Thane told himself that every passing day increased the likelihood that he would go to the mail box and find the letter he'd been waiting for. Yes, in any greater number of days, the odds were better that the man would have found time to sit down and write a letter. These odds were considerably worse where a lesser number of days were concerned, so the reverse must also be true. Every day the odds improve that I'll get the letter. That's right.

And for a while Thane found some comfort with these thoughts and the unthreatening gloom of the tavern. Then came Gerry, and comfort would have to wait for another night.

Chapter Five

Rachel Thorsson sat at her kitchen table with a notebook, several sharpened pencils and a cup of coffee. She thought: Thane will never get the letter he was waiting for, the one from his father, but he will get this one, sooner or later.

Dear Thane: she wrote. *Your father was a jack of all*

trades. That's what he called himself.

She remembered the song that the hippy kids used to play on the jukebox at the corner drugstore, back in New York. *Papa Was a Rollin' Stone. Wherever he laid his hat was his home. And when he died, all he left us was alone.*

She began to erase the words "your father," which caused the thin-legged table to wobble and made her coffee slosh over the edge of its mug. So she ripped out the page, tore it in half and in half again, and set it neatly aside. After cleaning up the spilt coffee, she resumed writing, on a clean sheet of paper.

Dear Thane: she wrote again. I've told you this a dozen times and you still don't believe it, but let me tell you one last time: I don't know what your father did. He went out, sometimes early, sometimes late. He wore a suit. Sometimes there was money, sometimes there wasn't. He didn't like to discuss it.

Was this going too straight to the heart of the matter, she wondered; would some preliminaries be in order?

Your father was a war hero. This I've said before, too, Thane. She thought: What kind of a name is "Thane"? I'll never get used to it. It sounds like something you would name your German Shepherd.

It was your father's idea to name you "Thane," because it had something to do with being a good soldier. I wanted "William." Sam wanted "Thane." And, with me, Sam always got his way. Always.

You've asked, a dozen times, what medals he won, and I know you're going to say, again, that if he was a war hero then he won medals. And if he won medals, then I would know about it. But I only know what he told me, and he said he was a war hero, and he fought in Korea. I didn't have any reason to doubt him. Lots of guys were war heroes in those days.

This wasn't going to be an easy job, she decided. She was already tired. All of a sudden she got angry, and took it out on the page. If you were smart, you would let it go. There's nothing about this story that's going to make your life any better. Why do you think I've been vague about it for all these years? It was my way of telling you that you would be better off not hearing it. But since you've convinced yourself that you absolutely must hear this before you can get on with life, then here it is. Here's the part I didn't tell you.

"Okay," said Rachel. "You asked for it."

We met on the Staten Island Ferry. I had bought a new scarf on the day I met your father. And I wanted to go take a ride the Staten Island Ferry.

Details. Thane always wanted the details.

The scarf was black silk with a paisley design in turquoise, white and red. She focused on a point far beyond the shoddy walls of her apartment, a point where she saw things clearly.

From my place in midtown, I felt like one measly, little ant, in the middle of an anthill. And I couldn't breath the air. You could never get a good view of the city. All you

could see were people out on the streets, rushing to work, rushing everywhere, and all the noises: the jackhammers, and the cars honking their horns, and everybody yelling at everyone else. When I took the ferry, I could get a view of the city. I could take it all in, all those hundreds of gray skyscrapers packed together. Standing out on the deck of that boat, I didn't feel so small anymore, and I could breath again. The air smelled as if you were out on the ocean.

Before coming downtown, I had bought the scarf at Stein Brothers, and I put it over my head because the wind was blowing so much. I was just standing there, taking in the skyline of lower Manhattan. There was your father. He just walked right up to me and said, 'That sure is a pretty scarf you're wearing, m'am.'

"I thanked him, and tried to walk away, but he followed me."

Rachel stopped writing for a moment, and took another sip of coffee.

A woman gets feelings. It was probably nothing. He was just so big and She erased it, shook the table again, and sloshed the coffee in her cup. But this time there wasn't enough coffee left to spill over the edge.

Your father said some funny things.

I asked him, "You're from somewhere else, aren't you?"

He said, "Everybody in this city is from somewhere else."

He was from everywhere, out west.

He said, "I'm going to buy one of those buildings, some

day. Which one should I buy?"

I played along and told him that Mister Klein was looking for a buyer.

"Klein," he said. "Klein, huh? Is that Jewish?"

"No, it's Chinese," I said. "What do you think?" He wasn't the quickest guy in the world. New York was too fast for him, always. Imagine one of those car races they show on the sports channel. Then imagine Charlie, from next door, driving his old station wagon in one of those races, and that was your father back east. Your father was out of his league in New York City, Thane.

I told your father that Mr. Klein was the owner of the grocery store on the corner, by my apartment. He had a good laugh over that, which I thought was very rude. I wanted to get away from him, so I excused myself and went back inside where there were plenty of other people. He followed me. He wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. I didn't know what to say to him, so I told him all about Mister Klein and how he had come from Germany with nothing but the clothes he wore and a good overcoat from his uncle the tailor, and how he taught himself English, and worked at the corner grocery store that was owned by an old Dutchman. And when the Dutchman died, Mister Klein got a loan from some friends in the real estate business, and bought the store. And I said how Mr. Klein was smart because everyone needs the things you sell at a corner store: milk, newspapers, beer, cigarettes, chocolate, bread and cans of soup and things like that. If you stick with it and you've got a head for

business, you can make a good life for yourself with a corner store. And I told your father how everyone loved Mr. Klein. Nicest man you could ever meet, Mister Klein, and handsome too. He was built like a boxer. And I told your father all about how Mister Klein had a grandson at law school at N.Y.U.

Your father wasn't impressed. I don't know what was so funny about all this, but your father laughed like I just told the funniest joke in the world. He said, "Do you mean to tell me that all you want out of life is a corner grocery store? Wouldn't you rather have the Empire State Building than Mister Klein's store?"

And I said, "What the hell would I want with the Empire State Building. It's probably not for sale, anyway."

Your father said, "If I owned the Empire State Building, I could do all sorts of things with it."

I said, "What sorts of things?"

He said, "All sorts of things."

Your father always dreamed and his dreams were never the regular ones, like wanting to own a shop.

Rachel put down her pencil and inspected the backs of her hands. She thought: One day you're standing on the deck of the Staten Island Ferry, and then suddenly you've got old hands. She didn't try to stop herself from crying now. She picked up the pencil and sharpened it. Then she wrote some more. All sorts of things. That was all your father could say. He was into everything. Everything and not much of anything.

The ferry stopped at Staten Island, and he wanted to take

me to lunch. I told him that I was going to take the ferry back to Manhattan and go uptown; he said he would be happy to take me uptown in a cab; but first he wanted to take me to lunch on Staten Island. No one had ever been that aggressive with me, and I didn't know how to respond. And even though he annoyed me, there was something flattering about the way he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. He was all man; sometimes a girl can fall for that. Maybe I was crazy. He took me to lunch at a little Italian place that had red and white checked tablecloths and candles in chianti bottles. They're all the same place.

Rachel took a sip of coffee. It was lukewarm. She looked at the backs of her hands, again, as though they were strange to her. And then she began to rub the legs of her slacks, as if her hands were covered with something bad that she wanted to get off of them.

Then she couldn't sit still any more. She looked at a portrait on the wall, one of Thane in his army uniform.

She couldn't write the next part, so she spoke it. "He wasn't right, and I knew it," she yelled at the portrait. "But I was lonely and he knew it. He wouldn't leave me alone. And I forgot to tell you that he was big and he was handsome and he reminded me of one of those cowboys in the movies. He was no good! He was trouble and I knew it, but if a girl didn't like a little trouble, she wouldn't be living all alone in Manhattan. A young woman can do some crazy things when she's all alone in a big city. Even your mother can feel this way, Thane."

Then she noticed how dirty the apartment had gotten since

last week's cleaning. And she decided that she should clean the apartment again before she finished the letter.

Chapter Six

Once upon a time someone had bought a few boxes of foot-square mirror tiles flecked with veins of imitation gold, and stuck them on the wall behind the bar. In this "mirror" Thane could see people come and go through the tavern's front door. He could "size up" the men and "check out" the women, most of whom looked like the kind you'd see at a roller derby. Then Thane saw someone he didn't want to see, and prepared for the night of peaceless drinking that would follow Gerry's arrival as sure as Mark follows Matthew.

Thane remembered the day he had befriended Gerry, when Gerry was a stranger. Thane couldn't forget that day. It was a week before last Christmas, and the tavern was thriving with a crowd who had come for lunch and decided not to go back to work. The daytime crowd at The Blue Ox seemed to have grown in inverse proportion to the number of shopping days left until Christmas. Drunkenness was forgiven as the town's respectable businessmen went slumming in the downtown tavern. They arrived in suited pairs like Mormon missionaries. They spent crisp twenties, straight from the teller machine, to buy their way into the comforting gloom that was the natural habitat to most of the regulars, year round. In the off season, the regular crowd dressed like slobs and were rude to strangers. But as Christmas

approached, the worst of the usual riff raff shaved, wore buttoned-down shirts and spoke politely to the outsiders. A couple of them even got out their old neckties, which was a sorry sight to behold. You might have noticed that the regulars' holiday cheer was nothing but a ploy for cadging free drinks from the monied men among the holiday crowd. But if you were sharp enough to notice such things, then you were doing a poor job of cadging free drinks for yourself. Lawyer and lawbreaker, banker and beggar banded together to fight the common foe: the loneliness that lurked in the darkness of the season outside the doors of the tavern, in the sober world.

In the center of the tavern was an octagonal table that sat eight comfortably, or twice that many drunkenly, as it did on the day that Thane met Gerry. The octagonal table was the place of least dishonor at The Blue Ox. Manuel McGuff, attorney at law and football aficionado, half Mexican, half Irish, all American, was debating with Artelious Washington, former offensive tackle at Mossy Stone State. "Arty" and "Manny" were arguing about the offensive line of Mossy Stone State's football team. McGuff was from Texas and missed no opportunity to make insulting remarks about football teams from anywhere else. "Arty" wanted to break both of McGuff's legs, and didn't mind saying so. McGuff had gotten Arty's goat so expertly that Arty didn't even know it was gone.

That afternoon, Thane was playing liar's poker with Brandon Cope. The year before, Brandon had graduated with a degree in fine arts from O'Neill, a college up north, which had been

founded for the teaching of Marxism but had turned into a popular place for rich liberals to send their children. When the weather was good, Brandon worked as a roofer because it was all he could get, or to purge himself of decadent, bourgeois ideals, depending on how drunk he was when you asked him what he did. Taking Brandon's money at liar's poker was easier than taking a copy of Watchtower from a Jehovah's Witness on the downtown mall. Before long, Brandon was broke but it didn't matter as far as drinking was concerned. As soon as he finished a beer there was another one from God-knew whom. Brandon would smile, hoist his glass and say, "Thank you very much. Merry Christmas!" A glass or two would rise in a halfhearted return of the toast, but the rest of the table ignored him.

Into that scene of holiday cheer Gerry walked, and sat at the table. He wasn't a businessman. He was dressed like a regular, but not one whom Thane recognized. Apparently, no one else recognized him either because they all ignored him until he walked to the bar and rang the bell, buying a round of drinks for everyone in the place. Alex the bartender came under an attack of orders, and his hands became a blur of bottles and glasses and pulls of the tap, as if he had to serve everyone in five minutes or the deal was off.

Thane amused himself with the arithmetic of the occasion. He counted forty six people in the tavern. If half of them -- the polite half, of which he was one -- ordered beer, that would come to \$19.55. The greedy half got their whiskey or vodka at about three dollars a pop, which came to \$69, for a total of

\$88.50. The stranger wasn't broke. That much was certain.

And it came to pass that Thane met the stranger. "Are you rich or is this just a Christmas thing?" Thane asked.

And it happened that Gerry, which was how he had introduced himself, had gotten a reason for his holiday cheer. One of his lottery tickets had paid off in a prize of one thousand dollars.

Somewhere along the line that day, Gerry and Thane got very drunk, along with everyone else. Thane asked what Gerry did for a living and Gerry poured out his heart to Thane. Gerry did some of this and some of that, but that wasn't as bad as everyone thought; his father had been the same way, God rest his soul, and there had been plenty of people to say good things about his dad. What had Gerry done lately? Most recently, Gerry had done some work for the county, but that assignment was finished. What sort of work was it that Gerry had done for the county? It had been maintenance work mostly. And at last they had something in common. Thane had done some maintenance work too, in the summer when he wasn't at the college.

Gerry said he played the lottery a lot. He had a system that was nearly ready to pay off. He was going to win the lotsa-bucks lottery jackpot: sixteen million dollars. Then he'd retire. He'd buy a house on the Whiskey River. He'd hunt. He'd fish. He'd chop wood for the fireplace. He'd brew his own beer, and he'd drink it. Heck, he might even buy The Blue Ox.

In the spirit of the season and all the free drinks, there had been a kinship between Thane and Gerry. Thane asked if Gerry had made plans for Christmas dinner.

Not yet, he hadn't.

Well, it just-so happened that Thane's mother was cooking a turkey which would certainly be big enough for the three of them. Besides, she wanted Thane to bring a friend. Would Gerry like to join Thane and his mother for Christmas dinner? Of course he would.

On Christmas day, Thane's mother stoked her blood pressure as she worried over the mashed potatoes and gravy and anxiously rearranged the table's settings, bowls of pickles, black and green olives, cranberry sauce, and a plate of celery stalks stuffed with cream cheese, blossoming with hand-carved radish roses.

Gerry arrived with a case of beer.

And lo and behold he was a "brother in Christ." Mrs. Thorsson knew him from church. They got along like old friends. And Gerry spoke words of praise for Pastor Fleese, "the shepherd of their flock."

Gerry must have been a newcomer to the church, as well as to the tavern, Thane thought. Years ago Thane had stopped attending regular services at the Miller's Hole Fellowship of God, but he had accompanied his mother on the Easter of his junior year at college, and he didn't recall seeing Gerry, who would have been hard to miss.

By the time they began to eat, Thane knew he had made a mistake. Mrs. Thorsson didn't seem to mind the big man's bad manners, but Thane minded for her. His mother had spent all of Christmas Eve and morning to make sure that every last radish-

rose petal was put in its place. Now their guest noisily gorged himself on turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, like a polar bear with a freshly-caught salmon. And he guzzled his beer straight from the can, although Mrs. Thorsson had set him a beer glass. By the time they finished eating, Thane forgot it was Christmas.

Since then, few Sundays passed without Gerry to incant the blessing over dinner before pouncing on it. Afterwards he always took a nap, snoring with his head on one arm of the couch and his boots on the other. And Thane loathed himself for having been drunk enough to invite Gerry into their lives. And ruining Thane's Sundays wasn't enough. Gerry also became a regular at the tavern. And when the two of them were at the tavern, there wasn't a moment's peace for Thane. The old man didn't even have to say a word to put tension in the air between them.

Now in the chintzy mirror behind the bar, Thane watched the approach of the man who had ruined his Christmas and never-ending Sunday dinners and nights at the bar. Their eyes met in the mirror and Thane looked away. He focused on his glass of beer, and hoped that Gerry hadn't really noticed him. But it was too late for that.

Chapter Seven

Imagine a cowboy like the ones in the advertisements for cigarettes. Now imagine one of those cowboys after his horse

had just rode off into the sunset without him. That was Gerry. He had the urgent demeanor of a man who had grown old without having done the things he was supposed to have done in his youth. He had the misery of an old man's paunch and wrinkles, worn out parts and a heart and lungs that had done their best work a couple of decades ago. Life was a stampede that had trampled him.

Gerry ignored Thane for a moment, and turned his attention to the bartender. "Alex," he yelled.

"You ain't got to yell, Gerry," Alex said. "I'm right here." Alex had come from Greece. But he'd fought for America, and had been a flag-waver ever since. On his right arm just below the sleeve of his pressed, white shirt, he had a tattoo in Latin: *Semper Fidelis*, always faithful, and that's what he was.

"Give me some quarters!" Gerry said, and handed Alex a five. Alex flicked five-dollars' worth of quarters from a coin dispenser and dumped them into Gerry's hungry hand.

A sign above the slot machines read, "These machines are for amusement only," which was the official truth. In theory, the machines paid off in points. If you started with ten dollars -- 40 points -- and you worked your way up to 100 you would have 60 more tries than when you started. But if you were one of the tavern's *cognoscenti*, you could casually call Alex to come witness your score; and he would discreetly pass you fifteen more dollars than you started with, plus your original ten.

Once Gerry spent \$100 to win \$25, and proceeded to

celebrate like a wide receiver who had just caught a touchdown pass in the Superbowl. The slot machines were not for the mathematically minded.

Gerry sat on a stool in front of a machine and fed a handful of quarters into the slot. He pulled the handle and conjured up an unlucky combination of bell, bar, cherry and grapes. "Come on you son of a bitch!" he said, and his five was quickly gone.

Gerry got another beer, paid with a ten, and took his change in quarters. One quarter at a time, he brought the machine's point-display from "00" to "37." A couple times, he got some of the pictures to match and brought the score to 58.

Thane said, "Why don't you leave it there? You've got twenty-five cents more than you started with. You'll be a net winner for the day."

Ignoring Thane, Gerry pulled the handle of the slot machine, again and again. The machine teased him with a two-of-a-kind, a bar of gold, and a score that climbed before dropping again. Then he pulled the handle as many times as it took to ensure that his nine dollars and twenty-five cents were securely locked in the coin box, to stay. Then he decided that he shouldn't have done this. Having voluntarily thrown away fifteen dollars in less than fifteen minutes, Gerry blamed the machine. "God damn it, you piece of junk! I oughtta bash your freakin' brains in!" Gerry said as he shook the machine.

In minutes Thane saw Gerry lose more money than he could earn in a couple of hours. And this was only the gambling that

Thane had witnessed. How far had it gone? The machines drove men to bankruptcy; there was a big story about it last Sunday in the Ledger Guardian. At the state capitol, legislators talked about legalizing these slot machines that had cropped up in taverns all over the state in the past several years. There was talk of regulating the machines, putting bad money to good use. An editorial last Sunday had argued that the machines weren't the problem. Stupid people were the problem. Smart men stayed away from the machines. The smart man knows that a slot machine is a one-sided deal, and you're on the wrong side of it. But as long as men are stupid, you would have the machines. Society can't protect stupid people from themselves. Thane had thought about writing a letter to the editor, informing him that nobody had suggested that society should protect stupid men from themselves. But society should protect stupid men's families from the bad karma that came when daddy left the grocery money at the tavern every week. And society could revoke the liquor license of a tavern that ran slot machines "for amusement only."

Now Thane watched Gerry, on the outside of the money world, trying to bang his way in. He'll never get there, Thane thought as he watched Gerry manhandle the machine.

Alex said, "You lost your money fair and square, Gerry. It ain't the machine's fault."

Approaching the bar, Gerry said, "Alex! bring me a Blue Ox special, please! I'm starved."

Alex saluted Gerry. "Right away, sir!" He turned to Thane. "And you, my friend?"

Thane said, "Nothing for me, Alex. It only ruins the drink."

Alex said, "You should eat."

"I know, Alex."

Alex said, "Special tonight, for my regulars. Two hamburgers for the price of one, but don't tell anyone else. If you don't want to eat it now, you can take it home. All right?"

"You're a good man, Alex. How'd you end up with all of us?"

Alex ignored this. He picked up a short pencil, and wrote on a notepad. Then he tore off a sheet and took it to the window at the end of the bar, beyond which was the diner, next door.

"Order in!" Alex said, and clipped the paper to a clothespin hanging on a piece of twine, which traversed the top of the three-foot square window. Thane and Gerry both kept quiet, staring at the bottles behind the bar, taking sips of beer, staring again, taking more sips. And after a couple glasses of this, Alex set a plate in front of each of them. On each plate, lettuce, tomato and onion stood aside for a huge ground beef patty, char-lined from the grill, on an oversized bun with its top cocked to the side like a commando's beret. The remaining space on each plate was overrun with french fries, shiny and hot from the boiling oil. Alex set a bottle of ketchup between them, and Gerry grabbed it before Thane had a chance. This was no surprise; Thane had lost the ketchup grab at more than one Sunday dinner. Breaking bread became a fight

when Gerry was at the table.

Gerry unscrewed the cap from the sticky bottleneck, and poured a glob of ketchup on his plate. He jabbed a handful of fries into the ketchup, stuffed them into his mouth, and chewed ravenously. Gerry's face went blank, as though his brain lacked the capacity to simultaneously eat and look alert. Thane had little appetite, but ate anyway; after all, it was free, and for a little while it gave him a good excuse not to speak to Gerry.

Having finished off his french fries, Gerry poured ketchup on the bottom half of his hamburger bun, topped it with lettuce, tomato and onion, put the hamburger back together, and bit off a quarter of it, which was an impressive feat.

That's when Brandon Cope appeared out of the gloom. He said, "Alex. Another five-dollars' worth. This time I'm gettin' the straight flush."

"Yes sir," said Alex, and exchanged the five-dollar bill for twenty quarters."

"You're a bum, Thorsson," Brandon said. "Get a job!"

"I got one."

"Doin' what?"

"Buildin' fences?"

"Good man."

"Later."

"See ya."

Thane thought: Thanks a lot, Brandon. You just gave my enemy the opening he's been waiting for.

As if he had read Thane's mind, Gerry said, "Building

fences, huh?"

"That's right."

Gerry stopped chewing and looked at Thane, surprised.

"Good for you," he said. "Pay good?"

"Food was good. I ate hot meals every day, but he charged me for them."

"How much did he charge you?"

"Five bucks a day."

Gerry said, "That's not a bad price for a hot meal these days, but he's not supposed to do that. It's against the law."

Thane said, "I was wondering about that."

"So what did you make."

"I made a fence. Broke a horse."

"No, I mean what did you get paid for the week?"

"Seventy dollars, after taxes and meals."

"You can't live on that."

"It's something to pass the time until I get the letter from my father," Thane said. "As far as the money goes, I just keep thinking about that scripture Pastor Fleese used to read to us all the time."

"Which one was that?"

"Consider the sparrows, for they sow not neither do they spin, yet their heavenly father provides for them."

"That's ravens," said Gerry.

"Ravens?"

"Yeah, it's 'consider the ravens,' not 'consider the sparrows.'"

Thane said, "Nah, it's sparrows. I'm sure of it."

"You may be sure of it, but it ain't sparrows. It's ravens. Consider the ravens."

"It's sparrows, or your name ain't Gerry."

"Why don't we look it up on Sunday, at dinner."

Thane thought: Gerry just had to mention Sunday dinner, and ruin my Friday night, didn't he? Thane ordered another beer.

Gerry said, "So, you broke a horse?"

"It almost broke me."

"That's all right. Used to do some of that myself, when I was a boy. Didn't hurt me none, either."

"It hurt all right. Still does."

Referring to an earlier bit of the conversation, Gerry said, "What was that about having something to do until you get the letter from your father?"

Thane welcomed the opportunity to remind him about the pending family reunion that would put Gerry out of the picture, forever. Thane said, "I'm expecting a letter from my father any day now. He's going to come see us. Mom wants him back. I'm sure mom must have said something about it, by now."

Gerry said, "What do you mean, you're 'expecting a letter from him.'"

"I wrote him and I'm expecting a reply. You know?" Thane took a sip of the beer and gave Gerry an angry look.

Gerry said, "How long ago did you write?"

"October, but the more time passes, the better odds I've got of getting the letter. Any event is more likely to have

occurred in a greater number of days than in a lesser number of days. So with every day that passes, I've got a better chance that I'll go to the mailbox and there will be the letter from my father."

Gerry said, "I can't buy that, Thane. This ain't about odds and stuff like that. It's about a man picking up a pen and writing a letter. It's the same odds every day. He can do it or not do it. There ain't no odds about it. It's the same every day. If he ain't wrote by now, I'd say the odds are pretty good he don't want to. Or your mom don't really want him back."

"That's a non sequitor."

"I don't know them college words, son."

"It doesn't follow. Dad would have no way of knowing whether mom wants him to write. Therefore, it doesn't follow that her not wanting him to write could be the reason he hasn't done it. And even if she really didn't want him to return and he knew it, what's to stop him from writing anyway?"

"Maybe he's dead."

"No! If he were dead, the letter would have been returned. He got the letter. I can be pretty sure about that."

"How do you know he hasn't died since he got the letter. Maybe he got it and put it aside, and said, 'tomorrow morning I'm going to get up and write my son a letter,' and then he died in his sleep."

Thane laughed. "He's too young to die in his sleep."

Gerry said, "I happen to know for a fact that he died in

his sleep."

"And how is that?" said Thane. He wasn't taking Gerry seriously now.

"I've got a copy of his death certificate, right here."

Gerry stood, took a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Thane. "Go ahead and read that" he said.

Thane took the standard-sized piece of paper, which was folded in half, and in half again. Thane unfolded it, and read it. Then he read it again.

All his channels broadcasted in color now. Channel one had a news bulletin. Gerry was the bloody lump under a white sheet. His head had been smashed with a baseball bat. Thane was the batter.

The paper that Thane held in his hand was a copy of a document that he quickly identified by the words in overwrought script at the top. The marriage that it licensed was that of Thane's mother with Gerry.

But Thane's mind would much easier imagine fantasies of murdering Gerry than to picture a family portrait with Gerry's face in the middle of it.

Thane said, "Anybody can forge one of these on a computer, nowadays. I don't know what you're up to, but this is bogus."

"We'll see about that."

"Mom would never marry a guy like ..."

"Watch it, son!" Gerry said, and pointed a cautionary finger at Thane.

"I mean, what do you do, anyway?"

"It ain't no secret what I do, son. I do some of this and some of that. There ain't nothin' wrong with that. It's what a lot of guys do nowadays."

Thane stood. He said, "You're a real job hopper, huh?"

"This ain't up to you, anyway."

"Of course it's up to me. Sometimes my mom doesn't know what's good for her. Who else is going to look out for her, if I don't? I mean, Jesus, she wants to marry a guy who doesn't do anything but take whatever money he has from wherever he gets it, and put it one quarter at a time into someone else's bank account. If mom would even consider getting married to a man like that is proof -- on the face of it -- that she needs my help making decisions, and that her judgment is seriously impaired. But I don't know about this marriage license. I still say it's fake." With one hand, Thane wadded up the paper and threw it at Gerry. It bounced off his chest and fell to the ground.

Gerry said, "Son, now, I'm beginning to lose my patience with you."

"Lose it, then!"

Gerry said, "I think we can find a way to settle this like gentlemen."

Thane was the one doing the pointing, now. He said, "Yeah, me too. I'll forget the whole thing if you admit that you're a liar, and say you're sorry and that you'll never talk about marrying my mother again."

Gerry laughed. He said, "That's not what I had in mind. I was thinking maybe we could arm wrestle, and the loser shuts up."

"After you," said Thane, holding out his hand toward a nearby table.

Big and deliberate, Gerry tucked in his cowboy shirt, and hitched up his belt, which looked like the third-place prize from a rodeo. They walked to the table.

Chapter Eight

Two pool players and an onlooker left their game of eight ball to watch the match. They were still muddy from a day's work. One stood holding his cue as if it were a pike and he were an ancient soldier, resting before going into battle. He had long hair and a beard like Jesus in the movies, but there was nothing Christian about the emblem on the T-shirt he wore tucked out of his threadbare jeans. The T-shirt bore the design of a goat's head superimposed on a pentangle, above which was printed the word "Magick" in gothic script. Thane assumed that "Magick" was the name of one of those rock-and-roll bands who cultivate a satanic image, and whose fans follow suit. This man looked the part: He ground his teeth like a speed freak, and looked stoned enough to do something crazy. He had the menace of a man who likes to be thought of as dangerous; Thane had met this kind of man in the army, where he had also met the really dangerous kind, and could tell the difference.

Magick's sidekicks were just as small, and tried to look just as menacing as their leader pretended to be. The first sidekick was Vietnamese and wore a flannel shirt with the sleeves down, in the style of the "gangbangers" in Los Angeles, in spite of the heat. The second sidekick wore a "Jack Daniels" T-shirt and a "Freightliner" baseball cap. And his face was a persuasive advertisement for an extra-strength brand of pimple medicine. He looked like some kind of a sideshow geek: "The Human Pimple," perhaps.

The three of them had faces that Thane wouldn't have been surprised to see staring glassy eyed from above a newspaper headline about the kind of murder that The Ledger Guardian inevitably called a "slaughter."

And then Thane turned to the task at hand. Gerry had the better stare so Thane avoided eye contact, and looked at Gerry's nose and the grin beneath it.

Gerry said, "Left arm or right? I'll whup you either way."

"Make it easy on yourself!" Thane said.

"Whoa!" said the mugs, in unison.

Gerry said, "Give me your best arm!"

Thane put his right elbow on the wooden tabletop which was carved with knives, burnt with cigarettes. Gerry's hand was as rough as the inside of a canvas work glove, and made Thane's hand look like that of a child, by comparison. His hairy forearm was as wide as two of Thane's, and longer; Gerry had to hold his arm at an angle, while Thane's arm was perpendicular to the table. They grappled for the better hand-hold, and Gerry

got it.

Thane's heart pounded like a military drum, calling the rest of him to fight. He wondered what satisfaction Gerry would get from such a mismatch. Gerry's menacing stare reminded Thane that brute force was all that mattered here. If anger were all it took, Thane was a match for Gerry. In a brawl, speed and skill count for something; in arm wrestling they count for nothing. Arm wrestling is a contest of power.

Thane's voice trembled as he said, "Shouldn't I get some sort of a handicap? David got a slingshot."

In a rare display of wit, Gerry said, "David was on the Lord's side."

"That's right dude," said the circus freak, trying to sound as tough as possible, which was about as tough as a bag of cotton balls.

Gerry said, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah."

"On the count of three: one, two, three, go!"

Instantly, Thane was struck with the absurdity of the fight. The unmovable object had met the stoppable force. Thane wondered how Gerry had gotten to be so strong. Perhaps it was simply a matter of leverage; Gerry had the longer forearm, hence the greater advantage. Thane grimaced as he tried to push Gerry's arm, which wouldn't budge.

The mugs whooped and hollered, obviously delighted with Thane's failure. Thane wondered why they were rooting for Gerry.

Gerry grinned and his face reddened as he held Thane's hand at bay. Catching a strong whiff of Gerry's stale breath, Thane weakened, and the back of his right hand began a steady retreat toward the surface of the table. The mugs cheered maniacally.

Thane looked in Gerry's eyes. Gerry was obviously proud of himself for this. And what was this? This was lighting your cigarette with a flamethrower; this was breaking walnuts with a sledgehammer; this was throwing a hand grenade at a platoon of unarmed boy scouts. It was overkill. Thane thought: An honorable man would not be proud of this.

Gerry said, "You're all talk, boy!"

Thane's anger saved him for a while. Now he no longer wanted to beat Gerry in arm wrestling. Thane wanted to kill Gerry. Thane grunted like a Hollywood soldier making his last wounded charge on the enemy. With all the anger he could muster, Thane pushed Gerry's arm back to the starting point.

One of the mugs said, "Look out! He's gettin' tough now." They laughed. This was very funny to them. They were like a band of hillbillies, drunk on moonshine.

Arm wrestling is strength against strength. Who's got more of it? To hunger for victory or to get mad count for nothing if the other guy is twice as strong. Courage counts for nothing. Thane's last charge had drained his strength. He was near the point of failure now. He could no longer push, and then he could no longer hold. And then Gerry smashed the back of Thane's right hand against the table, winning the match.

The mugs applauded and laughed like a jailhouse riot. The

Vietnamese said, "That's not bad, homeboy," and slapped Thane on the shoulder. The other two jeered for a while, and then returned to their pool game.

Gerry stood. "Come on, boy! I'll buy you a beer."

Thane said, "I'll buy my own."

"Suit yourself!"

Gerry said, "What's the matter, son? What happened to all that college-boy talk?"

He was the loser, and the loser was supposed to shut up, so Thane kept his mouth shut, as agreed. He looked at Alex, and pointed toward the beer tap. Alex nodded in return, poured a glass of beer from the tap and set the glass in front of Thane.

Gerry was done for the night. He hitched up his belt, and proudly stuck out chest. He said, "I'll see you Sunday. Don't show up with a hangover, if that's possible." And after stopping long enough to shake hands with the mugs, he was gone.

Was this the "real world" that Thane's fellow seniors had spoken of last year at Mossy Stone State? Were fairness and honor things you only read about in books? Was brute force all that mattered? You would have thought so from the way Gerry clomped through the front door, puffed up, pleased with himself.

And then there was a hand on Thane's shoulder. Thane turned on his barstool and saw Brandon Cope.

"Thorsson, man," Brandon said. "You beat the big dude, man. You really won."

"Take a hike, Brandon!"

"No, serious. That dude was two of you, and you held your

own. You would have creamed him if he was your size. Considering the handicap, you beat him by a longshot. Damn straight!"

Thane said, "Alex. How about a beer for my friend Brandon, here, and a glass of whiskey for me?"

Alex served a beer for Brandon, and nothing for Thane. "Thanks Thorsson," Brandon said, and went to a slot machine.

Alex picked up a towel and wiped the bar. After a while, he said, "Thane, my friend. Why don't we have a talk?"

"Sure, Alex. Can I have the whiskey, first?"

Instead of reaching for the bottle, Alex stood fast and said, "You're out of college now, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's right, Alex. I graduated a week ago last Wednesday. Why do you ask?"

Alex said, "What do you plan to do?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm worried about you, my friend."

"What are you, Alex? A bartender or a social worker?"

"If you're going to talk like that, then you won't get any whiskey from me."

"Come off it, Alex! You weren't going to give it to me anyway, were you?"

"Not if you talk like that."

"We've had this conversation before, Alex. I've told you about my plans. Haven't I told you about my father and everything?"

Alex said, "When did you write that letter to your father?"

"I wrote it last October."

"I don't want to be the one to bust your bubble, Thane, but don't you think he would have wrote the letter by now, if he was going to do it?"

"No, Alex, I don't agree. It doesn't make sense, in terms of probability. You see, because any given event is more likely to have occurred in a greater number of days than in a lesser number of days, the more time that passes, the better odds I've got of getting the letter. So every day I've got a better chance that I'll go to the mailbox and find the letter from my father."

Alex said, "All that college stuff doesn't work with fathers and sons, and things like that, Thane. Some things just don't make sense. Besides, I think I know what you're talking about; I heard about it once; you're talking about rolls of the dice; the more times you roll the dice, the more times you get snake eyes. But this ain't rolls of the dice. This is about a man sitting down at the table, picking up the pen and paper, writing the letter, putting the stamp on it and taking it to the mailbox. He either wants to do this or he doesn't. And I can think of a couple reasons why maybe he doesn't want to do it, Thane. Maybe he's afraid of you; maybe he thinks you want to pay him back for what he did to you, or what he didn't do. Maybe he's just afraid that he's gone so long without being a father that he won't know how to do it. Maybe he's doing you a favor. It might be better to let it go. Maybe a reunion is a bad idea. Besides, if he writes, and you get together again,

then what do you think is going to happen? What big change will come to your life in a little envelope?"

"That's a non sequitor, Alex. Lots of big changes come in a little envelope."

"Like what?"

"The grand prize in the lottery, for example."

Alex said, "They come to your door, with cameras and lawyers and everything."

"Okay, what about your tax return?"

A hearty laugh burst out of Alex's usually serious mouth. He said, "Do you know anyone who got a big one of those lately?"

"Okay, Alex, then how about the draft notice they sent you for Vietnam?"

He said, "I didn't get the draft notice, Thane. I volunteered."

Ignoring this, Thane said, "I've got it all planned, Alex. First dad and I are going to get a case of beer, and go fishing, just me and him. We'll sit there, and fish in the sunshine, and he'll tell me all about himself, and his life. We'll talk about the war and the work he's done and everything. When we each catch our limit, we'll take 'em home, and mom will cook 'em, with potato salad, and rolls and coleslaw. We'll have dinner together, like a family, you know. Afterwards we'll watch a movie on the VCR. We'll be just like a regular family. That's a big thing, Alex. That's the biggest thing there is. And that's just the beginning. He's going to set me straight about a career. That's what fathers are for, you know? All the other

guys in the army and at school were always talking about 'my dad said this' and 'my dad told me that.' Their dads really set them straight about a lot of things. That's what the problem is with me: I'm on the right train, just the wrong track. Dad's probably got a lot of connections at his country club, or whatever. Everyone's dad has connections like that. Know what I mean? Dad might be able to get me a job. It'll be a whole new life for me, once dad returns."

Alex leaned on the bar, and gave Thane an admonitory stare. "Sometimes a young man is better off without a father. These days, there's lots of young men out there that grew up without their fathers, and they're doing fine without them. Believe me, Thane."

"Then let 'em be fine. I'm not fine. I want my father back. My life won't be right until I get my father back."

Alex said, "In case you didn't notice, my friend, it looks like Gerry is going to marry your mama before your dad ever picks up the pen and the paper. You saw the marriage license yourself. How are you going to have a family reunion if your mama is married to another man?"

"That's impossible. It can't happen. it's just impossible. The marriage license is probably a fake. Gerry's just playing games. He's a liar, I can tell." Thane looked away from Alex, and drummed his fingers on the bar. "Can I have that glass of whiskey now, please?"

Alex put both hands on the bar, leaned towards Thane, and gave him a hard stare. Alex said, "Do you remember what

happened last Friday night, when I served you whiskey?"

Chapter Nine

Thane drummed his fingers on the bar. He smiled nervously. Alex wasn't amused. Thane stopped drumming his fingers on the bar. He lit a cigarette, and sat up in his barstool. Whatever this was about, it was no joke, so he sat at attention, while Alex stared and said nothing. And it didn't take long before Thane was uncomfortable with the silence, and felt pressured to speak. He said, "All right, Alex, never mind the whiskey. Just give me a beer if it makes you feel better."

Alex did nothing but continue to stare, reminding Thane of the sergeant major who had once called Thane to his office for a disciplinary proceeding. But with the sergeant major, you could bet that he only wanted to scare you, because to really punish you would take stacks of paperwork and lots of the kind of business that old men didn't like to bother with unless, for example, something from your childhood had made you contemptuous of authority and several weekends ago you had chosen to express this contempt in a spectacular lapse of discipline, such as driving drunk, and the car you'd been driving was the sergeant major's jeep, and you happened to have driven it through a rose garden that had been planted at the request of the wife of a colonel, your brigade commander. From the look on Alex's face, Thane inferred that last Friday night he had done the civilian-world's equivalent of stealing the sergeant major's jeep and

driving it through the colonel's wife's rose garden. And the colonel's daughter had been sitting in the passenger seat, and was half naked and completely drunk by the time the military police arrived. And the only good news was that you missed statutory rape by a couple of weeks.

Alex said, "What do you remember about last Friday night?"

Thane thought of Brandee and last Saturday morning. They must have met on Friday night, but it could have been anywhere. If memory were a gigantic mess of pencil scribbling, Thane's memory of Friday night was a spot where an eraser had been neatly applied. There wasn't a single jot to be found on his memory of Friday night. But Thane didn't want Alex to know this.

Thane said, "Friday night. Yeah, that was pretty wild."

"Do you remember playing cards with Jeb Habenschlect?"

"Jeb. Yeah, good old Jeb. That man knows his way around a deck of cards."

"You're lying. Jeb has been on vacation in Mexico for two weeks."

"Maybe Jeb was in Mexico, Alex, but I didn't lie. All I said was he's good at cards, which is true. We've played before."

Alex said, "Tell me something about last Friday."

"As far as I can remember, it wasn't much different from every other Friday night, except maybe I was a little drunker than usual."

"A little drunker than usual. Is that what you call it?"

"I don't know, Alex. What do you call it?" Last Friday night was sounding worse every minute.

"There's a word for this, Thane. What happened to you Friday night is known as an 'alcoholic blackout.' You drink too much and you're knocked out on your feet. You don't know what you're doing. You don't care about being nice any more. The real man comes out. And then you can't remember it. It's like turning into a werewolf in that movie. You know?"

"Come on! You've got to be an alcoholic to get like that."

Alex said, "Do you think you're not one, Thane?"

"I know I'm not one. An alcoholic is someone who goes to the meetings. I don't go."

Alex said, "Okay, Thane. If you didn't have an alcoholic blackout, then tell me something about Friday night. And if you can't tell me, then saying you're not an alcoholic is one of those, non what-do-you-call 'em?"

"non sequitor."

"right."

Thane reached for his glass but there was none there, so he took a drag from his cigarette instead. His hand shook, and Alex noticed. Thane didn't want any of this. All he wanted was a peaceful drink after a decent week's work. It was time to go home.

Thane said, "All right, Alex. Let me have one whiskey, and I'm out of here. Okay?"

"You're done for the night, Thane."

"But I've only had four, maybe six beers, all night."

"You've had six, Thane, and you only paid for three of them, four including the one you bought for Brandon. Most guys go home after six beers, Thane."

"Are you a bartender or an alcohol counselor."

"Watch it! You're lucky to be drinking here at all, after what happened."

"Can I have one beer for the road? Please, Alex!"

Alex eyed him sternly. "All right. One for the road."

Alex served him a glass of beer, and Thane chugged it in one tip of the glass. Then he pulled out his wallet and started to take a dollar bill from it, but Alex frowned and held up his hand to stop him. Thane thanked Alex and said he would see him next time. On his way to the back door, Thane passed Brandon.

"Later, Thorsson."

"See ya, Brandon."

The alley's grimy brick walls were barely lit by a streetlight nearby. The night was a contest of bad smells: garbage and exhaust, stale beer, pot smoke, and fumes from the big mill. The fumes came from across the Interstate, and smelled like a barnyard full of giant beasts who devoured acres of trees and drank from lakes of glue.

A siren squawked nearby. Then from Thane's left came the gunning of an engine. Then all he could see were headlights racing towards him. He turned to find the door locked. He flattened himself against the door and waited for the metal scrape of a fender taking him with it. Then the car screeched to a halt, and idled its engine.

"Hey homeboy!"

Thane turned.

A second voice said, "You want some pussy, Thorsson?"

Something struck his face, wet. The perpetrators sped off to Thane's right, onto the Avenue, away from the scene. Thane saw that the getaway car was a dark blue van which looked like an older Ford Econoline. And it had a single teardrop-shaped window on the rear passenger's-side panel. He saw the rear license plate just long enough to know that he wasn't going to have any trouble remembering it, because it was a vanity plate that bore the name, "SLAPPY."

Thane touched his face, pulled away his hand and saw blood on his fingers. He took out his bandana and wiped his face. At his feet lay a dead cat, freshly slit from collar to tail, with its guts hanging out.

Yes, it was time to go home now. But first he would stop at the store and get a 32-ounce bottle of beer, whatever was on sale. A 32-ouncer would be the least he would need after this. Then he would go home, watch some television and forget about everything.

If this was the way Slappy wanted to play, then he could forget about his four-hundred dollars. Besides, Brandee wasn't worth it anyway. And then Thane remembered Saturday in greater detail, and he changed his mind. Yes, Brandee was definitely worth four-hundred dollars. But Thane wasn't going to be worth anything if each of his legs was in a cast. Maybe it was time to borrow some money from his mother. Yes, that's what he would

do. Tomorrow he would call on his mother. She would cook him lunch and he would tell her about his money problems; he would omit the part about Brandee. Mom had a pile of money sitting in the bank, so it didn't make any sense to let himself get bullied by his landlord, cheated by his employer and assaulted by a pimp with a stupid name on account of a couple of debts totaling less than seven-hundred dollars. And if Slappy really did break his legs over four-hundred bucks, then what sense would that make? It wouldn't make any sense at all. If Thane got his legs broken, then he would have to borrow money from his mother anyway, and lots more of it; and he would probably have to move into her apartment while he was at it. So he would be doing her a favor by borrowing the money now. Getting a loan from mom, right now, was the smart thing to do. He would put her money to good use. He would get his life back in shape. It wasn't a big deal to borrow from your mom. After all, she would be borrowing from him, some day; he would be taking care of her, some day. Everyone was borrowing money from their parents, these days, especially right after graduation. He would borrow a thousand. Then he would pay the rent, get Slappy off his back and take his time finding a real job that gave him a check and didn't deduct for meals. But first things first, he decided. A peaceful drink could be had now, since Slappy had done his scaring for the night. To the QuickMart! Now nothing was going to get in the way of a peaceful drink.

Inside The Tavern, Brandon Cope left his slot machine and went to the pay phone. From his wallet he removed a business

card, at the top of which was written, "All-American Vending Co., Inc.", in gold letters. Brandon hadn't bothered to memorize the number, as he had been instructed to do by the man who had given him the card. The man had told Brandon to memorize the number and destroy the card, but Brandon didn't like to memorize numbers. They didn't stick in his head. He dialed the number and promised himself that he would memorize it soon.

It rang five times. He began to hang up, but then he heard a woman's voice.

He said, "Hi, it's Brandon. I've got some important information."

"Just a minute," she said.

In a second, Brandon heard a familiar man's voice. It said, "I hope for your sake that this is important. Yes?"

Brandon said, "Yeah, hi. It's Brandon. Listen, man! Thorsson was having a blackout, last Friday night."

"Blackout?"

"An alcoholic blackout, you know? He doesn't remember a thing."

"Good work, Brandon." The phone hung up.

Much relieved to be back on his boss's good side, Brandon sat at the bar. "Alex," he said. "Give me some of the good stuff! Make it a double Glenmacknie."

"Yes sir," said Alex, and served it right away.

Chapter Ten

At the QuickMart Thane took a cheap 32-ounce bottle of beer from the display case. And just as he did, he felt a hand on his arm, and heard a woman say his name. And when he turned and saw her, he nearly dropped the bottle. It wasn't that she was a knockout, but she made him feel awkward, like a little boy who had just been caught doing something naughty.

"You're blushing," she said. "That's really sweet." And she made "sweet" sound like something less than a man should be. Thane didn't want her to say it again.

Her skin was dark brown, and Thane would have guessed she was from the Middle East, or somewhere much hotter and dryer than Miller's Hole, Oregon, but she spoke like a hometown girl.

"Pardon me, m'am," said a big-bellied man who smelled like lots of beer. They stepped out of the way, and the man reached into the display case and grabbed a six-pack of generic beer. "Thank you, m'am," he said to the girl, and tipped his camouflaged hunter's cap. She stared at him until he averted his eyes, looked at the floor and shuffled off to finish his shopping.

Turning back to Thane, the girl insisted that they'd met before. Thane just stood and stared at her. She wore her hair in a pony tail, and it was a special kind of black, like the feathers of a certain kind of bird. And although he felt like he had seen her before, he couldn't say where. She had a distinctive face, the kind that you can still see when it isn't there anymore. The nose was more pronounced than he was used

to, and the scar on her left cheek was impossible to miss and made him wonder how it got there. She wasn't a cover girl or even a prom queen, but in her coffee-colored eyes there was plenty of the kind of attitude that can turn average looks into beauty. And Thane didn't like the reflection of himself that he saw there, beneath her unblinking lashes and Arabian eyebrows.

She said, "Are you drunk again?"

"Again?" he said.

"Last Friday night? Hello? Earth calling Thane Thorsson."

"Oh, yeah. Were you at the graduation party?"

"You're blushing again," she said.

He said, "That's because I'm embarrassed. Last Friday night is kind of blurry, if you want to know the truth."

"If you'd like to come to my place, I'll tell you all about it," she said. "The beer is on me." And she reached for the bottle, but he held it behind his back, out of her reach.

"Come on," she said. "You're not chicken, are you?"

"Let's just hold on a minute," he said. "I don't even know your name."

"My name is Maya. I already know yours, Thane. I like that name. It's so, I don't know, butch or whatever." She smiled and held out her hand. He gently put his hand in hers, and she gave it a squeeze, an unmistakable squeeze.

And then, without being the least bit shy about it, she reached behind him and took the bottle from his hand. And for a moment she was so close he could smell her perfume, which smelled nothing like the stuff that Brandee had been wearing

last weekend.

Earlier that evening, on his way to The Blue Ox, Thane had hoped to meet a woman. And he had hoped that she would be attractive, and that she would like him, and that they would "go to her place." Hoping to meet a girl and go to her place was foremost in his mind, whenever he went to the tavern. And going to The Tavern wasn't the only occasion that filled him with the anticipation of having a casual fling. Studying at the library, at the college, was like going to a singles' bar for him. And then there was the registrar's office, the bookstore, the grocery store. In fact, Thane had hopes of meeting a woman wherever he went. And here she was, in the QuickMart. She wanted him to go to her place, and she was in a hurry to get there. But he wasn't sure if he wanted it. He wasn't comfortable with the way she had looked at him, the sarcastic comment about his name, and the icy treatment she'd given to the poor, drunken man who had tried to be so polite to her. Thane's inner voice spoke very clearly to him now, and told him that he might spend the rest of his life regretting his next step, regardless of where he took it, and that he would be smart to politely refuse her offer, go home, sit on his couch, watch his T.V., and drink his bottle.

And so, for a moment, he just stood there and watched her walk to the cashier. She wore a pink cotton blouse that fit loose, and designer jeans that draped well and flattered the way she walked. Women from Miller's Hole didn't walk like that; her walk was from somewhere else, somewhere wonderful, and so were

her hips and legs and the foreign kind of sandals that she wore on her little feet.

"Excuse me," said the beer-soaked man with the camouflaged cap, who had picked out a bag of ruffled potato chips to go with his beer. He said, "Damn, son! I know what I'd do." And although he didn't say it, Thane thought: Yeah, I know what you'd do too; you'd go home, sit on your couch, watch your T.V., and drink your six pack.

Thane tried to put things in context. He thought about his debts and his job and Slappy. And then he thought about his apartment, which made him think about his mailbox and the letter he still hadn't gotten from his father.

And then she looked back over her shoulder at him. She smiled and motioned for him to join her. She was much more beautiful than he had realized at first, it was just a kind of beauty that was new to him; and it was better than the old kind. And, at that moment, following Maya was what he wanted more than anything else in his life. But as he followed her, Thane dismissed his nervousness. He had never met a woman in her league before. Of course he was going to be nervous.

In the parking lot outside the Food-Mart, Maya took from her purse a keychain, which she pointed at a silver Mercedes. The car bleeped in response.

Maya's Mercedes Benz looked like it had just been driven off the lot. It still had the printout taped to a back-seat window, and the card with the name of the dealership in place of the rear license plate. Inside, the car had its own finely-

crafted atmosphere, a significant improvement on the one of the world outside. The seats were upholstered in leather, and the dashboard was trimmed with what appeared to be quality hardwood of a very fine grain. Thane reached out to examine the door panel, but he stopped himself when he realized that this would probably make him appear to be even more of an apprehensive bumpkin than he already felt.

Maya put a cassette in the tape deck, and the car's stereo played expensive sound tricks: The music began with the laid-back brushing of a snare drum; it sounded like the drummer was drumming in the back seat. The sound was so perfect that he could hear the slight squeaks of fingering on a stand-up bass. He closed his eyes and easily imagined he could feel the polished wood of the piano, and smell the water on a riverbed rock which was how the melody of the saxophone sounded to him.

He knew the music. "Monk Mitchell Quartet," he said. "This is 'Rainbow's End.'"

She said, "That's right. I'm impressed that you know Monk Mitchell. You don't seem like the jazz type."

"Really?" he said. "What type do I seem like?"

"Oh, I don't know. Country."

He wasn't sure if he minded that she thought this.

The engine gave out a high-performance whine as she drove uphill, east of the college campus, to the neighborhood of houses well lit, lawns well groomed.

Thane pointed toward the engine of the car and said, "It sure can take the hills."

"That's what it's built for: mountain roads, and the autobahn, of course."

"Of course," he said.

She drove them upward through a forest of turns to the left and right and all the way around. Down below, the poor streets got in line. But up here, the streets went where they pleased. Before long, Thane couldn't tell which way was north. At last she pulled the shining import into the driveway of a Spanish colonial house, propped on the crest of a hill. "Here we are," she said, and killed the engine.

In front of the house, a lawn was freshly lain, so that you could still see the cut marks on in its turf. The rest of the landscape had the obligatory bark-o-mulch, and bonsai trees.

The door opened at the house next door, and a woman stood frowning, holding a dog on a leash. The dog was a Doberman, and didn't blink or make a sound. The woman wore green lederhosen, a matching cap with a feather in it, and a starched, white blouse. Although it was June, she looked as though she'd just returned from an Oktoberfest or some other place where people gather to dress like pictures in a travel brochure for Bavaria. The woman's mouth was smugly shut, and the look on her face said she'd gladly unleash the dog if she felt like it.

Maya said, "Hello Mrs. Reinhart."

Without returning the greeting, Mrs. Reinhart said, "When are those landscapers going to finish your lawn?"

"I don't know. Are they bothering you?"

Obviously affronted, Mrs. Reinhart went red in the face.

She said, "Your landscapers act like Juvenile delinquents. They throw their cigarette butts in my yard. The Vietnamese has a staring problem, and the bearded one has a potty mouth. I almost called the police, today."

Maya wasn't the slightest bit flustered over this. She said, "They'll have to do something more serious than littering or cursing, before the police can do anything about it, Mrs. Reinhart."

The woman's eyes bulged in offense, as if her brain had suddenly swollen and rendered her speechless. She looked disapprovingly at the 32-ounce bottle of beer that Thane still held. He thought: If she's going to go around dressed like that, then she shouldn't look so shocked at a bottle of beer.

Thane thought about introducing himself. But he couldn't be sure that taking such a liberty would be considered polite, up here on the hill; so he just nodded, and smiled, and tried to appear friendly.

Maya said, "I'll ask Yaqoub to speak to the workers. Is there anything else, Mrs. Reinhart?"

Mrs. Reinhart didn't respond. She disgustedly tried to exit the scene, to return to her house; but the Doberman stood its ground, as though its paws were cast in the concrete of the front stoop. For all his discipline, the Doberman refused to obey. He wanted to stay outside and intimidate the world for a little while longer.

Maya grabbed Thane's arm in her powerful little grip. "Let's go inside," she said. As he let Maya lead him to her

front door, Thane kept his eyes on the Doberman.

"Come on, Kaiser!" said Mrs. Reinhart. The dog stiffened its legs, and kept its paws planted on the stoop. Mrs. Reinhart pulled the leash until the dog whined with frustration and was dragged inside. Mrs. Reinhart slammed her door.

Thane said, "Is she for real, with that outfit?"

Maya said, "You should see her husband. He wears a kilt."

"Really?"

Maya laughed.

Thane said, "Who's Yaqoub?"

"My boyfriend." She tightened her grip on his arm, and pulled him toward the house. She said, "Don't worry about Yaqoub. He's gone for the weekend."

Above the house's garage hung a basketball hoop on a plywood backboard, painted white. The backboard looked as if it hadn't seen a single jump shot. The hoop was brand new, and the net was still white and unused. "What's that for?" Thane said, pointing to it.

"Basketball, of course," she said. "Silly."

"Yeah, but it doesn't look like anyone has played much basketball on it."

She said, "That's because it's brand new, you dork."

"Oh."

From inside the house, he heard a dog yip: "bark" was the wrong word for it.

Thane forgot that he was supposed to be trying not to look like a bumpkin, and he stopped to admire the house's front door:

an expensive piece of work, made of laminated hardwood, trimmed expertly, and fitted with well-cast hardware. Noticing Thane's interest, Maya said, "Wait till you see the rest of the place." She punched a sequence of numbers on an electronic keypad near the doorjamb, obviously to disarm an electronic security system. Then she put a key into the deadbolt lock, and turned it clockwise. She removed the key, put it in the doorknob lock, and turned it the other way.

"Come inside," she said, opening the door. And there was the dog: small, white, curly-haired and paranoid. She picked it up, and held it in her arms, but this didn't stop the yipping.

Remembering a line from a movie, Thane said, "That's the funniest looking cat I've ever seen."

Maya rolled her eyes, and petted the dog, who continued to yip at the top of its little lungs. Maya spoke to the dog. She said, "Uncle Thane thinks you're a cat, Toto." Toto really went nuts now, as though he understood the insult. In this dog, nature had designed a perfect little noisemaker. Maya said, "Toto is a Yorkshire Terrier. He's a dog. Isn't that right, Toto. Yes it is. Good boy!" She snuggled the dog, and rubbed noses with him. He licked her face, and Thane was jealous.

Thane wanted to pet the dog's white curly fur; actually, he wanted to pet the dog because Maya held him in her arms, and this would be the next best thing to petting Maya. Thane said, "May I pet the cat?"

"You can try, but Toto doesn't like being called a cat."

Thane reached out but Toto snapped viciously, and Thane

pulled back his hand. He said, "They don't call this dog a 'terrier' for nothing."

"Good dog, Toto!" Maya said. "That will teach him to call you a cat." Then she walked down the hall carrying Toto, who continued to yip at Thane. Thane followed Maya and Toto down the hallway.

And then they stood in a living room. You could have fit Thane's whole apartment, twice, with space left over, into the living room in which they now stood.

Chapter Eleven

Miller's Hole is an unimpressive town, but any town looks good from above, at night, when its lights are all you can see. And any view from a hill in any town is worth a look, even when the town is Miller's Hole. The view was impressive from where Thane stood looking through the window that took up nearly a whole wall of the spacious room.

The room was decorated with sophisticated Asian objects of art, sitting comfortably alongside expensive American furniture. In the sunken center of the room, a pair of black leather couches sat perpendicular to the window, facing a coffee table that made them look plain. The table was made out of a strange-looking kind of wood, carved intricately on its sides, but flat and smooth on top, and polished like a colonel's boots.

On the wall opposite the window hung a tapestry which Thane estimated to be five feet by fifteen feet. It had a black

background alight with diamond shapes of red, hooking vines of blue and yellow and flower-like creations of blue, brown and red. The central design was the 24-sided object that results from putting an octagon atop another of equal size and rotating the topmost one forty-five degrees, and this was flanked by two similar, complimentary objects. Around the central designs, lesser shapes did a dance of symmetry. Wing-like things flew contradictorily and notched oars rowed inward at each corner, among many-pointed stars and mushroom-ended crosses burning with angular, white fire. Interspersed among all of this were smaller compasses, card hearts, chevrons, combs, bird-like shapes and black scorpions foraging among green-centered pine cones. And all this had been done on a loom.

Thane walked across the room to get a better look at the tapestry. On closer inspection, it appeared to be woven from a rough kind of wool, whose colors clung stubbornly to their brightness. And the weave was threadbare in places, as though it had once been used for something besides decorating the wall of a Spanish-colonial-style house in a wealthy neighborhood in an American town. Thane was awed by the ingenuity and mathematical sophistication of whatever tribe of men or women had designed and woven the tapestry. He said, "This is good work. Where did you get it?"

Maya said, "I'm not sure. Yaqoub would know."

Yaqoub. There was that name again. This time it killed their conversation, and Thane stood uncomfortably, once again, in the field of Maya's unblinking stare.

"Please have a seat!" she said, after a moment.

But he just stood, holding his bottle of beer. She pointed to it and said, "Do you want a glass?"

"Yeah, all right," he said, and looked into her eyes again. And he couldn't fail to notice an expression that under any other circumstances he might have recognized as one of disgust.

Once again she said, "Please have a seat, and make yourself comfortable." And she left the room.

Thane scanned the room for further clues to Maya, who she was, where her people came from, what she did and why had she brought him here. And who was Yaqoub? What sort of a name was that? Where was he from, and what was he up to?

He spotted a stack of mail, some of it opened, on one of the lampstands that stood to either side of each couch. He listened for Maya. He could hear her from another room, on the telephone. She was talking just like a hometown girl, if her home town was Tehran or Islamabad. He quickly flipped through the stack of mail. Thane removed the billing statement from an envelope printed with the familiar phone-company logo. The amount due was \$204.95. Thane thumbed through the bill's several pages and glanced at the long-distance charges. He was hoping to find a billing entry for some faraway place, but there wasn't any such clue, only lots of entries for Reno, Nevada.

In his periphery Thane saw something came to life, shiny and metallic. He dropped the phone bill. His heart galloped. Then he saw the thing that had startled him. On a pedestal on the far wall stood a two-foot tall bronze sculpture of a female

creature who was familiar to him at once, although he couldn't remember where he had seen her. Thane approached her. She was a four-armed hag with bare paunch and sagging breasts, and she stood on the corpse of a man. In her four hands she held, respectively, a sword, the freshly-cut human head she'd used it on, a noose, and the lower half of a human skull, upended and fit with a handle so it could be used as a goblet. She wore a necklace of skulls and a crude sort of belt made from severed hands, which reminded Thane of the story a sergeant had once told him about Vietnam, where the troops made necklaces from strings of their dead enemies' ears. But the old hag went one better; she had whole infant corpses for her earrings. Her hair was a tangled mess, and she had eyes like a zombie -- three of them, one in the middle of her forehead. She had vampire's fangs and the devil's tongue sticking out of her mouth.

Toto was asleep, panting contentedly in the corner, until Maya returned to the room, and woke him again, yips and all, and Thane thought that if you wanted to have a dog who would be sure to keep your guests on edge, then Toto was the perfect canine for the job. Maya approached and handed Thane a glass, while Toto made a series of charges at Thane's right ankle, never actually biting it but wanting to. As he looked down at the dog, Thane noticed that he had dropped the phone bill on the floor near the lampstand. Had Maya seen it?

Maya walked across the room, with her back to Thane; and Toto followed her, back-stepping, keeping an eye on him. Thane took the opportunity to quickly step to where he'd dropped the

phone bill, set down his glass, pick up the phone bill and put it back on the lampstand, while he looked to ensure Maya's back was still turned, which it was. Then he sat on the couch that had a view of Maya. He set his bottle and glass on the coffee table, and admired the shape of Maya's hips flexing, tightening the drape of her blue jeans, as she bent forward, opened a liquor cabinet, removed a glass and filled it with ice cubes, while Toto stood guard, silently for a change.

As Thane picked up his bottle to pour himself a beer, he was shocked to discover that the bottle had put a ring on the mirror-polished surface of the table. Luckily, an Atlas of the World sat to one side of the table. Setting the bottle on the nearest lampstand, to his left, Thane shoved the Atlas to the other side of the table, and covered the ring-shaped stain. Picking up his bottle again, he held it as Maya turned around and returned with the whiskey and water that she had poured for herself, and a quiescent Toto in tow. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said and took a couple of coasters from a lampstand. "You must be dying for a drink."

Maya leaned over the table and set the coasters in front of him, right next to the Atlas. And as she did this, Thane caught a glimpse beneath her blouse, and he discovered what a good job the blouse had done of concealing her figure. Maya looked up and caught him in the act. She smiled and said, "Do you like her?"

"Excuse me?" Thane said.

"Kali," she said.

"Kali?"

"The sculpture, silly," she said, pointing to it.

"Oh, yeah. She's a fine piece of work."

Maya said, "You're probably like most westerners: You appreciate the craft but you're uncomfortable with the art."

She stood there, sipping her drink, waiting for a rebuttal. Thane poured a glass of beer and took a gulp. It had a slightly bitter taste; it was meant to be served cold, but had warmed itself on the ride from the Quick Mart. He waited for the comforting buzz and wondered how Maya could go so long without blinking. Maya kept staring, until Thane felt pressured to say something. He said, "Why shouldn't the sculpture make me uncomfortable? I mean, damn! A woman with two arms is trouble enough, but this one has four."

Not the slightest bit amused, Maya said, "You're joking about something sacred. Your response to Kali is profane, typically western."

He said, "Things are what they are. It ain't east or west." And he thought: There you go! Good job! Make her think you're a hippy. That'll impress her. Now all you need are a pair of sandals and a tie-dyed T-shirt. "Besides," he added. "What's all this stuff about me being a westerner. You're one too, right? You're an American, aren't you?"

Not responding to this, she sat on the edge of the couch, and Toto jumped up and sat beside her. Maya took a sip of her drink, and then she deliberately looked at the phone bill on the lampstand; and then she looked back at Thane, knowingly. And

although Thane wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen it happen, Toto did it too: He looked at the phone bill and then back at Thane, as though he were telepathically linked with his master. Maya was playing games, and Toto seemed to be playing along. Thane was their toy. And Thane was quite alarmed at this; he began to wonder if he was losing his mind, or she had put something in his glass.

All of the nervousness had enlivened him, and he wanted to stand and move around. He finished his glass of beer, poured another one, stood and walked to a bookshelf near the Kali statue. He said, "Do you mind if I have a look?"

"Not at all," she said.

He took a thick paperback from the shelf, and read its title out loud. "Leaves of Grass," he said.

Maya stayed seated. She said, "Do you like Whitman?"

"I've never read him."

He opened the book, chose a page, and read. "'Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs. Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven. The earth by the sky staid with, the daily close of their junction, the heavy'd challenge from the east that moment over my head. The mocking taunt. See then whether you shall be master!' Sounds pretty sexy," he said.

"How is it sexy?"

"You really can't deny that, can you? He's comparing a sunrise to a male orgasm."

She said, "I missed the part about the male orgasm."

Thane said, "'Prongs' is one thing, but what else am I

supposed to think about 'libidinous prongs.' And 'Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven' isn't sexy by itself; but when it comes after 'libidinous prongs, then maybe ... "

Maya said, "Then maybe your mind is in the gutter."

"Why shouldn't my mind be in the gutter, after reading such a dirty poem?"

She frowned at his joke. She said, "If there's anything vaguely sexual about that passage, it's that the libido and the bright juice are a subtle invitation to see a sort of sexual dominance in time's mastery over man."

Thane said, "Oh, sure. My mind is in the gutter."

"You're a Puritan at heart. Every Puritan is secretly a pervert and a rapist. This phenomenon is know as 'reaction conversion.' I read about it in psychology."

Thane said, "I was only joking. Know what I mean?"

She said, "Joking about poetry is a way of discounting it. In your heart you condemn it; that's typical Puritanism."

He flipped the pages of "Leaves of Grass," glancing at a passage here and there. He said, "Sounds like you know something about poetry and stuff. What do you do, anyway? Are you some kind of a writer, or something?"

She said, "I should ask first. What do you do?"

Mercifully, he had come across a fitting quote from Whitman. He said, "'I loaf and invite my soul. I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.'"

He said this to make her smile; and for the first time that evening, he succeeded. For a little while, she put away her

hard stare. Her mouth broke into a grin, and her eyes looked friendly. And for the first time since he saw Maya at the QuickMart, Thane no longer felt like a little boy in her presence. It had taken a man to catch Maya off guard, and to make her smile in spite of herself. Thane was proud. And he was satisfied to have an effect on her, however small.

"Come sit down," she said. Once again, he took the couch facing her. She shifted into a more comfortable position, with her legs folded to the left and her left hip flexed into a display of one of nature's most-perfect curves. She held her right arm straight for support, with her shoulder lifted into its optimum pose, and the fingers of her right hand splayed on the cushion of the couch.

Toto hopped onto the couch, next to Maya, and launched a preemptive salvo of little-dog noises. Maya gave Toto the attention he wanted. She petted him, and babied him, until he was sound asleep. If he was a cat, he would have been purring. Thane noticed that Maya's toenails were painted to match the pink blouse.

As Maya sat looking like a woman Thane had seen in a painting he'd studied in art history, Thane poured what was left of his bottle of beer and stiffly lifted the glass to his mouth. He swallowed the beer, set the glass down, leaned back on the couch and breathed deeply and obviously.

He wanted her.

Softly, for a change, she said, "What are you thinking?"

"I'm trying to figure out why you brought me here. What

was all that stuff about last Friday night, anyway? You said you were going to tell me all about it. I guess I'd like to hear your story now."

Still in the fashion pose, she shrugged her right shoulder, slightly. And then she wasn't relaxed any more. She sat up as though she were in a dentist's waiting room, and crossed her hands on her lap, as if to deny him access. Whatever her reason for bringing him here, it wasn't a casual romance, her body language seemed to say. And Thane didn't want this look, this pose.

She said nothing while Thane wondered what else Maya might have wanted that she could have got on the off chance of meeting him at the Quick Mart. And then he became very uncomfortable about the fact that he couldn't remember what he had done last Friday night. Or had it been by design that they met, today? Maybe she followed him. No, that wasn't it. Of course not. It didn't make any sense to think like that. Thane took another deep breath and hoped it would quiet the voice that now screamed at him, and told him that whatever he had done last Friday night, he shouldn't have done it, and whatever Maya had brought him here to give him, he didn't want it.

To drown the screams he had begun to hear, he would have to . . . do what? Predicting outcomes was useless because it was impossible to be right. There was an explanation for this, because there was an explanation for everything. He reminded himself that the simplest explanation is the most likely. Find the least-common denominator, he told himself. She's lonely.

Yaqoub doesn't "trip her trigger." She wants an affair. I'm not a bad looking guy; I'm in good shape. She wants me. Of course she does. Why wouldn't she? Or at least she wanted me when she was sitting like a harem girl. Now look at her. I've put out her fire. I'll have to make her smile again.

Maya said, "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

He thought: Good! Here it comes. He said, "No. Of course not. Go ahead!"

But then they were interrupted by the rambunctious approach of a motorcycle, the kind you couldn't ignore, with a loud engine. It sounded like a Harley Davidson. It brought Toto back from dreamland.

Thane said, "Who's that? Your neighbors?"

Maya said, "No, it's Yaqoub."

"Yaqoub? You said he was out of town for the weekend."

Maya laughed, and there was nothing funny about her laugh. She said, "I told you he was out of town so you would relax until he came. Yaqoub wants to have a little talk with you about last Friday night."

"All right, then. We'll talk," Thane said, nearly choking on his words.

"Excuse me," Maya said, smiling at Thane in a very unfriendly way. And she disappeared into the hallway.

Thane dashed to the liquor cabinet, poured himself some Scotch, and gulped it. Now he felt very strongly that earlier this evening at the QuickMart when the inner voice had told him that staying home and watching the tube would have been the best

way to spend this Friday night, he should have listened.

Chapter Twelve

The man handed Maya his bright red motorcycle helmet, which she took out of the room, leaving the two men alone. Thane had seen this guy before at The Blue Ox, and had steered clear of him. He looked like the kind of guy who could snap your neck and think nothing of it. Now he approached, limping slightly, and stood in front of Thane. He was a couple inches shorter than Thane, but much thicker, and built like a professional wrestler. He had a pony tail and beard, which wasn't remarkable these days when the man who sold supplemental medical insurance to Thane's mother wore a pony tail and a beard; but whereas the insurance salesman looked like a trend-consuming ape, this guy looked right.

He wore a cocky leather jacket which bore the design of an American flag. Thane thought it was the kind of jacket you'd only see on an immigrant who was eager to advertise his patriotism to the new country. The man unzipped it and revealed a gold chain -- "rope" was probably a better word for it -- which looked like it had come from a pirate's treasure chest. His blue jeans were the fifty-dollar kind, and his gray-dyed boots appeared to be made from the skin of some kind of reptile. He ignored Toto, who was not only yipping at full force now, but had begun to jump up and down as well. The man stared hard at Thane's face, looking for something there.

He said, "Hello, Mister Thorsson, I am Yaqoub. It is a pleasure to be properly introduced to you, at last." His voice wasn't a threat; it didn't have to be; the rest of him took care of that. Yaqoub's voice was the peaceful manner of a man whose presence was a threat.

"Call me Thane, please."

Yaqoub's handshake was firm, a suggestion of strength rather than a demonstration of it. Thane was instantly put at ease by the manners of this man who otherwise appeared to be the stock bad guy from a lurid crime novel.

Maya came back to the living room just in time for Yaqoub to turn to her and speak a phrase of a language that reminded Thane of the one he had overheard Maya using on the phone, earlier that evening. Judging from Maya's reaction now, Thane interpreted Yaqoub's phrase to mean, "Take that infernal creature outside before I kick him into the next life."

Yaqoub said, "I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for last Friday night." There, once again, was last Friday night, and another question: Why was Thane being thanked for it?

Thane said, "I was very drunk last Friday night. I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Maya returned without Toto.

Yaqoub said, "Do you need a drink?"

"Fine, thanks. I mean, yeah. All right," said Thane, and told himself that he would have to sip this one. It bothered him a little that Yaqoub had used the word "need" in reference

to Thane's drink, and he wondered why Yaqoub had sidestepped the question about last Friday night. But there would be plenty of time to ask about it later on, he decided. Now the important thing was that Yaqoub was grateful to him for something, and he probably wasn't going to snap anyone's neck for the time being. So Thane could relax now. And better yet, Thane felt as though he could enjoy a little camaraderie with Yaqoub. He imagined they could be just like a couple of army buddies, having a few drinks, hanging out on a Friday night.

Thane sat on the couch, again, and Yaqoub sat right beside him. Once again, Yaqoub spoke harshly to Maya. Thane noticed that in Yaqoub's presence Maya became meek and avoided eye contact as she spoke. Thane was jealous of the effect Yaqoub had on her.

Yaqoub leaned forward and began turning pages of the Atlas, without moving it from its position on top of the ring-shaped water mark Thane had accidentally left with his beer glass earlier that night. But Thane was no longer nervous about the possibility of someone discovering the stain. He even considered telling Yaqoub about it, but decided instead to wait until later, as he didn't want to risk killing the good mood. In the Atlas, Yaqoub found a two-page map of the United States. And as he studied it, he began to grin like a cartoon cat who had just caught a mouse.

Thane caught a glance of Yaqoub's profile. In addition to looking like the kind of guy who could give a good beating, Yaqoub appeared to have gotten a beating or two in his life. He

had a caved-in kind of nose like you would see on a boxer. On his right cheek was a clean scar which looked like it had been made by a sharp knife. Thane guessed Yaqoub was close to forty, but imagined it was possible that people aged quickly where Yaqoub came from, and that he might be younger.

Maya brought two drinks on a platter, which she set on the coffee table in front of Thane and Yaqoub. And then she just stood there as if awaiting further instructions.

Yaqoub took both glasses from the tray, and handed one to Thane. He said, "This is 12-year-old Glenmacknie. Only the best for my friends. Or you can finish drinking your cheap beer, if you like."

"No. Are you kidding?" Thane took a sip. He said, "Thanks. This is really good."

They were silent for a moment before Thane blurted out, "What's all this talk about last Friday night?"

Yaqoub said, "What do you mean, my friend? You were there. Yes?"

"It's all a little sketchy, to tell you the truth."

"What is 'sketchy?'"

"I only remember parts of what happened."

Yaqoub spoke to Maya as if he were chastising her, but this time she replied more like the Maya whom Thane had come to know. For a moment she was her old self again and she wasn't taking Yaqoub's abuse; her words were just as pushy as his. Then Yaqoub laughed. Whatever the joke was, Maya didn't seem to get it.

"Thane, my friend, are you hungry?"

"Yeah. Sure."

Glancing at Thane, Maya closed the Atlas, took the serving tray from the table, and set it aside. From the table's lower shelf she took a small tablecloth, and spread it out, covering the table's surface and the Atlas.

Looking away, Thane saw Kali, dead ahead, sticking out her tongue at all of them. Thane said, "If you don't mind, Yaqoub, I would like to hear the story about last Friday night." He took another sip of the Glenmacknie. At this stage in the evening's drinking, it tasted like any other whiskey, only smoother.

Yaqoub pondered Thane's abrupt request, for a moment, before speaking. "Okay Thane," he said. "If you insist, then I will tell you the story now." Yaqoub went deep into thought: eyes closed, head in hands, elbows on knees. He appeared to be almost in prayer. And then he nodded as though God had answered him. "Maya and I were at the Blue Ox, of course. I was playing darts and Maya went to the bar to get some drinks. One of the usual low-lifes grabbed her"

"How did he grab her?" Thane said, interrupting.

Yaqoub appeared to be offended by the question. He said, "What difference does it make?"

"None, I guess. Sorry, man. You were shooting pool, and"

"I said I was playing darts." Yaqoub took the gold chain from around his neck and examined it carefully, link by link, as

though he had just picked it up in a shop and were deciding whether or not to buy it.

Thane had been around long enough to have caught a few lies, and to know that few people lied without some kind of a telltale gesture. And Thane took Yaqoub's sudden interest in his jewelry to be just such a gesture.

Thane said, "Which dart board?"

Yaqoub deliberately savored a sip of his Glenmacknie. He nodded his head, as if in approval of the drink. Then he stared as if to say that Thane had just pushed his luck. He said, "Which dart board, Thane? What do you mean by asking me this?"

Thane said, "Were you playing on the dartboard closest to the front door, or the one farthest from it?"

Yaqoub finished his drink, and stood. He said, "Excuse me. I don't very often have a guest to interrogate me in my own house. Maybe I should have another drink."

"Sorry, man. I didn't mean to be rude or anything."

Yaqoub went to the liquor cabinet and poured himself another drink. He said, "Please, no, my friend. It is the Oregon style. Yes? Bluntness. To have no subtlety about the things one says. I should be the one to be getting used to it." Yaqoub held his glass in the air, as though he were about to make a great speech. He said, "I was playing on the dart board closest to the door. I was playing on the dart board not closest to the door. I was playing on both dart boards."

Thane said, "What happened next?"

"I heard a shout. I turned around. Maya was standing

there. You had pinned a man to the ground, and you were choking him."

Thane said, "How was I choking him?"

Yaqoub paused for a moment, and said, "You were choking him by blocking the flow of air in his trachea. How else would you be choking him?"

Thane said, "Did I grab him by the neck with both hands, like this?" Thane demonstrated, throttling an imaginary man in front of him. "Or did I use a one-arm chokehold?"

Yaqoub returned to his place on the couch, and went into his deep-thinking pose again, searching for the right thing to say. "What difference does it make?" he said, at last. Thane didn't bother to tell Yaqoub that he couldn't imagine choking a man in such a way that the man wouldn't struggle with all his might to remove the hold, and that such a struggle would have left bruises on Thane's forearms, and that Thane had no such bruises; nor had he noticed any bruises on Saturday when he had regained consciousness at Brandee's place. But pointing this out to Yaqoub, and thus challenging the truth of his story, seemed like the wrong move at the moment.

Thane said, "It makes no difference." Thane's glass was empty, now. He hadn't been sipping his Scotch as he had told himself to do, and he had become nervous again because no reason came to mind why Yaqoub should be lying to him, and doing it so transparently.

Yaqoub shouted for Maya. In a moment, she reappeared and set out a large bowl, a pitcher of water, and some white hand

towels, folded neatly. The pitcher looked as though you could rub it and a genie would pop out and grant you three wishes.

Yaqoub said, "We wash our hands first. Yes?" Yaqoub held the pitcher, and waited for Thane to do something. After a moment's hesitation, Thane did the obvious thing: He held his hands over the bowl, while Yaqoub poured water. Thane washed his hands, exaggerating the procedure to show that he knew what was expected of him. And he held them over the bowl again while Yaqoub poured some water for rinsing. Catching on to the custom, Thane took the pitcher and poured the water for Yaqoub.

Thane thought this was as good a time as any to get the rest of the story about last Friday night. He said, "Okay, Yaqoub. I was choking the guy, and then what?"

"We stopped you."

"Who?"

"You."

"I know me. Who stopped me?"

"Me and Alex, and a couple of the guys."

"Alex? You mean he came from behind the bar?"

Yaqoub said, "I'm telling you, my friend, if we hadn't stopped you." He looked toward the ceiling, and held his palms upward as if appealing to heaven.

Thane said, "Who were the two guys?"

Without answering this, Yaqoub kept talking. "If the police had come again, Alex could have lost his liquor license. You would be in jail. That would be a bad thing. Yes? But it would not be a great tragedy if this lowlife was dead. He

deserves to be taken out and shot for what he did to Maya."

Thane said, "For what? What did he do that was deserving of death?" Thane looked directly at Yaqoub, sitting beside him, looking serious. Thane said, "When we say someone should be taken out and shot, we don't usually mean it literally."

Staring back, Yaqoub said, "I mean it that way. A bullet should be put into this guy's head."

"Would you take a man's life because he can't keep his hands to himself?"

"You must understand, my friend. A lowlife like this is not a man. A man who cannot control himself around the women is bad for everyone. He brings nothing but bad luck for the whole world. This man is half of the way to being an animal. He is like a wild beast. Yes? He wants whatever he can grab, and then he wants more. He takes whatever he can get from the world, and gives nothing back. He is more like a pig than a man."

Thane said, "What you've got to understand, Yaqoub, is that this is the wild west. We've got our own rules out here. It goes back to the days of the Oregon Trail. In those days, if a guy was crazy enough to get in a covered wagon and drive to the land of wild Indians, you could bet he was going to bring some baggage with him. When these pioneers got tired of reading their Bible by the candlelight, they wanted to go out and play. They wanted to drink too much and get their hands on a woman. This is pioneer country, man. You've got guys walking around here whose ancestors came over on the wagon train. These are

the kind of guys who get carried away with themselves every now and then."

Yaqoub said, "Excuse me, please, my friend." Now he spoke as if Thane were a child. "Do you like to watch movies?"

"Yeah. Doesn't everyone?"

"Yes, but I think maybe you are liking too much to watch the movies. This business about the covered wagon is nonsense. Did your ancestors come here on a covered wagon?"

"No."

"Do you know anyone whose ancestors came on a covered wagon?"

"I never asked."

"Most of my friends came here on planes and trains. Do you think Alex, at The Blue Ox, has ancestors who came here on a covered wagon? How about Professor Al-Masari who lives across the street? Do you think that his great-grandparents were pioneers? And what about my dentist, Mister Nguyen? He likes to watch the John Wayne movies; maybe he saw a covered wagon in one of those movies. Yes?"

"You've made your point, Yaqoub, so I'll make mine. A man doesn't deserve to die for grabbing a woman"

Yaqoub said, "Not unless that woman is my little Maya."

And there she was, bearing a platter of *hors d'oeuvres*, which she set out for them. Then she removed the bowl and water pitcher, and left again. Yaqoub and Thane dug into the food. There were two dishes. The first held some sort of deep-fried dumplings, stuffed with spicy, potato paste that made Thane

sweat and reach for his hand towel. Then there was something like chips and salsa, with flat bread like overweight tortillas in place of the chips, and yogurt full of cucumber pieces in place of the salsa.

Yaqoub took one, tore off a piece and plunged it into the white sauce. He said, "Please, my friend," and he handed one to Thane, who also tore off a piece and dipped it in the sauce.

After they'd eaten for a while, and their silence had become uncomfortable to Thane, Yaqoub said, "Tell me, Thane. What do you do?"

And since he hadn't done much yet with his life, Thane hated the question. He said, "Right now I'm sort of in a transition period. I just graduated with the Class of '90. I got my degree in engineering but I haven't worked in that field yet. I've just been sort of, you know, doing odd jobs."

"What sort of odd jobs?"

"Manual labor."

"That could be many things," Yaqoub said, and offered another piece of bread. Thane took it and plunged into the sauce for which he'd developed quite a taste.

Thane said, "Last week, an old rancher hired me to build a corral for his horses. I'm going back next week to paint the fence."

"But, of course, you must have other plans for your life besides making a fence."

Yeah, I'm kind of, like, putting that on hold until"

"Until what, Mister Pioneer?"

Thane laughed, and Yaqoub laughed with him.

Thane said, "I'm waiting to see my father again."

"What do you mean 'again?' How long ago was it when you saw your father the last time?"

"Twenty years ago."

Yaqoub gave Thane the hard stare. He said, "But this is your father you are talking about. How is it that you have not seen him in twenty years?"

"He left when I was a boy, and he never kept in touch. Know what I mean? Damn, man! It ain't my fault."

"Forgive me for saying this, my friend, but I think that after twenty years this man will be just like a stranger to you. Yes?"

Thane thought of how his father had been a stranger to him even on the night when he'd seen him last. Thane and his mother had been living alone in New York City. One night a big, bearded stranger arrived, unannounced, at the door. He spent the night, and ate breakfast with them in the morning. Thane was afraid of him, and wanted to run out of the building. He hadn't even known the man was his father until later, when he left and Thane's mother explained.

Now Thane said, "These days, I could pass him on the street and I wouldn't recognize him."

Yaqoub said, "But your mother has pictures. Yes?" He mimicked a photographer holding up a camera. "Your mom and dad standing together at Niagara Falls? Yes? The Empire State

Building?"

This was embarrassing. Thane wondered how he would explain it, and decided that coming right out with it would be the best. He said, "You might find this hard to believe, but my mom swears she doesn't have one single snapshot of the man. I asked her about it once. She said he didn't like having his picture taken. He got real nervous whenever someone pointed a camera in his direction. She thinks it had something to do with his work." Thane wondered why he was sharing this information with a guy he had just met. And then he thought that perhaps Yaqoub was the kind of guy he wanted to be pleased with him.

Yaqoub said, "Was there not even a photographer at their wedding?"

Was everyone this straightforward where Yaqoub came from, or was Yaqoub just nosy? Thane's parents had been married at city hall, but he withheld this information from Yaqoub. There had been no photographer at the wedding. There had been no tuxedos and gowns. When his mother had described the wedding to him, Thane was shocked at the banality of it. They took a number and were seated, like waiting for a sandwich at the local deli instead of a marriage at the office of the justice of the peace.

Thane said, "There were no wedding pictures."

Perhaps recognizing he had hit a nerve, Yaqoub changed the subject. He said, "When do you expect to see your father again?"

"I don't know."

"I hope you don't mean to tell me that you're going to do these odd jobs and be a barfly at the tavern until your father comes to see you. You could waste two years like that."

Thane wondered why everyone was in such a hurry these days. He said, "My father will return, soon." He wondered if he believed it himself, anymore, or whether he had just said it for so long that it had become a habit.

Yaqoub said, "How do you know he is coming soon?"

Thane sat back on the couch and relaxed. He felt an exhilarating rush, a tingling sensation in his scalp. If ever there was a complete stranger he wanted to tell his story to, then Yaqoub was the one. Thane wanted to hold back and he wanted to tell the story. He remembered that Yaqoub had just lied to him, or Thane thought he had lied. But talking won, and he tried to convince himself that he was coming clean because he wanted to and not because he had begun to feel as though Yaqoub wanted to hear a story and could be unpleasant if you didn't give him what he wanted. Thane looked ahead at the statue and noticed that Kali appeared to have changed. It was probably the drink or a difference in light, but she appeared to have done another step of her dance since Thane had looked at her last.

Thane gave all the details he could remember of the story that until that point he had only told parts of, here and there.

"Last fall I decided I was going to find my father. I announced my plans to mom, and she dug up an old shoe box she'd been saving. I guess she thought it was the right time to give it to me, but she acted like she didn't want to. You know? The

box was full of stuff that belonged to dad. There was a pipe and a tobacco pouch; a Zippo lighter; a deck of cards. But it was mostly yellowed papers, letters and stuff. I wrote to some of the addresses on the letters. They all got returned, sooner or later, but that didn't surprise me; I knew they were a long shot when I started. Some of the old letters were postmarked from Dallas, Texas. So I called every Samuel Thorsson, and every S. Thorsson in the Dallas Directory. No luck. I got my first solid lead when I found an old newsletter from an organization called the "Veterans of the Korean Conflict," and an old claim letter from the Veterans Administration. The claim letter had dad's ID number.

"So I called the Veterans Administration, and told them my story. They were like a broken record. 'We're very sorry, sir, but we aren't allowed to give out that information, and blah, blah, blah.' So I said I hadn't seen my father in twenty years, and shouldn't a son be able to see his own father after twenty years, and couldn't they cut a guy some slack, just this once? But there was no way in hell these people were going to stick their neck out for a voice on the telephone, especially since they get requests just like mine all the time, as they were quick to tell me. 'We're sorry sir,' was all they could say to me. No problem. They had the information and I needed it, and I knew that all it would take was a little expertise.

"I found the expertise at the local chapter of the Veterans of the Korean Conflict. It was a one-man operation by a one-armed man whose name was 'Chuck.' He had one forearm like

Popeye and the other like something built out of an erector set."

Yaqoub interrupted. He said, "What kind of set?"

"Erector set, You know? Metal pieces; nuts and bolts and stuff."

"Do you mean it was a prosthesis?"

"Exactly," Thane said, and continued with his story.

"Chuck chewed tobacco and spit into a spittoon, and he didn't care who saw him do it. I told him my story, and he told me, 'This office don't keep records for anyone outside the Miller's Hole Chapter. There's nothing I can do for you, son.'

"So I said, 'Can you give me a number for the regional chapter, or something?' But he seemed to have made up his mind that he wasn't going to help me, so I thanked him anyway and asked if I could buy him a beer at the Veterans' Lounge. He was getting ready to close the office for the day, and he says, 'I wouldn't say no to a free beer.' So Chuck puts on his blue, V.K.C. garrison cap that had a bunch of ribbons and medals on it. He picks up his cane, and we go downstairs to the Veterans' Lounge, and I buy him a couple of beers. I was a paratrooper, and so was he. I'd been stationed in Korea, and so had he. He'd fought in the Korean Conflict, and I'd served during peacetime, but at least we had a couple things to talk about. I asked how he lost his arm. Ugly story about a hand grenade. I'll leave that part out, except to say that I couldn't beat Chuck's story, so I didn't try. I told him that my father's birthday was in July and that I'd like to send dad a card. Was

there a way we could check whether dad was still in South Dakota? Chuck said it was worth a try. 'Give me the address you want to check!' he says. So I took a cocktail napkin and wrote the address on it: Nine-six-seven-four-five Southwest Division Avenue, in Springfield, South Dakota. Chuck limps over to the pay phone, and makes one call. He walks back to the bar, and says 'Here you go, son. Here's your father's address.' He hands me the cocktail napkin, with dad's real address scribbled on it. It was in Reno."

Yaqoub said, "How did he get it?"

Thane said, "He called the Veterans' Administration, just like I did. But instead of calling to get an address, like I did, Chuck called to verify one. And when Chuck tried to verify the bogus address in South Dakota, apparently, Joe Bureaucrat couldn't resist being right and correcting an error. So he blurted out the right address, and there it was."

Yaqoub said, "What made you think of South Dakota?"

"Because I've never actually met anyone who was from there."

"What about the rest of the address?"

"They say there's a Springfield in every state, so that part was easy. Division Avenue is a street in Portland; I could have screwed up on that one, but I think Chuck was hip by then, and had begun to think I was all right, and decided to play along. I think the clerk at the VA might have caught on, too; after all, those guys are human beings too -- some of them. Or maybe he was playing by the book if he gave the correct address

to someone from a veterans organization who had called to verify the address, instead of just some guy calling out of nowhere, wanting an address for somebody who may or may not be who he says he is. Know what I mean?"

Yaqoub said "How did you think of that? That's pretty good, my friend."

"I didn't think at all. I was totally winging it. Call it instinct."

"That's a good instinct, but you still have not told me why you think your father will return soon."

"Well, you know, I sent the letter last fall, and it hasn't been returned. It seems like if it's on the way, then, you know, it's getting closer every day?"

"Yes. But, I hate to be the one to tell you this, Thane, if the letter is not in the mail by this time, then I think maybe he doesn't want to write it. What makes you think that he is going to change his mind after all this time has passed?"

"Because how could he live with himself? How could he sleep? If his own son goes to the trouble of tracking him down and writing to him, pouring out his heart, after all these years, he would have to be made of stone not to feel a pang of conscience that would make him pick up a pen and paper and get busy. Know what I mean?"

"Please do not take this the wrong way, but maybe stone is just exactly the thing that this man is made from."

Thane said, "Yeah. I thought of that too."

They finished off the *hors d'oeuvres*.

Yaqoub said, "You're pretty smart, Thane, but if you keep on building fences for a living, you won't make enough even to pay off your student loan."

Thane said, "I don't have a student loan, just a rich uncle named 'Sam,' and a credit card, and an eviction notice and one other thing." He remembered Brandee and her alleged leg-breaking pimp, Slappy. And he began to toy with the idea that a guy like Yaqoub might be a useful ally against a guy like Slappy.

Changing the subject again, Yaqoub said, "Are your father's family all workers, like you?"

"Mom doesn't like to talk about dad's side, but she says she's got a brother who's a carpenter, and another who worked in a foundry until he hurt his back; now he's on disability. But as far as I know, we're working class, all the way back to the old country."

"But you're educated, now."

"Yes. Educated working class. Education can't change your genes. A myna bird doesn't become a man because you teach it to say 'hello.'"

Yaqoub said, "What is this nonsense about birds, my friend? I think you insult yourself? Yes?"

"That's not an insult, it's just more like -- A guy shouldn't take himself too seriously, you know?"

"That's bad, very bad. You are talking crazy now. Why do you fight on the side of your enemy? Do you want to be a loser? Life is a serious business. Do you wish to go through life

laughing at yourself?"

"There's no sin in knowing who you are."

Yaqoub said, "This kind of talk is for crazy people. I don't want to hear any more of it. This is America. Here you can be anything. Henry Ford was a mechanic. Jacob Astor was a wild man who went into the woods and caught animals in a steel trap. Yes? And Mister Abraham Lincoln, himself, was a farm boy, reading from the candlelight, like your crazy pioneers. Am I not right about this?"

Although he had never heard of Jacob Astor, Thane was duly chastised, and completely at a loss for what he could say now to make Yaqoub like him again. He wanted very much for Yaqoub to like him again.

But then Maya brought a platter with the steaming main course, and more of the flat bread. Clearing away the empty plates, she left the room while the men ate their dinner. There was rice colored yellow, full of nuts and raisins. A family-sized platter held generous chunks of meat in a white sauce with herbs. Thane asked, "Is this beef?"

Yaqoub said, "That is lamb, and not just any lamb. This is the freshest lamb available. The only fresher lamb is still grazing in the field. My house is the only place in this state where you will find food like this. Please help yourself."

There was no silverware. With much gusto, Yaqoub used his right hand to scoop a handful of rice, and some chunks of lamb onto his plate. He used torn pieces of the flat bread to sop up the sauce.

Yaqoub's style of eating was very appetizing, and much better than using silverware. And the rice was much tastier than the kind Thane was used to. The lamb in gravy full of herbs was the tastiest meat Thane could ever remember having. They ate until neither one of them could eat anymore. Yaqoub commended Thane for his good appetite.

Lastly Maya brought some sort of orange-colored rice pudding and a pot of tea. They devoured the pudding and Yaqoub poured them each a glass of the tea, which was green and had the strong minty smell of a Greyhound bus after it has been cleaned.

They touched their glasses in a toast.

Yaqoub said, "Here's to America."

"What's left of it," Thane said.

"Okay, my friend. I'll drink to that."

Thane took a sip of the tea and scalded his tongue.

"Damn!" he said.

"Yes, damn," said Yaqoub. "The tea is very hot. You can tell by the steam coming off, Mister Engineer."

The pain of the burn cut through the haze of comfort that had settled over the evening. He had disobeyed his instinct when it told him to stay home, back at the QuickMart. Now he would go with his gut feeling and get to the bottom of why he had been brought there; something was up, and he needed to know what it was. He wouldn't disobey his instinct again. Subtleties eluded him now. He felt pressured to speak. He said, "Yaqoub, man, what do you want from me?"

Yaqoub said, "Why are you in such a hurry? Let's finish

our tea and relax. Yes? There will be plenty of time for that later."

"Thanks for the dinner and everything, and please don't think I'm being ungrateful, but, to be frank with you, Yaqoub, this suspense is getting to me, and if I'm going to do any more relaxing tonight, I'm going to have to know what happened last Friday"

"I told you that, already," Yaqoub said, losing his patience.

"Yeah, I know, but what's next? There's something else you want to tell me, isn't there?"

"Yes. You are right."

Thane said, "What's up? What's the deal?"

Yaqoub said, "I have an offer that could do more for your bank account than this business with the fences."

"It wouldn't have to be much of an offer to do that."

"I would like to offer you a job that could make you rich."

"All right, Yaqoub. Let's hear it."

Chapter Thirteen

Yaqoub reached into a pocket of his jacket and extracted a wooden box that was no bigger than a deck of playing cards; it looked like a jewelry box built by Lilliputians. Yaqoub opened the box, and offered its contents for Thane's inspection.

"Hash?" Thane said.

"Hash is something that you eat for breakfast. This is

Hashish. Only the best for my friends. If you have not smoked this, then you have not smoked. Solomon would have given his five hundred wives for one kilogram of this. It is pure, uncut wisdom. But you must be relaxed if you are going to enjoy this. I would not want to make you uncomfortable. If you are too nervous, then perhaps it would be too much for you."

It was a challenge. Could he handle it? That's what this was all about. Could he smoke Yaqoub's dope and keep his cool. He said, "Spark it up, man! Put me down for the magic-carpet ride!"

Yaqoub said, "Now this is the talk of a good man. You will be glad. Very glad.

Thane wasn't. Glad. At all. Glad was quite the opposite of how Thane felt, minutes after taking a toke from the pipe that Yaqoub passed to him. Thane was tweaked, he was cooked, he was fried, he was ripped, but he wasn't glad. Now he remembered why he had quit smoking the stuff. It made him manic to such a degree that he couldn't enjoy it. And in the '80s it had begun to make him paranoid. After one toke, the smiling faces of the Reagans would appear to him, and then the smiling faces of the tattooed convicts at the prison where Thane imagined he would be sent to serve the mandatory ten-year sentence the judge would give him for the one joint he had smoked.

Yaqoub's hashish was smoother than ordinary pot. It was more of a high, less of a buzz. It was a distillation of the finest marijuana, but it was still marijuana. It was sophisticated dope, but it was still dope. It wasn't a lead

pipe upside the head; it was a copper pipe upside the head.

Thane thought: Never, never, never again. He told himself that he should try to relax. Try to relax. He heard Toto's yip, outside. He closed his eyes and saw hallucinatory cartoons. He opened his eyes and all the world was the grainy picture of a cheap television screen. Never again. I'll never do it again.

Yaqoub said, "Are you all right, Thane?"

"Yeah, I'm all right." Thane said, and he made a fist of his right hand, and raised it in a stoner's salute. "Rock 'n roll."

"Good. I want you to be good when I say what I have to tell you."

Slightly out of breath, Thane said, "You mentioned a proposition. What sort of proposition is it that you had for me?"

Yaqoub said, "First, please relax and I will tell you. Yes? You would spend only a little time, and I would pay you a lot of money. Most of the work is done. I will use a metaphor. Okay?" Now it was Yaqoub's turn to be dopey. He smiled and revealed a perfect set of tough guy's carnivorous teeth beneath the dense growth of beard and mustache. Thane wondered if the teeth were fake.

Yaqoub said, "I have built a bridge. I have done all of the design, the engineering, the contracting, the hiring and the building. You would be doing only a small finishing touch, but your pay would be big."

Now Thane thought he knew what it was. He should have seen it coming: the off-chance meeting in the Quick Mart, the drinks, dinner, the talk about what he did for a living. "I should have known it, Yaqoub. I've had it all pitched to me before."

"Pitched? You are playing baseball now. Yes?"

Thane went on, "It's all about soap and catalogs and direct marketing and diamonds and stuff. And if I sign up all my friends then I get a kick-back from what they sell."

Yaqoub looked Thane squarely in the eye, leaned towards him and lowered his voice. Yaqoub put his hand on Thane's shoulder. "That stuff is for losers. I have a cousin, Abbas, in Houston who did that stuff. He went all the way. The harder you go, the bigger they bust you. Abbas used to be a chemist for a big cowboy oil company. Now he is bankrupt and divorced and he drives a Toyota and works at a store. Even worse, he becomes a born-again Christian.

This struck Thane as being very funny, but he was afraid to laugh, for fear that Yaqoub would be insulted. Thane tried but he couldn't rid his mind of the image of a depressed, frumpy man named "Abbas," driving a Toyota to a born-again church. And this image tickled Thane's guts until a grin took his face and he couldn't restrain himself from laughing. Yaqoub laughed with him. Together, they had an acute case of hashish-induced hilarity. Thane thought: they don't call it dope for nothing.

And then Thane remembered the business at hand. In the hashish-induced time warp, Thane's voice had shifted its wavelength, sounded unfamiliar; it was the voice of a boy. He

said. "Okay, Yaqoub. So you want me to smuggle some hashish. Is that it?"

Then it was Yaqoub's turn to be amused. Thane had just given the punch line to the funniest joke in the world. Yaqoub laughed like a drunken pirate. Thane wanted him to stop, but Yaqoub kept on laughing, holding his sides, throwing back his head. And he continued long past the point when the laughter had turned Thane's nervousness into a case of the jitters. And then Yaqoub laughed some more.

Thane attempted to engage him in conversation. He said, "Yaqoub, man. This thing you want me to do -- Is it legal?"

Yaqoub's previous bout of laughter turned out to have been a mere precursor to the one that struck him now. But now Thane was past being alarmed. He abandoned himself to it, as though Yaqoub's laughter were a storm at sea, and Thane was a man in a lifeboat on the sea, off the coast of a strange land.

Thane said, "What sort of crime do you want me to commit, Yaqoub?"

"I want you to kill a man."

Thane thought: here's the mind game that gets played whenever two or three are gathered together in a cloud of pot smoke. It's a test of nerve, a rite of dope-smoker's passage. Thane said, "That's pretty good, man! You really had me going there."

"I'm not playing games, Thane. This is not the movies. This is the real deal. This is the world of men. Are you in or are you out?" And he wasn't joking.

The urge to bolt was more than a gut instinct. It was a leg, arm, chest and face instinct. His whole body was charged with the urge to be gone from Yaqoub's house.

Thane stood and tried to speak, but choked instead. He swallowed, and tried to lick his lips. His mouth was dry, but then he managed to speak anyway. Now it was Thane's turn to speak in broken English. He said, "If I have to kill a man, to be in the world of men . . . If that's why you brought me here . . . I can't do that: kill a man. Not me. You've got the wrong guy. Thanks for dinner and the drinks and the hashish. I'll take the bus."

Yaqoub stood, and said. "When you leave here, it won't be on a bus, my friend."

Thane's voice was weak. "I'll walk, then."

"No you won't," said Yaqoub. "First we have a small business to settle. Yes?" Yaqoub reached down and pushed aside the Atlas, revealing the stain, which Thane had forgotten until that point. Yaqoub said, "What am I supposed to do about this? This table is the only one of its kind."

Thane said, "I meant to say something about that, but I forgot. Really. I'm sorry. I'm sure it can be fixed. They can sand it down and redo the stain and varnish."

Yaqoub said, "There is not one man in this town that I would let him try to fix this table. It is ruined forever."

"So ship it back to your country, and send me the bill."

And it was at that moment when Thane discovered why Yaqoub had kept his jacket on; from under its left lapel, Yaqoub pulled

a gun and pressed the barrel to Thane's forehead, as casually as a bartender pouring a glass of beer. "They say you are very smart, Thane; but now you are being stupid. It is very foolish and impatient of you to try and leave before I have told you the whole deal. And now you mock me and my country, here in my own house. I once killed a man for an insult that wasn't nearly as bad as this."

In a flash of enlightenment, Thane understood what was meant when a person said, "I was beside myself." Thane was beside himself, now. His conscious mind had been pushed out of the way by another self: one with heightened senses. Thane was watching himself in a movie -- a western -- in which he was the leading man who sat off camera while his stunt double did the work. There was the barrel of a gun, pressed against his nose. His senses were turned up to turbo drive. He smelled oily metal, and the spice from dinner. He heard Toto's yip, and Kaiser's low-pitched response, outside.

Yaqoub said, "Do you recognize this gun, Thane?"

Thane tried to say "nope," but it came out like a gasp.

"This gun is the same kind that Buck O'Brien used in the movies. Yes? Do you remember Buck O'Brien," Then Yaqoub did an alarming impression of Buck O'Brien. He said, "'All right, Cody. The way I see it you've got two choices here. And one of them comes with six feet of dirt, and you're gunna' have to dig it yourself.' Yes? How do like that, Thane? I should have been a cowboy. Yes?" And once again he heard the awful sound that for Yaqoub served as laughter. Thane thought: If Saddam

Hussein ever laughs, this is probably how it sounds. Thane thought of bombs, destruction, nothingness. No sparrow carrying grains of sand. No eternity. Yes, nothing. A pull of Yaqoub's right forefinger would annihilate him. Thane didn't want that. The second-place winner in the marathon of things Thane hadn't wanted in his life was several miles behind his not wanting to be blown to nothing by a bullet from the cold barrel of the gun pressed against his nose. Thane wanted to live. He wanted to build another fence, eat another meatloaf sandwich, check the mail again. Strangely, he now felt more hope of seeing his father again. In the part of Thane's brain that was responsible for saving him, a warning message blinked in red lights, "Don't let him do it!" as though he had a choice. But Thane's inner cowboy was running the show now, and the inner cowboy was much more concerned with honor. The inner cowboy said, "Look him straight in the eye! Don't let him stare you down! Stand still! Stand at attention, just like in the army!" And Thane obeyed his inner cowboy. He tried to stay cool under Yaqoub's burning stare. And he stood still while his heart pumped at running speed.

Yaqoub said, "This is not a joke, Thane. If you insist upon disrespecting me in my own home, I will kill you." SNAP! - - Yaqoub snapped the fingers of his right hand, to add a sound effect to the threat. "Please don't make me do that to you. I like you, and I want to help you."

Thane said, "Nobody is stopping you from shooting me, Yaqoub." Thane's legs stood fast and his words were bold, but

his voice had retreated to a higher pitch, not too many wavelengths below the Mickey-Mouse end of the audible-sound spectrum. He held up his arms. "Go ahead!" The inner cowboy was a great bluffer, a major-league player of the tough-guy game.

Thane heard Maya's voice screaming in her other tongue.

Yaqoub took the gun off Thane's nose, and held it to his side. Thane caught his breath, as though he'd just sprinted three blocks to catch the bus.

Thane laughed. He had no idea where the laughter came from, but there it was. Yaqoub laughed with him, but less robustly than before. Yaqoub put the gun back in its shoulder holster, and motioned for Thane to sit.

But first Thane asked directions to the rest room, where he quickly went. Returning, he fell to the couch and slumped. Maya set two one-liter bottles of beer, with glasses to go with them, on a tray on the coffee table. Then she sat on the couch across from them.

Maya appeared to be enjoying herself, as though she were aroused by the possibility of violence.

Thane's mouth was dry. He poured a glass of beer, gulped it, and poured another.

Maya said, "You shouldn't drink so fast."

"You're right," he said and quickly drank half of it.

Nodding toward Yaqoub, beside him, Thane said, "And your husband shouldn't threaten the life of your guest."

Yaqoub didn't respond. He sat back on the couch and

grinned, resting his gun hand, which still held the huge, nickel-plated revolver. He had done his tough guy routine for the evening. Now he was resting.

Then Thane couldn't help but notice that Maya appeared to be looking at him differently now that he had passed Yaqoub's little test. Or maybe it was just the hashish that changed the way things looked now.

Thane noticed that, for the first time that evening, all three of them were relaxed. And for a while there was no need to talk. They all just sat. Thane sipped his beer. Yaqoub slumped on the couch, and grinned, blissfully stoned. And Maya sat there with a hint of arousal in her eyes.

Thane said, "All right, Yaqoub. Let's hear it! What's the deal? Who do you want to kill." His voice had returned to its normal pitch.

Yaqoub said, "A man owes me a lot of money, and refuses to repay it."

"You would kill a guy over money?"

"A lot of money," Yaqoub said.

"All right. A man owes you a lot of money, so you want me to take his life. And you're going to pay me for this. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"How much does he owe you?"

Yaqoub said, "It will be the same thing to you if he owes me a hundred dollars or a hundred thousand. Yes?"

Thane said, "What I'd like to know is how deep in debt a

man has to be to earn your bullet in his head. Can't I be curious about that, if I'm considering doing this job?"

"No. That is not how it works. Some men owe me more, but I am not going to kill them. But this man says he doesn't have my money, and he puts hundreds of dollars a week into the slot machines. He is a liar, but even for that alone I would not kill him. But yes, I will kill a man for disrespect. The people at the tavern know this man owes me money, and they see him put my money into the slot machines, and they say, 'Yaqoub is not serious about the loans he makes. Perhaps I too will borrow money from Yaqoub. And when Yaqoub asks them to repay his money, they will say, 'I am sorry, Yaqoub, but I do not have the money to repay you today; now, if you will excuse me, please, I would like to go put some hundreds of dollars of your money into the slot Machines, please.' I cannot have people to say this about me. If I do not punish this man for his disrespect, then I will have no future in business."

"Why don't you break his legs? That will send a pretty clear message, won't it?"

"It would not work. The man must die."

Thane said, "What makes you think I'm capable of killing a guy?"

"I have seen you try to kill a man."

"Do you mean last Friday night?"

"If I didn't stop you . . ." Yaqoub looked toward heaven, and held the palms of his hands facing upward.

At that point in the hashish-induced time warp, Thane

noticed that the sculpture of Kali appeared to have changed once again. Now everything fit. Fangs and body parts, skulls and dead things all made sense now. Kali was about the one thing whereby all the other things were gotten. There was a brutal logic to Kali now. Thane understood this logic, but it wasn't his. It belonged to a world where he would quickly be damned.

Thane said, "So what does last Friday night prove? I'm a hothead. I fly off the handle. I can't be trusted. I'm exactly the wrong kind of guy you'd want to hire to commit a cold-blooded murder. And, frankly, Yaqoub, I'm curious why you would make the conclusion that you've made about last Friday night. Know what I mean? Frankly speaking, Yaqoub, there's something fishy about this whole thing."

Yaqoub said, "Okay, Thane, it is possible that you are not the right man for the job. But I am willing to gamble with you. I cannot teach you the desire to kill. But you were in the army, so this will not be new. I think you have pretty good odds. Yes? Your courage tonight proves that."

Thane said, "Yes, Yaqoub. I'm a veteran of the cold war. I was too late for Grenada and, obviously, too early for Dessert Storm. The only live rounds I ever fired were on a firing range."

"Any man can kill, if he is a real man," Yaqoub said, and sneered at him.

Thane said, "If this job means so much to you, then why don't you hire a professional?"

"I owe you a favor for last Friday night. I insist to pay

you."

Here was Thane's way out, his chance to walk out of Yaqoub's house with his honor intact. All scores would be settled and Thane would go back to his own world: odd jobs and fried-chicken lunches. He could taste his own world, once again. Thane said, "Do you really want to repay me for last Friday night?"

Yaqoub said, "Yes. Have I not said this, already, Thane?"

"All right, then, Yaqoub. If you want to repay me for last Friday night, then there is only one thing I'll accept for payment." Thane looked at Maya. The bothered gleam had not gone from her eyes.

Yaqoub said, "Yes. What? Anything." Yaqoub looked at Maya, and she smiled at him.

"All right, Yaqoub. If you want to repay me, then consider this evening's drinks and dinner as payment in full."

Yaqoub said, "You are a gentleman, Thane, and I thank you; but I still make my offer. If you don't do the job, then it will be done by someone else, but it will be done. The man will be dead before Monday. This is a promise."

Maya was herself again. Kali was herself again: a grim deity, lusting for propitiation. Moments ago, Thane could project the act of murder into the distant weeks, the realm of theory. But now that the deed loomed just beyond a night's sleep Thane knew he couldn't do it.

Yaqoub said, "The money will go into your pocket, or the pocket of a stranger. Who will it be?"

This wasn't for Thane. He had known it all along. He had only bothered to listen in the first place because he had been forced at gunpoint. But now Thane knew that regardless of what life had in store for him, this wasn't it. "Let it be someone else. The money should go into someone else's pocket."

Yaqoub said, "You are a fool."

"And you are a crook. This ain't Iraq here, man. This is the goddamned United States of America! Here you don't kill a guy just because he owes you money. That's not an eye for an eye. That's a whole head for an eye. Where's your sense of justice?"

Yaqoub said, "If you so much love justice then I will tell you another story. You see, this man does not only gamble but he has other expensive habits. That is bad, but for this he does not deserve to die. But this man cannot afford any of his habits, so he pays for them with someone else's money. This is very bad."

Thane said, "If the man was a credit risk, then you shouldn't have loaned him the money."

Yaqoub said, "He came to me, and I said no, but he would not leave me alone. I explain to him my terms and penalties for if he does not pay. But he says to me again and again and again that he wants to borrow the money. This man has killed himself."

Thane said, "If this man has got habits, then maybe he doesn't know what he's doing. Maybe he's not mentally competent."

"No. It is not that, Thane. This man is competent and he has the money. He has borrowed money from someone else, and he gives to me nothing.

Yaqoub couldn't sit for this. He stood and brandished the gun, like he was a terrorist highjacking a plane. Thane wished he would put the gun away, but decided that this wasn't the proper time to suggest it.

Yaqoub continued his story and his highjacker's gestures. He said, "This Mister Gambler knows a very nice Christian woman. He tells to this nice woman that he will marry her. She loans him already five thousand, and she has more money in the bank. And he will get that money too when they are married."

Unlike Yaqoub's story about last Friday night, this one rang true. Thane said. "Go on! Tell me the rest of it!" It was the story, not the gun, which remained drawn, that Thane was afraid of now.

Yaqoub said, "It is bad enough that this man must rob from the weak because he is too stupid to rob from the strong. But this man is proud of himself for taking money from a nice, Christian woman. If he was ashamed of himself for this crime, then it would still be bad enough but not so bad than if he was always bragging about it. He tells about it to anybody who listens. This man has also been at the county jail, and like a fool he brags about his big story, and these people all laugh very much at this story. But one of them is a customer of mine, who owes me money. This guy has big ears, do you know?" With the gun still in his right hand, Yaqoub held his hands to his

ears, as if to make them bigger. "For his story, I say this inmate doesn't have to pay his debt. From his story I know this time that the gambling man has money to pay me back, but he keeps it. For this alone, I would not kill him, but"

Thane said, "He takes the money he should be paying you and puts it in the slot machines, in front of the whole tavern."

Yaqoub said, "This is an insult to me."

Thane said, "This man who you want to kill -- What is his name?"

Yaqoub shrugged as if to say, "What do you think?" And he put away his gun. He and Maya both stared at Thane now.

Thane knew the answer. He was in Kali's world to stay. Kali's world was the only one that made sense, now. Thane belonged there. He had brought himself there. Thane had invoked the demon who faced him now: the four-armed hag who stood before him, and stuck out her tongue at him.

Chapter Fourteen

Thane stood, walked to the picture window and surveyed the town below, which looked much better at night when lights were all you could see. On the butte, on the north end of the town center, stood a lighted cross, a war memorial. Thane remembered the words of a song he'd once sang in church: *So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, 'till my trophies at last I lay down. I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown.* Many of the lights on the cross had gone out and hadn't been replaced. If a newcomer to the town had arrived at night, he could have been forgiven for failing to identify the odd collection of lights up on the butte, where the shape of a cross used to burn every night.

Yaqoub approached the window, and stood next to Thane. He said, "Nice. Yes?"

Thane said, "Needs work."

Yaqoub said, "Where I am from, it would make this place look like Beverly Hills. Running water is a luxury. I am not kidding. A decent meal is only for celebrations."

"Where's that?"

"It is a place where you dream about towns like this."

On the cross on the butte, another light blinked off.

Thane said, "How much would the job pay?"

Yaqoub said "Payment is negotiable, but I will pay a fair price."

"How about a hundred thousand?"

"Not even a professional hit man gets that much for one job. I will give you twenty thousand in cash."

"A brand new car costs more than a used one. Right?"

"Do you want to buy a car?"

"No, Yaqoub. It's an analogy. My murder-meter has zero miles on it. I'm a brand new car and my sticker price is seventy-nine thousand," Thane said, remembering that it was best not to barter in round figures.

"You are changing your tune very quickly. It was just minutes ago you wanted to take the bus home. Now maybe I think you want to drive home in a Jaguar. Yes?"

"I want to make things right, and it's going to cost a bundle. First I want to get mom's bank account back where it was before Gerry came along. Know what I mean? When I walked in here tonight I wouldn't have ever considered something like this, but I bought your story. I'm considering doing the job and I want to find out what it pays. So how about seventy-nine grand?"

Yaqoub tried his hard stare, but it had been rendered ineffectual by the gun show earlier that evening. Yaqoub said, "Okay, Thane, I will agree to this nonsense about the new car. But, please don't take this the wrong way, I think you exaggerate your own worth. I think your sticker price is closer to thirty-eight thousand, and I will advise you don't be greedy, or maybe hiring a professional might not be such a bad idea after all."

Thane said, "How can you stand there with Fort Knox hanging

around your neck and give me a sermon on greed? Greed is the business we're in here, man. Ain't this about usury, to begin with? Ain't it for money that we're having this conversation? I ain't asking for seventy-nine thousand so I can go out and buy a gold chain to hang around my neck. I'm going to need every dime of it once I finish the job. Shoot, I'll probably have to leave the state. And while I'm at it, I might as well leave the country. And I'm going to be spending lots of money to get what I need, a fake passport and God only knows what else. These things ain't cheap. Sixty-two thousand is the least I'm going to need for my life as a fugitive, and to see mom right."

Yaqoub held up his hands, as if to stop Thane from finishing his sales pitch. He said, "Because I am a generous man, I will pay fifty thousand. You can buy a very comfortable life in Mexico for that. Yes?"

Yaqoub appeared to be exasperated with the negotiations, and Thane thought this was odd because Yaqoub seemed like one of the most even-tempered men he had ever met. Perhaps Yaqoub's frustration was a ploy, but Thane agreed that fifty-thousand dollars was a fair price for the job.

Yaqoub said, "Then it is settled. We will review the plans, first thing in the morning." Then he stepped toward Thane, to close the deal with a handshake.

Thane refused the hand that was offered him. "Wait a minute, Yaqoub! I've just agreed to a price. I haven't agreed to do the job."

"Oh hell," Yaqoub said. He threw up his hands and stepped

away as if to leave. Then he stopped and turned. He said, "When will you decide, if not tonight?"

"I'll decide in the morning. This is the kind of decision a guy wants to sleep on," Thane said. "If sleeping will be possible tonight."

Yaqoub said, "You have been offered the chance of a lifetime. It would be wise of you to take this chance."

Thane said, "If it's as important as all that, then the decision should certainly be made once I've sobered up."

Yaqoub said "The job must be done by Sunday, and I want a decision by tomorrow evening." Then Yaqoub gave Thane a business card with the name of a company, "All American Vending Co., Inc." The phone number, Yaqoub explained, was for a cellular phone, which he would keep with him, turned on, until he heard from Thane, who should please call no later than 9 O'clock tomorrow evening, regardless of his decision.

Thane took the card and put it in his wallet. He said, "He's waited this long. What's another week?"

"He must be dead by Monday. If we are going to have a deal, you must give me a little bit of trust. It is best if you do not know the whole story. Okay, my friend?"

"Vending?" said Thane.

"Excuse me?"

"The card says 'All-American Vending Company, Inc.'"

"Yes, vending," said Yaqoub. "Leave that to me. You are making this more difficult than it has to be. Your part is simple."

After a brief foreign-language conference with Maya, Yaqoub said, "Maya will take you home."

Maya drove down the winding road onto the grid of the town center, and asked where to go. Thane led her on a roundabout way, because he had begun to dislike the idea of parting with her. He directed her out of the grid, to the warehouses and lots, the store fronts and lumberyards to the northwest of town.

The road followed the river, past abandoned commercial properties, which had been put up for lease by realtors with names such as "Heinz & Co.," "Magnusson & Associates" and "Kohler, Tomlinson and Happel," whose large signs were covered with skittish graffiti, unimaginative slogans like "Rafe '89," "Riverside Rules" and "Bite Me!" in degenerate, spray-painted script.

In a cul-de-sac where the streetlights had been blown forever, the old Fuller Bakery building sat abandoned, without a single window left intact.

June 5, 1996 Note: You're going backwards, up from this point.

"Are we getting close?" Maya said, when the road became abandoned.

"It's a couple of miles away, by the river. Just keep going straight, here."

They drove past the liquor store, a lively spot in the dead neighborhood. The bed of a pickup truck held a couple of sneering boys, wearing baseball caps with the brim pointed the

wrong way. They sneered at the passing Mercedes, and gave it the finger. Thane returned the greeting with the best mad-dog grin he could muster.

Maya said, "What if they follow us?"

Thane said, "What they want is a bottle. I've seen their kind before. They won't follow us."

"I've seen their kind before," she said, mimicking him. And she laughed. "Give me a break!" she said.

Thane decided to keep quiet as they passed the porno shop with its low-rent sign that looked as though it had been painted by one of the local graffiti artists.

A red Ferrari sat alongside a rowdy, blue muscle car and a variety of quieter American makes and businessmen's Jap jobs, which all democratically shared the parking lot of the topless-bottomless bar called "The Bottom Line."

If they had to have these places, Thane wondered, why couldn't they have some style about it? Why couldn't they have attractive signs, and imaginative names? If you're going to hell, why not do it in style? Thane said, "Take a right, there, on the street just past the bar."

A little way up the road, she drove across the railroad tracks, past yet another abandoned building, across from which stood Thane's apartment.

Thane said, "There it is, over there."

"By this building?"

"My apartment is on the other side of the building, but you'd better leave me here."

Maya said, "Why don't you let me drive you to the door?"

I just wanted to talk, you know? I wanted for us to be alone."

The Mercedes crunched to a halt on the gravel of the parking lot beside the abandoned warehouse, a giant's gaping barn. She stopped the car, killed the engine and the headlights.

Undoing her seat belt, she turned towards him. "Okay, Thane Thorsson. Let's talk."

He stared through the windshield and said nothing while Maya sat patiently, at ease with his discomfort.

Thane said, "Yaqoub's in vending. He run the slot machines at The Blue Ox?"

She was quiet long enough for Thane to guess that the answer was "yes" and she was trying to figure out a way to say it.

Thane said, "If Yaqoub runs the slot machines, and Gerry takes the money he's supposed to be paying Yaqoub and puts it into the slot machines, then isn't that sort of the same thing as paying his debt to Yaqoub? Seems like Yaqoub is making plenty of money off the man. What's his complaint?"

Maya said, "No! It doesn't work that way. Loans are one business and the machines are another."

"So you've just admitted that Yaqoub runs the machines. Yes?"

After a tortured passing of time, Maya said, "You haven't decided to do the job yet, have you?" She sighed, and crossed

her arms.

Thane said, "I'm trying to figure out whether I want to commit cold-blooded murder. My conscience has something to say about the decision."

She yelled at him. "Your conscience is not what you hear. Your conscience would tell you that Gerry must be punished for stealing from your mother. How can you think of not doing the job?"

Thane said, "I don't know where you and Yaqoub come from, but we do things differently here. We've got something called 'due process.' What if Gerry's story at the prison was a tall tale. What if he's gotten nothing from mom?"

Maya said, "Are you actually giving Gerry the benefit of the doubt? What's the matter with you? Why are you defending him? Why are you fighting on the side of your enemy?"

Thane said, "I'm fighting on the side of justice."

She laughed, insultingly, and said, "You are fighting on the side of talk, talk and more talk. You're just like one of those smelly old professors at the college. You talk to justify your own inability to act. Gerry wants to marry your mother for her bank account. Will you let him do that? Will you let Gerry rob from your mother? Will you or won't you?"

"Maybe he should be warned to stay away."

"More talk."

"He should be given a chance to desist."

"This man humiliates you. He wants to take the money that your mother has worked all her life to save. He wants to take

your honor. Why does he deserve a chance?"

Thane slammed his fist on the dashboard. "What do you take me for? This isn't about honor. This isn't about me and mom. This is about Yaqoub's big house and his gold chain and leather jacket. Do you think I'm so stupid that I can't see that?"

She said, "This is about us, Thane."

"Us?"

"If you can't see it, then maybe you are even more stupid than you claim not to be."

This was a side of her he hadn't seen yet. She moved closer. He wondered if she had really softened or whether it was an act. Was it all in his head, or did she smell the way a woman smells when she wants to be touched? A woman couldn't fake being turned on, could she? Thane's voice went deep and scratchy. He said, "There's nothing I wouldn't do to have you."

"Then do it!" she said, her voice cracking in the heat between them. He moved towards her, but stopped short of kissing her. When she didn't pull away, he put his mouth on hers. Before long, the pressing together of their lips became a struggle of their whole mouths and tongues.

He felt the inside of her thigh, and it was warm. Upward, his hand found plenty to feel underneath the drape of her blouse. He began to undo the blouse's buttons. Pain tore his lip, and ripped through his mouth. He pulled away. "What the hell?" he yelled. "What the hell are you doing?" He touched his mouth and got blood on his fingers. Her mouth had blood on it too. She had bitten him.

Breathing hard, she said, "You can have the rest when you've finished the job."

But he wouldn't be turned off so easily. He touched her leg again. She slapped him. She said, "Do you think I want to stop when we've come this far? I want this too, but first you've got to do the job."

He said, "Do you mean that if I do it, then"

"Yes," she said, interrupting.

If he finished the job, there were no questions to which she would answer "no." This is what he heard.

Thane said, "What about Yaqoub?"

"What about Yaqoub? What do you think I mean to him? I am like his housewife, but not really. He tells me I am the best girl in the world, and that I am the one he comes home to. But that's only after he's done with his little, blonde-haired bitch at the college. Then he comes home for the food that I cook for him, and the drinks that I make for him. I am no more than a cocktail waitress to him. A thing to cook his food, and to wait on his table and his bed. I am his house thing. I'm an American now, but he treats me like a harem girl. I don't want that."

She held up the fingers of her left hand, so Thane could see she had no ring.

Thane said, "He hasn't married you? I'll marry you. Let's go to Reno, right now. We have this car, and I can get"

She slapped him again, harder than before.

"God help me," she said. "I've fallen in love with a fool."

How far do you think we'll get with nothing? I have no money. Yaqoub has made sure of that. And you? You build fences. Do the job for Yaqoub, and get the fifty thousand. Then we'll go much farther than Reno. Do you have a passport?"

Thane said, "No. Where are we going?"

"Canada, of course. I've got cousins in Vancouver. Fifty thousand won't go far there, but we can get papers and then we can work."

Thane said, "Why not Mexico?"

"Because Yaqoub suggested Mexico, silly! Besides, *habla usted Espanol?*"

"Um, *si, uno pocito.*"

"That's what I thought. Men are all the same. You would be lost without a woman to think of the little things."

"Won't Yaqoub have us followed?"

"He'll barely notice I'm gone. Every night he'll have a different woman. He will only miss the cooking."

"Couldn't he find us? A guy like him must have connections all over the place."

She said, "A guy like him is nothing outside of Miller's Hole. It was not long ago that he was a bartender in this town."

"But now he's big, isn't he? I mean, look at the size of that house."

Maya said, "He's a legend in his own mind."

They made plans to meet after the job was done. She had already made a plan.

Thane began to say something else, but she put her hand over his mouth and told him that any more talk would be wasted. And she told him that deep inside him lay the strength to do the job, and that he would find this strength if he did it for her.

Once again, he told her there was nothing he wouldn't do for her.

Yes, but would he kill for her?

Thane said that if that's all there was to this whole business, then killing once would not be enough. For her he would kill as many times as there were grains of sand on all the coastlines of every continent and island, on the planet.

She laughed and made him blush, embarrassed that he had said something foolish.

For reassurance he tried to kiss her again, but she wouldn't let him. He begged for another kiss, for luck, before going into battle.

She told him that there wasn't going to be any battle and that once the job was done he could have as many kisses as he liked. She told him to get out of the car, and go home; she said he should try to sleep, and that tomorrow he should call Yaqoub, and agree to do the job. And she promised that there would be many nights of pleasure to come, once the job was done.

Chapter Fifteen

That night Thane had a recurring dream of a greenhouse where everything was designed to soothe the senses. There was a

pond with big lazy goldfish and the peaceful sound of water pouring over rocks.

There was a black myna bird in a cage.

Thane said, "Hey pretty bird, what's your name?"

And the bird said, "Arnold."

And this made Thane very happy, and he was even happier when the bird said, "What's your name?" Thane introduced himself to the bird. It was a magical garden.

And then an awful noise came and made it all disappear. The noise turned out to be an alarm clock. Thane woke up and remembered Maya and last night and what he was supposed to do today. Then he decided to take a shower before he called Yaqoub.

As he stepped out of the shower and dried himself, he began to feel sick from all last night's drinking and eating. He remembered that there were some things he wanted to do before he called Yaqoub. Thane dressed and made his first phone call of the day, which was to his mother instead of Yaqoub. Thane made plans to have lunch with his mother.

As he left his apartment and began the half-hour walk to his mother's place, Thane remembered his first trip to the magic garden of his dream. He was a young boy then, and he and his mother hadn't come west yet. They were still living in New York. It had been just before Christmas, he remembered, and he was sitting at his desk in the third grade classroom of PS 122, drawing a Christmas tree with presents underneath it: boxes of all shapes and sizes, every pattern of wrapping paper he could

invent: polka dot, diagonal stripes going this way and that, plain, plaid, checkered, and flowered, in all ten colors from his box of crayons. The drawing was vivid to him even after all these years; it was one of life's indelible sensations.

The teacher, Mrs. Weinberg, called Thane's name. He looked up and the teacher motioned for him to come to the chalkboard where she stood beside Sister Carmen, who had brown skin and a face Thane loved, and hair in a pony tail, a special kind of black; this was a day for indelible sensations. Thane knew Sister Carmen from catechism at Saint Bridget's, but what was she doing in the Third Grade Classroom of P.S. 122?

Sister Carmen took Thane's hand, and led him into the empty hallway, where there was a water fountain and Thane asked if he could get a drink of water, and she told him he could. And then Thane held up his hands in a gesture of confusion and said, "You're that pretty girl from Saint Bridget's. How come you're at P.S. 122?"

She told him he was blushing and it was sweet the way he blushed. And she knelt and held his face with both of her hands and spoke softly, and said, "Thane, honey. Your mother is sick. She asked someone at the hospital to call me, so I'm going to cook dinner for you and then we're going uptown to see your mother."

Thane did the gesture of confusion once again and said, "But it ain't dinner time yet."

"No, you should say, 'It's *not* dinner time yet,' okay, honey? I don't want you to say 'ain't.' That's ugly talk for

stupid boys and you're a smart boy, okay?"

Thane said it was okay, and she told him that she would come back to his classroom at 3 O'clock. Then she asked which he liked best: hot dogs or hamburgers. "Steak," Thane said. She smiled, and promised to cook him a steak for dinner and to take him to see his mother at the hospital.

And Thane felt like the luckiest boy in the world. On the playground, that afternoon, Thane found his friend, Booby. "Hey Booby!" Thane said. "You remember Sister Carmen from caddy-kizzum at Saint Bridget's?"

"Yeah? What about her?" Booby said.

"I'm going to her place for dinner, and she's gonna cook me a steak." Booby punched Thane so hard it knocked him down, and his nose bled, but Thane was so happy he barely noticed.

Then the 3 O'clock bell rang, Thane left the schoolhouse and there was Sister Carmen and she asked if he had been fighting. Mrs. Weinberg told the Sister that Thane had been bragging, and Sister Carmen smiled and took Thane's hand. In the hallway Thane said, "How come they call you 'Sister'? You don't look like no nun to me. You just look like a nice, pretty Puerto Rican girl." She smiled and hugged him. It was the first time he had seen her smile. She told him that they were going to go to a beautiful garden, and Thane would see his mother there.

Thane said, "I thought we was going to a hospital. Besides, when do I get my steak?"

And she knelt, as she had done before, and put both her

hands on his face again, and explained that there was a garden at the hospital; they had to get there before it closed and if he was hungry right now they could get a pretzel when they got uptown.

And Thane made it a point to ask plenty of questions as they took the bus uptown.

There was a big gray building, and lots of doctors and nurses. And then they walked down some hallways and went outside again and there was the greenhouse, and the garden. Standing next to a nurse was Thane's mother, with a look on her face like the one she had when she sat up late in the kitchen, humming softly by the light of a lamp without a shade, drinking from a bottle in a brown, paper bag, as the winos did. She wore a blue robe and slippers. She tried to touch Thane, but he stepped away.

"Thane, honey," Sister Carmen said. "Let your mother touch you."

Thane hated his mother's eyes, and the way she looked at him and said stupid things like, "You're my little owl."

Then Sister Carmen said she wanted to talk to Thane's mother, and she told Thane to go look at the rest of the garden, and he did.

Thane forgot all about his mother. He discovered the pond and the goldfish and the bird. And a black man in a white coat told Thane it was a myna bird, and it could talk. And Thane told the man that birds can't talk. And the black man said, "Ask him his name! Go ahead!" And that's where sister Carmen

found Thane, talking to the bird. She put her hand on his shoulder and told him they were going to take the bus back downtown, and she asked if he would like to sleep at her house. And he said he would.

On the stairway in Sister Carmen's building, there were two big women. One of them said, "Carmen, honey, who's the little angel."

And when they got to the apartment, Thane said, "That lady on the stairway sounded like a guy."

And Sister Carmen said, "He was a guy."

"So how come he was wearing a dress and stuff?"

"Because he likes to dress like a woman."

"What for?"

"I don't know, Thane, but I think he just wants to be beautiful."

"He don't look very beautiful to me. He just look like a guy in a dress. But that garden looked beautiful and you look beautiful, Sister Carmen."

And she hugged him and stroked his hair and spoke to him in Spanish and he never wanted her to stop, but she had to cook him dinner.

And the steak was the best he ever had, and there were rice and beans to go with it, and then they went for a walk in the neighborhood, where there was loud music with lots of trumpets and drums. Thane asked what kind of music it was and she said it was dance music. Thane said he liked dance music. They stopped at a bodega, where Sister Carmen bought a toothbrush and

spoke Spanish to a guy in a purple shirt who called Thane "Pablito."

Thane said, "My name's Thane, not Pabby-leedo." And the guy said, "Yeah, but in this neighborhood you gotta have a Spanish name." And then he said, "If I give you an ice, then can I call you Pablito?" And Thane said, "Yeah," and the man laughed and so did Sister Carmen, and Thane didn't know what was so funny. Thane took an ice with lemon-lime syrup, and Sister Carmen took one with strawberry.

Back at her apartment, they could still hear the music. There was a picture of Jesus on the wall. Sister Carmen gave Thane the new toothbrush and told him to brush his teeth. And then there was a siren and shouting in both Spanish and English, and the music stopped. Out on the street there were red and blue lights that shined on the picture of Jesus, and Jesus looked sad, and Thane asked if Jesus was sad because the cops made the guys turn off the dance music. And Sister Carmen stroked his hair and looked at him with tears flowing from her coffee-colored eyes.

Then Thane's mother got out of the hospital. And then she "received the holy spirit" and they quit going to Saint Bridget's and started to attend a mission in what used to be a store, farther down the lower east side, where they sang and danced, shook tambourines and danced around like idiots. And Thane never saw Sister Carmen again.

And then they went west. And Oregon also had something like the big gray building uptown, but there was no garden, and

Thane's mother said that was because the whole state was like a garden. And Thane asked if there were any myna birds, and she said no but there were other kinds of birds.

Thane saw an empty can on the sidewalk, and kicked it as he walked. The ground was littered with gum wrappers, cigarette butts, cans and broken glass. And grass grew between the cracks on the sidewalk. But everything was clean around the lumber yard where a solitary worker drove a forklift, which he used to put a new stack of lumber in a neat stack. Past the lumberyard, Thane ducked under a sagging tree branch, cut through the hole in a fence and emerged in a field overgrown by weeds and littered with the refuse of dead-end lives: shards of record albums, pieces of broken furniture, cardboard cola cartons, a warped bicycle wheel, a headless baby doll. Then came the railroad tracks, and Thane crossed to the other side of them.

The building was a cheap, wooden box, painted a cut-rate shade of blue. It was a residential island in a sea of industry. Some of the building's lines weren't quite plumb, and it looked as though it had been hammered together in a hurry, to keep the labor costs down.

The air smelled of marijuana, which had a skunk-like scent. Thane saw the smokers, three of them gathered around the engine of a big old Cadillac that engulfed the white lines of the space in which it was parked. The car had fins like a shark. It was up on cinder blocks and you could see its hubs and brake drums.

They trio stared and continued to pass a joint that looked like it could have been rolled from a page of one of those

pocket-sized editions of The New Testament someone wanted to give Thane every time he went downtown these days.

Thane's mother lived on the second floor of the two-story building, up a staircase made of wrought iron with concrete-filled steps; someone had foolishly painted the staircase white; you could see the brush strokes. Thane took the stairs two at a time, and felt the shoddy building shake from the vibrations he caused.

In a daze, starting to feel his hangover, Thane tried to put the key in the dead-bolt lock. And it wasn't until then that he noticed the apartment had a new door and a lock to go with it. He knocked and shook the flimsy door, which was mostly hollow, a board frame covered with veneer, designed to accommodate the cheap landlord. Then the door swung lightly open to the piney scent of cleaning fluid and the greeting from his mother in her cleaning clothes: navy-blue stretch pants, white sneakers, a gray sweatshirt -- although it was June -- and a flowered thrift-store apron with a frilly edge. "You smell like a brewery," she said.

"I had a few beers with a friend last night," Thane said, and entered the apartment. He sat on the couch. She closed the door.

"Which friend was that," she said. "Was it Scott Piedmont? I liked him."

"No, mom. It was someone you don't know." And then he added, "from the college," which wasn't untrue.

She said, "Do you ever see Scott any more?"

"No. He got married and just sort of disappeared. I got the feeling his wife didn't like me very much."

"But you were best man at the wedding. I'm sure she liked you fine. She just wants him all to her herself. Women are that way."

There was a painting of Jesus, which Thane had never seen before. Thane's portrait in his army dress greens had been moved to a place of lesser prominence, on another wall. Thane squeaked his finger across the surface of the coffee table, which had been freshly painted the color of lentil soup. There was a notebook on the table. He picked it up and read, "Dear Thane."

"That's not finished yet," she said.

"Why are you writing me a letter? Just call me and I'll come over and we'll talk. Save you a lot of work."

"Some things are easier to say in a letter." She took the notebook to her bedroom, and returned without it.

Thane said, "What happened to the table? What's up?"

She removed her apron and hung it in a closet. She said, "Last Sunday I came home after church and the door was smashed open. The place was turned inside out, just like they used to do in the East Village. Frisky was gone. He hasn't been back since then."

"The robbers painted the coffee table?" Thane said, jokingly.

"No, don't be silly," she said. "They made a mess of it. Charlie put a leg back on the table for me. I did the painting

myself."

Thane said, "With all the clearance sales these days, you probably could've gotten a new one for all the trouble you took and what the paint cost."

She said, "This table will do fine. Besides I wouldn't want Gerry putting his boots on a brand-new coffee table."

"Then tell Gerry to keep his feet on the floor where they belong!"

"Gerry likes to be the boss."

"Yeah, mom, but it's your apartment, isn't it?"

"Yes, but Gerry's the man of the house."

Had she really said it? At that moment Thane realized that his head really ached and his stomach was more than a little upset from last night's middle-eastern adventure. He said, "Gerry sure is doing a poor job of being man of the house, if he can't keep the bad guys away."

She said, "There's nothing he could have done. Gerry and I were at church, together."

Thane said, "What else did the robbers take?"

"I don't keep any valuables here after what happened to dear old Ida, last year. But here there was nothing to take, so the robbers just made a mess of things. They smashed the coffee table, and slashed my beautiful seascape. And Frisky was gone. He hasn't been back since then."

Thane said, "What would they want with a cat?"

She shrugged.

"What about your pills?"

"What about them?"

"Did the robbers take your pills, mom? Sometimes they like to steal drugs, you know."

"They left the pills."

She peeled off her rubber gloves, turning them from yellow to white. She was in a state Thane had seen before. When she got like this, everything in her four-walled world had to be straightened and scrubbed and stored in its proper place. Life became a frenzy of order and cleanliness. Then the trumpet of The Lord was going to sound, and the apocalypse was nigh. She didn't want to be caught sleeping, so she would stay up for three nights. She would fast and pray and pace the floor, clutching The Bible, wearing her bathrobe and slippers, day and night. She would hoard food, but she would quit eating. The Lord had healed her, so she would quit taking the pills. She had the troubled look that inevitably came with her frequent manic bouts of house cleaning.

Anna Thorsson's face gave a glimpse to her inner-world: a place of darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth. Cleaning was the exorcism she performed to cast out the demons of shame, uncertainty, hopelessness and fear. If she was worried about money or the direction Thane's life had failed to take, she might vacuum the carpet or scrub the kitchen floor. One Sunday she caught an especially strong whiff of Pastor Fleese's fire and brimstone, and she was so overwrought that she cleaned the oven, scraping and scrubbing the blackest residue of every baked-on mess, before she could calm herself again. She was in

a state that Thane had seen before and wished he never had to see again.

"Have you been taking your pills?" Thane said.

She couldn't lie. Experience had taught him that she would say so, if she had been taking her pills. But if she had been neglecting them, she would skirt the issue, as she was doing now.

She said, "Anyway, it's none of your business. The pills are between me and him." She pointed to the painting of Jesus.

"Did the neighbors sell you the painting, too?"

"No. Delbert, from the church, brought it back from Mexico."

"Delbert went to Mexico?"

"Yes. Mexico City."

"Delbert went to Mexico City?"

"Yes."

"I guess there's more to little Delbert than meets the eye," Thane said, and looked at the painting, which was a knock-off of the kind he'd seen in Christian book stores, the ubiquitous American-looking Jesus with the soulful eyes. But in this particular rendering, the brushstrokes were careless, and the colors were off. The skin color made our Lord look like he had hepatitis. Thane said, "I'll bet a half-a-dozen well-behaved nuns couldn't get in and out of confession in the time it took to paint that."

She rebuked him in the name of the painting's subject.

Getting back to the more urgent topic that he knew she

wanted to avoid, Thane said, "Do you remember what happened the last time you stopped taking your pills?"

She pointed to the painting. "He won't let it happen again."

"Why not? He let it happen before."

Smiling at the picture, she said, "When he returns, there will be no more sickness. We will have the great physician to heal us and the good shepherd to guide us. We will no longer wander aimlessly in a world that the devil has filled with confusion and sickness. The son of God will be our Lord and we will live in the abundance of his kingdom. He's coming soon. I can feel it. Any day now I'm going to wake up to the trumpet of the Lord. The rapture will come, and Jesus will take us to heaven where we'll dine at the table of The Lord."

Thane said, "Yes, mom. But until he returns, it's probably a good idea if you take the pills that the doctor prescribed. After all, the doctor is an agent of The Lord's compassion, isn't he?"

But she wasn't hearing him now. She stared at the top of his head, as if some joyful apparition appeared to her there.

And then she was conscious again. She said, "You've been drinking, haven't you?"

"Of course. It's Saturday, isn't it?"

"You men and your beer. I'll bet you're hungry."

"I thought you'd never ask. I'm really starved, mom," he said, and smiled at her. And for a little while longer she just stood and stared at whatever magnificent vision she saw in her

son's face.

And then she remembered what she was up to. She took her purse from the kitchen table, removed a bill, and tucked it away in a pocket of her slacks.

"You want me to run to the store?" he said, knowing she wouldn't.

She looked at the money and back at him, and said, "That's okay, Thane. I'll do it. I better hurry up, before it gets dark."

"Can you get me a beer?"

"Okay, one beer."

"Make it one of those 32-ouncers."

"That's too much."

"Trust me, mom. I'm an expert at this. I know what I need."

"What kind?"

"Anything that's on sale."

She stepped toward the door.

He said, "Aren't you going to take your purse?"

"Are you kidding? In this neighborhood?"

"Good point."

And when she was gone, Thane took her purse and found her checkbook inside of it, and did the work he came to do. And he discovered that Yaqoub hadn't gotten the whole story about Gerry stealing from Thane's mother.

There was no single, defining check she'd written to Gerry. Payments to Gerry had become a habit, like writing the check for

the rent, utilities and tithes to the Fellowship of God. Her usual check writing was a wave with regular frequency. The checks to Gerry had started out in harmony with the rest of the wave. A check for twenty at rent time; another check for twenty along with the one for the phone bill. And then fifty. And then the frequency increased, and so did the amount. Before long she had written him one for a hundred. And then what was the point of a mere hundred? There were a couple for two hundred, and then one for five hundred. She'd given it all to an alcoholic who at dinner on Sunday spoke of eternity in heaven, after a Friday night at the tavern where his portion of life's finite chunk of change had slipped forever from his hand into the coin box inside a slot machine. But Yaqoub hadn't gotten his story straight. Mrs. Thorsson hadn't given away half her life's savings. She'd given it all, nearly ten thousand dollars' worth.

Thane put the checkbook back in his mother's purse. Soon there was a knock on the door, and it was his mother, carrying a bag of groceries.

As his mother stowed the groceries and got busy in the kitchen, Thane sat on the couch and just stared and thought about how he was no closer to making a decision than he had been when he woke up this morning. Getting proof of Gerry's alleged embezzlement was supposed to have given Thane the spiritual boost he needed to go through with the job. But for all the good it had done to check the story -- which had turned out to be worse than even Yaqoub knew -- Thane would have been better

off if he had taken the advice Maya had given him last night, and called Yaqoub first thing in the morning, and gone ahead with the job. It wasn't that knowing he had a righteous cause wouldn't have made the decision easier; the problem was that the check register had proved nothing beyond the fact that Thane's mother had handed over her life's savings, check by check, week by week. And if getting to the bottom of things is what he wanted, now there was another level of excavation to be done. Had she been coerced. Had he intimidated her, or had he just charmed the money out of her? Was there really any crime involved? And what difference did it make if there was? Wasn't it obvious what should be done? And Thane felt guilty when he remembered how last night Maya had expressed outrage that Thane would even consider giving Gerry the benefit of the doubt, when the crux of the matter was that he was ruining her financially, and destroying Thane's whole family in the process. In a sense it was true. With his mother's savings gone, he would have to forget his idea about borrowing enough to pay the bills for a couple of months while he found a good-paying job. He would have to catch up on his rent now, or move in with her. He wondered how he would afford to eat? Now he would have no choice but to be a lackey of Mister Gutfreund and his kind, and it might be a long time before Thane could pry himself free from their grip.

Thane's mother brought his meal: eggs over easy, potatoes piping hot, with two triangles of toast neatly paired on either side of a steak, still sizzling from the pan. And she put a

bottle of ketchup beside the plate.

Mustering some enthusiasm, Thane said, "Mom! Thanks! What a lunch!"

She said, "Steak is your favorite, isn't it?"

"Of course it is." His mouth watered as he poured ketchup on the potatoes and punctured the egg yolks, adding a run of yellow to the ketchup. He picked up a steak-knife, and cut through the seared surface of the meat, into its red flesh.

His mother sat in her rocking, swiveling easy-chair. She focused her attention on a yellow shopping bag, lettered in red with the name of the store where she got it: Yarn-For-Less. She removed a crocheting hook, a lavender skein of yarn and a knitted square that was finished except for the border. And she began to crochet the yarn into the lavender border of a five-inch square, which already contained yarn of red, blue, yellow and green.

Thane cleaned his plate as his mother had always wanted him to do. He used the toast, like a sponge, to sop up every last bit of egg yoke, meat gravy and ketchup on the plate.

And then he drank his beer in silence, and watched as his mother sat and did her work. Her face went into a frown as if she lacked the capacity to look smart while she mastered the task at hand. Thane was ashamed of his mother's ugly look of concentration. And he was secretly bothered by her habit of working for a few minutes and then stopping and unraveling the work. Who would ever notice the small flaws with which she concerned herself? It was no wonder she spent so much time

finishing the Afghan. Soon she got tired of the work, and put it back in a shopping bag next to the easy chair.

Then she came to the coffee table and took away the bottle of ketchup and the plate and silverware. Thane followed her to the kitchen. She turned the water on full blast, and squirted some dish soap into the sink, which wasn't plugged. The soap and water went down the drain.

Now she was too distracted to even wash the dishes. He was worried that she might cut herself. "Let me do that," Thane said, and took over at the sink.

Thane turned down the water, plugged the drain, and squirted some more dish soap into the sink. When the sink was full of steaming suds, he went to work on the dishes; and soon they were all drying in the rack.

"I'd like to borrow a little money," he said.

"How much money?"

"Twenty or so."

"What happened to your graduation money?"

Thane thought: to Gerry she gives her life savings, but twenty is too much for me. Thane wondered if Gerry had instructed her not to give her son any more money.

"Good bye, mom," he said. He wanted to hug her, but he it wouldn't be his mother he was hugging. It would be what was left of her after she left the big gray building, quit Saint Bridget's, started going to the funny little storefront mission, and took Thane west, years ago.

"Where are you going?" she said, with a hint of panic in

her voice.

"Good bye, mom," he repeated.

And then he stood in the covered hall outside her front door, and pondered his next move. He wondered if he should bother to call Alex and try to verify the other story, the one about last Friday night. This probably wouldn't put him any closer to making a decision, but he felt compelled to go through with it anyway, to hear someone else's story about how Thane Thorsson spent his blackout.

Charlie, the next door neighbor, walked up the stairs. Charlie said, "Hi, Thane. Did you find a job yet?"

"No, Charlie." Thane looked at the giant Charlie's denim overalls, workman's boots and tin lunch pail. Thane said, "If it weren't Saturday night, I'd ask if you were on your way home from work."

"I am on my way home from work, Thane."

"Did they give you a day off during the week?"

"No. I work six days a week." He raised one hand, and then realized he'd need both of them. He put down his lunch pail, held up all five fingers of his right hand and one of his left.

Thane said, "They should give you two days a week off."

"I like to work, Thane."

"That's good, Charlie. You're a good man."

"Do you like to work, Thane?"

"Charlie, could you loan me ten dollars?"

"I have to get my money first. Wait here."

Charlie ducked to pass through the door of his apartment. He returned with a twenty dollar bill.

"Thanks, Charlie."

"You have to give it back to me, Thane. Okay?"

"Okay, Charlie. I'll bring it back in a couple days."

"Are you going to get drunk, Thane?"

Had Thane's own mother betrayed him? Had she blabbed to her half-wit neighbor all about her son who liked to spend time at the tavern? Or was it that Thane's drunkenness was just obvious to everyone?

"I'm going to be good, Charlie. I'm going to get the bad guys."

"That's good, Thane. My father says guys that like to get drunk can't find a job."

"Thanks, Charlie. I'll keep that in mind."

"Thane."

"Yes, Charlie."

"Are you a good guy or a bad guy?"

Chapter Sixteen

When Thane arrived at his apartment building, he checked the mail and found The Bookworm, the newsletter of the Pine County Library.

On entering his apartment, Thane's first thought was that someone else was there. He reached for the light switch. His second thought was that the back of his head was on the floor,

and there were several people in the room.

A voice said, "If you're done with your siesta, we've got to talk, Thane."

Another voice said, "Check it out, Slappy. He's got twenty."

And then he saw a face looking down at him, and it belonged to one of the three men who had watched Thane's arm-wrestling match with Gerry, at The Blue Ox on Friday night. Thane sat up, then stood up. There were the trio Thane remembered as "the mugs."

The Vietnamese guy threw something at his feet, which Thane ignored, not wanting to look into an uppercut.

The leader spoke. He said, "You're good at math, Speedy. How much does he owe us now?"

Speedy, the Vietnamese man, said, "Okay, cuz, that's three hundred plus one week's interest; so, like, it's four hundred and fifty, man, minus the twenty. So that's like, four thirty, homeboy."

"Yo, Pizza! How much time he got, man?"

"One week, ain't it, Slappy," said the one with the bad complexion, whose adam's apple bobbed largely while he spoke.

"And then what?"

"Then, like, we bust his leg, man. Right, Slappy?"

So this was Slappy, Thane realized with relief. So this was the famous pimp whom Thane was supposed to have been afraid of, and who was going to break his leg if Thane couldn't pay. But the mugs looked like the three of them put together couldn't

break a leg off a cheap wooden stool. Pretending not to know what was going on, Thane said, "Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my apartment?"

Slappy said, "You've forgotten Brandee, already? Boy, you really do have shit for brains, don't you?"

Thane said, "I don't drink Brandy or Cognac, or any of that stuff. A whiskey, occasionally, but I'm a beer man, pretty much."

The leader said, "Oh, please stop, Thane. You're killing me. Hey, I know. Tell me if this rings any bells." Slappy handed Thane a Polaroid picture, which Thane couldn't remember at first but soon recognized as a snapshot of himself naked except for a towel wrapped around his waist, a much-befogged look on his face and a wet head of hair. It was the Polaroid snapshot Brandee had taken of him last Saturday morning.

Thane took another look at his three assailants, and decided that they could be easily caught off guard.

"This isn't me." Thane said. "I don't know what you're talking about." Then he flicked the snapshot at Slappy's face, grabbed the back of a nearby wooden chair, and swung it up at Speedy, striking him in the face. Pizza dropped to his knees and attended to Speedy.

Thane held the chair in front of him. He said, "Are you out of the game, already, Pizza? Hell, I'm just getting warmed up and you're already shaking like it's judgment day."

Slappy produced a buck knife, but Thane knew that cutting or stabbing someone required a certain virtue which the wild-

eyed man appeared to lack.

Thane said, "If you're going to cut me, go ahead and do it! Otherwise, take your accountant and his nurse out of my house!"

Pizza and Speedy didn't have to be told twice to be out the door and down the hall.

Slappy remained, glaring at Thane and brandishing the knife. He said, "We both know what this is about, Thane. So don't make me hurt you. All right?"

"Without your buddies, you're nothing. Shoot, you're nothing with your buddies. You're worthless, all three of you put together. How do you guys ever survive in the business you're in? Somebody must be protecting you."

Thane advanced toward Slappy, who hissed weirdly, and lunged with the knife, careful not to actually do any cutting. Thane kept advancing, slowly, keeping the chair in front of him. And although Slappy had a wide-open door behind him, he acted as though he were cornered. He crouched into a fighting pose, jabbed the knife at the air, and continued to make the crazy hissing sound. And then he started to laugh. Thane thought Slappy probably imagined his laugh to be menacing.

Keeping the chair between himself and the knife, Thane managed to back Slappy through the door, into the hallway.

Slappy said, "You're going to pay for this. Pay dearly, you know?" He was shaking, and his voice broke. He was nearly in tears. He said, "Next time I see you, I'm going to have a gun."

"Next time you see me, you better have a pair of balls."

"You're the one who needs to grow a pair of balls. Know what I'm talking about, Mister big, bad Thane Thorsson?"

"Get out of here!" Thane said, and poked the leg of the chair into Slappy's face, causing him to drop the knife.

Slappy was meek, now. He gave up the pretense of being a tough guy, now. He said, "All right, Thane. You win this round, but we'll just have to wait and see about the next one."

The door next to Thane's door opened, and a man's face appeared in an opening as wide as the chain latch on the door. The man said, "I'm about ready to call the police, if you guys don't take it outside."

Thane said, "Sorry, man. We're done."

The neighbor said, "You better be!" And he closed the door.

Watching to make sure Thane didn't follow him, Slappy said, "By the way, you're right about one thing. Somebody is protecting me, big time, man."

Thane remembered what Brandee had said about how some of her best customers were policemen. Now it was Thane's turn to be afraid, and Slappy appeared to have noticed his fear.

Slappy said, "How's your mom's cat?"

"What?"

He laughed again, and this time it was menacing.

"Did you ever get any pussy, Friday night?"

In a sudden fit, Thane took off after Slappy, and chased him down the hall, down a flight of stairs, out the back door and into a parking lot, where Slappy jumped into the passenger

seat of a van, a dark blue Ford Econoline with a teardrop-shaped window on the rear passenger's-side panel. It was the van from Friday night, in the alley outside The Blue Ox. Before Thane could catch up to it, Slappy had slammed the door, and the van had sped off with its horn blaring and tires squealing.

Thane went back to his apartment. He decided that getting clean would be the first step, regardless of what he decided to do next. He went to the bathroom, and looked in the mirror. In addition to the scar from where Maya had bitten him last night, there was a fresh bruise on the left side of his head, from the blow that had floored him this evening. His face was bloody. He thought of Maya. And what he was tempted to do while he showered would not have been a good way to proceed, he decided. He turned the shower to cold.

Out of the shower, he tried several times, unsuccessfully, to comb a straight part in his hair, which was soon dry. He wet the comb and tried several more times to get a straight part, before he realized that he could waste the whole evening trying to part his hair, and he settled for a crooked part.

He put on his shirt, buttoned it, looked in the mirror and saw that one side of the collar was higher than the other; then he realized that he had buttoned it wrong. And when he sat on the bed and began to put on his shoes, he stopped because he hadn't yet put on his socks. His hangover was bad. He went to the refrigerator and found a pitcher of orange juice, which he poured into a glass, filling it half way. He drank it and felt slightly better, after a moment.

The phone rang and Thane jumped.

Walking to the phone, he picked it up and said hello.

"Thane! Is that you?"

Thane recognized the voice of Mr. Gutfreund, the landlord.

"Yeah."

"Your next-door neighbor called me at home and complained about the noise. He said it sounds like you're having a fight up there. I ain't too happy about getting called at home on Saturday night, Thane. I sure hope you've got a good story to tell me."

"Yeah. My apartment was broken into. I had to chase the guys out. I had to fight them."

On the other end there was a long pause. Finally, Mr. Gutfreund said, "You got June rent?"

"I'm afraid not. Not yet, anyway."

"I know you made a paycheck last week."

Thane wondered what he would say about this? After all, it was the landlord's brother they were talking about, and . . . who gave a damn! Thane said, "Yeah. Your brother paid me minimum wage, and he charged me for the lunch he gave me."

"Well, excuse me! Boy, you try to help someone . . . "

"What I meant to say was that it didn't bring me any closer to having June rent. A guy has to eat."

"And drink."

Thane said, "Then there's the electric bill."

"Electricity won't do you any good if you're out on the

street."

Thane said, "This is a bad time. Can we talk on Monday?"

"Ain't you going back to work for Jacob?"

Thane paused, too long.

Mr. Gutfreund said, "Well, if you don't want to work, then I don't want you in my building. I want you out of there by next Friday. You hear?"

"There's no need for that. I'll have the rent money by next Friday."

"I want it Monday."

"I'll have it by Friday."

"How are you going to get it?"

Thane looked at his wallet, lying on the floor where Speedy had thrown it. He said, "Leave that to me."

"You going back to work for Jacob?"

"Working for Jacob I'll never make rent."

"All right, but if I don't get it by Friday ... "

"Then you will have to give me a formal eviction notice, and I'll have 30 days to clear out. It's the law."

"Boy, you try to help someone and ... "

"I'll have it by Friday." Thane slammed down the phone.

He realized that he was no closer to making a decision about the job than he had been this morning. The evidence in his mother's check book hadn't helped. He turned on the television. There was nothing on, so he decided to shine his boots. Regardless of what he decided, he would need a pair of boots to wear, so he took out his old army boots. After

cleaning them, he applied some polish, and buffed it out with a brush. And then he repeated the ritual he had learned in the army. He took a piece of white cotton cloth and wrapped it around the index and middle fingers of his right hand. He blackened the cloth with wax polish, and applied it to the toe of a boot in a small, circular motion.

And then when he was done with the toe, he did the heel, and then the other boot. And when he was done, they would have almost been ready for a Colonel's inspection, except that the eyelets had worn through to the metal, and they needed new heels. They would do for now. He decided to put them on.

He went to the dresser and opened the sock drawer. Removing a rolled-up pair of army-green tube socks, he unearthed a piece of paper, folded in thirds. It was a copy of the letter he had written to his father, last fall. He brought the letter back to the living room, sat on the couch, and read. *Dear Dad: I'm sure you will have read the return address on this envelope, and will know what this letter is about. So, I'll dispense with the preliminaries.* Thane blushed with embarrassment. The language seemed stilted to him. He wouldn't write that way now, not after graduating from at college. It seemed as though someone else had written it.

He continued to read: *Do you remember the walk-up apartment off the corner of Eleventh Street and Avenue "D," in New York City? I remember. I was a boy, then. A lot of East River water has passed underneath the Brooklyn Bridge since then, and I've done a lot of things.*

Thane wondered what he had been thinking with that business about East River water and the Brooklyn Bridge? It was just the sort of pretentious play on "water under the bridge" that you'd expect from a college junior. No, it was the kind of pretension you'd expect from a junior in high school. A more straightforward approach would have been better. This letter said, "Look dad! I can write." This is not what it should have said. What had Thane been thinking?

He continued reading the letter: *When I was thirteen, I delivered papers. And as soon as I was big enough to carry a bag, I caddied at the country club. I was in the army airborne infantry. I even got my parachute wings. When we first moved from New York, mom and I lived on a farm for a while. I've been to California, Kentucky, Georgia, Texas, South Korea, and back to the walk-up apartment on Eleventh and "D." It's an empty lot now.* Thane thought: He'll never come, and who can blame him?

I'm twenty-six, and I'm working on a Bachelor of Science in Engineering, at the college here. I hope to graduate in June of next year. I've enclosed a picture of myself, taken when I was twenty, at Fort Benning. I'll send you a graduation invitation and picture, when I get them.

The last part wasn't so bad, he thought. But the next part was worse: *Whatever made you leave us, it's okay now. I forgive you, if there's anything that you should be forgiven of. But I won't pretend that I know there is, because I don't. I don't think about the past. But when I think about what life holds*

for mom and I, I'm scared at the thought of facing it without you. Mom needs a husband. She's lonely and scared. I need a father. My life is without direction, or guidance of any kind. I don't know what I should do with my life. I don't even have a clue. You could help. Fathers are wise. You could point me in the right direction. Our lives have teetered on the edge of hopelessness without you. If life must be a war for us, then the three of us should fight it together. Mom has an apartment, and two bedrooms. The cost of living is low here. You could do well on a veterans' pension, and social security. Please don't let me down, again. Love, Your son, Thane.

Yes, it was the work of a high-school junior, all right: a high-school junior girl. Thane could barely stand himself now. "Father's are wise." What had he been thinking? "Teetering on the edge of hopelessness" was pure sap. It was no wonder his father had not responded.

Maya was right: If Thane's father had wanted to reply, he would have done it by now. Everyone but Thane knew this. Setting down the letter, he put on his socks, and then his boots. And then he went to the phone. There was one more call to make before he called Yaqoub. The thought about calling Alex made him nervous, all of a sudden. Thane wondered if maybe, on some level, he really didn't want to know what had happened last Friday Night.

He decided that nervousness was normal, under the circumstances. To calmly contemplate the decision ahead of him would not have been good. You were supposed to be nervous; this

was your body's way of "gearing up" for the job. To be brave didn't mean you weren't nervous; it meant you were nervous but you did the job anyway. Fifty-thousand dollars, and the chance to spend the rest of his life with Maya, would certainly be worth the discomfort.

It was after five o'clock, and he decided -- at last -- that making any decision, even the wrong one, would be better than letting his imagination cast him into the abyss of possibilities and contingencies.

You had to act. If you made the wrong decision, you lost. You were a loser, but you took some pride in being a man who made a decision and stuck with it. None of these thoughts comforted him in the least.

Thane wanted to talk to his mother but it occurred to him that he shouldn't call her now, and that he might never talk to her again. This thought sickened him. He wondered who would take care of her.

He picked up the phone's handset, and dialed the number of The Blue Ox.

"Hello," said Alex's voice, above the Saturday night revelry.

Thane said, "Alex, it's me. Thane."

There was a pause wherein all Thane could hear was the background noise: A wretched laugh, an exuberant shout, the unmistakable sound of a rack of billiard balls being broken, the soulful voice of George Strait singing "Amarillo by Morning," on the jukebox.

Thane said, "Alex! Are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm here Thane. I just wish I was somewhere else."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. I don't have time for playing twenty questions. Just tell me what the hell you want and then leave me alone. Okay?"

Alex wasn't himself. He had never spoken to Thane this way before. Something was wrong. Thane said, "What happened last Friday night? What did I do?"

There was a pause. Then Alex said, "It's very noisy in here. If you want to talk, just come down here. Okay?"

Thane took a deep breath, and exhaled. He knew that Alex wasn't going to be any help.

And then Thane got a hunch. He said, "Did Yaqoub call you before I did?"

Alex said, "Look, Thane, I've got work to do here. Okay? If you want to talk, just come down here. All right?"

"Yeah, Alex. All right."

"I've got to hang up now."

"Good bye, Alex."

"Good bye, my friend. And good luck."

"Thanks, Alex."

Alex hung up the phone.

And then for the first time since he had sent the letter to his long-lost father, Thane thought of an explanation why the letter had gone unanswered for so long. And remembered what Maya had said last night about how Gerry wanted nothing from

Thane's mother but her money; yet, this didn't jibe with the fact that the last of mom's savings had been gone for several weeks and, as recently as Friday, Gerry had shown Thane the marriage license, which proved that he intended to go ahead with the wedding plans. Thane hadn't bothered to notice the date on the marriage license, so maybe Gerry had gotten it months ago; it had served its purpose, and now he just carried a copy of the license for some other reason: to spite Thane, for example. Maybe Gerry thought there was more money, and he still intended to go ahead with his plans of marriage and plunder. Or maybe there was another explanation. No, it was impossible, Thane decided. Or maybe it wasn't impossible, but just improbable. Or maybe he just didn't like it because if it were true then he didn't want to live with its consequences.

He picked up the copy of the letter and took it to the kitchenette. He lit a burner on the gas range, and caught the letter on fire. Then he held the burning letter until it burnt his hand, and he dropped it into the sink. The awful whine of the smoke alarm went off.

Thane ran water into the sink, until the fire was out and there was plenty more smoke to feed the alarm. The room had a high ceiling, and Thane couldn't reach the smoke detector. He got a chair, stood on it and took down the smoke detector, but the alarm kept going. He fumbled with the transistor battery for a while, and finally got it out and stopped the noise. But just to make sure it wouldn't go off again, Thane dropped the white, plastic smoke detector and smashed it under the heel of

his boot. Then Thane stomped on the smoke detector again and again, until all that was left were the red and green wires, the simple disembodied electrical mechanism and the jagged shards of plastic.

And then he wanted to smash something else.

On the TV was the news, something about campgrounds being closed due to a record drought which increased the danger of forest fires being started by camp fires. A kick from Thane's right boot made the picture disappear with a glassy pop and a violent spark. He unplugged the television set and watched it smolder. The tenant downstairs banged on the ceiling. Thane banged back on his floor.

Thane picked up his wallet from the floor, and removed the card that Yaqoub had given him last night. He went to the phone, picked up the handset, and put it down.

Then he picked it up again and held the receiver to his ear. There was a dial tone. He dialed the number, and heard the ringing.

And then the phone stopped ringing on the other end, as someone picked up. "Hello," said the voice on the other end. "That is you, Thane. Yes?"

"Yeah, Yaqoub, it's me."

"What have you decided?"

Chapter Seventeen

On top of the upended milk crate beside his bed sat a pack

of cigarettes. He took one, lit it and smoked the whole thing in bed before getting up.

And then came the feeling like it always did with his first smoke of the day, nowadays. He felt like all the little red lights on his dashboard had been lit up for the past fifty miles or so, and he wasn't going to make it much farther before smoke would come out from underneath his hood and he'd have to pull over onto the shoulder of that old highway.

For Samuel Thorsson, morning felt like a judgment. Whatever the crime had been, "guilty" was the verdict. And his sentence was confinement to flop houses for the rest of his days with a broken-down body and no money to get it fixed. To add to the morning's usual punishment, arthritis, back ache, Samuel Thorsson's head and stomach took their revenge for what he had done to them last night. The stuff between his ears ached like a rotten tooth. His tongue felt drier than a piece of smoked salmon. His stomach was cancerous with discomfort. His liver, Christ, he needed a trade-in on that; he needed a new one of them; that's what the doctor had said, in bigger words, years ago. But today's abdominal discomfort was worse than usual. A serious condition was developing beneath his bulging gut.

It wasn't quite wake-up time yet, so Sam relinquished his naked body to the gravity of the mattress, which was ripe for the garbage dump. The sheets were covered with the sweat from his sick body.

He knew there would be no more sleep. This is what happened, these days: he had a nightmare and woke up to a life

worse than any dream could be. The shock of his flop-house life scared him wide awake; his heart began to beat at its wakeful rate and he knew that he'd gotten as much sleep as his body was going to give him for one morning.

It felt like this was God's way of taking Sam by the back of the neck and rubbing his nose in the failure of his life. One little slip and a man was lost. Put one foot wrong and he spent the rest of his life crawling. Tired from work or bored from lack of it, you went to The Blue Ox one night. You had a couple gallons too many. Good morning, loser!

Was he there already? The thing about Loserland was that sometimes you couldn't even tell you were there. You went right on living like there was a point to it. That was half the joke. The show was over and you didn't even know it.

You fought that monster with all the heads, like in the book. You didn't count the heads; you were too busy fighting them off, dodging their fire, keeping them hungry mouths away from biting off a chunk of your flesh. You didn't beat the monster. Best you could do was to keep her off, live another day, keep her off again. You took some pride in being a man who fights monsters, but you weren't happy.

Retirement? Shoot, for what he owed in other places, Sam could have retired. But that was the other places, and this was here. Sam couldn't forget where he was. They wouldn't let him.

They were everywhere.

He met them in New York. You didn't want to be broke, out east. Goddamned greasers, all of 'em. Guys with funny names.

Johnny Nose could let you have a thousand for a week, and "two points" was all it was going to cost for a good man like you, a family man, with a wife and a kid on the way. Week was up, you didn't have it, he introduced you to a couple of his friends. And then you went to the corner bar to lick your wounds and there was Frankie Boots, like a miracle. Frankie Boots was a good guy, a reasonable guy, and he'd heard about what happened. News traveled fast in the neighborhood. Crying shame, what happened. What was the world coming to? And lo and behold, he could loan you the twelve bills to keep Johnny away. But nobody gave two points, except Johnny Nose, and everyone knew he was nuts. Frankie's price was three points, which was as good as you were going to get in that neighborhood, from anyone but Johnny Nose. At the end of another week, your debt was up to sixteen bills, and there was Frankie with his goons, just like Frankie had brought a week ago -- same two guys. Your name didn't have to be Nelson Rockefeller to figure that one out. Unless you wanted to spend the rest of your life playing leapfrog with Johnny Nose and Frankie Boots, you got the hell out of Dodge and went back out west, where they didn't follow you because it would cost more than the debt was worth.

There were plenty of towns out west. You got tired of one and moved to another. You ended up in Reno. The Johnnies and Frankies were there too. You moved. That didn't hurt them none with their gold chains and their cars that cost as much as a house. Nobody was going to starve if you skipped town. Reno was easy to leave, especially when the letter came. Had twenty

years passed already, since you left New York?

Things got funny, quick. The Monster got bigger. You got weaker. When you went to the new town, you got a new name. You said you weren't going to do it, but you started playing the games again. What's the harm in putting a few quarters in a slot machine? It ain't like blowing five bills on a craps table. Just a quarter here, a quarter there.

You never sat down and did the math in Reno, and you didn't do it here either. Yaqoub did the math. Last time you checked, you owed twenty-four thousand, two hundred and eight dollars and ninety-eight cents; Yaqoub figured it out to the penny.

What was twenty thousand to a guy that wore a gold chain that looked like it came from King Tut's treasure around his neck? For a guy like Yaqoub, twenty thousand was pocket money. For a guy like Sam, Twenty-four thousand, two hundred and eight dollars and ninety-eight cents was about eight thousand dollars more than his last job had paid in a year.

Through the dingy blinds came the sun, and showed the ailing room's symptoms: corners that had gone out of whack, moldings that curved where they shouldn't, walls that swelled and water spots that blossomed like cirrhosis on the cracked plaster of the ceiling. It wasn't a home. You were a transient. You paid by the week. Sooner or later you left.

But where would go this time? You couldn't get any further west than this. Yes you could: fifty miles of winding road through the coast range, you would find the ocean, and then you couldn't get any farther west. Land farther west was in the

east. Except Hawaii, and you couldn't afford that.

Anna.

Sam sat up on the side of the bed. Somewhere in the wasteland between his ears, there was a healthy piece of brain, and it held an indelible picture: a moving picture with sound and color. A young woman stood in a skirt and sweater and scarf. The skirt was cheap, but what was underneath it was first rate. Same with the sweater. The scarf was black with designs in red, blue and yellow and it blew in the wind of the New York Harbor, as the two of you rode across in the Staten Island Ferry. Look at that back! Look at the way she puts her face into the wind, and closes her eyes! Look at those arms! She's going to hold your son in those arms.

The skyline shrunk across the water as the ferry boat took you farther away from the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Anna watched it like a movie: one of them romance stories with what's-his name and that woman with the neck and the string of pearls.

Mister Klein's corner grocery store was all she wanted out of life: selling bread and milk, newspapers, cigarettes and cans of Schaeffer. It took you years to see it, but she was right.

You wanted it all. And in that little room in midtown, you had it all. And for a while, the city didn't belong to someone else. For a while the city was all yours.

The days got away from you, and so did the money. Then came Johnny and Frankie.

Anna was no covered-wagon girl. She was no pioneer. She was a city girl. You couldn't stay. She couldn't leave. And then, after you were gone, she couldn't stay either. But there were different reasons why she had to leave the city. After all of that, she ended up out west, where she should have been in the first place. You spent the best years of your life missing her. She spent the best years of her life wondering where you were. And now, when neither one of you had anything left to give, you got a chance to love again.

A second chance to spend your nights with Anna was close now; you could damn-near feel her beside you. This is what got you out of bed in the morning. This was what you lived for now. You lived for Anna and Thane: a family. You lived for someone to share your Sunday dinner with. You lived for anything but this room, this loser's life.

Sam took a troubled breath, as deep as his lungs would let him, which wasn't very deep.

Bolted to the floor was a stand with a TV bolted to the top of it in a padlocked metal bracket. On top of the TV was a coin box that made the TV work. You put a quarter in the slot. You pulled a handle . . .

Sam wept. There was no way to hold it back now. It wasn't just tears. You wouldn't want the guys at The Blue Ox to hear these sobs and moans. No sir. Someone might get the idea that you did this sort of thing all the time. That wouldn't be any good at all. If your old dad had ever heard you blubbering like this, he would have knocked you into next week. He might have

shot you. But your old dad was long gone.

Sam's room seemed smaller now, and dirtier too. He felt the day's first palpitation of dread. Now was the time to do something. Going through the motions, accomplishing life's little chores would keep him from being eaten by the monster.

Streams of tears trickled down his gut, and ran alongside the rivulets of sweat. Sam tried to see himself, but his gut was in the way. Where had it gone? There it was. This one wasn't his. You went to bed one night, middle aged, and you woke up old. It took years to get like this, of course, but it didn't feel that way. It was like they'd come in the middle of the night and attached someone else's thing to your body.

No one could have missed the dirty clothes, the tan, white, brown, black, cowboy plaid and the blue jeans thrown on the carpet: filthy, spotted, cut-rate brown. Who would put carpet in a place like this?

Atop the dirty clothes lay a glossy porno magazine: "Yeehaw." A Blonde sat abnormally well endowed on the cover. She wore a belt with a big buckle, toy-gun holsters, a black cowgirl's hat and a matching vest that she couldn't have fastened shut if her life depended on it. And she was doing something very obvious and unimaginative with a toy six shooter.

Using the big toe of his left foot, Sam turned the pages to a more explicit photograph of the cover girl. It didn't do the job.

Sam crept onto his hands and knees, and cleared a patch of carpet: a space big enough for pushups. He usually did thirty,

but today he did just twenty one and collapsed on the rough carpet, huffing and puffing, his nose in the stink.

The "Yeehaw" girl smiled at him in a backward-looking way, from the fold-out page of the magazine. "Come on, cowboy! You can do better than that," she seemed to say.

"Shut up, you slut!" he said. "All you care about is money. I've seen your kind before." He did fifteen more pushups. Breathing hard, he said, "If I had some money, you wouldn't care what kind of shape I was in. Ain't that right?"

"That's right, cowboy."

Regarding the rest of his usual morning drill, jumping jacks were abandoned due to dizziness. Sit-ups, deep knee bends and toe touches were forgotten in consideration of vital signs much worse than usual. Just being alive today had gotten his heart up to its target rate.

You didn't want to give yourself a heart attack.

He winced his way several steps, across the room, to the kitchenette: a walk-in closet, fitted with a sink, a small gas range and one of those waist-high refrigerators, where he found orange juice and, miraculously, a six-pack of beer that he couldn't remember buying.

No glass was clean. From the sink he excavated a glass dirty with dried beer foam. The sink was so full of dirty dishes, pots and pans, that there was no room to rinse out the glass. He pulled a frying pan from the sink pile, and spilled cold, weeks-old dishwater on himself. "God damn it!" he said.

He stacked the dirty dishes, pots and pans on the counter

beside the sink, and rinsed out his glass. He poured a glass of orange juice. He drank it. It cooled his guts.

Then he drank a can of beer -- too fast, he realized too late. Under his chin the skin tightened, and he got a coppery taste in his mouth. He hobbled his way to the bathroom, got on his knees in front of the toilet, and vomited. And when there was nothing left to vomit, he went through the motions of vomiting anyway, whether he wanted to or not. He was a tube of toothpaste being squeezed by the hand of a thrifty God.

Squeezed out, he lay there with his arms on the rim of the toilet, his face in the bowl, and his feet stuck through the doorway of the tiny bathroom. Nothing had been cleaned for a long time. Where had all the hair come from? The smell was awful. Then Sam's body had its way with him, one more time.

If he wanted to go ahead with his plans, he would have to tell Thane everything, the whole story clear back to New York City. Otherwise, Thane wouldn't let it happen. That kid is going to make some kind of trouble about this wedding, as long as he thinks his old dad is going to write him back and come riding into town on a white horse. It was time to tell the kid everything. Take him to some place where they could talk: a pancake house, or something. Tell him to keep everything under his hat. It's for everyone's good.

He stood and looked in the mirror. His eyes were red and full of tears. When had his face gotten so old? For a long time it hadn't been young, but this morning it looked close to dying.

He usually felt better after his morning prayer to the porcelain god, but this time he felt worse than before. Another beer was medicine. A third was his cure. With his fourth beer and "Yeehaw" in hand, Sam sat, still naked, on the easy chair.

He folded out the fold-out girl. He held her this way and that way, and there he was again. He was himself again. He made the cowgirl buck and bounce. She couldn't get enough of him. She said, "Come on, cowboy! Giddee up!"

He said, "Shut up, you little hussee!" He slapped her on the shanks. "That really trips your trigger. Don't it? You shameless harlot!" And so on and on it went. And then they were man and magazine once again, and he got another beer. He was ashamed of his nakedness, so he took a shower and got dressed.

It was Sunday, and soon Anna would be calling for him to come take her to see this week's episode of the Pastor Fleese Show. You didn't want to be hearing too much of Pastor Fleese, but anything was better than spending a Sunday morning alone in this place. Scare some money out of your wallet, into the collection plate; that's all Pastor Fleese wanted to do. Any man could see it was a scam; you didn't need a degree in engineering, like Thane. Real men know that there's only so much stuff out there; there's only so much time. But Thane thought he was a genius because he figured it out for himself. That's the way it is when you're young. You figure out a couple things and you think you're a genius.

But God bless that boy, anyway.

You had never been anything but proud of that boy. When he was born, you snuck back to New York. You steered clear of Frankie and Joey. You went straight to Alphabet City, where Anna lived. Out in front of that busted-out tenement, there was a Puerto Rican guy drinking a can of Schaeffer while his buddy took a leak against the building. They cursed you in Spanish. You didn't speak Spanish but you knew a curse when you heard one.

In the entranceway you found her name scrawled in ball-point pen on a scrap of paper, stuck into the slotted frame on the front of a little mailbox on the flat, metal row of them; you pressed the button above it.

The entrance door buzzed and you opened it. You heard the funny music, and smelled the spicy food. You walked up three flights of stairs. You knocked on the door. Half a dozen locks were undone, and there she stood. Inside the apartment, there was the boy: Thane, just like you wanted.

He grew up to be a genius. Engineering. You couldn't be prouder. The kid was good, but you didn't want to be soft. No sir. Your father was never soft. Not yours. If you tried to give him some lip, your old man would have knocked you into next month. Arm wrestling was kid's stuff.

But Thane was all right. He was a little spoiled, but that could be fixed. Like his mother, he was a little bit of a feeb, maybe, but he had some fight in him. You didn't doubt that the kid had a pair of balls; but it was too bad they couldn't be attached to a little more heft. You didn't want to be a small

man, out west. Not out here you didn't.

The kid had balls, just no common sense. College did it to him, same as always. Kids come out of college with a head full of ideas about everything except how to make some money.

Yaqoub ain't gonna let you analyze your way out of a debt. No sir. Cash on the barrel. Give me five thousand dollars and I won't break your legs. College wouldn't do you any good getting out of that one.

This time you would stay. You would work things out. You always worked things out, one way or another. You would quit running. You would settle down. Make an arrangement with Yaqoub. Do a little Frankie-and-Joey work. You could do the dirty work just as good as the next guy. That was the answer: moonlighting for Yaqoub. Save your money. Thane would get a real job, move in, help out with the rent. You could all live together, like a family.

Besides, you were going to hit the Lotsa-bucks multimillion dollar jackpot on the lottery. You could feel it in your bones. Any day now you were going to walk into the QuickMart and buy yourself a ticket, and change your life forever. If you kept playing long enough, you were bound to win sooner or later. Thane said it wasn't scientific to think like that, but how couldn't it be? Anyone could see that the more tickets you bought, the better your chances got.

College made him smart, just too educated to see the truth about the lottery. Anyway, now it was time to get him on your team, and get some things taken care of, together, like a

family. What was it that he'd said in the letter? Life is like a war, and we should fight it together. The kid was right. You had to hand it to him. He knew a thing or two for someone his age.

The beer was going fast today. He would have to get out and buy some more, soon. One can remained, and he took it back to the easy chair. He put a quarter into the coin slot, on the coin box on top of the TV; he pulled the handle, and the television flicked on.

There was a wrestling match. "Best of the West" wrestling was on the TV.

And there were the usual announcers: Butch, in his suit that fit him perfectly, thirty pounds ago; and Brian, who was known behind his back as "Brian The Rug," because of the very obvious toupee he wore. Sam thought: Boy, where'd he get that thing? He'd look better bald.

It was the rematch of Captain Liberty and Sheik Omar Abdul. Sam had watched their last fight. Sheik Omar Abdul had been badly beaten. The crowd had loved it.

Captain Liberty entered the arena. He was a blond-haired, blue eyed, goateed Goliath, wearing a red, white and blue top hat, and matching vest and trunks like that guy in the movie. Following Captain Liberty was his entourage: "The Liberty Babes," a bundle of curves in their bikinis that matched Captain Liberty's outfit. And behind The Liberty Babes were the pipe and drum corps, playing a marching tune from the revolutionary war.

In an Australian accent, Brian The Rug said, "You know, Butch, I get a shiver up and down my spine whenever I see those Liberty Babes, Butch."

In his scratchy, high-pitched voice, Butch replied, "I think this crowd agrees with you, Brian. I know exactly what you mean, Brian. I get a shiver, too, when I see those Liberty Babes, and the happy smiles on their faces. It makes me want to stand up and salute."

Then Sheikh Omar Abdul entered the arena.

The crowd stood. The crowd booed and hissed, and fired a salvo of paper cups and whatever else they could find to throw at Sheikh Omar Abdul, who was undaunted by their abuse. He smiled big, and his teeth shined white, gold where they had been capped. He had a magnificent mustache, and a black turban and cape. His eyes were bright.

Like Captain Liberty, Sheikh Omar Abdul had an entourage: a troupe of three belly dancers in silky, bejeweled costumes and veils. They were guarded by three men in Sikh regalia and white, military uniforms.

Sheikh Omar Abdul climbed into the ring, flung off his cape, smiled big and raised his hands like Moses parting the Red Sea in "The Ten Commandments." Sheikh Omar was smaller than Captain Liberty, but more muscular; he was in better shape.

Brian said, "You know, Butch, I don't think this crowd likes Sheik Omar Abdul very much, Butch."

Butch said, "You might even say they hate him, Brian."

The camera panned the crowd, and focused on a fat man in

camouflage fatigues and a hat just like the one that Captain Liberty wore. The man really hated Sheikh Omar Abdul. He nearly drooled with hatred. Sam laughed. What a loser, he thought.

Brian said, "I'm afraid you're right, Butch. This crowd really wants to see some blood. This rematch could really get ugly here today Butch."

Captain Liberty kissed and groped each one of the Liberty Babes in turn; they wriggled and smiled for the crowd, who made lewd catcalls. Captain Liberty took the ring.

"I think this crowd is going wild, Butch!"

"I think you're right, Brian."

And then the match started.

Brian said, "Butch, you know I think Sheikh Omar Abdul must have taken some of that famous magic potion of his, that he's always been threatening to take. Just look at him go!"

Butch said, "I think you're right, Brian. You know, Brian, when I interviewed Sheikh Omar last week, he told me that he had found a magic lantern, and rubbed it, and a genie popped out and granted him three wishes."

Brian said, "Do you suppose that one of his wishes was to beat Captain Liberty in this rematch here today, Butch?"

"Well, just see for yourself, Brian."

Then Captain Liberty was stunned. He looked paralyzed, out of commission. His top hat was crushed in a red, white and blue clump by his head. His fake, blond goatee was hanging off his chin. He bled from the lip. His arms and legs were splayed.

The Liberty Babes stood just outside the ring, berating Sheik Omar Abdul, while striking sexy poses.

"Butch, you know, I think Sheikh Omar Abdul wants to settle the score, right here and now."

There was a nervous vibrato in Butch's voice as he said, "You're right, Brian. Sheikh Omar Abdul doesn't want to lose today."

Sam sat on the edge of his seat. Everyone knew wrestling was just for show, but this fight looked like the real thing. It looked as though Sheikh Omar Abdul didn't care how much he was getting paid to lose today, he wanted to win for a change. Sheikh Omar Abdul was tired of being the bad guy, the loser. He wanted to beat Captain Liberty. Damn, thought Sam, old Abdul looks like he wants to kill Captain Liberty.

The crowd were hushed now; they weren't having fun any more. There was an added twang of tension in Brian's Australian accent as he said, "I don't believe it, Butch. I really don't believe it. Someone should stop this fight."

"I don't believe it either, Brian."

Sheik Omar Abdul stood atop the corner turnbuckles, bleeding from the mouth. Had he bitten Captain Liberty? Sam shouted, "Biting is against the rules. You oughtta be ashamed of yourself, you goddamned dirty camel jockey!" Sheikh Omar Abdul was crazed, really; you could see it in his eyes. This wasn't a show any more.

Brian said, "Looks like Sheikh Omar Abdul is going to give old Captain Liberty the body slam."

"I think you're right, Brian," said Butch. "I think Captain Liberty is going to get the body slam, today."

And the body slam is exactly what Sheikh Omar Abdul gave to old Captain Liberty.

"Brian," said Butch. "Sheik Omar Abdul has just given Captain Liberty the body slam."

Brian said, "Butch, I'm speaking as a concerned human being and not a wrestling announcer right now when I say this, but someone should stop this fight right now, before Captain Liberty gets seriously hurt."

"Brian, I think you're right," said Butch. "So why don't you take off that coonskin cap you call a toupee, and get on out there and show us what you've got, Brian?"

Brian said, "I really can't believe you're doing the toupee shtick at a time like this. I'm telling you, Butch, Captain Liberty needs to go to the hospital."

Butch said, "Yeah, Brian. I know. But we're still on the air. What else am I supposed to do?"

The cancerous discomfort flared in Sam's guts. He stood and turned off the television.

And then the phone rang.

Sam picked up the phone and said hello.

"Is that you, Gerry?"

"Yeah, Thane. You going to your mom's place for dinner today?"

"Actually, I was going to ask you a favor."

Sam hesitated. Then he said, "Go ahead! What is it?"

Thane said, "Since it's such a nice day, I was thinking I'd like to go up the Whiskey River and get some trout for dinner. And since I don't have any way of getting up there, and you've got a truck, I thought I'd ask if you want to drive."

At first Sam thought there was something wrong with Thane's voice, but he decided it was nothing, and this was the chance he'd been waiting for, to talk to Thane, alone, away from everything. Sam said, "You mean you ain't sore about Friday night?"

"Hell no I ain't sore. I had it coming. I'm lucky that's all I got, after the things I said."

Sam said, "What time do you want me to pick you up?"

"I'm ready to go right now. All we've got to do is stop at the store."

"All right, then. I'll be right over. We'll get started right away. Boy, this sure is going to beat listening to another one of Pastor Fleese's sermons."

"You ain't kidding. Just don't let my mom hear you say that."

Sam said, "All right, Thane. I'll be right over."

"All right. I'll see you soon."

Yes sir, that boy is turning out to be pretty damned good after all, thought Sam, as he rounded up his rod and tackle.

Chapter Eighteen

She imagined she could feel their eyes, although their

shadowy profiles were all she could see in the moonlight and what was left of the lights in the neighborhood. The one in the parking lot had burned out weeks ago, and still hadn't been replaced, not in this part of town. There were three men in the van, and the driver looked like a hippy. He held up his right hand and Anna could see its profile, with the extended middle finger.

She shut the curtain and prayed out loud, "I beseech thee Oh God, dear heavenly father, creator of heaven and earth. All wise one. All knowing one. My son, Thane, has gone astray and I need him now. Please send him back to me now, I pray. Amen."

This was not the first time the demons had come. The last time it happened, she called the police. But before the police arrived, the demons had returned to the infernal realms whence they came. The police asked for a description and she gave it to them. Then the police took her to The Jefferson Unit, which was better than Bellevue, speaking of infernal realms. At least Bellevue had a nice name. "Jefferson Unit" sounded like you were being punished, she thought. You were.

Her Bible sat on top of the coffee table. She picked it up and clutched it. Now she was armed with the sword of The Spirit.

Pacing the floor didn't help. Clutching her Bible, walking back and forth between the living room and the kitchen did no good at all. What would she do? She knew God would guide her, if she only opened her heart to him. She prayed, "Please, dear heavenly father. I love thee above all else. I worship thee

and praise thee." She looked to heaven prayerfully, and -- yes -- the Holy Spirit descended upon her; she was sure of it now, and she prayed in tongues, "Huddumah sheedumah, sheedumah huddumah, sheedumah sheedumah sheedumah shondumah huddumah shy-shondumuh hi!"

After the gift of tongues came the gift of translation. With a loud voice, she said, "Thus saith the Lord thy God, 'Out of Babylon shall I lead thee, away from the demons of hell encamped round about thee, and into the promised land shall I take thee.'"

Yes, the Holy Spirit had descended upon her now like a mighty rushing wind. "Hundumah Hi! Sheedumah Shy! Sheee-Hundumah Shy! Praise you lord. Hallelujah. I lift my hands toward heaven, and worship thee. And the demons of hell shalt be vanquished unto the infernal realms, if I only have faith in thee, oh heavenly father, praise thee!"

If she had faith like a mustard seed, she could move a mountain; she could send the demons back to hell. "Dear heavenly father," she prayed. "Please make the demons disappear, that thou may be glorified, and thy power shall be known unto the wicked." If I only have faith, if I only have faith, if I only have faith.

The Holy Spirit guided her now. He told her what to do. She should close her eyes, and open the curtain -- not a little like before but wide, like Moses parting the Red Sea. Be thou not afraid! And if she had faith like a mustard seed, when she opened her eyes, the three demons would be gone.

Setting down her Bible, she yanked the curtains' drawstring, and pulled open the curtains, all the way. Closing her eyes, she stood before the window. She raised her hands toward heaven. She opened her eyes. Her faith hadn't been fervent enough, this time. The demons hadn't moved. They just sat there, passing a cigarette between them.

"Oh God help me!" she yelled.

Then the wisdom of the Holy Spirit come to her, she thought. Now she knew how to get her sign from The Lord. She would close her eyes and open The Bible. She would touch the page. Then she would open her eyes, and read the verse she'd touched. And this verse would be her word from The Lord. If she only had faith as a mustard seed, she could move a mountain.

She set her Bible on the kitchen table. Then she sat and closed her eyes. She felt the imitation leather of her Bible's cover, the pages, thin like cigarette paper. With her right hand she leafed through the pages and stopped on one. The index finger of her right hand came to rest. It was the New Testament, the Book of Revelations. She read aloud, *"And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in midheaven, 'Come, assemble for the great supper of God; in order that you may eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of commanders and the flesh of mighty men.'"*

False start, she decided; better try it again. She used her left hand this time, thinking she might have better luck with the Old Testament, full of all those prophecies. She

closed her eyes. She turned the pages. And when the index finger of her left hand found its resting place, she read, "'I shall bring terrors on you, and you will be no more; though you will be sought, you will never be found again,' declares the Lord God.' Ezekial 26:21."

God was going to punish her. God was going to annihilate her. What for? Long ago she had lost count of the things she'd done to deserve the wrath, the punishment of God. First there was the bleached, white innocence of childhood and the sweaty stain that had been heavily breathed upon it. Any number of things followed.

There was Bellevue. There were doctors. She couldn't remember the things. Bellevue. The chaplain. Wicked women . . . she was a wicked woman. She repented. Many times she had begged The Lord for forgiveness. Why hadn't The Lord forgiven her? If God wouldn't give her a sign . . . If God had permitted Satan to send his demons . . . Wouldn't he at least tell her what she was being punished for?

Thane stared from his portrait on the wall, in dress-army uniform, the stars and stripes behind him. She walked to the wall, and took down his picture. Had Sam ever looked like this? Did Thane look the way Sam had once looked? If Sam had ever looked this way, he had looked it long before she met him on that blustery day on the Staten Island Ferry, when Sam was well on the way to the spent cowboy he was today.

But Thane had such a soft face: the blond hair and blue eyes, the smooth skin. No smile; he'd always been a sad boy;

his eyes had always been full of longing. She remembered the times Thane had told her about all his questions, and how he didn't know who was going to give him the answers. If only Thane had asked her; if only she had gotten the chance to answer. If only she could. He had so many questions and so few answers, and after all these years his eyes were still full of longing. This was the thing that was wrong with Thane: He was still a little boy with too many questions. Now he was going to stay that way, forever.

She hung Thane's portrait back on the wall, and turned to the room which surrounded her like a box. On the floor beside the easy chair lay the Afghan, nearly finished. She picked it up and examined it. The border wasn't exactly right on the half dozen or so squares that she had just added to it. She noted the flaws in the loops and knots of the Afghan's border, on which she had just finished working, that morning.

Now she unraveled the border, and off fell the squares. She examined each square with its yarn of red, blue, yellow and green. None had been done properly. Each contained a flaw, distraction, unruly knot. She unraveled the squares, turning each into a string of yarn, made from lengths of different colors joined end to end. She unraveled her way back to Christmas, Thanksgiving, leaves falling, first rains of fall, Thane's finding his father, writing the letter, returning to college for his senior year. And at last she had unraveled it all, until a multicolored pile of yarn, at the foot of her easy chair, was all that remained of all those months of work.

There was only one thing left to do.

On the dresser in her bedroom sat the bottle of Somnazine, two weeks' dose, fourteen capsules. The Lord had healed her of it, but what had Pastor Fleese said? The Lord gives his power to the doctor. The pills are God's compassion.

She had stood watch for long enough. Jesus would not return tonight; she knew it in her heart. Everything would be fine now. The demons would go away, just as the doctor said they would.

She removed the bottle of Jim Beam that she kept in her sock drawer, hidden away from Sam, away from Thane. Setting down the whiskey, she picked up the pill bottle, and tried to unscrew its cap, which turned loosely on the bottle. Child-proof cap, she remembered. She firmly pressed down on the cap, and twisted. This time it came off. She spilled some black-and-green capsules into her hand. Too many for now. One was set aside; the rest went back. She put the capsule into her mouth, and washed it down with a burning swig of Jim Beam.

But there was something else she had to do, before she went to sleep. She took the Somnazine and the Jim Beam to the kitchen table. From the dressed-right stack of things on the desk in the living room, she took a notebook. She turned the pages until she found the place where she had left off writing the letter to Thane. Once again, she sat at the kitchen table. And she wrote:

I cannot begin to have the words of which The Lord has seen fit to put into my pen, to tell to you. The

devil has deceived you so greatly, and The Lord has chosen me as his agent of the divine and sacred Holy Spirit, to impart unto you his wisdom, which has been denied you for so long.

If you can feel such hatred for Gerry (it's obvious to me), then you are truly not walking with The Lord. And if you would stop your backsliding, and walk in accord with the Holy Spirit, then The Lord with all his wisdom would show himself unto you.

You may think that you have a right to hate Gerry, but you must not allow hatred to enter into your heart, because when you allow hatred to enter into your heart, you allow the Devil to encamp in the realms of your soul; and surely damnation can only be too soon to follow. You must love, even Gerry, especially Gerry.

There is a very important reason why you must love Gerry ...

But then her thoughts trickled away on a stream of sleepiness. Writing had become a chore, and her letters had gotten lazy and out of shape. Her pen staggered over the ruled lines of the notebook paper. She would have to finish the letter soon, if she wanted to finish it at all.

And then all was peace for a moment. She could feel in her heart that the demons were gone. Once again she imagined she had received the divine wisdom of the Holy Spirit. She felt certain that when she went to the window this time, the demons would be gone. Her faith was strong now.

She went to the curtain, opened it, and didn't care whether they saw her or not. They were gone. The van was still there, but the demons had vanished, back to the infernal regions whence they came. And there was her sign. She clasped her hands, and looked blissfully toward heaven. "Praise you Lord!" she said,

and raised her hands toward the ceiling. "Sheee-Hundumah Mi Keendumah, Fooondondumah Shy. Hallelujah."

There was a hard knock on the door. It wasn't Sam's knock. And it wasn't Thane's either, or Charlie's or the landlord's. And it certainly didn't belong to any of her friends from church.

"Mrs. Thorsson!" someone said, outside the door. It wasn't a good voice. It sounded like one of the demons.

The fear was a rush of wind now: a storm blowing through her. God The Father had not finished testing her. She imagined she knew the voice at the door. It was the voice of a demon. She would not let him in. She said, "Faith as a grain of mustard seed."

And the knock came again.

"Mrs. Thorsson. It's the police. We want to talk to you about your son, Thane. He's gotten himself into some trouble with us." And then there was the laughter of more demons.

The police -- Now it was time to call them. The Jefferson Unit was better than this. Bellevue was better than this. No. Bellevue was worse, but Bellevue was back east. She wouldn't have to worry about Bellevue anymore.

At the desk in the living room, she picked up the telephone's handset, held it to her ear, heard the dial tone and dialed 9-1-1 on the phone's rotary dial. It rang twice, and whirred, "Hello . . ." said someone at the other end.

Anna said, "Someone is trying to break into . . ."

The voice interrupted, "Thank you for calling the Pine

County Consolidated Emergency Response System, efficiently providing emergency services in greater Pine County."

There was another knock. "It's the police. Open up, Mrs. Thorsson. We want to talk to you."

"Liar! You're a liar!" she screamed. "Go to hell! Go back to hell!"

The recording continued, "Please listen to the following menu, and make your selection."

Anna screamed, "They'll kill me."

"If you would like to report an assault, please press one, now. If you would like to report a robbery in progress, press two. To report any other kind of robbery, press three. If your car has been stolen or burglarized, press four. For harassment, vandalism, domestic abuse, indecent exposure or any other crime, press five. For any other emergency, press six, followed by the star, your zip code and the pound key. To hear this menu again, please press the pound key."

Anna said, "I can't press anything! My phone has a dial."

"If you do not have a touch-tone phone, please stay on the line, and one of our specially-trained emergency-response technicians will assist you."

Helplessly, she listened to the on-hold music. It was the theme from the live-action television show, "Police."

Bang, bang, bang came the knock on her door like gunshots, and she worried that a few more bangs would pop the flimsy new door off its hinges.

"Hello," said a woman's voice, on the other end.

Anna shook, and her voice took the tone of a woman in shock. She said, "Hello. Is this a real person?"

The operator said, "Of course it's a real person. What did you expect? A robot? What's your emergency?"

"Someone is trying to break . . . "

"Do you have a weapon?"

"No."

"Do they have a weapon?"

"I don't know, they're . . . "

"How do you know he or she is trying to break into your house?"

"They've been sitting in a van, out in the parking lot all evening, and . . . "

"This whole department isn't here just for your own personal sense of comfort. If they're just sitting in a van, then there's nothing . . . "

"Oh God, please get the police here soon. Please. They're going to kill me."

"Describe the van!"

"It was . . . a van."

"If they're sitting in a van in your parking lot, then how can they be breaking into your house?"

Bang, bang, bang went the door again. Anna said, "They're going to break down the door."

"What makes you think . . . "

"Huddumah Sheedumah."

"Are you on any medications, prescriptions or otherwise?"

Medications. Somnazine. Jim Beam. She dropped the handset.

"Hello? Hello?" said the far-away voice of the specially-trained emergency-response technician.

There was laughter outside the door. It wasn't good, happy laughter. It was Bellevue laughter: The big, black laughter of men in white, canvas jackets. And when they -- she wouldn't allow herself to think it. For a moment she thought the fear would blow her through the window, into the parking lot. Bellevue. At least they'd given it a nice name. And the garden was nice, too, and the myna bird. What was his name?

She had been vigilant long enough. She had done her duty as a faithful and trustworthy servant of The Lord. Soon she would enter into his eternal bliss, his eternal rest. There was the Somnazine. There was the bottle of Jim Beam. She counted out six Somnazine, and washed them down with a sting of the amber-colored liquid in the bottle, which she kept wrapped in a brown, paper bag. A couple of handfuls of the pills, a couple more burning chugs, and the Somnazine was all gone. She sat with the bottle, and waited. There was nothing else left to do.

"Mrs. Thorsson. Open up, or we'll have to arrest you for obstructing law and order. This is the police. We need to talk to you about your son Thane."

Thane! The letter! He would have to know. It was time for him to know. He had suffered long enough. It wasn't right that he should have to wait forever for something that would never come. Waiting had made him bitter and hateful. That is

why the demons had returned: Because Thane was so full of hatred. And after the demons had destroyed her, then they would destroy him. She would have to warn him. She picked up the pen.

They were doing something to the lock, now. All of that water, all of that coffee and Jim Beam -- She was nearly bursting with it.

Then, Magick. Head of the devil. Staring eyes. Twitching face beneath the beard. Another. Flannel. Oriental. A third. Walking blemish. Head of a freak.

"Check it out, man!" one of them said. "She's got a bottle. Yo, give me that!"

"What's all this string for?" another said.

The bearded one picked up the phone. "Hello?" he said, and paused. "Yeah. Yeah, I know." He laughed. "That's my grandma. She's been hitting the bottle again . . ." His sidekicks laughed. He said, "That's okay. Glad I could, like, be of assistance. You're welcome." He slammed down the handset on the cradle of the phone.

She needed to say the words, with the power of the Holy Spirit, and she would send them back to hell. But the words wouldn't come now, and she wasn't bursting anymore; it was on her legs, the chair. If she could only say the words: I rebuke you Satan in the name of Jesus, and command you by his holy name to return to the lake of fire. But she could only manage to mumble, groggily, "Go to hell!"

And they laughed their hellish laughs. The bearded one

took the pen from her hand, and picked up the notebook. He said, "Check it out, homies! It's a letter for Thane."

"Whoa!" said the two sidekicks, in unison. Then all three of them laughed, like machine guns of merriment.

The bearded one tore up the notebook's pages, and threw them on the floor.

She wouldn't be able to finish the letter now, but she would pray it and The Lord would impart his wisdom unto Thane. "Father," she said.

The bearded one said, "What did you say about my father?"

The Holy Spirit had given her strength, and that's why she could no longer feel any pain. Whosoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Someone said, "Man, cool it, Slappy. Jesus, she's an old lady. Yaqoub said we were just supposed to scare her."

Slappy said, "She said something about my father."

One of the others, who had a funny head, said, "Check her out, man!"

Nothing made sense now. What had they said about a father?

The Father was loved by his heavenly father. The father had been patient in his suffering. The heavenly father had tested the father, even as he tested Job of old, and the father had not been found wanting. And then, bliss. Thank you, heavenly father. Thank you, father in heaven. Thank you, father. Thank you, father. Father.

Chapter Nineteen

There was something portentous about the wind and how it upset the trees in the forest near the park. But no, Thane decided; "portentous" was the wrong word because a portent was a kind of forecast, a prophecy of an impending evil, and today's evil deed had already been done. And, besides, the wind would have come regardless of what he had done. Thane shivered as a breeze struck his wet shirt. His mouth was dry and he was hungry. He wondered if there had been any beer left in the cooler when he threw it in the river. He really wanted another beer, now. And then Thane realized that his mind had begun to slip into the realm of the impossible, where it didn't belong if he wanted to make a successful getaway. But then, he thought, whose mind wouldn't slip a little? But he had a long way to go before he could ever rest again. And after getting paid and getting home there was the rendezvous with Maya, and he would have to stay sharp for what would come after that.

In the forest near the park, the trees swayed more violently as the wind blew faster. Things were different now; the world was full of creeping panic. Thane wanted a cigarette. His sudden bad humor was nothing that a dose of nicotine wouldn't cure; he knew this from experience. Yes, he would be a new man after a cigarette. He sat on a rock at the river's edge, and laid the gun beside him. From the pocket of his soaked flannel shirt, he took the red-and-white hard pack, which hadn't escaped the soaking. He flipped the pack's top to reveal one last cigarette, soggy, ruined. He didn't need a cigarette

anyway, he decided.

Sitting there, doing nothing, didn't help. Being inert made the panic worse. He stood and went to the tackle box, opened it, removed his spare rounds and reloaded the three that had been fired. Then he put the pistol back in its hiding place, and closed the tackle box.

Going to the calm water on the downstream side of the jetty, he lifted Gerry's chain stringer with its ten fish who had all ceased to flop. And there would have been no use having to explain why he was in possession of nearly twice the legal limit of trout, when staying to catch the limit was his ostensible reason for being there. So he swung the stringer overhead, and let it fly. It touched down with a splash, in mid-river. And as far as he could tell, all traces of the dead man were gone now, except for the blood and . . . it was best not to think about that because he would be in Mexico by the time anyone noticed it.

It was getaway time. With his left hand he picked up his own chain stringer and its nine trout, a heavier load than he expected. In his right he grasped his fishing pole between thumb and forefinger. With the free fingers of his right hand, he hooked the handle of the tackle box. And he hadn't made his way far over the uneven rocks of the jetty before he had to stop and rearrange his load, with the pole and stringer in his left hand and the tackle box alone in his right. With this better-balanced load, he more quickly negotiated the jetty, which hadn't been built to be easily walked upon. He thought about

how easy it would be to break his arm, walking on the jetty; he could die of shock out here before anyone found him, and no wonder the park rangers wanted you out of the park after dark.

At last he left the jetty's haphazard footing and stood on the paving of the bank near the boat landing. And then he did what, at the moment, came naturally. He baited his hook and cast into the calm. And this small act of normalcy made him feel better. Yes, you've got to trick yourself into keeping your cool, he decided. He left the pole lying on the tackle box, so its tip was aloft just enough so it would twitch if he got a bite.

He went to the getaway car, the dead man's old green Plymouth Fury. He tried the driver's door, which was locked. So was the passenger's door and the other two doors. And it was at that point Thane realized that he had forgotten to get the car's keys, and they were probably in Gerry's pocket, shooting the rapids with the rest of him. And then the panic no longer crept. It pounced on him.

He didn't spend much time thinking about his next move. He walked away from the car and found a rock that took both hands to lift. He wielded the rock, charged and launched it through the rear passenger's-side window, which shattered and fell away into fragments.

The car's back seat was stocked as though Gerry had just returned from a garage sale. There were rusty tools, a spare fishing pole, tackle, tire chains, a length of nylon rope and an old lamp. Thane opened the door, brushed aside some pieces of

glass, reached over and unlocked the driver's door.

Remembering a pack of cigarettes that he'd seen earlier, he opened the glove compartment, which contained a map of the state, a pair of sunglasses, a screwdriver, a pocket calculator, several pens and a pencil, some quarters, dimes, nickels and pennies, a porno magazine and, yes, a green-and-white pack of menthol cigarettes. Thane wondered what Gerry was doing with a pack of menthols; guys like him were supposed to smoke Marlboro. Thane lit one and inhaled its minty smoke. It failed to make him feel any better. The nicotine was like an express train carrying all the bad humors through his body. Panic was like a gang of bandits who had jumped the train. But he continued to smoke regardless of this ill effect.

He found the cellular phone where he'd left it, crammed in with the rest of the stuff in the glove compartment. On the cellular phone, he pressed a green button, which lit the touch-tone dial. He had the number on a card in his wallet; but, as an added precaution, he had memorized it, and easily recalled it now; and he took this as proof that his mind hadn't slipped so far after all. He dialed the number, and heard three rings before someone picked up on the other end. Thane recognized Yaqoub's voice.

Thane said, "Yaqoub!"

"Thane, my friend, have you finished the job?"

"The job is done, Yaqoub."

"Is everything okay? You sound scared."

"Everything is okay, but . . . "

Yaqoub interrupted, "What did you do with the body?"

"Down the river, just like you said."

"What about the gun? You still have it, of course? And you reloaded, like I said?"

"Yes. Of course."

"And you used all six rounds on him, like we planned?"

Thane paused for a moment. He hadn't been able to follow through with that part of the plan. Three had done all the damage he could stand. "Yeah," he said. "All six rounds."

"You don't sound very sure."

"I'm tired."

"Yes, you should be tired now, my friend. You are very close to being finished. Yes?"

Thane didn't like Yaqoub's choice of words, but he convinced himself that Yaqoub's diction was nothing to be upset about. After all, Yaqoub obviously hadn't been speaking English long enough to know that "being finished" meant something just a bit more final than having just completed a job. But was there something he didn't like about Yaqoub's tone of voice? Or maybe, Thane thought, he was just picking up signals that he had missed before, now that his senses were fully enlivened. At any rate, the best thing for him to do right now was to clarify his position to Yaqoub. Thane said, "I've got a problem, Yaqoub. I think the keys are still in his pocket. How am I supposed to make my getaway?"

Yaqoub sighed, exasperated. After a moment he said, "This is going to be a problem, indeed, my friend. You could walk out

of the park, but then what would you do? The highway was not made for walking. You might get hit by a logging truck."

Thane did not like the weak sound of his own voice, as he said, "Yaqoub, look! I'm very tired, and I can barely think straight. I'm hungry, I want to get out of here. You're the boss, so tell me what to do!"

"Yes, Thane. I am the boss, but I do not remember saying to you, 'Thane Thorsson, please leave the keys in the dead man's pocket, and then throw his body in the river.' Also, I remember clearly telling you that you should not be drunk today. Yes? And yet you sound like you have had a few beers. But I think I have an idea. Since you still have the gun, then why don't you go to the highway? Wave at a car and he will stop. When he stops, show him the gun and steal his car. If he resists, you shoot him. Am I not right?"

Thane began to think that there was nothing he could do to save himself now. Surprisingly, he had begun to feel calm for the first time that evening. He said, "I don't know, Yaqoub. Are you serious?"

In the background Thane heard a woman's voice. Thane said, "Did I hear Maya?"

"Of course."

He remembered his agreement with Maya. Thane said, "I did the job. Now pay me, and you'll never see me again."

Yaqoub said, "You still don't understand, do you, Thane? You just don't get it. I am going to pay you now, but not with money." Yaqoub laughed full blast, and Thane held the cellular

phone's receiver away from his ear. Now Thane imagined that he had begun to understand. Loud and clear, Yaqoub's laughter said there would be no paycheck for this job. Thane had murdered a man, and what would he get for it? He would get caught, and then he would probably get the death penalty.

Thane said, "Okay, so you set me up. Now I go straight to the cops and tell them everything. We're gonna be neighbors on death row, Yaqoub. How do you like the sound of that?"

"The cops will get nothing. You will be dead before they get to you, Thane."

Had Yaqoub sent someone after him? Thane wanted to hang up the cellular phone, to slam it down; but with a cellular phone there's nowhere to hang it. And then, in the distance, he saw a pair of headlights twisting and turning through the forest, on the park's entry road.

Thane said, "I've got to hang up. Someone is coming."

Yaqoub said, "That will be Slappy and his friends."

Of course, Thane thought. Yaqoub had been behind Slappy and the mugs. It all made sense now, he thought. Thane said, "I've still got the gun."

"Good! Good! Then shoot one of them! Shoot all of the worthless bastards, if they don't shoot you first! But remember to save a bullet so you can blow yourself to Hell. It's a better place than where I'm going to send you, if you make it out of there alive."

But Thane caught a view of the vehicle from the side, and then he became confused again. "That's not Slappy," Thane said.

Chapter Twenty

In New York City, Thane thought, a man could get himself shot for coming up into another man's face like this. But this was an Oregon state park, the man was a state park ranger, Thane was trespassing and the ranger was much bigger than him, which apparently gave him the right to hike into Thane's life and pitch a tent. Thane took a deep breath to calm himself, tightened his grip on the fishing pole and tried not to be more nervous than a man should be when he's fishing in a park after closing hours and has just been approached by a park ranger, a very big park ranger

The ranger said, "Are you crazy or just stupid?"

Thane said, "I'm fishing."

"You're fishing after closing hours. You could be liable for a two-hundred and fifty dollar fine."

"I'm one fish short of my limit."

"I'll say you are. You're probably a few boards short of a stack, too. Let me see your catch."

"Be my guest."

"Be my guest," repeated the ranger, parroting Thane's voice. He walked to the river's edge, pulled Thane's chain stringer from the water, counted its nine fish, and put it back. Then he walked back to his pickup truck. Thane hoped he would get in and drive away, but the ranger shut off his engine and headlights, and returned with a flashlight, which he shined in

Thane's face. Thane closed his eyes and resolved to keep his cool as he recognized the smell of spray starch on the ranger's uniform shirt.

The ranger said, "What are you shaking for?"

"I've caught a chill. My shirt is wet."

"I've caught a chill. My shirt is wet," the ranger said, adding what Thane thought was too much embellishment, although he couldn't deny that his voice had become more feeble sounding than usual, and uncontrollably higher pitched.

The ranger said, "Let's see your fishing license!"

Thane complied. The ranger shined his flashlight on the paper, inspected it, and put it in his own front shirt pocket. He said, "Why don't we have ourselves a little chit chat about consuming alcoholic beverages in a state park, after dark? And while we're on the subject, why don't we talk about being intoxicated in public?"

Thane said, "With all due respect, I'd rather not discuss it. If you want to cite me for being in the park after hours, then go ahead! But if I'm drinking in the public park, then where are the empties?" Thane had put the empty cans in the cooler before dumping it in the river. "And you'd have to be a cop or a sheriff to cite me for public intoxication."

The ranger said, "The empties are around here, somewhere, maybe over there." He pointed toward the picnic area, where whitewashed, fifty-gallon drums stood amid the wooden picnic tables and the barbecue pits made of iron grates cast in concrete. The ranger said, "Why don't we go have ourselves a

look-see."

Thane said, "Supposing there are empty beer cans, how can you prove they're mine?"

"Because you smell like you've been drinking."

"You smell like spray starch. Does that mean you've been ironing shirts?"

The ranger said, "Are you a lawyer, or something."

Thane nodded. Yes, he was something. He kept his mouth shut.

The ranger said, "Well? Are you a lawyer?"

"No, sir. I'm just a concerned citizen."

"That's what I thought."

"So cite me, then!"

"You're pretty smart, son. What sort of work do you do?"

Thane bristled at the word "son." He said, "First you're a park ranger who thinks he's a cop. Now you're a park ranger who thinks he's a career counselor. Maybe you should decide what you do, before you ask me."

"What's your name, son?"

"It's right there in your shirt pocket."

The ranger removed the fishing license. "Thane Thorsson" he said, in the same, awful mock-sissy voice that he had already used once that evening. He pulled out a notebook, wrote in it and then stowed Thane's license in his own front shirt pocket.

The ranger said, "Do you mind if I look in your tackle box, Thane Thorsson?"

If the ranger opened the tackle box, he would find the gun.

As assertively as he could manage, Thane said, "What business do you have looking in my tackle box?"

"Just curious," the ranger said. "Since I am the park ranger, and you are trespassing, ain't I allowed to be curious?" Like an army drill instructor, the ranger struck the brim of his hat against Thane's forehead. Thane could see the ranger's beard and smell something minty like chewing tobacco.

"Put down your pole, and open your tackle box!" the ranger said.

That's when the tip of Thane's fishing pole began to dance. "I've got a bite," Thane said and cranked the handle on the reel. The drag ratchet buzzed louder than it had all day, as Thane caught his tenth fish.

"Sure is fightin'" the ranger said.

"It feels like a native," Thane said. "The others were all planters, and they sure didn't fight like this." Thane cranked the reel until he could see the fish swimming desperately in the pool where the river met the cement of the boat landing's ramp. Thane lifted the pole and hoisted the fish into the air. The fish flopped mightily to free itself from the hook. After several failed attempts, Thane grasped the slippery fish and clutched as it stubbornly flopped its tail from side to side, trying to escape. In the light from the ranger's flashlight, Thane admired the trout's side-spots and brilliant colors. It was a native, "rainbow" trout, and felt a pound heavier than the other nine he'd caught that day.

"He's gotta be ten inches," the ranger said. "This is your

lucky night, Thane."

Thane said, "I guess I can go home, now."

But the ranger had taken a sudden interest in the fragments of safety glass that were once the rear, passenger's-side window of the Mountain Cruiser.

Thane hoped the ranger had forgotten about inspecting the tackle box.

The ranger said, "How'd you break the window?"

"I used a big rock."

"Does this car belong to you?"

"Nope."

"Are you telling me you broke into someone else's car?"

"Yep."

The ranger approached Thane, and -- for the first time that evening -- kept a respectable distance. "Are you confessing a crime?"

"I don't know. A friend loaned it to me, so I could come up here to the park. While I was fishing, I lost the keys."

"Where'd you lose 'em?"

If I knew where I'd lost them, they wouldn't be lost, would they? Thane thought it but didn't say it because he feared he had been about as smart-mouthed as he could get away with for one evening. Besides, it was the single most obvious thing he could imagine himself saying at the moment. He said, "I was fishing up there." Thane pointed to the jetty and instantly wished he hadn't, as he remembered that his victim's blood was all the place, over there.

The ranger said, "Let's go take a look."

Thane said, "I went over every inch of the jetty. You won't find any keys up there."

The ranger said, "I've got a flashlight."

"So do I."

"Where?"

"Right here," Thane said, and motioned toward the cargo hold of the Plymouth. There was bound to be a flashlight in there, he told himself; but he couldn't find one. He said, "Now, let's see. Where did I put that thing?"

The ranger said, "You sure are losing things tonight, aren't you?"

"Yep. I must be getting tired. You know, what I'd really like to do is drive this thing out of here, take it back to my friend and go home. I sure wish I knew how to hotwire an ignition."

The ranger said nothing as he went to the driver's door, opened it, and climbed into the front. As the ranger ducked his head under the dashboard, Thane thought about the gun in the tackle box, less than twenty feet away. He got the beside-himself feeling again, as though his conscious self were watching the action of a being who possessed him. But Thane stood and waited. He had a hunch that the ranger was more bored than suspicious. Suddenly the Fury's starter cranked and the engine turned over and ran.

The ranger climbed out of the cab and brushed his hands together. "There you go," he said.

"Thanks. Now I can go home," Thane said, and realized too late that he had sounded suspiciously eager to flee.

The ranger got suspicious too. He stood close again. Once again he was like a drill instructor and Thane was like a recruit who had just faced left on a right face. The ranger shined the flashlight in Thane's face, and Thane shut his eyes. Then the light was gone and Thane opened his eyes again. And when his eyes adjusted again, he watched helplessly as he saw the blurred outline of the ranger, who walked to the tackle box, opened it, found the pistol, drew it, and shined his flashlight on it. The ranger whistled and said, "Well lookee here! I'll be goddamned. My uncle's got one like this. It's a thirty eight, ain't it?" The ranger aimed the pistol and pretended to fire it. He made the sound of a gunshot, and jerked his arm to imitate the kick of a pistol.

"Yeah," Thane said, "They make 'em just north of here." And they kick a lot harder than that, he thought.

The ranger approached and pointed the gun as if he were going to shoot Thane. The ranger said, "Damn, son. It's locked and loaded." The ranger held the pistol to his own nose, and sniffed demonstrably. "You've been firing it. What for?"

Thane's mouth was dry. He tried to speak, but choked instead. An obvious gun enthusiast, the ranger was having a little fun now. He pointed the pistol toward an imaginary target on the other side of the river. He said, "Whooooee, I'd like to take this over to Indigo Creek, and bust a few caps."

"Uh huh," Thane managed to say.

"Goddamn, son. You could drop a polar bear with this. Where'd you get it?"

"At a gun show," Thane said.

"Where at?"

"In town."

"Which one?"

"Just down the highway, about ten miles." Thane pointed at the road leading out of the park.

"No, stupid! Which gun show, not which town!"

"Stupid" rose Thane's hackles again but he stood outwardly still while his inner man leapt into action, and his guts geared up to fight.

The ranger said, "Well? Where was the gun show?"

Thane said, "The gun show was at this, like, convention center or something. And there were lots of people."

"Was it the Outdoorsman's Expo?"

Thane thought: Yes. No. He's faking you out. Oh hell! "I don't know."

The ranger said, "I guess I'll have to call the sheriff and report you for carrying an illegally concealed weapon." Keeping the gun, the ranger walked toward his truck.

"But it's not concealed," Thane said.

The ranger turned. He said, "It was concealed when I got here."

"You can't prove it."

"Maybe not, but I'd bet my next paycheck you ain't got a handgun license for this thing."

"I do."

"We'll have to leave that up to the sheriff."

Thane yelled, "Wait!" And the ranger stopped. Thane said, "You're stealing my gun."

"No I ain't. I'm the park ranger, and I'm impounding this weapon pending verification that it's properly licensed."

"You can't do that without a warrant."

"I don't need no goddamned warrant, son. This ain't an arrest; it's an impound."

Now if Thane's head would only work as fast as his heart was pounding, he could outsmart the ranger. Thane said, "You government employees are all the same. You take our tax money and you don't care how you spend it but that ain't enough. You've got to walk right into our lives, and help yourself."

"Goddamn, boy! You're in a state park, after dark, smelling like you just drank a case of beer. You're packing a thirty eight, and you've been shooting it. I can smell it. Now this is for your own good."

Thane said, "I don't need no government employee telling me what's good for me."

"Yeah, all right, son. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got some work to do. Your car is running. If I hadn't hotwired it for you, you'd be stuck up here all night. Now get out of here and go home!"

"But when do I get my gun back?"

"You'll be notified when a decision is made."

"How are you going to contact me?"

"I got your name and address from the fishing license. Remember, stupid?"

"You could at least give me back the fishing license. I can understand if you want to steal my gun, but what do you need my fishing license for?"

The ranger removed the license from his shirt pocket, and held it out for Thane to take. But when Thane reached to take the license, the ranger dropped it. Thane didn't pick it up.

The ranger said, "You're lucky to get anything. Damn, son! I should just place you under citizen's arrest, and take you up to the sheriff's."

"Arrest me for what? For fishing in the park after closing hours? This is typical government waste: There are guys poaching timber, starting forest fires, hunting out of season, trapping endangered species, and you've got to bust the guy who stays in the park after closing hours to catch his limit of trout."

The ranger shook his head in disgust, and started off again.

And then Thane decided it was time to play his trump card. Speaking in a voice that he meant to be declamatory, but which came out a little on the whiney side, Thane said, "*A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of the free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.* Do those words mean anything to you and the rest of the thuggish government bureaucracy? I'm a citizen of a free state. You've probably never heard of it, but there's this

thing called the constitution of the United States."

The ranger turned quickly. "Shut up!" he said, and approached Thane. Thane was sure he was going to get punched now. And then Thane couldn't believe it was actually happening, but his ploy worked. The ranger shoved the gun -- flat side first -- into Thane's chest, and Thane held it there, with both hands. Then the ranger stuck a finger in Thane's face, and said, "Don't call me no goddamned government employee. Do you hear me, boy? I ain't got to take that. I'm an American citizen, same as you and everyone else. I'm a working man with a wife and kids, and I know all about the second amendment and the rest of the constitution. Back home I've got a thirty ought-six and a twelve gauge shotgun. My son has a twenty two, and I'm teaching him how to shoot it and how to be a good American citizen just like his dad. But I ain't no goddamned government employee and I want you to apologize for calling me one."

In as heartfelt a voice as Thane could manage, he said, "I'm really sorry, sir. I didn't mean anything by it. You just made me mad when you took my gun."

In a sincere, brotherly voice, The ranger said, "That's all right. Forget about it. You're all right, Thane." He punched Thane's shoulder, hard enough to make it sting. They were pals now. They were ideological kindred now. The ranger turned around and walked towards his truck again.

Or was it really over? Thane thought: Maybe he's going straight to the county sheriff's office, and I'm going straight

to the state pen.

There was no choice to be made now. He had made his choice last night. He had made the choice to become a killer, and now there was nothing else for him to do. If he wanted to escape, he would have to do this. Thane raised the gun, and aimed it. The shot took his arm by surprise, as he knew it should when the trigger is properly squeezed. And the bullet hit exactly where he wanted it to hit.

He saw the wind make chaos in the forest again, but the sound of it was drowned by the ringing in his ears. The smell of gun smoke filled the air for a moment and then dissipated.

The ranger, who had dived for cover, picked himself off the ground, dusted off his uniform, and yelled so loud that Thane could hear it even above the ringing. He said, "Are you crazy? You could have killed me."

"Yes, I could have. And if I fire another shot, it won't be a warning. Now stick 'em up."

The ranger complied.

Thane said, "Who's the stupid one, now?"

The ranger stood silently, his hands in the air.

Thane said, "This is really funny, if you ask me. You call me stupid and then you fall for all that second-amendment stuff. Then you give up your gun. You should never, ever give up your gun. The second amendment is nothing but words to you now. Do you think the second amendment will stop a thirty-eight caliber bullet? Do I look like a well-regulated militia. Do I look like a well regulated anything?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, son."

"Nix the 'son' business. Now I'm the bully and you're the victim. This is justice, man. This is your karma, man! Now you'll call me 'sir.' Do you understand me, boy?"

"Uh huh."

Thane brandished the gun. "What?"

"Yes sir."

Thane said, "That's right, boy! That's what I'm calling you now: 'boy.' Right, boy?" Thane was no longer beside himself. He was himself altogether now, and knew exactly what he was doing. He said, "On second thought, I think I'll call you 'girl.' Okay, girl?" He brandished the gun again. "What do you say, girl?"

"Yes sir." Now it was the ranger's voice that shook.

Thane said, "Where do you keep your keys: the ones to your truck."

"In my pocket."

"I know in your pocket, girl. Which pocket is it? Front? Left or right?"

"Right, front."

"All right, then. Do exactly what I tell you, no more, no less, or I'll blow you straight to the big, girlie doll house in the sky. Keep your right hand in the air, and keep your eyes on me. Now take your left hand, cross over your body, and reach into your right front pocket -- No! Keep your eyes on me! That's it. Now take out the keys and drop them. Good. Now get your left hand back in the air and take five steps backwards."

Thane had learned the routine from watching "Police" on TV.

The ranger obeyed and Thane stepped forward and picked up the keys. Thane said, "Now walk to the boat landing." The ranger followed Thane's instructions now, looking at the ground.

Thane sensed that the ranger was scared, and he thought how the bullies were all the same: they would push you around all day long if you let them, and then they didn't know what to do when you fought back. Gerry had been the same when he turned and saw the gun. The moment before he died, Gerry had thrown up his hands to cover his face. Then he had fallen to his knees, and . . . Thane said, "Turn around and face me, and keep your hands in the air."

The ranger turned.

Thane said, "Take out your wallet, and throw it to me!"

The ranger said, "Come on, man! This money has to last until payday. I've got a wife and kids to feed."

To hell with your wife and your kids too! The world doesn't need any more like you. And you're not going to need any money where you're going. Now hurry up!"

The ranger threw the wallet, which landed at Thane's feet. Thane picked it up and put it in his own front pocket.

The ranger's voice was no longer that of a bully. He said, "What are you gonna do?"

"Shut up! Take off that stupid hat and drop it. Now take off your boots."

"What are you gonna do?"

"Don't talk, girl! Just unlace those boots, and get them

off. Hurry up!"

The ranger stood on his right leg, trying to unlace his left boot. But he couldn't balance himself this way, and quickly realized there was no point trying. With both feet on the ground, the ranger crouched, untied the boots and took them off.

"Now the socks, girl! Hurry up!"

"What are you going to do?"

"That depends on how well you follow instructions. Now the shirt and the pants. Everything!"

"What for?"

"You'll see."

The ranger made no move. Once again, the blast of the gun kicked Thane's arm, and put a ring in his ears. In moments, the ranger stood naked, shivering, covering himself.

Thane said, "Get in the water!"

Continuing to cover himself, the ranger stepped in, up to his ankles.

"Farther! Up to your neck!"

The ranger waded into the river until the water came to his chest. "It's cold," he said.

"You won't feel it for long. Now turn around and face me! And get your hands back up in the air!"

"My arms are tired."

"Put them on top of your head!"

The ranger stood shivering, with his arms on top of his head. Thane crouched and kept the gun pointed at the ranger.

He said, "You might die tonight. It's out of my hands, beyond my control. Someone else is running the show and I'm not sure who it is."

"Are you going to shoot me?"

Thane laughed. Now he really hated the ranger. He said, "Yes, you could die tonight. So I think it's only fair that you know what you did wrong. Now I know you're going to tell me you were only doing your job. I've got no problem with that. But just because you're a park ranger and I'm trespassing, that doesn't mean you can climb my cage, get in my face, touch me, insult me and put your hands on me. You do all of that and you expect me to take it. What does that tell me? It tells me that you don't have a very high opinion of me, if you think I'll stand for that kind of abuse. Then you call me 'son,' and 'boy.' What the hell is that all about? Don't ever call me 'son'! I'm an army veteran and a college graduate and I'm twenty-six years old. What makes you think you've got the right to speak to me like I was a boy?"

The ranger said, "I didn't mean anything by all that."

"Nobody gives a damn what you meant. I know your kind. God blessed you. You've got strength and size, and the women are crazy for you, but that's not enough. You've got to be better than someone. You've got to lord it over someone. You've got to go out and find a man half your size, and then you've got to push him around."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Good! I don't know what I'm talking about either. Words

are wasted on you and your kind. You only hear what you want to hear. As long as you've got a job, a wife and children, a house, a hot meal and a warm gun or two, then the rest of the world is your punching bag. You've got yours, so now you think you've got a right to push around the little guy."

The ranger said, "You ain't making any sense at all now, s-sir."

Thane said, "And all this stuff about your son -- I don't give a damn if you've got a son and you're teaching him to shoot. Do you think I want to hear that? My father left when I was six, and then I never saw him again. You want to hear about my father? I haven't seen him in twenty years. Last fall I finally got his address and wrote him. Do you think he wrote me back?"

The ranger said, "But that ain't my problem."

"Oh it ain't, ain't it? No, I think you're wrong, Mister Ranger. I think it is your problem. See, if I had a father, I wouldn't be standing here, right now, ready to take your life."

"All right, so why don't we just talk about this?"

"Now you want to be nice. Is that it? Sorry. You're too late. You should have thought of being nice about half an hour ago. Now get your hands back over your head. You've rested long enough."

The ranger stuck his hands over his head. "You're crazy."

"No. You're the crazy one, not me. I'm not the one who's going to shoot the rapids, naked, in a freezing cold river, in the middle of the night."

The ranger got some courage. He said, "You can't make me do that."

"You're right. I can shoot you instead."

"You ain't got the guts."

As Thane had promised, the next shot was not a warning. It hit its target. It hit the ranger's left hand, the bloody remainder of which he now clutched to his chest, howling like a coyote caught in a leg-hold trap.

Thane said, "You can take your chances with the river while you've got one good hand left, or you can end it now. I know what I would do if I were you."

The ranger kicked to where the current just started to pull him, and then he flailed his arms to turn himself around, the other way, and he kicked furiously to try and stop himself from being pulled any further. But he quickly gave up. The current began to pull him out and the ranger flailed his arms and kicked, to turn himself around, once again, so Thane could see his face as he began to drift away. And just before the current yanked the ranger out of sight, Thane thought he could see -- in the light given out by the full moon -- that the ranger's face had a look of hatred.

Chapter Twenty One

Thane took off his soaked flannel shirt and put on the ranger's uniform shirt, which felt about twice his size, but was dry and well pressed. He tucked it in and cuffed the short

sleeves, which otherwise would have hung below his elbows. He thought the shirt might help him pass for a park ranger, in the dark, if no one looked too closely.

Without really knowing why he was doing it, Thane went to the back seat of Gerry's Plymouth, took a length of nylon rope and used it to tie a bundle of his flannel shirt and the ranger's trousers, underwear, socks and boots. Taking this bundle to the edge of the boat landing, he heaved it overhead into the river. He worried for a moment that the bundle would wash up on a bank somewhere downstream, but then he reminded himself that it wouldn't matter what washed up, as long as he could escape successfully.

Taking the cellular phone and the gun, he climbed into the ranger's truck. Using the ranger's keys, he started the truck and let its engine idle. Then he turned on the headlights, fastened the seat belt, stepped on the brake and shifted into drive. Releasing the hand brake, he stepped off the brake and drove onto the park's exit path. Things were going his way now. The truck's headlights showed a single lane winding through the forest in front of him.

He took a hairpin turn. Something sprang into the road. He slammed the brakes and honked the horn. Thane's heart beat so hard he imagined the buck could hear it.

"Go on!" he yelled. But the buck stood, entranced by the headlights' glare. Thane honked the horn again and the buck fainted with his head while his hooves stayed planted in the lane. Thane turned off the headlights and honked the horn once

again. He heard the rustle of underbrush. When he turned the headlights on again, the buck was gone.

The road took him through more twists and turns than he remembered taking on the way into the park. And the road hadn't seemed as long as it did now. Was he now on a previously-undiscovered path off the main road? Or was it a newly-built path? No. Of course not. There was a simpler explanation. They had entered in daylight. Gerry had been driving, and Thane had been too preoccupied to pay any attention to the road. So it just seemed different now. Yes, that was it.

And time also seemed to pass differently now.

The road turned to gravel, and Thane felt the panic leak into his veins again as he remembered that the road into the park had been paved from start to finish. This was another road. But every road has to end somewhere, he told himself, and continued to drive through the forest, which now seemed closer than before. The path seemed narrower, only slightly wider than the truck that Thane now drove.

He took a few more turns before he saw at last the highway's clearing beyond the path cut through the forest ahead of him. But the exit from the path -- the entrance to the highway -- was barred. When he reached the clearing, he stopped and pulled the hand brake.

He heard the familiar sound of a logging truck coming closer, returning from the city. And then it zoomed past. Its trailer was empty. Thane looked for the driver but couldn't see him. Taking the gun, Thane got out of the ranger's truck and

left the engine running, the door open. He inspected the boom that blocked his way to the highway. It was a square, metal crossbar at knee level, painted bright yellow, held in place by a big brass padlock. He hadn't noticed a barrier on the way in and he assumed that this was because the boom must have been raised when they entered the park that day. He had just been so preoccupied that he hadn't noticed any of it. But it was pointless to worry about that now when he had a real problem.

Here was his getaway vehicle. There was the freeway. Between them was an obstacle. How would he overcome it? He grabbed the boom with both hands and shook it.

How thought about how using the truck to ram it would probably smash the bumper and grill, and puncture the radiator, before it loosened the boom. And although it should have been obvious to him that there would be no point to a barrier that you could simply drive around, he looked anyway and failed to find a negotiable path through the thick trees and stumps on the forest to either side of it.

Feeling completely stuck, he just stood there and held the gun to his side. The gun! Of course. There was his salvation. He would blow the big brass padlock into the next county. He took aim at the lock.

A horn honked and Thane turned to see the headlights of what appeared to be a van approaching, a couple hundred feet away. Slappy, he thought, as he remembered what Yaqoub had said.

Thane scrambled back into the ranger's truck, slammed the

door, released the hand brake, shifted into reverse and drove backwards as fast as he could, watching the van with its hazard lights flashing, halt askance of the boom. The van's doors opened, and there were the three of them, who were recognizable to him now, even in profile. Each had a gun and each took aim at Thane.

In front of his face, the windshield disappeared in a burst of glass, followed immediately by popping sounds like firecrackers. Thane ducked, cranked the wheel to his right and floored the gas. The truck bucked, slammed Thane into the dashboard and yanked the steering wheel from his hands. The truck's bed was stuck in the air.

On his left, the window smashed. He would have to get away from there. He shifted to drive, grabbed the wheel, cranked it all the way clockwise, and stepped on the gas. The truck halted, slammed him back. The rear window went, taken out by a bullet or the back of his head; it could have been either one. He shifted into reverse, and gunned it. Shots went off again.

He put the truck in drive, floored it and took off. And soon the mugs were a comfortable distance behind him. Thane gunned the engine, and the truck responded sluggishly. Keeping control of the steering wheel was difficult now, on the gravel road. Then he hit the pavement and that's when he noticed the thump, thump of a flat tire. He pulled over, got out and found the flat. Would there be time to change it? Yes, but changing it would be no use. Steam poured from under the hood, indicating a punctured radiator, or any other disabling

malfunction. The truck smelled of a gas leak; no, a gas pour.

Grabbing the cellular phone, Thane ran away from the truck, as fast as he could, until what seemed like a long time had passed, and he was out of breath. Then he walked. Then he realized he'd left behind the gun and it was too late to go back for it. But at least he had the cellular phone.

Something that should have been obvious to him all along now dawned on him with sudden clarity. He was in a dark forest in the middle of the night. He felt the terror of having completely lost his bearings. Then he went straight ahead, as fast as he could, which wasn't very fast because he had to step over snags and put his feet carefully into the thick brush that might have hidden anything. His steps made dry cracking sounds on the fallen dead wood beneath his feet. A branch struck him in the eye. The forest hated him, he thought. Then his breath came in gasps, and his side ached.

He wanted to lie down and sleep. But if he lay down now, someone would wake him, sooner or later. It would be the police, if he were lucky. They would put him in jail where the sleep would never be good again. There would be a trial, and possibly more than one. Appeals. And they'd do it all just so they could put him to sleep again forever.

Thane thought how they would have to honor his request that a minister be present when they tucked him into the big bed. And then Thane decided he would request Pastor Fleese. Pastor Fleese would raise his fat hands and do his mumbo jumbo. Thane would spit in his face. But wouldn't Thane's mouth be too dry

for spitting? He would chew bubble gum. He would spit gum in Pastor Fleese's face, just like what's-his-name in that book.

And that's when the black-haired, brown-skinned image of Maya unveiled itself in Thane's mind. The way she had looked at him last night made sense to Thane now. It was hatred, black as the bottom of a bottomless pit. Jesus, it wasn't love or salvation at all. No one had ever told him that hate could have such a pretty face.

He could hear the river. Then he could smell it. Then he saw it through the forest. There was no telling whether he was downstream or upstream from the park, but who cared? As he climbed and twisted his way through the forest towards the river, something lit the forest behind him, and he heard the rush of heated air, and the clank of metal. He turned and saw the fire which had already begun to feast upon the dry timber of a summer forest in drought conditions. Thane had never imagined that forest fires could grow as fast as this one grew.

As fast as he could go through the tangle of forest in front of him, Thane at last made his way to the river's edge. There was no eddy in the water here. The river was white and it roared like a waterfall. Here you could have no illusion that you would survive if you jumped into the river.

There was nothing to do, now. He sang an old, church hymn:
Shall we gather at the river?

Then he sat on a stump, turned on the cellular phone and dialed the number Maya had given him last night.

And then Yaqoub was telling Thane that there was someone

