

ALWAYS COVER YOUR BLIND SPOT

ALSO BY LAURANCE YAP

ESSAYS

Save the cars, not the whales

Literature's carnival mirror

Robert Ross: an autopsy

Garnet French is Meursault

TV for tots is too tame

Voting with your right foot

FICTION

Grendel

The burglary

A window on the world

Eating cake

ALWAYS COVER YOUR
**BLIND
SPOT**

L A U R A N C E Y A P

T H E P H O E N I X P R E S S T O R N O T O 1 9 9 6

ALWAYS COVER YOUR BLIND SPOT: A NOVEL

©1996 Laurance Yap. All rights reserved.

No part of this document may be reproduced, in whole or in part, without the written permission of the author. For more information, please contact The Phoenix Press, 46 Bellrock Drive, Scarborough Ontario, M1V 2V9.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Second edition.

Printed on acid-free paper.

For Mom and Dad

Chapter 1

SATURDAY, AUGUST 15TH

I had never really stared death straight in the eye.

Oh sure, I had watched the TV shows, had seen the gory pictures in the magazines. Heard the news reports; lived through a period in my neighborhood where an eighty-year-old woman across the street was killed by the Night Stalker.

Yet, even so, death in my life had always been on the sidelines—I grew up in a small town, and even the ten years I spent in Los Angeles were relatively quiet and peaceful. It was always something I didn't have to deal with, and was glad not to: at my age, it was just an unpleasant eventuality that would

hopefully catch me asleep.

At the same time, death has always fascinated me in a way no other topic could. I voraciously read murder mysteries all the way through life, was always wondering what it was like on the other side of the coin, how violence could be so close to some people's lives, in such close proximity to me, someone who had no experience at all with it. Had imagined time and again what it would be like to die, what it would be like to see somebody really close to me die.

But still I cringed at the gory paragraphs, still stared into my popcorn when the bloodletting started.

Until that one meeting where everything changed.

Curiosity supposedly had a hand in some feline's death. It almost got me, too.

My good friend Anthony "don't you dare call me Tony!" Sparacino had rung me up to warn that she was coming. Anthony and I went through high school together, before he decided to join the police academy and before I went on to design school. Despite the fact that we ran in radically different circles, we still kept in close touch and spent much of our spare time together, indulging ourselves in our hobby of collecting old automobiles.

"I've lined up somebody you might wanna meet," he said over the telephone that morning. It was ten o'clock and I was sitting at my kitchen table, reading the paper and sipping a cup of coffee—black, as always.

Since I retired from the advertising business ten years ago, I have sporadically rented myself out to car fanatics trying to track down elusive rare or collectible automobiles. Anthony, when he left the force, joined a ton of car clubs to keep himself busy and is now the president of three of the largest in the Toronto area.

Whenever he comes across somebody who hasn't been able to find something he or she is looking for, he brings them over to me. Sometimes we had even worked together to obtain—legally or otherwise—a car that a client particularly pined after.

“Really? What’s he after?” I asked. It had been about six months since I had last done a trace on a rare automobile.

“First of all, ‘he’ is a ‘she.’ It’s somethin’ really interestin’, somethin’ I’ve never seen,” he explained. Something Anthony hasn’t seen probably doesn’t exist. “A 1963 bubble-topped Lincoln Continental.”

“Sixty-three?” I asked, fascinated. There hadn’t really been a sixty-three model year for Lincolns—for various reasons, Ford had simply decided to skip that model year.

“I thought you’d be interested. You want I should bring her over?”

In all of my time spent at car clubs, I had only met a handful of women. I married one of them. I leaned back in my squeaking chair and tried to imagine what she looked like.

“Sure. I’d like to meet here. You know I’m available anytime.”

“Let’s say I bring her by Monday mornin’, ‘bout nine o’clock.”

“See you then.” I hung up the phone and hauled my mug over to the sink.

My wife Susan and I live in a ramshackle old house in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. At the time of Anthony’s call, we were in the process of having the house restored to its original state—over the last thirty years or so, it had been utterly destroyed by a series of couldn’t-care-less owners.

Meaning that about the only thing we could do in the house was sleep; the rest of it was in various stages of restoration.

While the house was being fixed, I had set up temporary shop in the loft above the converted barn that I used as a garage. The arrangement worked so well that even after the ground floor had been completed, I left all of my office stuff—my computer, fax machine, et cetera, in the loft. It was a nice, quiet place to do work—and unplug the phone, take naps. My wife had taken my old office space on the ground floor and converted it to a guest room.

“Hi, hon,” I said as I kicked off my shoes. I was just returning from another glorious nap in my old leather chair. “How was work today?”

Susan, still slender at fifty-six, was working at the creative department of Ogilvy+Mather Canada, a branch plant owned by one of the more successful U.S. ad agencies. When I met her at an antique car auction five years ago, we had hit it off immediately because of our common background. Looking at us any other way, there was no way in hell that we could have ended up together; she’s slim and beautiful, an ivy-league graduate with tycoon parents; I’m short, fat, just a city kid who barely scraped through the local university, only attending one of the big schools in the States after I had my foothold in the business. Her parents were always asking her why she had married me; I frequently asked myself the same question.

“Work was fine. I finally found the perfect angle to shoot that damned dishwasher from.” As she unzipped her portfolio on the kitchen counter, she stopped for a moment. “Oh, by the way, John just called. He’s sorry he missed you. Do you want to get back to him?”

As I picked up the proofs for the dishwasher advertisement

and looked them over, I said, “No. He’ll be sure to call back. I want to avoid intruding into his life as much as is humanly possible.”

John was my son, at the time in his second year of law school. Since marrying Susan, our relationship had been tenuous—sometimes during our conversations, I often felt that his desire to go to Yale was not about ambition, but about getting away from me. We’d had a rough few years after his mother died—killed by a drunk driver on her way home—and while now he seemed perfectly willing to forgive and forget—he had, for the past three years, been a perfect gentleman with Susan—I still found myself having a hard time completely relaxing with him, always fearing I was about to step over that ledge again.

“So, where do we want to go tonight?” Though both of us loved to cook, the fixtures and appliances in the kitchen hadn’t been hooked up yet.

“Into town?” To both of us, ‘going into town’ meant Toronto, where we had lived until four years ago.

“Let’s just stay around here.”

Susan had left her blood-red ‘64 GTO parked in front of the house. We took it for a leisurely drive down to the falls, where we dined on hot dogs and french fries.

When we returned home, the answering machine was flashing. John had left a message—he was due to start school in a couple of weeks and would like to visit—“If that would be okay with you”—he had booked a flight arriving Monday evening.

I got back to him that time, immediately. “Of course we would like you to come over and visit,” I said, “and as a spe-

A l w a y s c o v e r y o u r b l i n d s p o t

cial treat, you'll get to eat out every day you're here. Our kitchen still isn't working." John was our family expert on Toronto's restaurants—a veritable connoisseur. "What time is your flight arriving?"

"Six-thirty. Do you want to pick me up or should I hail a cab?"

The thought of the bill for a cab ride from Pearson airport to Niagara Falls made me wince. "I'll pick you up."

"See you then, dad."

Answering my wife's expectant look, I said, "John's going to arrive monday at six-thirty. I'll take care of picking him up." She smiled at me and headed upstairs.

Chapter 2

SUNDAY, AUGUST 16TH

After the late mass at church, I met Anthony at the Ontario Cadillac Club's watering hole, the Pelican Bar and Grill, where we talked for a while about how our latest projects were coming along—mine a '57 Eldorado Brougham and his a '60 sixty-special convertible. Eventually our talk moved round to the lady I was supposed to meet tomorrow.

"You'd better watch yourself 'round her," Anthony warned, "She's a looker. Anthony was still unmarried at sixty-three and spoke like a hormone-controlled teenager.

Giving him a wink, I crossed my fingers and said, "I promise to control myself." Not

A l w a y s c o v e r y o u r b l i n d s p o t

that I ever intended to try anything with her—I had all that I ever needed in Susan; besides, if she ever found out, she would kill me.

“You did remember to send her to the loft?”

“Yeah. She’ll be there at nine o’clock. I’m goin’ to be comin’ ‘round with her.” He replied. That comment set me on edge. There was only one other time that he had come around with a potential client.

“What for?” I asked.

“You’ll see. Just trust me.”

Trust you. I should have known.

Chapter 3

MONDAY, AUGUST 17TH

At seven-thirty I awoke with a hacking cough because I'd forgotten to close the window again. During the summers in Toronto, I had grown used to leaving the window open so I could be awakened by the sound of traffic rushing by; on a Monday at Niagara-on-the-Lake, though, there is no traffic, and because of our proximity to the falls, even summer mornings are frigid.

When I groggily walked down to the road to pick up my mail, our neighbor, Paul Rand, was already wide awake and smiling. Paul is a retired drill sergeant from the army, and even as a septuagenarian retiree, he awakes at a regimental five o'clock. Our daily

exchanges at the mailbox had become a staple of my life since moving in from the city.

Paul's angry looks and domineering countenance belie his intelligence and appreciation of culture—I know him to be a closet ballet fanatic. Despite that knowledge, he still put on the militaristic face for show and growled an indecipherable greeting at me as I opened my mailbox.

"Morning," I mumbled, still groggy after less than six hours' sleep.

"How 'ya doin' today, sah?" When he's in a particularly good mood, Paul mixes up his military catcalls with the inner-city accent of his youth.

"Good, I guess. You?"

"Ah feel fahn," he replied. *How did he slur those words together?* "What are you doing up so early this morning?" he added more seriously. It was rare that we picked up the morning mail at the same time—I'm a late riser by nature and since retirement had rarely got up before ten. Most of our across-mailboxes exchanges had taken place just before dinner, when the real mail arrives.

"I've got to talk to Anthony Sparacino this morning. I think you've met him," I said, extracting the three Toronto dailies to which I subscribe from my mailbox.

"Yeah, damn abrasive guy, what? I like him. What could be so important for you to get up this early?"

"I'm not really sure yet. He's being pretty secretive about the whole thing." I replied.

Paul's piercing black eyes spoke of suspicion, but his dark, craggy face revealed nothing. "Well, good morning to ya', and see you later then."

As he marched back up to his home, which was in infinitely better shape than ours, I stopped; thought. I've always taken

Paul's advice seriously and while he hadn't told me anything, I knew he had been warning me.

His eyes were still haunting me when I jogged down the stairs to the door. They loomed even larger as I opened up the door and ushered in Anthony and a short, redheaded woman who walked as if she was about two feet taller than she actually was.

We walked back up the stairs and as I held the door open for her, I could smell her perfume and her hand—inadvertently or not, I still haven't decided—brushed gingerly against mine.

She strode into my cozy little room and immediately folded her petite frame into my prized old armchair, something I've had for ages and only recently reupholstered back into use. For a moment, she grimaced. It's the chair I nap in, and admittedly it has a bit of an odor. She regained her composure quickly, though, and smiled.

Anthony rolled over the chair from my computer table and I settled myself into the chair behind my scarred oak desk.

As I tidied up the papers cluttering up its top, I looked at her again. Her hair turned different colors in the light coming through my window, ranging from a fiery red to a quasi-blonde. I decided, finally, that she was actually quite attractive—the hair which rested perfectly on her shoulders created shadows, framing her petite, not overly made-up face in a something like a black hole.

I closed the final drawer, swiveled around and smiled at both of them. Before I could utter “so, what can I do to help you?” An old magazine and an envelope had hit the table.

The magazine was an old Newsweek from November

1963, with that picture on it. You know the one. Jackie Kennedy crawling over the trunk of the presidential limousine, John F. slumped in the seat beside her. The car on the cover was the same one in the photos; a long, low creation, instantly recognizable as a Lincoln, but obviously a one-off, with short overhangs, a bubble top and an odd rear window, divided in the center and spreading out to the b-pillars. The photos were old black and whites, tinged in sepia. I couldn't make out the color but I could already see it in my mind, and anybody could—indigo blue, with polished chrome trim, a tan leather interior. Even on the ratty old magazine cover, it managed to look beautiful—its curves had to have been formed on an English Wheel rather than on an assembly line; they were just too smooth, too subtle, to be of the mass-produced variety.

I gingerly flipped open the magazine's cover and thumbed through the articles, trying to find the mystery car.

"The presidential limousine," the woman explained. "There's only one in the world and I want it."

"What do you want me to do about it?" I asked, trying to look into her impenetrable hazel eyes.

"Mister Sparacino—" she flipped one of her hands at him (I don't want to say flippantly, how about nonchalantly?)—"told me you have a good reputation for being able to locate old cars." Her mouth was wide and expressive, revealing a perfect set of white teeth. "I was hoping that you would be able to track it down for...me."

I looked on patiently.

She hadn't stopped yet. "I'm willing to pay a substantial sum for its recovery—or a theft, if it proves necessary." The last phrase she said in almost a whisper; Anthony had obviously told her about the job that we pulled for Robert Farnsworth, a Texas

oil tycoon a couple of years ago.

Farnsworth had a Packard Darrin fetish, and he was willing to pay a million for one of the thirty-two copies made. Since every last copy resided in museums around the world and were thus not for sale, he got in touch with Anthony through one of his police colleagues and together we arranged a disappearance for him. The \$350,000 that he paid each of us helped make our retirements significantly more cushy, and also added a car each to our collections; I had anted up \$75K on a '38 Cord 810 Westchester, while friend Sparacino had picked up a '55 Ford Crown Vic at an auction in the States. Though both of our families were old enough to know about the source of extra income, and enjoyed the money as much as we did, both of us knew that it was a sensitive topic to broach with them.

Nobody had been that forthright before. Never.

"How much exactly were you talking about?" My voice had dropped a notch to below the level of hers and I had started fidgeting. Anthony's brow was already bathed in sweat, and he hurriedly extracted a handkerchief to buff it. In contrast she was, if possible, even cooler than when she came in, leaning back in the chair with a relaxed grin.

"We're—I'm—prepared to pay two hundred thousand to each of you. That's a total of four hundred." Her mouth formed the words slowly and delicately.

"You obviously know that we've done this before," I explained, "There's too much risk involved." Plus I had my eyes on a '55 Mercedes 300SL gullwing.

"Six hundred, plus expenses," Anthony said. The logistics involved in stealing a museum piece were considerable.

"Four-fifty, you pay for expenses." The woman obviously

enjoyed this wheeling and dealing. Her smile had grown wider.

We finally settled on an even half-million, plus expenses, a sum of money that I would never had dreamed of coming to me for one car. As she and Anthony headed towards the door, I said, “When I’ve found something, I’ll give you a call, miss...”

“Anthony will be able to find me. It was nice meeting you.” Her voice had an edge to it, the slightest trace of a mediterranean accent.

I watched Anthony and the mystery woman from the window of my office. He helped her into the rear seat of a black V-12 Jaguar. As he closed the door, I saw two burly men emerge from under my field of view—one joined the woman in the back seat, and the other went over to the driver’s side.

With a nervous glance, Anthony gingerly swung himself into the passenger seat and they took off.

I couldn’t tell what was going on in the car; the windows were tinted a mirror-like black.

The weather was just warm enough for a drive with the top down and I followed Lundy’s Lane (a heart-rending exercise in my old Cadillac, a car that’s about twice as long and twice as wide as a Toyota Tercel) to the Old Mill, the only restaurant in the area that didn’t cater to tourists and thus had real food.

After pulling up the top and extricating myself gingerly out of the car—parking spaces are just too small nowadays—I ran to the door and bounded inside. The air conditioning was on way too high; the cold hit me like a brick wall on the way in. As I stepped through the door, I felt as if my rear half was being broiled while my front had just entered the freezer.

I loosened my collar before greeting the waiter, Sam.

“Io.” He’d obviously had too much to drink again last night.

“Want the same table, right’uh.”

“Sure, Sam.”

As he guided me to my regular corner seat, I noticed how out-of-place he seemed in his outfit. He bobbed and weaved towards the table, dropping the menu twice in the process. Every time I met him, I had the unconscious reflex to place a hand on his shoulder to steady him; his potbelly was so large and his legs so frail, it always looked like he was on the verge of tipping over.

I sat down, ordering my usual, a roast beef sandwich on rye with a side order of onion rings. While I waited for my food to arrive, I picked up the local paper, to which my esteemed neighbor Paul Rand contributes a column every week. As usual, besides his article, it was full of the traditional fluff for tourists, and I tossed it down contemptuously as Sam returned with my food.

I decided to spend the afternoon in Toronto—I had to pick up John at six-thirty, and Susan had called to say she would be late.

After garaging the Cadillac and slipping myself into our only late-model car, a 1994 BMW M5, I hotfooted my way into town with the stereo turned up, trying to keep myself from thinking about how I was supposed to break the news to Susan. Despite that fact, I was so preoccupied that I stalled the car on two consecutive launches on my way to the QEW freeway.

By the time I took the off-ramp from the always-crowded Don Valley Parkway, my head had cleared a bit. I took a right onto Bloor street and started looking for parking.

It was Monday, but luckily, most people were still at work.

The Metro Toronto Reference Library, though, was a draw for students and academics even during the summer, and I was lucky enough to find a three-quarters-legal parking space three blocks away on Yonge street.

Metro Ref is a sprawling complex in the middle of a city where buildings are packed so close that there isn't enough space to walk between them. Its six floors contain millions of books and periodicals from all over the world—more than enough to justify the five-dollar entrance fee to a bibliophile.

Most of the automotive publications are contained on the fifth floor, so that's where I headed first, taking the long way up the central stairway that curved in massive arcs under the huge skylight, leading to the heavens.

The first place I stopped was the information desk, where I had them pick out a stack of *Automobile Quarterlies* for me. I hauled the thirty hardbound “magazines” over to a table and set them down.

By the time I'd handed back all of my materials, it was approaching five and I needed to get to the airport. Traffic was still light and I was able to get out of the city and onto the 401 quickly. As I joined the highway traffic, I had time to ponder what I had found.

According to *Hemmings Motor News* (the car collector's bible,) the Presidential Limo, model SS-100 X, had been delivered in August 1962 for modification to the armory branch of the Secret Service. It had been put to work later that year and, after JFK's assassination, both examples were sent to museums, one in California, one in Detroit.

The standard 162-inch convertible frame without the hood, fenders, bumpers, or grille, but with cowl-mounted instruments

and a radio aerial had been shipped from Ford's tech center. That's where I needed to start.

When I parked the M5 in the terminal one garage, I was half an hour early, which gave me enough time to make a couple of phone calls, one to a friend I met at a design school who now was at the tech center and the other one to Anthony telling him not to plan anything because we were going to Detroit tomorrow—and to tell the mystery woman what we would be up to.

I almost missed John as he came out of the arrival doors. In the last six months he had grown even taller; when he left he already towered over my five-five; he must have gained at least another half foot—the only other explanation was that I was shrinking (I guess that was possible, too.) I wondered if the kid would ever stop growing.

His countenance had changed a lot also; the last time I'd seen him he was busy worrying over midterms, his hair disheveled, his face unshaven and clothes hanging limply off his frame. But just before the end of summer vacation, he looked a lot better: his brown hair looked like it had just been cut, his eyes were alive and he walked with a bounce in his step that reminded me of his mother before her accident, her eventual death.

It was his wave that caught my eye. I guess I hadn't changed as much as he had.

"Dad."

"John." Almost all of our conversations started out like this, but by the time we were rolling we were already deeply embroiled in a discussion about Québec sovereignty. It was good to see that he was keeping up with the Canadian news

while he studied in the USA.

When we turned into the driveway, Susan was already standing out on the porch waiting. Before I had the chance to park the car, John had already got out and was running up the stairs to greet her. It never ceased to amaze me how well the two got along—especially considering the right she had originally driven between us when I'd first told John about our intention to get married.

As I hefted the bags out of the car, Susan was asking him what he'd been doing during his vacation.

"For the first month I worked, giving tours through the campus to pay off some of my loans," he said. Despite the fact that we were relatively successful, Yale was still say beyond our reach. Luckily John had been granted a good scholarship along with a few thousand dollars in loans. "The last couple of weeks, I've been looking over my notes before I have to go back. I figure it's the only time I'll have—the bar exam is coming up pretty soon."

By that time we had made it inside the house. I asked then if anyone had any ideas about dinner.

"Renovation still not finished, eh?" asked John, smiling.

"You know these contractors—they've got so many jobs going at the same time and not nearly enough people to do all of them." Susan thought I was being too kind. Maybe I was, but I was also enjoying eating out every night.

We finally decided to drive into Toronto for our food. John was still the consummate expert on all-you-can-eat buffets, and he drove us to a place called Frankie Tomatto's, an odd permutation on the theme that served not Chinese but Italian. It was set up in what looked like an old office building, and the interior decorating was an abomination—cheap imitations of all sorts of style, clustered around a plaintively fake trattoria. The place

would have been intolerable if the food wasn't as good as it was.

I broke the news to them over dessert. Susan just nodded soberly—she'd seen it coming. John stared at me dumbfounded for a minute before opening his mouth. He knew all about the first time, of course, but I didn't think he ever expected me to do it again.

"When?" was all he said.

"On Tuesday, I'll be heading down to the Ford tech center in Dearborn to do a bit of sleuthing. What happens next depends on what I find out there."

"May I ask how much it's going to net you?"

I told him about our agreement for five hundred thousand on delivery of the car, "most of which will be used to pay off your education."

"That will be unnecessary." John was still the idealistic law school student. Eventually he would come around—how did he ever expect to be a lawyer if he didn't. But I didn't want to force a confrontation with him now.

The drive home was way too quiet.

Nothing I said would bring a peep out of them, a signal of the gravity of the situation I'd created—for both of them, mouth open was a natural state of being. I found myself wondering how things would change after I was done—it had taken a long time after the first incident.

We arrived home close to ten o'clock. As John drove the car over to the garage, Susan and I stood on the porch waiting for him. She didn't look at me and I didn't look at her. When I went into the house, I knew what I had to do.

A l w a y s c o v e r y o u r b l i n d s p o t

Quickly, I gathered up all of the things that I needed—a pillow, a blanket and my toilet stuff, and headed over to my office.

It had taken five weeks before Susan had invited me back in the last time. How long would it take her the second time around?

Chapter 4

TUESDAY, AUGUST 18TH

Anthony picked me up at 11:30 in his decrepit old '72 Buick. It made such a racket that by the time he had run up to the house to ring the doorbell, I'd already finished my abbreviated goodbyes; neither John nor Susan had much intention of speaking to me that morning.

I reassured John that I would be back soon—an empty promise, as it turned out—and grabbed my bag on the way out to Anthony's rustbucket.

I often wondered which he had hung on to the old thing. The money we earned from the last job had enabled him to buy almost any daily driver that he wanted, and yet he

chose to run around in a car where the magnificence of its rusted chocolate-brown exterior was only matched by the fragrant grandeur of its diarrhea-brown interior, coated with dust and sporting many a mysterious stain.

Somehow, we bobbled our way north to Mississauga, where he took a the exit for the 401, headed southwest, for Detroit.

Dearborn is a huge suburb on the right of I-94, all office complexes, light industry, buildings melting into one another in an odd gray mush.

The Ford tech center is a sprawling five-story complex set on a huge, flat parcel of land thirty minutes' drive outside of the Motor City.

I took the exit off I-94 and headed towards the tech center on Ford's internal "loop." About twenty-five minutes later, on our second lap, Anthony spotted the sign for the turnoff hidden behind a tree.

It had been almost ten years since I had last visited Rick Amery at his post as Senior Safety Engineer. During our time at ArtCetner in California together, we'd met in a designer math class and we quickly became friends, finding that our different strengths were largely complimentary—his diligence and willingness to stick out anything meshed with my sometimes bizarre thoughts and creative ideas.

Rick had gone on to get his master's at MIT and had been at Ford for over twenty years now; he had already passed retirement age, but the company loved his work so much that, much to his surprise, they allowed him to stay on. While we didn't keep in touch as much as we used to, we still talked at least once a year and exchanged cards and gifts at Christmas.

Security had tightened since my last visit; there was a bored-

looking guard in a rumpled brown uniform at the entrance to the parking lot, asking what my business was.

“I’m visiting Rick Amery. He’s expecting me.”

The guard thought for a minute and pulled a white plastic card from a drawer, handing it to me.

‘card must be visible at all times,’ it said. I tossed it on the centre console and ignored it.

Perhaps security hadn’t tightened as much as I thought.

As befits an automobile company, I guess, the parking lot was vast. I found a space relatively close to the building—only about five minutes’ walk, and carefully backed in the Buick. Neither I nor Anthony locked our doors.

As we neared the glass façade of the building, I spied a small white-coated figure standing outside, waving at us. I sped up my pace as my eyes tried to focus in on him.

Rick hadn’t changed in the ten years since we had last met in person. His gestures were still joyously exuberant; his walk was still light-footed. He still stared at me over the top of half-height glasses. His hair still grew in frizzles, albeit only out the side of his head now.

When we reached the quarter-mile point, he started hollering my name. “How good it is to see you after all these years!”

I gave him a wave and when we reached him, introduced Anthony.

“What have I done to deserve this honor?”

“We’d like you to do us a little favor,” I explained, “I’m trying to track down a car that you sent out of here in 1962.”

“Sixty-two?” he asked. “You know that was way before my time. “We were still in school back then.”

“Think you’d be able to get us access to the archives?” I asked.

“Follow me.”

After the marble-and-glass grandeur of the foyer, the rest of the building was a disappointment—Rick led us through a labyrinth of institutional-gray hallways before we reached a bank of elevators somewhere in the middle of the building.

“Okay, I’ve got to get back to work now,” he said. “Punch B3 and make a left at the elevators to go to the archives. I’ll call down there before you to warn them that you’re coming.”

“You’ve been a great help, Rick,” I said, clapping him on the back. “The least I can do is buy you dinner.”

“Yeah, that would be fine. By the time you’re done down there it will be about dinnertime.”

The bowels of the building were even more drab than the main floor. The third basement’s concrete walls weren’t painted—and the calcified streaks on them showed the neglect that this section of the building received.

Anthony was about to make a right when I grabbed his arm and steered him towards the end of the hall, where a single brown door was marked simply, ‘archivist.’

For the archives, the room seemed surprisingly small—it was an office-sized enclosure with a desk facing the door, a computer resting upon it. A bank of filing cabinets was stationed along the back wall, there was a microfiche machine situated in a carrell on the left, and the right of the room was stacked with boxes.

The old man sitting behind the desk looked like he was older than the building. It also looked like we had been his first visitors in years.

He looked up from what seemed to be, from the screen image,

evidently a game of solitaire, and looked at us expectantly.

“Hi,” I ventured.

Nothing.

“Rick Amery sent us down here—we’re looking for information on a 1962 Lincoln convertible chassis that was shipped out of here—” Anthony started.

The old man got up from his chair, extended a hand.

“Name’s Wilson Nesbitt. Rick told me you were coming.”

I took his hand and shook, introduced myself. “This is my friend Anthony Sparacino.”

“You have a lot of digging ahead of you. We only started computerizing our records when the new building was put up in eighty-six; if you’re looking for fifty-three you’re going to have to dig through a lot of paperwork.” He turned his chair around and pulled open a drawer on one of the file cabinets, extracting a key from within.

“Follow me,” he said, crooking his finger at us.

I hadn’t noticed the door along the right side of the room, having been under the mistaken assumption that the boxes along the wall were the archives. Behind a stack of them, however, stood another brown door. Nesbitt unlocked it and handed the key to me.

“There’s a phone in there if you want to ask me for anything. Otherwise, you’re on your own.” I could see that the solitaire game on his screen was half-completed and the clock was running. I thanked him and led Anthony in. The sound of the closing door echoed loudly in the stadium-sized room.

Now I understood why the archives had been placed on the B3 level. The room that we entered could just as easily have been described as an aircraft hangar, it was that big. Row

upon row of shelving covered the floor; just to our right stood an ancient card-catalogue like the ones at libraries a century ago. A floor directory was pinned above it.

“Nineteen sixty-two,” said Anthony, “says here it should be in section C-3.6.”

Hanging above each column of shelving was a letter. C was looked like it was a mile down to our left. I led off, with Anthony following.

We had to climb up a built-in rolling ladder to reach the sixth level of shelving, but we finally were able to dig out three boxes of invoices for 1962. I grabbed one of them and headed toward the table, on the right of the entranceway.

“Rick, I owe you one,” I said an hour later. Sitting in front of me was the invoice for a 1962 convertible chassis that had been shipped over to the armorers in Washington. The total package, according to the invoice, had cost \$1769.95.

What was a surprise was that Wilson Nesbitt had been living up to his name—a good number of the records in the box had new annotations detailing the present whereabouts of each vehicle. I wondered idly for a minute if the senile-looking old man had some kind of note on my ‘55 Thunderbird.

There wasn’t a note attached to the invoice for the ‘62 convertible chassis. I sighed, but Anthony, brash hotblooded guy that he is, picked up the box, turned it over and shook.

Amid the flurry of paper, there it was: a pink post-it note detailing the last known locations of the two ‘63 Presidential Limousines, dated July 1990.

I slipped the note and the invoice into the pocket of my jacket before packing up the boxes and returning them.

I could feel Wilson Nesbitt’s gray eyes tracking me as I left the

archival area. As soon as we got into the elevator, I breathed out a sigh of relief.

Chapter 5

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 19TH

The Henry Ford Museum is a largish exhibition hall that holds an impressive number of automobiles, the large majority of which are not Fords. It was only a few blocks' walk away from our hotel on Jefferson avenue, and I felt that it would be appropriate to pay homage to Henry Ford and his comrades, as well as get a feel for how a museum that size worked.

At ten o'clock in the morning—my normal waking hour—I got up and dressed. Anthony was evidently still sound asleep behind his door. I left a message with the front desk before leaving telling him that I'd be back before lunch. Breakfast could wait.

The admission was a reasonable ten dollars, and I was treated to a visual feast of some of the greatest machinery that Detroit had ever put out—there was row after row jam-packed with historical automobiles, all crammed way too close together. I'm a naturally curious person, and I wondered idly how they got all of these cars into the building—which was in the basement of a large office complex—so I talked to a few security guards and did a bit of snooping around the exterior.

I almost missed it in the crowded room full of '50's GM products styled by the late Harley Earl. The room had been made over as a scene from a gas station with cars waiting at the pumps and realistic mannequins checking oil. There didn't seem to be an entrance to the room anywhere, until I picked up on their secret.

Behind the fake gasoline station was a fake mechanic's garage. Further investigation revealed that the garage was more than it seemed—behind the mockup of a Corvette lifted in the air with one wheel off, there was a faint outline in the back wall, beside what looked like the washroom door. A sliver of light barely made it through, casting a infinitesimally small glimmer on the polished shop floor.

I took note of the simple card reader installed discreetly under the mechanic's telephone before heading outside.

Walking fast and head-down through the side alley, I caught a glimpse of a loading dock—not surprising in a building of this size—with one door cut right into the ground. This was obviously where the cars came in, and the space looked just big enough for a semi trailer to work through. Out of the loading area, a wider alley led out, terminating on what looked to be a quiet side street.

As I waved and said goodbye to the cashier at the entrance, I

noticed that an exhibition of 1930's Cords was due to start in another couple of weeks. Maybe I'd be done in time to catch it.

That was my first brain lapse that day.

I lived up to my promise of taking Rick Amery to dinner that night—he dragged Anthony and I to an absurdly expensive steakhouse situated in a remodelled house on Cadieux, just three blocks down from Jefferson. It was run by a jovial Somali immigrant named Khaled Kelkal who made it a custom of walking over to your table every five minutes (there were only ten tables in the place,) to strike up a conversation.

His jokes were a hoot and the steak was absolutely fantastic—it had been marinated with something that I've never tasted before; it must have been some kind of spice from his home country. On our way out, as Anthony fetched his car, I gave him a conspirational blink and asked him for his recipe.

Kelkal laughed jovially, patted me on the back and said, “you must be joking, sir. Have a good evening.”

Chapter 6

THURSDAY, AUGUST 20TH

I stayed at home all day catching up on my E-mail and doing a bit of design consulting for a local gift shop in need of an image makeover.

In the afternoon, I surfed some of the darker areas of the Internet, posting some bulletins, setting up some appointments, booking some plane tickets.

Susan was still sleeping in the bedroom that night.

I was still in the office.

John was leaving on Sunday.

I had to make good with him before he left.

Chapter 7

FRIDAY, AUGUST 21ST

The day was clear and cold, a perfect one for a drive along the numerous passages that line the Niagara Falls area. John and I, me sitting in the passenger seat of the Cadillac, were cruising sedately when he, inevitably, brought it up.

“Do you really need to do this?” he asked.

“I don’t really need to do anything.”

“It’s not as if we’re poor or anything. And plus, the money that you earned last time was more than enough to cover my education. I know you. You’re not really in it for the money, you enjoy it. I could see the triumph in your eyes when you came home the last time. It wasn’t about the money, it was

about beating the odds.”

After John’s mother Evelyn, the light of my life, died, I had become many things, among them a gambler. I lost my shirt several times over in the five years before meeting Susan, and though I don’t venture anywhere near casinos today, I still haven’t completely lost the taste for the risk and the high of the win. John knew me better than I gave him credit for; he’s quite perceptive, and the fact that we hadn’t been all that close made his skill even more remarkable. I was in this to beat the odds; I was triumphant because I had beat them the last time.

I turned around in my seat and faced him. His eyes were concentrating intently on the road ahead. “You know me to well,” I said. “What do you want me to do?”

“You’re an old man already, and you shouldn’t be taking risks like this,” He said. I had to control my face to keep it from flushing with anger. “But you’ve always played *laissez-faire* with me, so I’ll do the same for you. If you want to do it, go right ahead. But please don’t get in over your head. Despite what you may think, I worry about you.”

I didn’t say a thing. During the silence of the ensuing minutes, I began to understand the importance of his statement—his intention to *laissez moi passer*, while not a glowing encouragement, did show his willingness to fit me back into his life. His admonishment for me to be careful showed he’d finally forgiven me for what I had done to him before.

John had never warned me to be careful before. Not ever. Ironically, he’d really been the risk-taker in our family during his formative years, and I would always be the one warning him. Now I wondered as we rolled into our driveway what it meant for him to be warning me.

He’d sounded eerily like my father. The only time my father

had ever warned me about anything was my first time driving his car. *The car is not a weapon*, he'd said.

I'd heeded his advice until this day.

I knew that I wouldn't be heeding John's advice.

Chapter 8

SUNDAY, AUGUST 23RD

John, Susan and I rode down to the airport together in the BMW. John was leaving on the two-thirty flight back to New Haven, and I was booked on the three-o'clock to Los Angeles. Susan had to work the next day, so, after the customary goodbyes, all three of us went our separate ways.

It was only after I'd settled into my business-class seat that I realized she hadn't kissed me.

The Toronto-Los Angeles flight takes about five hours and includes a so-called meal and a movie. The meal was dry and so was the movie. At six-thirty, after polishing off my coke (one of the other things I had

A l w a y s c o v e r y o u r b l i n d s p o t

become during that five-year black hole was an alcoholic,) I hauled my notebook computer from the package shelf and commenced a game of solitaire.

Well, actually about twenty games. I lost every last one of them.

Chapter 9

MONDAY, AUGUST 24TH

I was still suffering from jet lag the morning after and awoke at 1:00 p.m., local time. The sun was way too bright and the sky was way too blue when I slid open the drapes on the window.

My motel was situated in Torrance, California, on the outskirts of Los Angeles and within thirty minutes' drive (traffic permitting) from LAX. Anthony would be arriving later today and I had reserved him a room adjacent to mine. We planned to stay in the city for two weeks, tops. The extended amount of time we would be laying over was due to the fact that we hadn't yet planned the operation, let alone hired anyone to help

us with it. Over the next week we would be conducting several interviews within these two rooms, leaving the second one for the lining up of equipment and the commission of the crime itself.

Anthony was due to arrive at three-forty. I had taken a taxi from the airport when I arrived yesterday, and thus didn't have any wheels. Having no wheels, as you must know, is fatal in a city like Los Angeles—the buses are infrequent at best, and there is no such thing as a taxicab except at the airport. Luckily, parts of Crenshaw Boulevard—yes, the same Crenshaw Boulevard that eventually dead-ends in South Central—such as the one I was staying on, were chock full of motels, restaurants, and car-rental agencies. I picked up the yellow pages sitting underneath the phone and looked for a place close by.

The Pacific Coast Highway was crowded as I piloted my Rent-a-Wreck out to the airport. It wasn't really a wreck—an early '90s Honda Civic—and it drove creditably well. I-5 was remarkably loose for this time of day and I made good time to LAX. As usual, I had budgeted too much time, and thus had some to waste, wandering around the arrivals area, where I visited gift shops and caught up on the news at many a magazine stand. The looks shot at me by the irate storeowners didn't bother me at all.

I spotted Anthony from a mile away. Being used to living in a relatively cold place, most of his clothes are tailored for such. When he visits a place like southern California, he always finds himself unprepared and thus is immediately spottable by virtue of his antiquated clothes. He was wearing a pink t-shirt over purple sweats and a jacket of some indeterminable color and pattern hung over his hand. I waved to him, and he rushed over.

"You stick out like a sore thumb," I said.

He eyed me over. "You don't exactly blend." He was right. I

was wearing a pair of old jeans, that, while not quite as vibrant of color as his, more than made up for it in number of tears. My shirt was dirty white and had a mystery stain on the back.

I smiled, leading him out to the car. We had a busy day ahead of us.

After dropping off Anthony's luggage at the motel, we hurried back out to I-5, but not fast enough. Rush hour had just begun and we were stuck for two and a half hours in a traffic jam that, if it moved at all, moved slower than I could have walked the distance.

(Not that I wanted to walk the distance—it was a sweltering 102° and at least the Rent-a-Wreck had air conditioning.)

By the time we took the exit off the 405 extension into Danville, it was almost seven-thirty and I doubted that we would have adequate time to do our investigation. Sure enough, the Bering Auto Museum, a long, low building done in the postmodern style of Frank Gehry and situated on a big parcel of land just north of the City Hall, was closed.

I sighed as I rolled the Civic into a parking space in the empty lot.

“What do we do now?” Anthony said.

I got out of the car, took a breath of (fresh?) air and stretched my arms.

“Well, obviously we're not going to be able to get inside and plan a route out, but we may as well find out where the loading dock is and how big of a truck we can get into it.”

On that note, we set off on foot around the building. It was a smaller one that it seemed—the architectural detailing, such as the appendages on the front entrance, mad it look bigger

than it actually was. I deduced quickly that it held about seventy or so cars—it covered a little less than a tenth of the floorspace of the Henry Ford museum and was only one story high. Around back, hidden behind another pair of fluorescent-orange appendages, the loading dock was large and had obviously been designed to accept cars in its back—the doors were cut to the floor and there was ample space to park an eighteen-wheeler. (Not that we would bring one around, mind you.)

On a whim, I walked up to one of the doors and tried it. It wouldn't budge, but as I was turning around, I glimpsed the magnetic contacts that were fastened to the bottom of the door, and their matching contacts fastened to the jamb. That might present a problem. I pointed them out to Anthony and he nodded soberly, an ironic gesture when one considered his loud clothing.

The traffic was mercifully light on the way back and Anthony drove sedately, never exceeding the speed limit by more than five or six miles an hour. Just before exiting from the 405 onto Crenshaw, he brought up the alarm system.

"Looks like we need to hire an electronics guy, too," he said as we pulled up to a red light.

A red Camaro a few cars ahead of us gave one long blast at someone in front of him.

"Maybe," I said. "Although I don't really like the idea of bringing in more people than we need."

He obviously hadn't got his point across. He gave two long blasts.

"It's somethin' we need. Trust me." He used to be a cop after all, and he probably knew about things like that.

The guy in the Camaro was really getting on my nerves now; the sound of three honks made their way down to my ears. That's when it clicked.

“Maybe not,” I said.

Chapter 10

MONDAY, AUGUST 25TH

Frank Bulcher was a mountain standing on two feet; he was a walking steamroller: a giant. His presence blocked out all of the light filtering into my room from the front door. As he walked in and light started to filter through again, I had time to look him over; he was wearing a grey T-shirt (with '1967 Monterey pot festival' emblazoned on the front) that must have been extra large but still stretched to contain him; the legs that emerged from his cutoff jeans were as long as I was tall.

This was a lock guy? I asked myself. Usually, a stupid slogan on the front of a t-shirt was indicative of an IQ that was well below the

100 mark.

“Hi.” His voice was surprisingly high and soft for his stature. His mouth was small and he had an odd tic that periodically jerked at one cheek.

Anthony pulled a chair from his room up to the bed and hiked up his feet.

“As you prolly know, we have a job coming up and we need someone to work some very sophisticated locks. The place that we’re entering is a museum; you’re going to need to deal with some pretty high-tech stuff.”

“I can handle it,” he said.

“Show me.” I said.

Last night, I had surreptitiously installed a Rabson police lock—similar to the ones at the front door of the museum—on my motel-room door. It was a high-quality lock and quite difficult to undo—I consider myself a not-bad lockpick, and I hadn’t been able to pry this one open, even with an hour’s work. We didn’t have an hour, so we needed a pro. I pointed down at the new keyhole then waved him out, locking it behind him.

I heard some clicking and started the stopwatch.

Click. Click. Click.

The door flew open.

Thirty-three seconds.

Frank Bulcher may have been a man-mountain, but his hands worked that lock like an expert. I watched him do it three times over and he got better and better as he went along, explaining that he was a little bit “rusty.” I smiled as he came back in and said, “Okay. You’re hired. We’ll pay you five thousand, two-five now and two-five on completion.”

“How do I know you’re not going to rip me off?”

“Trust us.” I pulled over the briefcase I had filled with money

last night, opened it up and showed it to him. “We’re not going to stiff you.”

“Three now, two later.”

“Deal.” I took out three stacks of bills, closed the briefcase and brought over my overnight bag, extracting some brochures that I had picked up at LAX while waiting for Anthony. “The place is called the Bering Auto Museum. We’ll get in contact with you by Friday, but in the meantime, it would probably do you well to check it out.”

He nodded and took the papers, walked out the door.

Frank Bulcher the steamroller did not lumber over to the black Ford pickup on monster tires like I thought he would, but he disappeared behind it and a red Alfa Romeo Spider emerged, the guy’s head way over top of the windshield.

What an odd man, I thought to myself. The glance that Anthony shot at me a few seconds later said the same thing.

Wally Murch was Bulcher’s archetype. He was a small, wiry man, looking like someone a movie director would cast as an alcoholic street person, right down to his scruffy brown clothing and the brown paper bag that hung from his left hand. His toupée was unkempt and looked like it had a ten-mile-an-hour speed limit on it; the beginnings (or endings?) of a beard dotted his pockmarked face.

“Lo,” he said. His speech was slurred and one eye lolled around aimlessly in its socket. Was he drunk, stoned or both?

“Mister Murch,” Anthony began, “we’re involved in an enterprise that requires a driver.”

Wally nodded.

“Can you drive?” I asked slowly. Really slowly.

“Shur I can dryuv. Just shyow me the tryuk and I’ll dryuv it

for yew.”

“You in any condition to drive?”

“Yew jest watch ol’ Wally handle ‘er.”

For the job we had planned on renting a crew-cab pickup truck with a covered trailer attached (the sort used for small racing teams; a lot less conspicuous than a semi and something Anthony or I could drive if we were in a pinch.) It was parked out back, and I led Wally to it. He lunged for the driver’s door but I stopped him.

“Wait a few minutes,” I said, “we’re going to take you somewhere.” Anthony guided him into the backseat and we set off towards Torrance airport, a small facility mostly used by recreational flyers that’s usually deserted on Mondays. The tarmac outside of the main hangar is an obstacle course in any car, let alone a 3500-rated pickup and a car trailer. I stopped in between a twin-engine Beechcraft and an antique Citabria then got out of the driver’s seat and motioned Wally in.

“Back her through the planes and out onto the runway,” Anthony ordered, “Go to the end, and then come back through here as quickly as you can, and out to the rear of the hangar; back into the loading dock. Got it?”

“Ayuh,” said Wally. “Gotcha.”

That was one wild ride! Wally may have looked like a boozier, may have even been a boozier, but he went through that obstacle course backwards so fast it made me sick. Upon reaching the end of the runway, he flung the truck and trailer into a 180° power-slide and roared back to the hangar, backing into the loading dock quickly but with unerring precision. Before he’d shut off the engine, before he’d turned around to flash his stained and incomplete smile at us, Anthony already had the cash out.

I leaned out of the cab and vomited.

Chapter 11

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 27TH

It was one of those beautiful California nights that happens about three or four times a year. The moon, though not full, was out, and the stars sparkled against a deep azure background. The air was cold and crisp, without a trace of the humidity that normally makes southern California so intolerable.

It was, looking back, a perfect night for a heist. What it lacked in dramatic potential, it made up for in working conditions—the work was slow and painstaking, and would have killed us on a hot and humid night. As it was, the temperature was perfect for four hours' work.

We had met in an alley between two rows

of houses, around the corner from the loading dock of the Bering Auto Museum, at 12:30 that evening. By that time, all of the employees save for the night watchman had left after the ten o'clock closing, and most sane people were in bed. Wally had driven the truck and trailer, which we'd given him the keys to yesterday, after scouting out the location of the car yesterday; Bulcher's Alfa was parked a couple of blocks down, on another of the many residential streets surrounding the museum. We wouldn't need him after he got the car out anyway—his money was with me and the sooner he left, the sooner he'd be out of danger.

I had checked the back door after Anthony and I arrived by cab (we had already returned the Rent-a-Wreck); it was as locked as before and the electrical contacts still poked out ominously from their bottoms. As the time approached one in the morning, I made my move, running (with difficulty) down to the loading dock, where I whipped a credit card between the contacts.

The alarm sounded immediately and I hurried back to our hiding spot in the alley. I could already hear the sirens blaring. As I swung back in, I saw two fists cocked and ready to hit me.

"Hold on," I said. "There is a method to my madness." Gradually we all poked our heads around the opening of the alley, where we could see the flashing lights of the police cars and could catch a few snippets of conversation between the officers and the night watchman. One cop came into our view, having finished a circle of the building. All four cops shook their heads, and the night watchman seemed to be apologizing.

It had taken them a minute thirty-five to respond.

As soon as the cops had driven off, I made another run for it.

The same group of cops returned, obviously annoyed. The night watchman walked out, and gesticulated wildly to the officers. One officer took a lap around the building and was back in a

flash. They drove off much faster than the first time.

Two fifteen.

The third time, there was only one car, two raging officers, and no sirens. They didn't walk around, just shouted at the night watchman. He nodded soberly and they drove off in a flash.

Four minutes, twenty-two seconds.

The running was getting a little bit hard on me, but my fear of getting caught served to push me on. I made another run at the garage door, slid the credit card through.

No sound.

I smiled and walked back to our hiding place. The guys were already emerging before I got there. Frank Bulcher was laughing.

We made it inside the building in a matter of seconds. Blucher, skilled with a couple of lockpicks, had brought along a motorized doohickey that worked even faster than he did. He'd simply slid it in, flipped a switch, and the door had popped open. Amazing stuff.

I had seen light filtering out between the doors when I'd ran over here earlier and as we entered, we found an area that was surprisingly large and well-lighted for such a small museum run by such a small staff. The light helped us find our way to the bank of stairs, but also added to our anxiety of being exposed. Not that we should have had any worries; there were no security cameras in the place (I had checked yesterday, when I'd come by to find out exactly where we needed to get the car from,) and the night watchman was on the other side of the complex, making rounds every two hours if at all. The last time he'd come out to meet the cops,

he'd been wearing a pair of big earphones around his neck; I counted on them to be over his ears for the next couple of hours.

Just ahead of us, centered between two lines of cars with tarps covering them, were two humongous steel doors big enough, of course, to drive cars and trucks through. Frank Bulcher's motorized lockpick opened them quickly, too, but not without an undue amount of noise. After we had slipped through them, we closed them slowly behind us, stopping and waiting every few minutes. When nobody came around, we lit up our flashlights and proceeded.

The "1963" Presidential limousine—the one with the double-sectioned bumper and the gold-plated trim, the model that Kennedy had been shot in—was parked on a pedestal in the center of a circular room, a few corridors away from where we'd entered. We were about halfway between there and the guard's booth at the front entrance.

Getting to the car itself proved to be more difficult than it seemed; it was parked above ground level and there were four cars—two DeSotos, a Mercury and a Pontiac, all styled in Europe, surrounding the pedestal. It looked like there was enough room between them to get the car off, but it would definitely be a tight fit and would require the greatest of care.

The door was unlocked, but the key wasn't in the ignition. Frank Bulcher's electric doohickey wouldn't fit in, and so he extracted a leather carry case from his pocket and set to work, one hand holding the light, with some old-fashioned lockpicks. While he did so, Anthony and I went at a panel from the wall enclosing the room with a cordless electric screwdriver—it was surprisingly easy; the museum had been constructed early in the last decade, when modularity was all the rage. The wall panels,

much like those in institutional setting such as schools, were simply bolted to runners that laid in the ceiling and floor.

We had figured on using the wall panelling as a ramp because bringing in a couple of ramps would have been too difficult and time-consuming to do noiselessly; the panels had metal frames that meshed with the runners and a metal inner structure. They wouldn't hold a car for an extended period of time, but for a simple roll down a few feet of stairs, we thought they would suffice.

It was not a difficult task but a tedious one, requiring frequent hand-boosts to reach the top screws. Fifteen minutes later the wall creaked and we were able to pop open the hinged metal plate at the top that held the wall up. I jumped down from Anthony's hands (he sighed appreciably—I weigh about two-thirty and he's only one-fifty,) as the wall creaked its way downwards. When it was horizontal, we lifted it up and brought it over to pedestal—very carefully. We both know the approximate value of an Adventurer II and neither of us, despite showing utter disrespect to the United States Government and the person who owned this car, wanted to harm it in any way.

The piece of wall turned out to be just a little too long to fit the stairs perfectly—the top part jutted up and that just wouldn't do. We adjusted its position so the bottom would be pushed further out.

Click, went the lockpick in the ignition. The light that was playing about inside the car clicked off.

We didn't want to start it up and drive it out of there, you understand; we just needed to unlock the steering column so we could push and steer it out. When Bulcher smiled out the windshield and gave me a thumbs-up, Anthony and I ges-

tured for the giant to get out and help us turn the turntable. Wisely, he set the handbrake before doing so.

The turntable was gigantic and the car sitting on top of it was no lightweight, what with its armor plating and bulletproof glass. We tried to push the circular platform around, but despite the help of Bulcher it just wouldn't budge. I sighed, sat down and thought.

A light came on—actually, a whole bunch of lights. The room was, in fact, flooded with light. I snapped my head back and was about to yell at Bulcher, standing beside the door, on the opposite side of where we had removed the panel, when I heard the noise behind me.

The turntable was starting to spin very slowly.

The light, cast by a bevy of halogen fixtures above us, was entering the hallway through the hole in the wall we had created. I mentally willed the turntable to move faster, but its motion seemed to get slower and slower as the front of the car neared the ramp.

Just as immediately as they had come on, the lights went off. We were bathed in darkness again and I snapped on my flashlight.

Anthony was inside the car. Bulcher was standing behind it, gesturing for me to come over and give him a hand. I walked over and we pushed—really hard; despite its lithe-looking coachwork, it was, after all, an American car built during the sixties, the age of excess. As it started to budge, it became easier to move. With one almost easy shove it cleared the lip of the turntable and started rolling down the ramp. Anthony hit the brakes and the walls, and through the hole we'd created, the halls, were bathed in red light.

Then the ramp creaked. Painfully. It was sagging in the middle

and a large crack was forming down the center. My conservative estimate had put the car's weight at around 5000 pounds; I'd forgotten about the bubble top, which must have added at least 500 to that figure.

Uh-oh. The limo was sinking fast. I banged on the trunk, hoping Anthony would let off the brakes and let it roll. He did so, but it was too late.

With a crash, the ramp collapsed and the rear of the car sat solidly on the third step from the ground. The ramp that used to be underneath it disintegrated into the pieces it was put together with; the floor was littered with rods and screws that had once made the panel; residue from the plaster outer shell floated down amid the red glow of the lights. Bulcher and I gave a valiant shove to no avail.

I got into the car, shouting "*Go, go, go!*" the engine roared to life in front of us, Anthony selected Drive. Some absurdly loud rap music filled the hall—the station must have been something else before, I thought—and the car bump-squished its way down the last three steps (hopefully not doing too much damage to itself in the process,) and we rolled out of the room at a speed that was much too slow given the speed my heart was beating at. I could see Frank Bulcher in the rear-view. He was walking along easily, emphasizing just how slowly we were moving.

The night watchman was coming right at us, having somehow emerged from his musical cocoon. In my fear, I started laughing hysterically; Anthony tried to keep a straight face as we pattered along down the hallway; the entrance to the loading dock was only about fifteen yards ahead.

The night watchman was ten. Bulcher walked quickly around the car and stood in front of him. He walked quickly

for someone of his apparent size and weight. Anthony stood on the brakes. With what looked like very little effort, Bulcher picked up the small man (who looked inordinately like Wally Murch, who hopefully was waiting outside,) and tossed him into the wall. He landed with a little bounce but got back up again, gun drawn. Bulcher, undaunted, grabbed the guard's right hand, enveloping the gun inside it, and twisted. The night watchman doubled over in pain, and Bulcher lobbed the gun into the hallway. He then picked up the rent-a-cop and walked down the hallway, opened the doors leading to the loading dock, and, from what we could see, threw him onto the hood of one of the cars parked under tarpaulins. A faint crunch could be heard as the guard hit.

I winced at the sound but smiled just after—Frank Bulcher had thrown open the door to the loading dock, spilling light out into the hallway. Anthony gave the car some gas and we ground our way from the carpeted floor of the hallway and screeched onto the concrete one of the loading dock pretty fast, only bumping a side-view mirror out of place in the process.

The loading dock door was open. Bulcher was standing in the back of the trailer waving us in. I got out of the car before Anthony drove it in and was seated in the backseat of the crew-cab when the door of the trailer slammed. As soon as he was in, Wally Murch, looking more like a boozier midget Santa Claus than ever in his red sweater and khakis, dropped the truck into gear and skidded us out onto the 405, laughing at some kind of private joke all along the way.

Chapter 12

THURSDAY, AUGUST 28TH

We dropped off Frank Bulcher and Wally Murch at a service station just off the 405, heading north. I paid each of them their two thousand dollars and provided another hundred to hail a cab with. In the half an hour since leaving the museum building, we had covered a lot of ground—Anthony maintained a constant speed of about ninety miles an hour, and by six o'clock in the morning we were just entering San Francisco on California 1.

I cracked open the window as we accelerated from the toll booth on the Golden Gate Bridge to get some air. The cool breeze was

intoxicating—it hit my sweaty face like a wall of water and by the time we’d made it to the other end of the magnificent orange structure, I was feeling completely refreshed.

The sensation lasted all the way through the city and out to Sonoma, where we finally pulled off the highway for a spot of rest. We weren’t due to meet anyone until a lot later tonight, and it would entail driving back into town, so we didn’t want to go too far.

The Motel 6 that we chose was just off the main road and looked to be newly refurbished. It was the only motel that we had seen along Highway 1 that had trailers in its parking lot. I backed in the white Ford between an eighteen-wheeler and a horse carrier. They looked to be safe company, and one of the horses whinnied at me as I got out of the cab as if to say, “don’t worry about it; I’ll take good care of it for you.”

When we checked in the clerk pointed at our trailer and asked what we were carrying.

“We’re actually with the equestrian truck parked beside us,” I responded in a faux southern accent. “Half of our trailer hauls hay; the rest we use to take Twice Shy’s manure back to the farm as fertilizer. She’s got quite an appetite—eats like a pig and shits like one too. Jest lucky, I guess, that she doesn’t like to roll in it like a pig does.”

With a furtive look, the clerk handed Anthony and I our keys and we went our separate ways (I to the right, he to the left and up,) and arranged to meet in the lobby at eight-fifteen.

I had dinner alone for the first time in a long time that night. There was a relatively good-for-the-price Italian place a couple of blocks down and I walked there and back to clear my head (and to work off the extra pounds I must have put on after eating so

much lasagna.) So far everything had gone close enough to plan—the side-view mirror wasn't damaged and only had to be pushed back to its original place; save for the injured rent-a-cop and maybe an injured antique car, the museum business had been dealt with with a minimum of fuss, even after the ramp had collapsed. (Whatever motivated us to think that it would hold? I wondered.) And tonight, hopefully the ugly business would be all over with—I would be on my way back home, more than half a million dollars richer, and hopefully on my way also to making amends with my wife and son.

Or so I thought.

If you've never done it before and relish a challenging drive, try taking a pickup truck with a trailer to downtown San Francisco. I defy you to get through this obstacle course without a scrape. We bottomed out so many times on our way to the pier that I was afraid the suspension would fall off at any second—and when we had finally made the turn towards the marina the bumper of the trailer was hanging on by sheer will.

Still, it was only nine-thirty by the time we came round the bend and headed towards the gray-painted boathouse on pier 24. The air was unseasonably cool and there was a surprising amount of activity for a weeknight—dozens of couples strolled along the waterfront and kids dressed in bright clothing cavorted in and out of the water. There were two burly guys dressed in thousand-dollar suits, hands in pockets, that were walking down the driveway as we rounded the bend towards the abandoned boathouse. Both of them leered lasciviously at us before continuing the conversation. I could feel their appraising eyes giving me the once-over and I had

to force myself to keep from shivering. Anthony didn't catch himself in time—and as a reward, one of the guys noticed, pointing a finger at him and squeezing off an imaginary trigger.

I dwelt on the two perhaps longer than I should have, due to the fact that we had arrived about forty-five minutes early; we were supposed to meet at eleven-thirty. It wasn't the fact that they were gay that surprised me but rather the idea that they seemed so out-of-place in this scene; their stuffy suits and ties were a distinct contrast to the shorts and t-shirts that almost everyone else was wearing; despite the gesture one of them had made to Anthony, they seemed much too uptight for the party-like atmosphere of the waterfront on a cool summer night. Above all, the hands in the pockets as opposed to the other people I could see—who were, always with animation, either gesturing to their counterparts or tossing/catching objects. I didn't see one other person on the waterfront that night that had his hands in his pockets.

At precisely eleven-thirty Anthony got out of the truck and walked over to the street entrance to the boathouse. It was painted the same flat-gray that photographers use for light metering but was peeling severely in several places. The roof didn't look to be the stables, and there was an ominous hole punched through it at the end closer to the water, just visible from my vantage in the truck. I couldn't see a light on anywhere, but even had there been one, I wouldn't have seen it anyway. The windows hadn't been painted over but had long since been rendered useless by a thick layer of grime on the outside, undoubtedly duplicated on the inside.

Keep in mind that this is the side away from the water that I'm describing—the side facing the Pacific was probably even more

dilapidated.

Apparently there was a bell situated alongside one of the door joists, as I could see Anthony jabbing at one impatiently. After what looked like the fifth or sixth ring, the door grumbled upwards in what sounded like its first time in twenty or so years. It seemed like the latest layer of paint had been put on right over the motorized door—I could hear the motor groaning loudly inside to pull it up, and could also hear the crackling of the paint, flaking off the rusted metal surface of the door.

Was it an illusion, or was there a fluttering of bat wings in there?

I started up the truck, put it in first, then steered away from the boathouse before turning back sharply, bringing the trailer in line. In front of me it wasn't completely dark—light filtered in through the water at the other end of the structure, weakened and distorted by the dirty water and rebounded the omnipresent, twenty years' worth of dust in the once-sealed boathouse. By the time it finally reached me, the light was weak and blurry and not all that helpful. Not wanting to drive straight into the water, I snapped the headlights on before going any further. The enormous cloud of dust, disturbed only by the breeze, had an almost equivalent effect on the headlights, and if it wasn't for the orange parking lights cutting through the whole concatenation, I might never have seen her body.

The mystery woman from earlier, from my leather chair, from the black Jag, was sprawled grotesquely on the floor, barely lit by the fading beam of the headlights about a yard to the left and five in front of the truck. Her flaming red hair had turned gray. There was a small pool of blood emerging

from underneath her shirt.

I braked quickly and honked for Anthony to come over. He almost missed her too, then froze for a second before leaning over her limp body, almost as if visiting her at a funeral. When he touched her neck, though, he sprung back to life, gesticulating wildly at me to come over.

“She’s alive!” he cried. “Get her into the truck. We’ve got to find a hospital!”

We hauled her up into the back seat. She seemed a lot heavier than she had looked when I had first met her; was every human this dense or was it an effect of imminent death? I didn’t know, didn’t really want to find out. As soon as she was strapped down securely by the lap belts in the backseat, I got behind the wheel and hauled ass.

As we drove, Anthony swung his captain’s chair around and attended to her wound.

“Looks like she was hit in the chest,” he said quietly, peeling back her sodden red shirt. It had been white once, and probably very expensive. Anthony bunched it up into makeshift tourniquet, used her belt to strap it around her body, and then rebuttoned her jacket. “She’s really lucky she’s still alive. Prolly because it was so dark in the boathouse that nobody bothered to check if she was really dead.”

I didn’t say anything then. I was too focused on weaving in and out of traffic, dodging cars in the oncoming lane as I sped towards hospital row. I don’t know which one I pulled into. All I know is that I jumped out of the truck before it had rolled to a stop, ran into the reception area and hollered, “Somebody’s been shot! Please get someone out there, *now!*”

You may be surprised that I was so concerned about this woman, and I assure you that it was definitely not me having fall-

en in love with her. It's just that she was my meal ticket—without her, I would have spent tens of thousands of dollars on hiring people, buying equipment, et cetera, for absolutely nothing. I didn't know who this woman was or where she was supposed to get her money from. If she died on us, we wouldn't know where to go to get paid. We at least needed to keep her alive long enough to get a name.

The next six hours were a blur. A flurry of doctors walking into the waiting room, reporting that she was in surgery, she was out, she was resting, she was waking. I didn't listen to any of it. I vaguely recall Anthony getting up a couple of times, I'm going to the washroom, I'm going to get something to eat, I'm going to go and talk to her. All I could think about was the two guys walking up the driveway as we turned in.

They weren't gay at all, I told myself. The answer had started brewing in my mind a couple of hours earlier because of a T.V. show that I'd been watching in the waiting room. It was one of those low-rent B-movies about mobsters killing each other, driving around in black cars with tinted windows, wearing dark suits while shooting holes through each other. Despite all my efforts to find a better answer, the idea that they were mobsters, coming from an attempted whacking, seemed to be the only one that explained everything about them.

The fact that there were two of them, for instance. One to do the killing, one to watch out for us in case we were early, probably to blow us to bits if we happened to stumble upon them. The hands in the pockets also seemed to be readily explainable; they were obviously gripping some kind of weapon, ready to shoot if we caused any trouble. Their stares

Always cover your blind spot

weren't lascivious at all; they were cold and menacing and were obviously meant to threaten us—a fact reinforced by the gesture made to Anthony. And the thousand-dollar suits? Well, that was obvious, wasn't it?

It all seemed perfectly obvious. The woman was obviously some mobster, and the two big guys were also obviously mobsters. It was equally obvious that Anthony and I had simply—coincidentally and with really bad timing—stumbled onto the resolution of a personal vendetta between the three.

Chapter 13

FRIDAY, AUGUST 29TH

Her name was Margaret Lucia and she was killed for good at 3:23 that morning.

She had died of a gunshot wound—a .22 directly to the heart, which I found interesting, given that most of the crooks nowadays were accustomed to using much heavier firepower. Either a professional assassin or somebody truly old-fashioned had done her in.

I had been dozing in the waiting room for a couple of hours when the frantic echoing footfalls of a whole bevy of nurses woke me up. I glanced at my watch and then noticed that all of the medical staff was converging on the mystery woman's room. That was a bad sign, and by the time I got there I knew

it was already too late. She didn't look dead—there were no new bullet wounds, no pools of blood. She just lay on the bed as if asleep. Her smile, as always, was almost haughtily calm and serene. I turned away as the doctor shook his head—not unexpectedly—and it was then that I noticed the name, written on a card and slipped into a plastic holder on the door.

It was then that I heard the shots ringing out some floors below.

I already knew who was doing the shooting.

The stairwell echoed as I rocketed downwards, taking only every third, sometimes even fourth, step. As I threw open the door into the lobby, the first thing that I saw was them—the two men from the pier, each holding what looked like a 9mm pistol, each waving it, and each backing very quickly through the doors.

The next thing I saw was a male nurse sprawled on the floor, blood pouring out of a knee. A doctor was already by his side, and although he looked like he was in a lot of pain, it looked like he would make it through.

An engine roared to life in the parking lot and as I dashed through the entrance, nearly impaling myself on a concrete post set in the ground to keep people from parking, I glimpsed a black Cadillac Fleetwood burning out of an illegal parking slot. There was no way I would be able to follow—stealing an incoming car only happens in the movies, and by the time I would be able to get the truck out of its berth round back, the two would be long gone. The best I could do was remember the license plate.

What seemed like ages, but which was actually two minutes later, the air of clinical quiet had rested itself in the hospital again. The woman's—Margaret Lucia's—body had already been moved from her room, and the attendant and his doctor were

gone, replaced by a janitor frantically trying to clean up the blood on the linoleum entrance floor. The muzak was playing in the hallways again, and soon enough, the almost comforting squish-squish of the nurses' shoes at normal speed lulled me back to sleep half an hour later.

Anthony shook me awake at ten-thirty. As I tried valiantly (and unsuccessfully) to focus my groggy eyes, he handed me a styrofoam cup of coffee and sat down across the formica coffee table.

"Heard you had a spot of excitement around here," he started.

I was too tired and too half-conscious to wonder why he wasn't here too. "Yeah," I said feebly.

He answered the question for me. "I figured we were going to be here for a while, so what I did, I moved the trailer out of the loading area an' hid it in an alley. I was walkin' back at about four-thirty and I saw all of the lights out front. Struck up a conversation with the attendin' cop, an' he told me all about it. It's a shame about that woman, but at least we got her name."

"Nice guy you are," I said.

"Hey, I haven't had an exactly easy time either. I just walked about twenty blocks from where I parked the truck, and most of it was uphill." He was right. He did look pretty worn-out. His normally sturdy five-seven frame was hunched over and his face was gaunt. A trace of stubble graced his cheeks, and he rubbed it gently while adding, "*Really* uphill."

The rain had started to fall as we started our trek out of the hospital, and was pelting in earnest when we stopped of for

lunch at a McDonald's. By the time that we reached Dolores Park, it had started to let up and became barely a patter five minutes later.

Before the encroachment of drug dealers in the late 1960s, Dolores Park was one of the most fashionable upper-middle class neighborhoods in San Francisco. The community was centered around a medium-sized park at the corner of Church and 19th. The majority of its residents were not of the same economic or even educational backgrounds of those who had lived there before; the three-level brownstones and narrow sidewalks now mostly belonged to poor immigrant families. A few persistent holdovers, though, did stay, and their houses were typically the more carefully maintained examples along the street.

It was between a blue-and-white trimmed house and one currently under renovation—it looked like it had been so for more than a year—that Anthony had parked the truck in. As I rounded the corner into the alley, I glimpsed the back of the trailer and thanked my lucky stars that it hadn't disappeared. The trailer didn't even look like it had been touched.

Anthony and I were both smiling jovially, until we came upon the white pickup truck attached to the trailer. The grins on our faces suddenly transformed themselves into frowns; our jaws dropped endlessly lower as we stared at the truck.

Oh, it was still there. The interior didn't show any signs of forced entry and even the bag containing my PowerBook still rested on the backseat. The paint wasn't blemished in any way, and the mechanical bits under the fenders looked fine.

In that bit lay the problem—had there been wheels or tires on the truck, I shouldn't have been able to check out the mechanical bits. The beautiful dualie chrome wheels and their matching wide rubber had disappeared, and the truck now sat like a

beached whale on a quartet of construction blocks, which looked like they had been hastily removed from the renovation site on our right.

As if to add insult to injury, the tire tracks were imprinted deep in the damp ground and led off to the intersection about thirty yards ahead of us before disappearing.

“Me an’ you,” Anthony said wryly, “we got some talkin’ to do.”

Thirty minutes later, from our spot on a still-wet park bench, we had witnessed three surreptitious drug deals, heard a possible gang argument (lots of young voices shouting at each other in earnest tones,) and had both acquired colds from planting our butts on a puddle of water.

The car came out of the trailer relatively easily—the thieves had been kind enough to block the truck back up to its original height and the metal ramps we’d used at the museum were still lying in place on the trailer’s floor. An onlooker might have thought it odd that we were unloading an antique limousine out of a trailer in Dolores Park, but there weren’t any onlookers, and even if there were, they were probably too high or trying too hard not to be noticed.

We did a careful, meticulous job about cleaning up after ourselves, wiping down the whole trailer to remove our fingerprints, and then stowing the ramps, and the bumper that had finally fallen off, inside it. We then grabbed our bags out of the cab of the pickup truck—heck, even all of our money was there!

By the time we had finally settled ourselves into the presidential Lincoln, it was three-thirty and the sun was shining and our butts had mercifully dried off. Our noses hadn’t.

Just our luck—the gas guy happened to be a car buff. We were detained for fifteen minutes while he quizzed us on the origins of the SS-100 X, finally satisfied by our explanation that we were running it down to the Palm Beach concours d’elegance.

I hoped he didn’t know that the concours had been run about three weeks ago.

We followed highway 101 all the way up the California coastline before turning onto 199 at Crescent City and heading back to Interstate 5, stopping for gas only once (surprising in such a car with a big V-8) and making numerous food stops—we didn’t just buy a whole bunch of stuff and bring it with us because we were afraid of spills, and thus our trip took about twice as long as it might have.

It was nonetheless an enjoyable drive, and even during the times when I was a passenger, I was contented by the beautiful scenery we rushed by—the clear blue ocean on the right, and the craggy red faces of the mountains that we were circling on the left.

Medford is a sleepy little town just astride the California-Oregon border. (Why is there a sleepy little town called Medford in *every* goddamned state? Why does each such Medford have a Transit road?) The town looked a hundred percent asleep when we righted onto the main street—the aforementioned Transit road—and even at the only motel in town the lights were off.

After a goodly amount of knocking and some groggy exchanges, we managed to secure ourselves a room on the second floor near the back (the only one left), let ourselves in and fell asleep staring at the “no vacancy” sign.

When the smell of fresh coffee wafted me awake six hours later, I noticed that there was a TV in the room, realized I hadn’t a clue what was going on in the world, turned it on. It was seven

forty-five and the local news, in its space allotted to it by the Today show, was just starting.

“Investigators are on the scene of what they call a suspicious car fire on interstate five this morning,” the anchorwoman recited. She looked as if she’d had about an hour and a half of sleep last night and was having difficulty focusing her eyes on the teleprompter. After another squint and a beat, she continued, “Two Massachusetts men were burned alive in the wreck, which was found at about three-thirty this morning two and a half miles from exit five.” The video was chilling. Five or six fire engines, of both the red and the yellow variety, and with a number of different logos on the side from different towns, had converged on the car fire. I couldn’t make out the color of the car, it was so charred to a crisp. But I could make out that it was a Cadillac Fleetwood and I could make out the license plate number. “Crash-scene investigators have determined that the fiery death of the two men can be attributed to a gas leak and explosion caused by a .22-calibre bullet hole to the gas tank.”

“Oh shit,” Anthony mumbled through his toothpaste before turning around.

That gun again, I thought.

Amid the sounds of his gargling, the anchorwoman was continuing with the newscast. “Also in the news is the theft of the 1963 presidential Lincoln convertible in which John F. Kennedy was shot. It disappeared from the Bering auto museum outside of Los Angeles two nights ago and hasn’t been seen since. Three men are being sought by police in connection with the incident, which left a night watchman injured. He is now in serious but stable condition in a Los Angeles Hospital.”

A l w a y s c o v e r y o u r b l i n d s p o t

They then rolled the film of the assassination, which even I knew by heart, and one that, despite my being Canadian, tugged at my heartstrings. I felt a momentary pang of guilt before they flashed the composite sketches. They were not even close, thank God—both Anthony and I were of average height and build and it had been pretty dark, but even the sketch of Frank Bulcher was really off. As she described the car, I asked myself, where, perchance was the sketch of Wally Murch? The anchorwoman had said three men, right?

“...is dark blue with a clear glass top,” she finished. “Anyone who has seen it is to call the Los Angeles Police Department at the number below.” The number flashed dutifully and the commercial—a Lincoln one, ironically enough—cut in.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” I said. “Fast.”

Chapter 14

SATURDAY, AUGUST 30TH

That afternoon was my first real opportunity to explore the intricacies of the car we had just stolen.

It was about noon and we had just pulled off Interstate 5 onto country road 138 in rural Oregon. The drive was perilous at best, but we'd figured that we'd be a lot less easier to spot on the side roads, and that it would be easier to hide out if we were spotted.

Interstates may be terribly efficient, but the options for getting off them are limited and, plus, the scenery isn't nearly as beautiful.

We drove slowly, maintaining a speed of about forty miles an hour until reaching Diamond Lake, where we pulled off, parked

under a huge oak tree, for lunch. It was a beautifully serene area, and a nice shelter from the incredibly hot weather, magnified through the glass roof of the Lincoln. While Anthony jogged down the road to a KFC that we'd seen on the way in, I sat back in the driver's seat and started playing with the controls.

Nestled just in front of my right elbow, mounted just underneath where the transmission handle would hit "1," was a large, elaborate chrome-plated panel that held about twenty metal buttons, each with a tidy little engraved script-type label above it.

I've often chided American cars for using English, rather than easy-to-read symbols on minor controls, and this limo was no exception. But after thinking about it for a while, I couldn't come up with any symbols to represent some of these controls. They weren't your simple heating-and-ventilation ones, but rather were marked with names such as "rear bumper footrest" and "secret service grab handle."

I started pushing, stopping each time to walk around the car, discover what the button did. Evidently the "rear bumper footrest" and the "grab handle" were just what they said they were—pressing the buttons shot out a small metal platform from under the rear bumper and extended a handle from the front of the trunklid, respectively, presumably for Secret Service agents who got too tired to run alongside. The position was surprisingly comfortable—the center of the grab handle was swathed in leather, and the footrest was large enough for both of my feet to fit easily. Similar controls opened up a pair of gun ports in the front bumper (the guns were there but I didn't care to find out if any ammunition was,) powered open the gigantic moonroof, raised and lowered the suspension, and activated a run-flat system in the tires. Each opening, meaning door, trunk, hood, gas cap, had its own button which powered it open and closed should

the operator be incapable of closing it on his own volition. There were even motorized American flags stashed in the front fenders which would flip up along with an illuminating light at the touch of a button.

There was a row of three buttons at the bottom of the panel with ominous red anodized buttons. I didn't touch those since the engine was off and they all were labeled with engine-something. How fast do you dare go? they seemed to ask me.

After I was finished playing with all of the stuff (there was a wet bar in the glove compartment!) I sat and waited. Being idle is always a bad thing because it gets you thinking. And I started thinking about why anyone would want to own this car.

Certainly it was historically significant. After all, there was only one car that JFK was shot in, and there was only one JFK. But why anyone would want to actually own it was beyond me. A stolen example such as this couldn't just be driven around (although I suppose that's exactly what we were doing,) and it was probably too valuable to do so anyway. Was the purchaser a big fan of JFK? A big detractor? Some kind of sicko that wanted a piece of American tragedy? Was the car to be used in some kind of sinister plot to undermine the current presidency? My mind unfortunately ran rampant with such ideas, but to save your brain I won't tell them to you. Suffice to say even the most plausible one was absolutely outlandish. Or was it a Kennedy clan member that just wanted old John's car back? If it was so, why didn't they just ask for it? Rule that one out.

Obviously, I reasoned, it was not one person but a group of persons who were after the car. That in itself suggested a plot

bigger than just someone wanting to put this in their collection. Three people had already died—two of them had killed the one of them buying the car from us. I began to realize the possible scope of the mess that we were involved in. That they were connected with the mob somehow was not a question anymore; the question was how high up they were, why they wanted this car, and how we were going to get paid now that I knew this.

And what they were going to use it for. *Don't think about that*, I told myself, but couldn't help it. *You could get yourself into a lot of trouble.*

Aren't I already?

Anthony came back hauling a bucket of chicken and we sat in the grass and ate quietly. Neither of us wanted to talk about the possibilities surrounding the death of the two hitmen—he knew all that much better than I how such things worked, and he looked even more puzzled than I was—a bad sign by all accounts.

“Where are we going now?” I asked quietly to myself, or so I thought. Evidently he had heard me. The quiet could get to you in a place like this. I was eager to move on.

Of course, anticipating my every wish, Anthony replied, in what he probably thought was a quiet tone, “We’re going to stay put for a day or two while I call up some cops I know—so we can find out just what is going on, so that eventually we can get paid.”

“Uhh.” It echoed. Another day of thinking. What could be worse?

Chapter 15

SUNDAY, AUGUST 31ST

I guess being one of those dead hitmen could be worse. They had died a pretty horrible death, according to Anthony's contact, a man named Weitzman in the SFPD. The medical reports said that they had been trapped in the raging inferno of the Cadillac for at least ten minutes before finally dying, done in by the locks that locked themselves up when you set the car in drive. A so-called "safety feature" to keep owners safe from carjackings, it seemed to be taking its share of lives now too.

The café was one of those that you only saw in small towns nowadays; its floor was polished wood but was appropriately scuffed;

the tables each had a transistor radio. The food was cheap, plentiful, and considering the price, quite good. We were just off 138 at Diamond Lake, and it was seven in the evening. As we waited for our coffee to arrive after the meal, Anthony and I, inevitably, wandered the conversation back to the two dead guys.

They had both been in jail and thus their dental records had been matched relatively quickly. Their names were Carlo Nicolati and James Quigley—alias ‘Jimmy Quicks.’ (!!?) Both of them, at some time in their lives, had spent time in jail for armed robbery and assault. Both of them operated out of Boston, which is where Anthony had called, calling in some markers after striking out in Los Angeles and San Francisco. What were two East Coast thugs doing in California?

“You have any idea who they work for?” I asked, knowing that they wouldn’t have come down here to do the killing on their own volition—how could someone want to kill Margaret Lucia?

“Weitzman doesn’t know,” Anthony said, “but my guy at the BPD is workin’ on it. He says there’s probably some mob connection.”

“That’s pretty obvious. What isn’t is why the hell they want this car, what they want to use it for, why pick us to get it for them?”

He lifted up a hand, started flicking down his fingers methodically. “Dunno. Dunno. Dunno. The important part is we get it to whoever wants it as fast as possible, get our money, and scam.”

It was then that the waitress arrived with the bill, and she does bear a little bit of description, simply because of the fact that I couldn’t fathom at the time what the hell we were supposed to do. I don’t remember how tall she was, if she was fat or thin. But she had the most outlandish hairdo I had ever seen. It was a towering, pleated, curled, piled, everythinged, monstrosity, dyed an

improbable shade of blond. It was so outlandish, in fact, that she had to compulsively touch it every five seconds or so, as if to reassure herself that it was still there. It always was, but every bob of her head threatened to topple her over backwards.

She picked up our cash on the table, replacing it with a couple of mints. I left her a big tip—keeping that ‘do in tip-top shape, especially with the pressures exerted upon it by a greasy frystation like the one in which we were eating, was undoubtedly expensive.

The old, weatherbeaten black woman at the counter of the Mountain Lake Motor Lodge and Eatery lifted an eyebrow at us as we strode through the lobby. It was amazing that mere facial expressions could bring us to a halt, but her eyebrow-lift did, and I steered back towards the counter.

“There was someone here looking for you about a half-hour ago,” she said. Her articulate, educated speech was at odds with her Aunt Jemima looks and this small town. “You been expecting anyone?”

I looked at Anthony and he shrugged. “No,” I said. “What did he look like?”

“She was about five-five, thin blonde woman. Not from around here, that’s for sure.”

“Did she leave a message?” I asked, intrigued. I hadn’t ever been in this part of Oregon and I sure as hell didn’t know any thin five-five blond women in the States.

“No. Said she’d call back later.”

“Whatever,” Anthony said. He turned towards the stairs that would lead us to our rooms. “You wanna go for a drink after?”

“Good idea. Meet you down here in fifteen.”

The bar was called The Headless Horseman and it harkened back to the good old days—quiet, empty, dark and just slightly musty-smelling. Anthony and I sat at the counter—he nursing Heinekens and I sipping club sodas—discussing this woman who supposedly visited us at the motel earlier this evening.

“How do you think she got our name?”

“Seems to me like the only way would be if she knowed that Margaret Lucia dame,” Anthony started. When he gets drunk not only does he slur his words but his grammar goes completely to hell. “Proibly her sister or sumpin’. Though I don’t see how she can be her sister if she’s a blonde.”

“Ever hear of hair dye?” I asked. I was trying to be playful but was probably even more worried than he was. After all, this job was supposed to have been just between the two (formerly three) of us. If one person managed to find out about it—well, you know. A secret isn’t a secret anymore if anyone but yourself knows it.

Forgive me for my sexism, but the fact that it was another woman also distressed me. It was clear now that Margaret (we’d deteriorated to calling her “Mags” eventually) was not working alone.

The very idea of a criminal—as it obviously was—enterprise run by women was worrying because in my experience, despite the façade put on for the rest of the world’s benefit, women in control tend to be more ruthless than men.

Take, for example, my first driving examiner, who failed me because I sailed through a yellow light that I didn’t have a chance of stopping for, while the male examiner I’d had a month later docked me a couple of points, chastising me for stopping when

I'd had "ample time to get through." I'd also had not a few run-ins with female broder control officers—but those stories are the subject of another book altogether.

It was then that the harsh blue light from the street cut into the bar in a bent trapezoid and she entered. It had to be her. The woman at the motel desk was right—all of the women that I'd seen in this sleepy little town had been dressed in rather ratty clothes and walked along in the loping, lolling gait of people who had the time to savor right now.

She, on the other hand, was dressed in a severely tailored—though not unflattering—black business suit and carried a sharply creased and gold-buckled portfolio under her left arm. What looked like a gold Rolex glinted as the door swung shut. The image that immediately leapt to my mind was her on a movie screen—her style of dress and walk were just too outlandish.

Her walk was quick and uncompromising—she'd stamped her way up the aisle and dropped herself on a chair beside me before I'd even had the chance to say anything. Her pantyhose made an almost imperceptible swishing sound as she crossed her legs, signalling to the bartender.

She did not turn around to look at us but we turned around to look at her. Even the nondescript, fade-into-the-back-ground bartender had difficulty keeping from locking his eyes on her.

It wasn't that she was exceptionally beautiful, mind you—in fact both her severe face and sharp-cornered body appeared to have been enhanced numerous times by artificial means. It's just that she didn't belong in a bar like this. She belonged in a trendy little café in New York that served twenty-dollar cappucinos to people in a constant rush. By contrast,

A l w a y s c o v e r y o u r b l i n d s p o t

as I swiveled my head around, checking out the other patrons, the clientele here seemed mostly composed of dolorous rednecks who had their heads down and looked perfectly willing to while away the whole night here, if need be.

Her vodka rocks clacked onto the table beside me. I glanced over as she picked it up and she shot me a venomous look before turning back and downing it in a single gulp. She slammed the glass back onto the counter—lucky it was plastic—and then bent down, unbuckled her portfolio and extracted a sheet of bluish-white typewriter paper. She slid it down the bar in front of me, dropped a twenty on the counter, and clopped out.

The bartender looked like he'd won the lottery as he cleaned up after her. I shot a glance at Anthony and pushed the paper over so both of us could read it.

MOTEL PARKING LOT. MIDNIGHT. YOU'LL GET PAID.

I raised—or at least I tried to—an eyebrow. Anthony was a lot better at it than I was, especially when drunk, and he smiled as we sauntered out of the bar. I followed, after settling the bill. The motel was just a short walk away and it was already closing on eleven o'clock.

Chapter 16

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 1ST

The air was crisp, even in the late summer, as the wind blew over Diamond Lake. The sky was clear and I could clearly pick out the tiny pinpricks of stars lining the atmosphere. Not that I knew anything about them, or even particularly cared—I have never been able to fathom how anyone could actually distinguish patterns amongst them, or why anyone would want to—but, they were beautiful anyway, and certainly worth watching for a few minutes if you have the time.

We were standing sheltered under the awning jutting from underneath the second-floor balcony, at the back of the motel building. The Lincoln was parked mere feet away,

so close I could see the stars—even smaller pinpricks than in the sky—on its midnight-blue flanks. At ten minutes to midnight, almost everybody was asleep but there were a few errant lit rooms and also a few errant bedspring sounds. I tried to block them out as I swiveled my head around, taking in all of the scenery, trying to forget the tension that gripped my entire body.

Anthony, in his inebriated state, was of course doing significantly better. He lolled against the wall, his head bobbing up and down sporadically, and once in a while he would actually fall asleep, his snores ripping their way through the quiet evening. The last of the lights clicked off and we were alone.

A minute to twelve I heard a car approaching—it was a pearl-white Audi, and it glided to a halt, sandwiched between a tractor-trailer and a motorhome. The sound of its door slamming was too loud for comfort, and I winced as the thunk echoed amongst the walls and cars to become a crack, rather like a gunshot.

Anthony jumped. “Wha...wah...ha?”

I pressed my finger to my lips in an exaggerated motion. “Shush.”

Once I saw it was her, I let out a silent breath. For a moment I was under the impression that it was another similarly statured blond woman, as both her hairdo and her clothes had changed in the two hours since we saw her. I gave Anthony a shove and then followed him out beyond the sidewalk, into the cool wind, under the bluish glow of the light above us.

She gave a little wave and proceeded towards me.

“Hi.”

“What were the original terms of your offer?”

“Seven-fifty,” Anthony said. It was not a bad lie, as far as lies go. How did this person know that there was an order in the first place, and what did she care about it?

“We’re not prepared to go that high,” she said. As I leaned back and pondered, I had a chance to study her further. Her hair wasn’t the blond I had originally thought it was—under the glare of the streetlights faint black roots could be seen, as if she had forgotten her coloring for a couple of days (or something like that; I’m not exactly what you would have called an expert on women’s hair-care products.)

“How high are you prepared to go?”

“Five hundred thousand.”

Anthony smiled at me before saying, “Who what when where how and most of all why.”

“Me. The Lincoln. Up to a week. Miami. Up to you, but I accompany. And most of all, none of your damn business.”

A quiet bump-thump of an expensive car entering the driveway. I couldn’t see the lights; it must have been going around the front.

She continued: “A hundred up front for each of you, the rest on completion.” That portfolio emerged from underneath her arm again, but its creases were dulled and its sides were bulging. She had trouble opening it—the zipper was strained by what must have been the cash inside. The task completed, she pointed the opening towards us, and we glanced inside—the blue light above didn’t afford a good enough view. I removed one of the wads of cash, carefully, but eagerly, flipping through the stack of hundreds. The wind in a gust flipped the bills like a book and I almost lost the stack.

The wind had for a moment hidden the muted roar.

Suddenly the parking lot was bathed in light and we were pinned in the center of the big car’s high beams. It was accelerating rapidly and did not look like it was going to swerve around us. I grabbed hold of the woman’s jacket with one

hand, grabbed the neck of Anthony's t-shirt with another, and threw all of us out of the car's path, sheltered between the woman's Audi and the tractor-trailer.

The attacker had screeched to a halt and had lurched into reverse.

I ducked and ran as fast as I could under the trailer, emerging on the other side, where I could see an impeccably dressed line-backer get out of the Cadillac STS. He left the door open, and the dome light silhouetted him against the night sky, ten feet tall and toting a massive silenced automatic.

Anthony and the woman were behind me, panting. I shushed them. The man with the gun had started walking towards the trailer. I saw him disappear behind it and that's when I pointed towards the Lincoln, hoping both of them would get it.

Then I ran. Not a pretty sight, but when you're scared for your life you can go pretty fast. I was seated in the driver's seat within a few seconds; the woman threw Anthony into the car and then dived in herself a few seconds later.

The doors of the presidential Lincoln were solidly built and made a loud, distinctive, head-of-state kind of noise when opened and closed. The gunman was running out from between the trailers as I slammed the limousine into reverse, knocking bumpers with his Cadillac, shifted, goosed it out of the parking lot. It responded like the hemi that I had driven for years during my youth: there was real power under that hood, belied by the conservative image of a presidential limousine.

I could hear the faint whizz of the silenced pistol he was holding, and all three of us automatically ducked.

Another high pitched whizz, then a ping from the rear glass. Slight clouding of the rearward vision, but otherwise no damage. Bulletproof glass—what else. As I swung right onto 138 another

shot ricocheted off the passenger's window—again, I ducked, but again there was no damage to myself.

Why had Kennedy gone without this thing on That Fateful Day?

“Okay, just who the hell are you and what do you think you’re doin’ to us?” At three o’clock in the morning, Anthony’d had the shit, and all of the alcohol, scared out of his system.

The woman was silent. We had been heading east on I-80 for about an hour and a half; we’d thought that travelling down the little roads of eastern Oregon wouldn’t offer us much in the way of cover if the guy caught up with us. So instead we jugged down to Sacramento and got on the interstate. We were nearing the Nevada border when we stopped for gas and some rest.

“Either of you want anything?” I asked. It hadn’t been all that long since I had last eaten but I was famished—I figured that after the parking-lot incident, they would be too.

Silence.

“That’s okay. We’ll just stay right here until this little lady starts talkin’,” Anthony said. “Won’t we?” His drunkenness seemed to have come back. Or was he just sleepy? I didn’t care either way and stalked inside to pay for the gas and to buy a hamburger.

When I got back to the car they were gone. Probably decided they did want something, I told myself. Turning around to see if anyone was looking, and discovering no one, I bent down through the driver’s-side rear window and extracted the woman’s purse, lying beside the still-bulging portfolio.

Looking around again, I unclasped the buckle (it was a leather thing rather like a belt,) and extracted her wallet from the bag's depths.

Why is it that women's wallets are so big? I mean, they're about double, triple the size of ones that men tote around but don't seem to carry much more. Typically, this one was large in surface area but rather thin—much like a coffee-table book. I suppose one of its advantages was that it allowed money—about a hundred and fifty dollars in this case—to lie flat instead of having to be folded. A couple of rows' worth of credit cards were also laid flat. The majority of them were gold or platinum. I started rifling through the little pocket underneath them and found a surprise.

Rosa Janssen. I could have found that on any of the other cards—I checked just to make sure and found I was right. What was truly interesting was what the card claimed its holder to be. It was a screen actors' guild membership card. Issued 3/92. Valid until 3/97.

My perception of her in the movies wasn't that far off, then. I tumbled the black-and-white card between my hands as I thought, then suddenly heard a thick New York voice hollering at me.

"Hey!" She was obviously returning. I swiveled and saw her furiously waving her arms, one of them flinging a stream of cola rivulets in all directions. The other hand held what looked like a chicken burger. As she flung, a tomato slice launched itself at an innocent bystander. "Get out of there! Get out out out of there!"

I raised my hands up in mock surrender, hoping she would stop waving. I dropped down, putting her bag back into the car. While her view was distracted by the door, I slipped her SAG card quickly up my sleeve.

“Rosa Janssen. That’s an interesting name,” I started, before she bopped me on the head with her chicken burger. I think I had lettuce in my hair—I don’t know, because I wasn’t paying attention as I bopped her back.

“Kids, Kids,” Anthony must have emerged from the com-mode—he looked ever so contented. “We don’t want to cause a scene here, now do we? Get in the car, both of you. I’ll drive.”

“Anyway,” I said as we rolled back onto the highway and got up to speed. “As I was saying, that’s an interesting name. Where did your parents come from?”

She seemed to be more willing to answer my questions. Could it possibly be because I was less intimidating with mayonnaise smeared through my hair? “My mother was Italian and my father was Swedish.”

“Where do you live?”

“L.A.”

“What do you do? Not an actress, are you?”

“I work at an accounting firm.” Lie, but it was not a bad one: her style of dress and the omnipresent portfolio did suggest a professional, mathematically-inclined woman.

“I used to be an accountant before I retired!” I said loudly. “Worked at Peat Marwick for over thirty years in Canada. Great country, Canada. It’s damn cold but the air is clean and there are so few people. I guess, though, that the States has its advantages too. Me personally, I like clean air and solitude. You said you’re an accountant, right? What firm do you work for?”

“I have my own firm.”

“Really? And it’s profitable? Most of the accountants who ran their own ships in the good old days had to close up after

a while—there just wasn't enough money in it for them. Do you have a sideline?"

"No. And, um, I'd really like to sleep now. Could you please leave me alone?"

I shut up and she was true to her word. Once I could hear the near-snores emanating from her nostrils, I turned back towards the front.

"Do you know anybody in the LAPD?" I asked Anthony.

"Nope," he said, "but I could call up Sam Weitzman, have him ask. What are you looking for?"

I removed Rosa Janssen's SAG card from my sleeve and showed it to him. "She was lying. She is some kind of actress. See if he can find out what movies she's been in, who she might be working for. Most of all why they would want to pay for this car."

"Maybe wants to make a movie about JFK."

"Good idea, but there are plenty of Lincolns out there that could be made to look like this one at maybe a tenth of the price. There must be some special reason they need the real thing."

"Sicko?"

"Maybe. Likely? Although I can't imagine what kind of sicko. Not your typical fetish, is it? Presidential limousines." I started mulling the thought over in my mind and soon mulled myself to sleep.

Chapter 17

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 1ST

Even at five in the morning Reno is an eyesore, a condition made even worse because my eyes were aching from an hour's worth of sleep in a car moving at eighty miles an hour. I slid up in the seat (cars didn't have seatbelts back then), rubbed my eyes, and turned around.

Rosa Janssen was glaring at me, holding her SAG card in a tightly clenched fist. Oops. I'm such a sloppy sleeper. She looked like she had been holding it for about as long as I had been asleep—oops again.

"Good morning," I said.

When she didn't respond, I shrugged and looked back out the windshield. The sky was

still dark, but a purple fringe could be seen peeking its way over the horizon. Framed in that eerie glow were—of course—the lights of Reno’s central district, which though not nearly as bad as the ones of Las Vegas a few hundred miles south, were bad enough to make me want to close my eyes again.

“Why’s she so mad?” I asked Anthony. His eyes didn’t seem to be doing any better than mine; he probably hadn’t blinked in an hour.

“Just figured out she’s our prisoner.”

“Prisoner!” I spat. “Why did you have to tell her that? She’s not our prisoner, and she’s free to go whenever she wants, as long as it’s after she tells us what the hell is going on.” I looked back at Ms. Janssen. “So you can tell us now, say, and we can drop you at the airport.”

“Sorry.” Woman of few words, this.

“Anthony,” I said, “I wonder who’s footing the bill for all of this. Evidently they have very deep pockets—they’re not only willing to pay half a million dollars, but they’ve got to be paying her a heck of a lot to keep her mouth shut. Um, I mean shut.”

“Probably some kind of sicko Hollywood type,” he said. “Feel sorry for him. Probably didn’t know that somebody else has been after this car also. Didn’t know what kind of danger he was puttin’ little Rosa into.”

“Is that the way it is, Rosa?”

“No.”

“Okay then, I guess you’re going to be staying with us for a little while longer. Anthony, why don’t you stop. Much as I hate to do it in a place like this we all need some rest, and we’re far enough away from Diamond Lake, I think, to take a day off. Just rest, maybe go see a movie. Get some real food for a chain.”

He smiled deviously. “Maybe even go and shoot some craps.”

“You don’t want to do that. You’ll lose your pants. Trust me, I know from experience.” I did.

“Whatever.”

We got a big suite in a big hotel about five and a half blocks away from downtown. It was nice and secluded and the service was good. The parking attendant seemed to be under the impression that we were the Hollywood types that Anthony had just been describing. Either that or some high-ranking government officials who drives around in an official car (even with the flags on the front!) and just don’t like wearing suits. In towns this close to L.A. you never know, and you can’t afford to find out you’re wrong. The net effect of which was that we got a choice room that somebody had reserved for their honeymoon and a complementary dinner at the restaurant on the second floor.

I said “tut, tut, tut,” and grabbed away the leather portfolio from her before she turned right to head to her room. A good try, but I wasn’t that tired.

I spent the rest of the night indoors trying to phone home. Nobody answered.

Somewhere around nine, after having returned from dinner, Anthony slipped quietly out of his room. Probably to shoot some craps. I was worried because the woman Rosa was supposed to be locked up in his room; I eased open the adjoining doors so I could keep an eye on her. She was still there, sleeping, if not like an angel, at least relatively peacefully. I left the door open only a crack, then hauled myself back into bed and started pushing the clicker again.

There was no shortage of entertainment shows—channel after channel with *Entertainment Tonight*, *Extra*, *E!* Blah, blah,

blah. They were all blathering about some old moviemaker's supposed return to fame.

I don't know when I fell asleep, and it doesn't matter all that much. What matters is the crash that woke me up.

It was lucky for me that I had left the door open—I'm a heavy sleeper and the crash would have meant nothing to me if muffled by a couple of doors and a layer of sound insulation. It's only the fact that it was so close, and that it was so clear, that got me out of bed and interested.

Like Jean Chrétien and his inuit statuette, I grabbed the nearest heavy object to me (it turned out to be a heavy crystal tumbler that I'd been sipping diet Coke out of) and inched towards the door.

The lights were on and Anthony and the woman were still in their separate beds. But somebody was rustling through the drawers out of my view. Which probably meant they were looking in the dresser right underneath the TV. I also heard a suitcase unzip and the tossing of clothing on the the floor—reminding me to glance back over my shoulder to make sure the portfolio was still there. It was and I refocused my attention on what was going on in front of me. I could now see the shoulder of the one who had been rifling the suitcases. He looked oddly familiar, and when he turned around I realized it was the same guy that had tried to run us down in the parking lot. How had they found us so fast?

More importantly, what were they doing in here? The car was parked in the parking lot amongst all the rest, and we didn't have a set of keys to speak of, only working with the motorized lockpick that Frank Bulcher had left behind. Surely if these thugs could afford to drive around in Cadillac STSs, they could find a motorized lockpick?

It had to be something we'd brought down with us. And what had we brought down? I had my overnight bag, with one dirty and one clean set of clothes, the portfolio and my notebook computer. Anthony was only carrying an overnight bag, and as far as I could remember the only thing Rosa Janssen was carrying was her purse.

It had to be something in that purse, I thought. I must have thought too hard because while moving my hand upwards to scratch my chin, I dropped the tumbler.

Flash of light moving in my direction.

Distinct sound of a revolver being cocked.

Me yelling ,“Get up, get up, get up!”

The woman and Anthony both jumping out of their beds, ducking as the linebacker looses a shot at me.

Me grabbing my two bags, bolting into hallway, Anthony and Woman following, trying to pull on their clothes as they run.

Their hallway door bursting open and the two gunmen tumbling out.

Run run run down the stairs to the garage. Get into the car, stab the lockpick into the ignition, hit the button.

Rev the engine, drive off with doors still open as two others get in.

Launch out onto road from underground parking lot.

Two black STSs—with Massachusetts plates, I notice—swerving into gear behind.

Bounce onto I-80 and hit the little red button on the control panel.

I was thinking to myself that the big Lincoln was amazingly smooth at a hundred miles per hour when she said, “We

A l w a y s c o v e r y o u r b l i n d s p o t

have to go back.”

“Like hell we do,” I said. We had been driving for about an hour, turned off on 95A about a half-hour ago. “Forget your purse or something?”

“Yes.”

“Too late. We’re too far out, can’t risk going back there,” Anthony said. “What if those two are back again?”

“There’s something very important in my bag.”

I handed her the Gold Amex that I had stuck in my pocket at the gas station, but she shook her head. “That’s not it.”

“What could be so damn important that you have to go back? Here we are cruisin’ along, we’ve got a hundred thousand in cash, what could be the fuckin’ problem?”

“If I tell you, will you turn back?”

“Tell me first,” I said, but I had already eased my foot off the accelerator pedal.

Chapter 18

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2ND

It was like returning to the scene of a crime, only the police hadn't been there yet and everything was left where we had left it. Rosa Janssen's bag was still on top of the towel rack in her bathroom, the single unopened bag in what was a virtual sea of them, clothes, shaving kits, toothpaste tubes strewn everywhere.

We'd come back to the hotel carefully, leaving the Lincoln parked about a block and a half away at a shopping mall. It was ten o'clock in the morning and the lot would be starting to fill up; when we'd parked it at about eight-fifteen, the only other vehicles in the lot were eighteen-wheelers.

The lot of the hotel was absolutely bereft of any car from Massachusetts, and thus it had looked safe to go in, even take a bit of time to pick up all of our stuff; I'd left behind my computer, and all of us—especially the “prisoner” Rosa Janssen—had left behind clothes. While we picked up after ourselves, Rosa elaborated on why her employer was interested in the SS-100 X and showed us what she had come back for, and trust me, it was well worth the trip, for us and for the thugs.

It was a black leather wallet, containing twenty-six dollars in bills and a Commonwealth of Massachusetts Driving license. Number 05332D, identifying the licensee as one John F. Kennedy, 122 Bowden Street, Boston.

That afternoon, we went to visit Rosa Janssen's employer.

The mall was a relatively small one, probably built in the early seventies, decorated predominantly in brown and orange. Its walkways were dim and the stores were depersonalized, with only their differing names (all set in Helvetica) to distinguish them. No-smoking signs were everywhere, but they'd probably been here only for a few years, and their efforts coupled with the cleaning crew's, did little to cut down on the stench left behind by twenty years' worth of smokers.

The movie was called *Bleeding Hearts* and it was about a CIA conspiracy behind the Watergate affair. The acting was lousy and the writing was awful. Rosa Janssen played a bit part where she nodded at incoming dignitaries at the Watergate Hotel. She nodded very well. The director's name was Maurizio Lucia. Things started falling into place.

“Let me guess,” I said as we walked back out to the parking lot. “Mr. Lucia is a conspiracy freak.”

“A big one. Sometimes I think he's crazy, he gets so obsessed

about these things. But he pays well so I've never had any reason to complain."

I couldn't argue with that. Anthony nodded, saying, "Yeah, but why does he want Kennedy's car? Or is it the driver's license that's important?"

"I honestly don't know which one he wants, but he said to bring both of them. Trying to figure him out is like trying to put together a puzzle that's been mixed from two boxes. It's not worth the effort."

"What're we goin' to do now?" Anthony asked. Good question. We'd already dawdled in Reno more than we should have, and if I wanted to dawdle, there are other places I would have preferred to do it.

"We're supposed to be heading for Miami, right? We were supposed to get there in a week; we should get going soon."

"I think," he said, "that we're goin' to have to go on the interstates. We might don't have enough time to get to Miami by Saturday."

The interstates had always been a problem, but I had to agree.

I stopped abruptly before rounding the corner and signalled to Anthony and Rosa Janssen. There were two cops exploring our car.

Well, not our car, technically, but there they were anyway—two just-recently postpubescent kids who didn't have enough of a paunch yet for the utility belt to strap to convincingly. They were walking slowly all the way around, chatting to each other, but nothing I was able to hear. I drew myself in behind the red Ford Taurus that I was standing by and knelt down behind the hood to watch them. I couldn't see any

police car in the underground parking area; I hoped that they would have to run off at one time or another to call in.

No such luck. They might have been young but they had been trained well; one of them (the taller and weightier of the two, with red hair and the valiant attempt at a beard) stalked towards the mall entrance while the other one waited, still walking around.

I called over Anthony and the woman, making the most exaggerated gestures I could without making a sound. They both nodded, headed quietly back towards the entrance, went back into the mall. I waited five seconds before getting up and creeping across the lane to a car two spaces down from the Lincoln.

The door to the mall burst open and a couple, rather conspicuously angry at each other, clopped out into the parking lot.

"How the hell do you think," the male party asked, "that you can just do that to me? Do you think I'm some kind of fool or somethin'? I swear, next time you do that, I'll knock your head off! At a funeral, even. You couldn't save it for an hour later, had to get it on with him right in front of his mother's coffin?"

—SLAP—*That must have hurt*, I thought. "I was not as you say gettin' it on with him. I was simply trying to offer him some com—"

—SLAP—*Were they really slapping each other?*

They sounded awfully real. If they weren't, how were they doing it? I saw them walk into view from behind a yellow-painted marker. They really were hitting each other.

"Who the hell do you think I am? I'm your husband, for chris-sake. I been married to you for twenty-five years! You think that I can't tell when you're having an affair?"

"You didn't know about Rod Meyerhoff."

"You slept with Rod Meyerhoff? *I'll kill you—*"

It took the policeman long enough to straighten himself up to full height, but now he was going full steam. “Hey, hey, hey. Calm it down over there!”

“What you talkin’ about?” Anthony was laying his Italian accent on thick, a sure sign that he was acting. “This bitch slept with my best friend. Now you stand outta my way or I kill you too.” He lunged for Rosa’s throat.

The policeman lunged for him.

I lunged towards the car.

The lockpick was already in my hand, its red light flashing, the motor whirring. It opened the door in about three seconds and in I went, closing the door behind me. I started up the engine, drove out fast, braked in front of the police officer (who had yet to draw his gun) to let Anthony and Rosa in.

The officer didn’t want to move, but now he had his gun out. I jammed one foot on the brake pedal, gunned the engine, started to release the brake. The car was going nowhere but its tires were making an awful lot of noise and he jumped out of the way just as I got off the brake and shot out of the parking lot.

I don’t know how long it took the cops to get to the mall, and I don’t really care that much. But we made it out with nary a scratch and were zooming down I-80 towards Salt Lake City in less than a minute, with the sirens screeching and the flags waving.

We pulled into the motel just south of Salt Lake City about four hours later. Its sign outside proclaimed V C A N Y in bold neon lettering. The air had become surprisingly chilly, and the heater in the car wasn’t at all adequate—probably a function of its really being a convertible, but inexcusable in a

presidential automobile.

Anthony and Rosa Janssen wanted food, went to a diner just across the bridge, but I chose just to go to my room.

Bored, I clicked on the TV, hoping to get some kind of new show, but there wasn't any sound, and the only thing on the screen was a black menu with four white-lettered choices: "1. Learn about our online information service; 2. Room Service; 3. Check Out Electronically using your room key; 4. Movie Channel." In smaller type at the bottom of the screen, "Choose an option by pressing a number on your remote and [enter]."

I pushed four, the menu faded out and in faded—

Two highly passionate, graphically naked, intensely frenzied, glisteningly sweaty, incredibly built, dazzlingly blonde and pointedly fake lovers on a bare mattress.

Huh?

Another message flashed onto the screen just then, blocking my view. "Thank you for ordering *Sinderella*. A \$14.95 charge has been added to your bill."

I called downstairs very fast, protesting that I didn't really want to order the movie, that it was all a mistake.

"Sorry," the desk clerk said. "I can't undo it now, it's all electronic. Why don't you just sit back and enjoy it?"

Five minutes later, amid the sounds of massive—if fake—orgasms, I dozed off and the sleep enveloped me like it hadn't done in years.

The dream was one that I'd never had and I was unable to wake up and shut it off. Surrounded by red-tinted black-and-white, I drove along a deserted road through the woods, nothing ahead, the blinding glow of sirens, gunfire, movie klieg lights behind. I couldn't hear any of them, only the thrum of the engine in front of me as I stared intently out of the glass.

A deer stepped out onto the road in front of me but I was going too fast to brake. I hit it with a sickening crunch; it was so heavy the car dragged to a halt. I could now hear the sirens and gunshots behind me; could hear the shouts of the director. I backed up, tried to work my way around the deer.

It was only as I was zooming past that I looked down and saw my wife and son.

Chapter 19

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3RD

The morning fog had enveloped the city like a big gray blanket, and when I finally got up it was nearing ten o'clock. We needed to go, right now. I hastily put on my clothes, swished a bit of mouthwash around, spat it out before banging on the adjoining door.

When no one answered, I eased open the door and no one was there. A note on the TV said "Gone to breakfast. " I peeled my clothes back off, jumped into the shower figuring I had a bit of time before they would be finished; they couldn't have got up much earlier than I did because the bathroom mirror was still fogged. When I got out, they still hadn't arrived so I took my bags to the car,

locked it, and went looking for them in the restaurant, and when I walked in I couldn't believe my eyes.

There they were, sitting like a couple of newlyweds, talking into each other's ears, smiling little shy smiles off to the side. Anthony's face was beet-red, working valiantly, but failing to conceal his grin. Rosa Janssen had her head bowed and was mumbling something to his hand, which twitched in anticipation. A demure little peck on the cheek; a violent shuddering of a surprised old man.

This was too fun for words, and I soon lost my appetite for breakfast. Instead I went back to my room, grabbing a chocolate bar from the vending machine in the hallway, and sat on the bed thinking of things to say to them while we drove.

"You sit in the back today, all right?" Anthony was unlocking the passenger-side door to let Rosa in. He did a little bowing motion before closing it. I shot him a glance, but he didn't offer any explanation and I didn't need one (though, hopefully, he didn't know that.)

"Sure, anything you say." The backseat, if anything was more comfortable than the front, with more legroom and a separate radio system. It would allow me, after the harrowing day of driving that I had experienced yesterday, to sit back, relax, pretend to sleep and eavesdrop.

Town led to town and city led to city and highway stretched into highway and hours melded together as we traveled along. The farther we had gone, the longer the time since our last pit stop, the more both of them talked, and the more beans each of them spilled out of the coffee bags that were their heads.

114 "Honestly, I can't really tell you why I never settled down," Rosa said. "I'm forty-three years old, something of a veteran in

the movie business, I've already made my stake. Maybe it's just because I've seen too many Hollywood romances end in disaster. Maybe it's just a natural side-effect of the business itself. Maybe it's the town. Maybe it's me."

"Never got married, never wanted to," Anthony replied. "Didn't want to be tied down, have somebody that could pull my strings, stop me from what I wanted to do. I almost got married once, but backed out at the last minute. Couldn't handle the idea of somebody that would need me somewhere at some time for somethin' and I'd have to be there."

"What was she like?"

"The would-be wife? I must have been about nineteen when I got engaged to her—we were just out of high school. She was a lot like me in many ways, somethin' of a free spirit, outcast at our private school. Both of us loved to travel, had nothin' we really cared about leavin' behind. We saw each other for about four months before I proposed to her—I remember it surprisin' me at the time when she said yes. Over the next coupla months we moved in together, everythin' worked out fine."

"So why didn't you marry her?"

"Everythin' worked out fine."

"Come again?"

"After we moved in together, everythin' went too well, you know? All the excitement was gone. Seein' each other was no big deal anymore—we used to have to scheme to meet behind our parents' backs. No more goin' off on spontaneous little trips in the dead of night; when we were livin' together everythin' was planned, it was routine. Both of us knew it wasn't the same."

"So you ended it."

“Actually, she did, brought it up a week before we were supposed to be married. We were drivin’ into town, she just said it, like that. I was kinda shocked for a minute, you know, but I couldn’t disagree with her.”

“Still friends?”

“Haven’t seen or heard from her in forty years.”

“What was her name?”

“I don’t remember.”

Omaha, Nebraska is a surprisingly beautiful little city with tree-lined sidewalks and little twisty roads. The color green seems to predominate; deep green grass, green leaves which have yet to go red, green crops on the way in. The green was so strong that even the sun, sliding slowly towards the horizon was tinted jade at its base.

It was sometime in the late afternoon and we had been driving for about six and a half hours, nonstop. We had been lucky not to run any speed traps along the way, because Anthony was driving like a madman, often hitting one-twenty when no one was in sight—not that he knew that I knew. It looked like if we kept up the same pace we would make it to Miami with time to spare.

We stopped for the night at the Best Western Regency West on Pacific Boulevard, which was only a stone’s throw away from I-80. It was perhaps a little bit more flashy a place than I thought we should be staying in, but Anthony insisted and offered to make up the difference between it and whatever other mo/hotel I could find in the area. I promptly found a decrepit old three-story hot-sheet establishment about five blocks down and upon return to the marble-floored and satin-wallpapered lobby, I gleefully pocketed almost three hundred dollars. Love certainly does strange things to people.

My room was too big, with three rooms, a big-screen TV and a kitchenette that even contained a microwave. I picked up the restaurant list from the coffee table, sunk into the leather sofa. After marking off a couple of possibles, I left the room, walked past the elevators to the room in which Anthony and Rosa were staying, where I knocked knocked knocked on the door and received no answer.

I didn't particularly feel like going out anyway, I lied to myself, and before returning to my room, I rode the elevator to the lobby, where I bought a pile of paperback novels at absurdly inflated prices.

I don't know what time Anthony and Rosa got back to the hotel; the only thing I did know was that when I woke up the next morning, I wasn't alone.

Chapter 20

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 4TH

The guy prowling around the living room, just visible outside the open door of my bedroom, was not somebody I had ever seen before. He was tall and thin, with long blond hair and a pair of green reflective sunglasses. His moves were not the confident swagger of the thugs two nights ago; they were furtive and sporadic, reminding me of one of my high-school math teachers.

I had a clue of what he was looking for, but he was looking in all the wrong places; the car keys were under my pillow and the driver's license was with Rosa. He paused momentarily—had he sensed what I had?—and continued searching after plucking a

mini-vodka out of the bar in the wall—no.

He came into the bedroom.

I had a damned hard time keeping my eyes closed while he searched the drawers of the nightstand; the tension was killing me and what I really wanted to do was get up and sock him. He finished his search and proceeded to lift the blanket, dropped it.

My alarm clock went off.

It was six-thirty and the clock was one of those old, old metal contraptions that beat two bells with a hammer. It made an incredible racket, and I could just see the intruder jump at its sound. I started to stretch out my arms—still keeping my eyes closed—and yawned loudly. By the time my eyes were open, he was out in the living room and I saw him just closing the door behind him.

“I had a visitor this morning,” I told Anthony and Rosa at breakfast. We were at a McDonald’s a block down from the hotel. It was approaching eight o’clock and we had to get going soon. “Did you notice anyone in your room?”

“No.”

“No.”

I chomped on my hash brown and finished off my coffee. It tasted like sludge, and I don’t know why I even bought it—usually I need coffee to get me going in the morning, but today I was plenty awake already.

I described the burglar to them. “Anyone you know?”

“No.”

“No.”

Any line of questioning this morning was obviously pointless. I shut up and just sat back, dozed off for about ten minutes while they whispered sweet nothings into each others’ ears.

We had parked the SS-100 X in the underground parking lot of the hotel; it was a large, well-lit affair with high ceilings and neon-colored markings on the posts. In this hotel, our presidential limousine was couched among good company; the majority of the vehicles in the garage were Lincoln Town Cars—there was a Hertz agency in the lobby, and it stored its fleet on the second level, where we had parked.

There were also quite a few Cadillacs, including an ominous STS with Massachusetts license plates.

I pulled Rosa and Anthony behind a post—hopefully before the driver was able to see us—and pointed. They both nodded and we proceeded circuitously around parked cars to get to the Lincoln—the thugs' Cadillac was across the lane from us. I hoped that we would be able to get enough of a jump on them so that by the time they caught on, we'd be moving; as long as we were in the car, we were safe.

The doorlocks worked quietly and I slipped into the driver's door without a sound. Anthony did likewise into the left rear seat, leaving Rosa the passenger's. The motorized door closers did their job with consummate silence, and I started up the engine and started pulling out.

Too late; the linebacker was standing in the middle of the lane, a gun trained right on my face. He looked, from my vantage, to be about ten feet tall—an impression heightened by the fact that he was silhouetted by the bright fluorescent lights behind him. I couldn't make out his features very well, though to be honest his features were about the last thing I was thinking about at that moment.

Crack! A bullet slammed into the windshield. It clouded, but was otherwise undamaged.

Always cover your blind spot

My father's words were ringing in my ear.

The car is not a weapon, he'd said.

You're an old man already; you shouldn't be taking risks like this.

My right foot took over.

The engine roared and we were slammed back in our seats as we first accelerated violently and then jerked just as violently as the linebacker was tackled by the hurting five thousand pounds of metal.

He leapt about a foot into the air before tumbling onto the hood, bouncing and then sliding off the side. He was bleeding, not moving at all.

The linebacker had a friend—call him the quarterback—who was out of the car and running after us. I gunned the engine and another bullet ricocheted off the rear window; we leapt into the intersection from the parking lot; the light was unnaturally bright and it bore down relentlessly as I slewed the car to keep it from crossing over the median. We hit the ground, wheels spinning, flags-a-waving, sirens going and never looked back.

“A nation-wide manhunt is now under way and a reward of fifty thousand dollars is being offered for information leading to the arrest and capture of the three culprits you see on your screen; please call your local police department or our toll-free number below.”

The composites they were showing on the screen weren't particularly good ones. Besides the fact that they were blurred by the TV screen, our facial proportions were generally out-of-whack, and Anthony and I are about as average lookers as you'll find in the male species. Rosa Janssen's hair was two or three shades off, and drawn way too long—but they had got her deep blue eyes right. I saw her cringe as I swung around to face her.

We were sitting in the last room of a decrepit little motel along I-70, just south of Kansas City. I was tired of listening to Robert Stack's voice; I used to watch *Unsolved Mysteries* every Friday, but trust me, the attraction wears off right quick when you're one of their feature presentations. His rumble voice faded into the background: "when last seen the three culprits were driving around in..."

The sound was gone and I got up from the chair, looked out the window into the dingy parking lot. The image on the screen was reflected in the window, which looked like it hadn't been cleaned in years. Then the film came on.

Not again.

It was something I had seen only a few times in my life, but had never been able to erase completely from my imagination. No matter how long it had been since my last viewing, I almost didn't need to look at the screen to tell what was happening. The clip has that kind of power over you and I found myself, despite my knowledge of what I was about to see, irresistibly drawn to the television screen. I turned around reluctantly and then fixed my eyes on the set while the film rolled.

It was as if they had put a slow-motion button onto life itself. The clip was maybe ten seconds long and they hadn't slowed it down, but everything in those five seconds seemed to move as slow as molasses—the images on the screen, the facial expressions on our three faces as we watched. Again.

There's JFK is again, in living color. There's Jackie beside him, waving to the crowd when suddenly Kennedy's head snaps back—then disappears. There again is the first lady crawling over the trunk, a little handkerchief dangling from her hand, her pink outfit bloodstained.

I grabbed the remote and flipped the channel. The show was one of those tabloid trash shows, *Hard Copy* or *A Current Affair* or one of the others, it didn't matter.

“—seen here with the infamous Boston gangster Charlie Dixon. It is rumored that he is preparing a bid to run for president. Is Dixon providing him with cash? Is Dixon providing him with muscle? Just how far does their relationship go? Stay tuned as we investigate.”

They cut into a commercial and I was able to stare out the window again. The car was parked just underneath us. Its finish was immaculate now, its trunk reflecting the no vacancy sign in distorted red neon letters. I couldn't keep my mind from wandering back to the earlier broadcast, and I wondered idly how it looked just after the assassination. Had they cleaned it off right away? Did they leave the blood there to analyze it? Was some of it still there on the seats that we had been sitting on for more than a week now?

I clicked off the TV. *What had we done?*

My sleep that night was fitful and not at all pleasant. The clip played over and over again in my mind, and I couldn't seem to wake up from it. As the head snapped back and the camera bobbed and zoomed in close, I didn't see my head exploding in a spraying mess of blood; the gunman used a .22 and the bullet only ricocheted within my hard head.

Chapter 21

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 5TH

The bartender/waiter/mâitre d' was about a hundred and fifty years old and had smoked as many thousand packages of cigarettes. Every second word out of his mouth was punctuated by a hacking cough that threatened to topple him.

It was about ten forty-five and we hadn't stopped at all this morning after leaving the motel; Anthony had driven all the way to St. Louis on a full tank of gas—which, admittedly had cost about eighty dollars; I guess the Ford people had planned for long-distance presidential trips. Upon entering the city, we promptly went downtown for lunch, where parking spaces were plentiful on weekends

and where there were less people to stare at us. Not that they didn't anyway, what with us parking across from the entrance of the little place we were now seated in. It was called Johnny Spurago's, and according to the travel guide that I had ripped off the motel, it was supposed to be about the best cheap, low-profile food you could get in St. Louis.

Low-profile was definitely the word for the place—with its dim, dim, dim track lighting I had trouble seeing my companions' faces, which were just across the table from me. I did the little hand-flip I'm-ready-to-order signal.

"What'll—" hack, hack, hack, hok, HOK, HOK, HOK, hok, hack, hack, hack, hack, herack, "—you be having?" the bartender/waiter/mâitre d' called from way over there.

I called right back to him, then he hollered into the back room, sat down again, lit another cigarette. His fingers were trembly and looked about to drop the joint, but he held on valiantly, and succeeded in getting it up to his mouth by the time it had burned to half-mast. I turned away, adjusted my ballcap.

The ballcap was not my idea, but after the broadcast last night, Rosa Janssen had of course suggested that we try to disguise ourselves "just a little bit," so before lunch we had hit the sports-clothing store just a few blocks in from the Gateway Arch on 55. We were all in ridiculous getups, stuffed to the gills with sports paraphernalia, from the caps to the jackets to the jerseys even to the socks, all bearing the logo of the Blues. I could have thought of worse outfits, but it would have been a stretch. Not only have I never been a sports fan, but the jacket and the jersey and the socks and the hat were all just a mite too tight—but at least the cap gave you something to play with while waiting for your food.

126 The bartender/waiter/mâitre d' was reading the newspaper.
We were on the front page.

I adjusted my cap some more, turned my back towards him, picked up the little plastic thing on the table holding today's special, pretended to pore over it intently. I didn't make a very calm and rational fugitive, that's for sure—why would I be looking at this now, after I had finished ordering already. I put it down just a bit too hard.

The bartender let out one big HOK and headed towards the bathroom, down a hallway at the back of the restaurant. There was a pay phone back there, I knew, and I must have got visibly nervous because Rosa looked at me and said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

"Like hell you will." But by that time she had already pulled a gun—a gun!—out of her purse and was headed towards the back. I jumped up and grabbed her by the arm but she wouldn't stop.

"I'm not going to shoot him," she said.

"Like hell you aren't."

"This isn't a real gun, stupid. I got it from the prop department at Universal before coming over to meet you." She tossed it into the air and caught it again. It was a good thing the lighting was so dim and the restaurant still empty—we, uh, she would have caused a huge ruckus if she was tossing it around at rush hour. It landed in her hand with a light thwap and she passed it to me.

It was a startlingly realistic prop, with the right blued finish and an authentic-looking fake wood handle, but it was made out of some kind of plastic and weighed only a couple of ounces.

"All the more reason you shouldn't go in there after him," I said. "He might be going for his real gun."

But he wasn't because I could hear him turning the dial on

the ancient brown pay phone back there. “All right, go ahead.”

The fake revolver clicked realistically enough.

Clack of the phone being dropped.

Rosa’s mobster voice, which I had originally heard in the bad movie we’d seen in Omaha, was startlingly good in person. It took on a low, breathy quality that she had never exhibited in front of Anthony and I—well, at least not me. “Come here.”

He did, trembling. “What—” hack, hack, herack, HOK “—do you want?”

Rosa’s magic purse sure held a lot of stuff: out of it she had pulled yet another movie prop, or so I assumed, this time it was a line of rope, which she handed to me.

I was trembling, too. “What should I do with this?”

“Tie him up.”

“I never could do it,” I said. “Even in scouts, I couldn’t do it.”

“Try.” So I did, and for some reason or another it was remarkably easy this time. I threaded the rope in and out of his hands and then strung it through an exposed pipe in the hallway, securing it with a double knot which I tested by pulling outwards on. It was tight, all right.

“I thought you said you couldn’t do it.”

“I’m good under pressure.”

“That must be why you’re about to wet your pants right now. Because there’s no pressure,” Anthony said from behind me.

“Are we just going to leave him here?” I asked.

They had already left. I looked at the guy and it looked like he was about to suffocate from his shaking—he was red all over and the jitters had become major tremors. I lifted a finger to my mouth and loosened the knot behind him.

like some kind of underworld hitman but who was googly-eyed head over tapping heels in love with the fake gun and rope woman. And one of us too afraid of a dying man's wrath.

"I let him go," I told them once we were out on the highway.

"What?" Their voices were synchronized now. I was duly impressed.

"He looked like he was about to keel over and I didn't want to be stuck for another murder."

"It's not as if it would have made any difference," Rosa said, "If they catch you you'll be sentenced to death for the first one anyway."

"Not the point," I said. Was she acting, or was this the real Rosa coming through? If it was, I wanted to get to Miami as soon as possible.

"Well, let's all hope we're not going to get caught," Anthony said, suddenly the voice of reason. When had that happened? "Look, we're going to be in Florida in another couple of days. Tonight I think we try to get as far away as we can from this place as fast as possible—at least out of the state. We'll start looking for a place around..."

I pulled the map out of my leather tote and pored it over. "...Memphis."

"And Graceland," Anthony said. We're both Elvis fans but I have never been anywhere near Memphis in my life. I'd planned on at least a cursory drive-by when I found it on the map.

"Just what I need," Rosa said.

"Don't you get sarcastic with us, missy," I said.

Elvis Presley Memorial Parkway is a beautiful road with a grandeur that befits its namesake. It's four lanes each way of gleaming blacktop, curving gently into the faraway horizon. The cars are all big american ones and glide along without a care in the world. There is no such thing as rush hour down here.

The exits, rather than being infested with those infernal fast-food joints and gas stations, instead are dotted with expensive steakhouses and elegant old bars. It was off one of these exits I pulled, number 291 into Southaven, to look for a place to stay.

Southaven, Mississippi is a sleepy little hummock about fifteen miles out of Memphis but hotel rooms are just as expensive there as in town because of its proximity to Graceland, which was only a few turns away from its main thoroughfare—Main street, of course. From the looks of main street, we were in for a surprise if we thought that we would get the same quality of stuff that bordered the highway; the street, rather than being lined by quaint little stores selling antiques and such, was a veritable mini-Vegas with jumping neon signs and gaudy flashing lights. I piloted down the road slowly to take it all in: John-Bob's \$1.99 buffet steakhouse; the Rock-a-Billy bakery and Dance Hall; the Gay-La eatery and general store; Big Jim's grocery and restaurant. Was there a theme here? At least we would never be at a loss for big cheap food—not that we would have been at a loss anyway since that's the only kind you can get off the highway.

It was getting late by the time we pulled into the ratty-but-relatively-clean motel a couple of blocks back from Main street on Parallel road—don't ask—and I didn't feel like going out. Lord knows what Rosa and Anthony were up to but I was just too pooped to care.

130 Sometime during the night, I wanted to get room service but the menu was actually a list of all of the restaurants in the area

listed by price and—of course—size of portion. Upon looking it over, I discovered that John-Bob's and the Rock-a-Billy and the Gay-La and Big Jim's all delivered. Which made my decision a whole lot easier: who had the most interesting name?

John-Bob's came a hair behind the Gay-La, so I flipped through the booklet and found their menu. They delivered steaks?

"Gay-La eatery and general store. How may I help you?" Actually, store was pronounced stawr and I was Ah. All in all just the right kind of voice to order a delivery steak from.

"Hi," I said. "Could you deliver a sixteen-ounce porter-house, let's say medium rare, over to the—" I glanced out the window, "—Southaven Millington complex? I'm in room 219."

"Anything else with that? Side orders, pop, beer?"

"You're allowed to deliver beer?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "It's one of our state's biggest selling points."

"No thanks," I said. "How about a Perrier?"

"What's that?"

"Never mind."

I gorged myself pretty well that night and I have no idea when I passed out from all of the cholesterol. When I awoke, the alarm clock/television/radio thing in the wall said it was just past one in the morning. My headboard was moving in unison with the wall it was bolted to, which appeared to be wobbling with the force exerted by the headboard somewhere above and behind mine, which was also making a damned squeaky spot of noise and which annoyed me to no end, it probably having been the thing that woke me up. Don't these people know about structural integrity or sound-

A l w a y s c o v e r y o u r b l i n d s p o t

proofing? I asked myself.

I resolved not to let it bother me and the rock-squeak, rock-squeak of my bed actually helped me get back to sleep.

Chapter 22

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 6TH

Anthony and Rosa were both grinning way too much when I knocked on their door.

Oh.

Rosa didn't mind going to Graceland.

Oh.

Anthony didn't want to drive.

Okay.

I slipped myself into the front seat, and decided that we would spend three hours—no more—at Graceland before leaving. I put the Lincoln in gear and we motored off at a sedate pace to join the congregation to see the King.

Three hours was overly optimistic, even for simply finding a parking space. By the

time we actually got in the gates of the mansion, it was way past lunchtime and we had been standing in line for what had seemed like hours. Nevertheless, Anthony and I felt the experience was well worth the wait and Rosa—well, let's just say she didn't say anything.

If you've ever been there, you'll recall Graceland as a study in tasteful excess. Taking in what was trendy at the time, it doesn't seem that garish at all; the floors are carpeted in deep brown pile and the majority of the furniture is upholstered in not-too-puffy red velvet. The windows are framed by ornate curtains with tasteful little gold rosettes at the sides, letting very little light in to spoil the mood.

The top floor was as closed off as ever, a barricade bolted to the wall on either side of the stairway. I wondered idly what it was really like upstairs—from what I'd remembered, I had always seen pictures of Elvis when he was down here, where we were touring right now. What did his bedroom look like? Where, exactly, did he die? What the family had to hide twenty-five years after the fact I didn't know, but I respected their right to remember their father in a positive light. It was rather the way I hoped to be remembered by my own son, come to think of it.

The garage, which is open to the public, can be described in much the same way. Its concrete floors are immaculately clean and the chrome-and-red-lacquer tool racks aligned along three of its four walls are spotless. The cars, seven pieces of good ol' Detroit metal—all Cadillacs or Lincolns—in total, are parked in the center and are in museum condition.

One of them, parked beside the red '59 Cadillac Sixty Special from *Heartbreak Hotel*, was a lot like the Lincoln we were driving right now, in fact. It had its convertible top retracted, but I could see the interior upholstery was almost a perfect match to what

JFK's car had and the paint on the outside looked mighty close, if not identical. Obviously Elvis' car had no bulletproofing or anything, but it still looked remarkably similar.

Each detail was perfect and had obviously been lovingly restored. Nary a fingerprint could be found on the doorhandles, and the shine on the paint made a Rolls-Royce's finish look like it was put on with a towel. I bent down to look at the beautiful chromed turbine-look wheels, which had been polished to a mirror-like shine, and that's when I saw a familiar pair of eyes looking back at me.

Not again.

How had they found us so fast? I asked myself. I thought that we had gotten rid of him once and for all. I yelled and waved to the other two to go. We'd done everything we could to get rid of them—had even bumped one of them off—and they kept on coming back.

Zoom out the front door. Shove aside startled onlookers. Cringe as rent-a-cops give chase. Trot down Elvis Presley Road towards the absurdly expensive parking complex. Look over shoulder, notice Anthony and Rosa huffing and puffing. Look down, notice one loafer is gone. Pause momentarily, long enough for Anthony and Rosa to come crashing in, see loafer a hundred feet behind. Yell obscenity, start running again.

There was a faint whizz of a gun, and as we got into the car, started rolling, I saw the STS barrel around a corner, clipping a concrete stanchion in the process and nearly knocking out a wizened old man with a bouffant hairdo that had just passed beside it.

Great, I thought to myself. I was sitting in the backseat of

the Lincoln, Anthony was driving, Rosa in the right-front. My foot was bleeding all over the floor, which I had covered with the tour map of Graceland. I knew I shouldn't have kept on running with my shoe gone.

The quarterback was about five carlengths behind us but wasn't gaining any because of the traffic we had hit on the way out of the complex. It was, after all, Saturday, and the roads in and out were crowded. What worried me more were the two black-and-whites coming up the shoulders behind him. I told Anthony to step on it and we swerved out of our lane and barreled down the roughly paved shoulder, bouncing around like little dolls in a child's toybox.

I don't remember exactly what happened next. The pain was getting bad and I slipped into unconsciousness.

The interrogation room was not like the ones I had seen on countless TV cop shows. It was clean and well-lit, four panels of fluorescent light mounted flush with the sixteen-foot high ceiling. The table had a chrome frame with a white formica top and there were no bloodstains and there wasn't a pair of handcuffs fastened to it. The room had no one-way glass on any of the walls—the only glass looked out onto the quaint Chattanooga street scene, old brick buildings on each side of a cobblestone road. There was a print on the wall of somebody's bad painting of the Chattanooga Choo-Choo.

It was the first time I had been away from Anthony and Rosa for a long time and I wondered what they were saying now. I wondered where they were and what their rooms looked like. I tapped my fingers idly on the table until a towering black man in an expensive suit came into the room through the door with the frosted window and sat down in front of me.

“The management at Graceland doesn’t like strangers running around and tearing up their calm and peaceful atmosphere,” he said, making it clear that he gave not a damn about Graceland or its calm and peaceful atmosphere. “And they wish to know what you were doing there in a stolen presidential limousine and two armed thugs after you.”

I sat there silent for a moment, studying my foot in detail. When we had arrived here, they’d had somebody patch it up for me and it was currently swaddled in some itchy canvas bandages that I was extremely tempted to rip off—the only thing stopping me being the tenderness of the wound that they hid.

“I was hired to steal the car and bring it to Miami,” I said. I didn’t think there a point in lying to the man—besides, I was hoping I could get out before I had to answer too many questions. I would also have looked worse had I not responded at all.

“By whom?”

“I don’t really know.” That was sort of true.

“You don’t know.” He got up from his seat, started pacing around. “You don’t know who hired you, but yet you are going to bring it right to him or her in Miami.”

“Not true,” I said. “I don’t know yet where to bring it.”

He pounded a fist on the wall and the Choo Choo picture frame tilted to the left. “How are you supposed to find out where you are supposed to bring it, then? Are you supposed to get any phone calls or letters? Is somebody supposed to be giving directions to you?”

“No, no, and yes,” I said.

“How yes?”

“She was with us when we came in here. I trust you

haven't lost her yet."

"The woman?" He sounded surprised and the look on his face suggested that he was angered, too. "She was telling you where to go?"

"Absolutely," I said. "She was the one who approached us, in, let's see, Diamond Lake, it's her that offered to pay us off."

"Wait a minute. I thought you said you were hired to steal the car."

"We were."

"But she offered you money after you had already stolen it."

"She did. But that was after the original offerer got killed." I could see that I was just digging myself into a deeper hole here. But much as I hated doing so, I couldn't think of a good lie and I'm not a very good liar anyway.

"I think we had better start at the very beginning," he said.

And so we did.

Two and a half hours later, Sergeant John Colcannon had all of the facts down and I was sitting in the interview room drinking a warm can of diet Sprite. He had walked out after the interrogation some time earlier with what looked like a grin on his face. Why he was smiling I couldn't figure out.

The fact that I was trying to figure out why he was smiling should tell you just how bored I was. He must have been gone at least half an hour, and didn't look to be coming back soon. I got up off the nicely padded chair (it had turned warm after all that time) and strode to the door, where I gingerly tested the knob to see if it was locked. It wasn't.

Was this a trap? I asked myself as I eased the door open. It was new and well-oiled, made only a faint sigh. There was no one in the hallway, and I couldn't see any obvious surveillance equip-

ment. The hallway itself was finished in the same sort of clinical style as the interview room, with whitewashed walls and fluorescent lighting. There were no windows, just two doors, each about fifty yards to either side of me. I played a little game of eenie-meenie and chose to go left.

My foot was aching and the bandage had started to unravel. I swore lightly, eased off the pressure on it and kept on going.

The hallway was a short one and contained five doors, two of which were to my right and three to my left, the one I was coming out of being in the middle. I proceeded slowly along, looking in the small glass window of the door on my left. No one, but the next door up showed me where exactly Sergeant Colcannon had been during my wait. He was in there with Rosa Janssen, his gray-suited back towards me. I gave her a sheepish grin as I did a u-turn and headed back the other way. Not surprisingly, Anthony was in the other room. I made some hand signals to him, and he made some gestures to me and I went in.

“I spilled my guts,” I said before he could get a word in edgewise. I knew he would be mad at me but I also knew he would be even worse if I didn’t tell him. “You know I’m not a good liar.”

“So did I.”

“I’ve never been able to lie well, not even in the first grade. You remember when we got caught outside the school making drawings on the sidewalk? Remember when I tried to say it was Robert Stanley? Those were the most painful whacks I’ve ever gotten.”

“I told you so did I.”

“So what do we do now?”

I pondered that for a minute. “Find some shoes. Then try

and find out who those guys were that chased us.”

“How are you plannin’ to do that?”

“This is a police station, right?”

“Right.”

“I’ll peruse the files,” I said.

“You’re goin’ to peruse the files,” he said. “Like somebody’s goin’ to let you peruse the files just like that.”

“Nobody’s going to let me,” I said. “I’m going to sneak.”

The downtown Chattanooga police station lives in the same building as the majority of the city’s courtrooms, the department of justice, and city hall. For the most part the building is quite old and formed out of the granite and limestone that are such a luxury in modern buildings. The floors are inlaid with fanciful patterns and polished daily to a mirror-like shine. The ceilings are high, very high, rising upwards into an ornate dome. The effect is not unlike that of walking into a centuries-old cathedral without all of the religious ornamentation.

The rooms where we were being held had been in a new annex, constructed only a couple of years ago, behind the whole complex. A large greenhouse-like passageway connected the two buildings. The transition in between was a surprise: accustomed to the cool, air-conditioned atmosphere in the new building, I was unprepared for the wall of heat that hit me as I wobbled my way into the marble-tiled hallway of the police station’s front office. I glanced at my watch—it was now approaching eleven in the evening—and took a right into the antiquated reception area.

At this time of night and in this kind of a city you can probably guess that the place was not buzzing with activity. There was an old woman with a ridiculous peroxide-blond haircolor snoozing behind the counter, and the desks behind her were all empty. I

tiptoed (something I was getting to be able to do naturally,) towards the desk, gave a few knocks on the table to assure myself that the woman was actually asleep, then lifted the partition, which for its age was quiet.

There were thirty or so desks behind the counter, a larger number than I had expected, but they were small desks and were crammed very close together. On top of about a quarter of them sat a computer terminal, screen invariably flashing some sort of geometric screen-saver pattern. The other desks still hadn't upgraded to the new technology and were dominated by twenty-year old IBM Selectrics.

I browsed back and forth between the rows of desks, trying to find a pair of shoes that fit me.

This was a detective squad, I had reasoned earlier, and thus most of its officers—like John Colcannon—had to wear loafers on the job. The city being as big as it is and the distances in a town like this so short, it was safe to think that at least one of the detectives would go home on foot, and would therefore have a set of walking shoes stashed somewhere.

In fact, four of the thirty detectives in the squad had shoes tucked under their desks. The first pair were gleaming black Guccis that would have been painful even if they were the right size. They were about double the size of my own shoes and I briefly had a vision of myself walking bowlegged and clown-like down the main street. No. The second pair, scuffed black Hush Puppies that looked a little more hospitable, must have been the property of some kind of dwarf. The third pair—recite after me—was just right. They were some kind of no-name shoes made in China, clad on the outside in leatherette and finished inside with some kind of rubber, had soles that were worn three-quarters of the way

through and had thread coming out of everywhere. But they were the right size.

I was in the middle of slipping them on when the alarm went off.

It was a loud, piercing alarm made all that much more loud and piercing by the size and acoustics of the old building. The matron at the counter jolted awake, and I ducked under the table to get out of her sight, taking off my loafer and leaving it as a present to whoever normally inhabited that desk.

A door to my left banged open and I could hear the distinctive footsteps of sergeant Colcannon clopping through the duty room. I could also hear the startled pleas of one Rosa Janssen.

“Come on, officer,” she was saying. “That’s a really good deal.”

Two or three more sets of feet pounded into the room and I heard Colcannon barking orders at them to find me now, as well as—get this—Anthony Sparacino, who seemed to have slipped out after I did.

Rosa was plopped forcibly into a chair that seemed to be about two desks down from my own. Then the room, after the hurricane of less than a minute ago, was quiet. When I heard the muffled snores coming from the counter I slowly slipped out from under the desk to face Rosa.

She was sitting there with a petulant look on her face and didn’t notice me for the first five or so seconds.

“Hi,” I whispered.

She swiveled around halfway to stare at me. “What’re you doing down there? You know they’re all over the place looking for you.”

“But not here,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I tried to bribe the detective.”

“What?”

“I thought that the hundred grand we had in the car would be enough to buy him off. It wasn’t.”

“You tried to bribe him with our money?”

“I would have been able to get it back when we got to Miami,” she said.

“If we get to Miami,” I said.

“Oh, we’ll get there,” somebody else said and suddenly there was Anthony standing at the doorway.

“Shut up,” I said, motioning towards the secretary. “Can’t you see she’s sleeping?”

“So what are we waitin’ for?” he asked. “Let’s go.”

“Not yet. I saw them bring in the guys that were chasing us. I’d like to find out who they were. They must be on record somewhere.” It was getting really annoying running from these guys, and thank God they were in jail, but from our experience, there would definitely be more of them and I felt it prudent to find out at least where they were coming from.

“How’d you think you’re goin’ to do that?”

“I take the computer and you two take the files,” I said, pointing at the bank of puke-green cabinets stacked along the back wall.

Chapter 23

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 7TH

Leave it to the police department to completely eschew all of the time savings and cross-referencing acumen that their computer system could have provided. Each of the terminals I checked was completely bereft of any software, save two games called solitaire and minesweeper.

On the other hand, the filing cabinets were a treasure trove of information, and it was Rosa, ten or fifteen minutes later, who eventually found the file for our case, which contained sheets on us as well as the thugs. It also—get this—contained, in a little manila envelope, the keys to the Lincoln.

The two thugs' names were Mitchell

Harman and David Simpson, both residents of Brookline, Massachusetts, which is about thirty minutes out of Boston, a playground for the rich and famous. Somehow I thought the address on the sheets was a little beyond their reach—after what we had been through, I felt it safe to assume they were some kind of hired help for a wealthy magnate, who I envisioned standing outside the front door, back arched, head upwards blowing Cuban cigar smoke lazily into the air.

I slipped the sheets out of the folder, took them over to the copy machine behind a wood-and-glass door and ran off a couple. When I came out, it seemed that Anthony had just found out Rosa tried to bribe Colcannon.

“You were goin’ to sell us out?” He was incredulous.

“Not sell you out,” she said, “get us all out of jail.”

“I can’t believe it. After all of the...oh, hi. You ready?”

“Sure. Now all we need to do is find our money and then our car.”

“Money’s in the car,” he said.

“You seriously think they would leave a hundred thousand dollars in the car.”

“Evidence room,” Rosa suggested, so that’s where we went.

And found a mean old man hunched behind a wretched old oak table. He looked sort of like the archivist—what’s his name?—at Ford but the moment he opened his mouth, all family resemblance was lost.

“Nrgh.” He didn’t have any teeth, his dentures were lying in a cup beside the Alfred Hitchcock magazine he was reading. He noticed, too, and covered his mouth, turning around to spare us the sight.

“What’re you looking for?” His voice hadn’t improved much—

it was high-pitched and reminded me vaguely of Preston Manning's. He looked at Rosa. "Washroom is down the hall, first on your left."

"Actually," Rosa said, "we're looking for a package of evidence—brown leather attaché case."

"I don't recognize you."

"I'm just new on the job. My name's Joanna Haverford. And you are?"

"I.D.," he said.

She pulled something out of her wallet that looked vaguely like a badge and flashed it quickly at him. When she winked at Anthony and then shot her eyes sideways and I suddenly understood—beside the cup of water that held his dentures were a pair of ultra-thick glasses.

"You got the tag number?"

Rummage, rummage. "Oh, shit, I must have left it in the car. Do you mind if I just step in and look for it?" Wiggle-wiggle of the hips.

"I don't know..."

"Come on. I know what it looks like. Can't you help me out? I've only been here a week." The words were getting longer, slower and lower, and the wiggles were doing the same.

"Oh-kay, come on in. I guess nobody will catch us, anyway." He lifted the partition and she stepped through, locked eyes with him for a second, and then proceeded into the space behind him. He turned around, too. I had to suppress a giggle as Anthony grew red.

She was out in a matter of seconds, blowing him a kiss, saying "see ya later."

"Did you really have to do that?" Anthony asked as we

trampled down the stairs toward what I hoped would be the garage.

“Do what?”

Clang went a door above us. “They’re probably headed toward the parking lot, sir.”

“Shut up and run,” I said to the two.

It was a parking lot but for a building like the one we had just exited, it was a lot larger than I expected. Half of it was under a section of the old stone edifice while the rest was out in the open air.

Row after row of unmarked white Chevy Caprices were lined on each side of us, looking like beached whales. We ran along, out into the open section, where we discovered it was raining but also discovered the impound yard around a corner.

The Lincoln was back there, all right—I could see the flags flapping in the steadily increasing wind. The question was how we were going to get it out of there. I ran over, opened the door (they hadn’t locked it!) and slipped in behind the wheel. The motorized pick was still in the ignition and I cranked the engine as Anthony and Rosa piled in behind me. I had started to roll forward very slowly in between the two rows of parked cars when a couple of young officers who looked like they were just out of high school stepped in front of me.

“Not again,” I said. I had no intention of running anyone else down—the first time was excitement enough and I didn’t want yet another vehicular homicide on my ever-growing rap sheet. *Honk*, said the car.

Of course they didn’t move. Of course not. *Honk, honk*, said the car, this time more stridently.

Nope, their eyes seemed to tell me.

Honk.

Honk yourself.

I slipped the transmission lever into neutral and gunned the engine. It was loud for a so-called luxury car, a full-bodied roar that reverberated through the covered area of the parking complex.

Okay, okay, said their eyes, as well as their legs. I shifted back into drive and rolled slowly forward. When I passed the two officers, I kept looking forward and tried not to wince as they started to run back up to the car to hit fruitlessly on its windows.

Two people were giggling in the backseat. In front, I didn't find it at all funny.

They were still giggling as we crossed over into Georgia on I-75. It was nearing six in the morning and we still had several hundred miles' worth of driving ahead of us, which, if we wanted to make it to Miami by monday, would have to be finished right quick.

In Georgia, especially along the roads leading in and out of Atlanta, one is never at a shortage of food. In part due to the fact that Atlanta would be hosting the 1996 summer Olympics, and in part because people down south just plain eat more, there are fast-food joints as well as relatively good restaurants situated in the median every mile or so. We pulled into one of these places—a no-name brand breakfast joint that served better food than any of the other places I'd experienced on any of the highways on this trip—at about seven-thirty, and we sat down for an hour or so to talk out what we were going to do next.

"We're getting close," I said to Rosa. "Are you going to tell

us now where we're supposed to go?"

"Good a time as any, I guess. Here's a map of Miami—" she pulled it deftly out of her purse and unfolded it on the large oak table. "—and here is where Mauriccio Lucia lives."

"Nice area," Anthony said. "Looks like there's some really big houses there."

"You're right," Rosa said, gazing at him, but not dreamily. "I think he said once the house was worth fourteen and a half million. His closest neighbor is more than a quarter-mile away, and he has a great ocean view."

"You've been to this house?" I asked.

"We filmed a movie there once. The house is so big and its basement is huge. He has the crews make sets down there all the time. He says it's easier for him to get started right away, if the sets are at home. And his beach is absolutely magnificent—he gets a lot of requests from other movie people to use it."

"Sounds like a Playboy mansion to me," I said.

"I resent that."

"No offense intended. There are worse places I can think of visiting." I adjusted myself in the seat. "Are we supposed to go directly to his house?"

"Yes. He says that he'll be in all day waiting for us—for some reason or another, this car means an awful lot to him. He hardly ever waits for anyone."

"What we do," Anthony said, "is when we get into the city itself, you give him a call to let him know we're comin', then you let him talk to us. I don't want no surprises."

"Absolutely. What time do you think we'll be able to reach the edge of town?"

150 "We should be there by dinnertime, maybe even earlier if traffic allows us."

“That’s great,” she said, getting up and grabbing her black handbag from behind her, “we’ll be just in time for dinner, and he has a wonderful chef.”

Traffic allowed us, and we were through Georgia and into Florida in less than three hours. We’d made the changeover onto I-10 less than an hour after finishing breakfast, and by lunchtime were headed south from Jacksonville on 95 towards Miami.

The day had started off auspiciously, but by the time we’d passed Orlando and Disney World, the rain had started coming down in buckets, as it does once in a while in Florida. But unlike most rain that I had experienced in Florida, it didn’t abate after an hour and was getting ever stronger as we continued south.

By the time we pulled into an Exxon station on Worth avenue in Palm Beach, it hadn’t let up a bit and getting out of the car involved getting soaked immediately and returning to a puddle on my seat. It was about four-thirty and Rosa had walked (rather jogged) into the station to make her phone call. We were about an hour out, and it was a Sunday, so I didn’t expect any rush-hour traffic on the way into Miami.

As we cruised down Florida’s version of Rodeo drive, I watched the disgruntled customers dashing out of stores under the umbrellas held by dutiful servants, and contemplated exactly what we were supposed to do now. We already had a hundred thousand dollars stashed in the trunk of the car, but hadn’t discussed how we were supposed to receive the rest of it—and I didn’t know what kind of reception was planned for us.

Knowing the reputation of Mauriccio Lucia as a loose can-

non, I knew that while it would not be something to really look forward to, it would certainly be exciting.

As I had predicted, traffic was light and we rolled into the massive, heavily guarded development in less than an hour. The rain was still dumping on us and a thick fog hung over the neighborhood. I could barely make out the street signs—or even the locations of the intersections and were it not for Rosa's directions, would probably have plowed right through the iron-and-concrete-topped-with-barbed-wire front gate of Maurizio Lucia's mansion.

Although the time of day and the fog conspired to make a quick evaluation of the house difficult, it was still easy to see why Rosa Janssen had spoke so admiringly of the Lucia estate. It was set on a gigantic parcel of land that extended right to the shore of the pacific ocean, and must have encompassed several acres. Not one, not two, three, but four separate buildings stood on the well-manicured lawns. Besides the boathouse and what looked like servants' quarters (a house grandiose enough for a middle-class family,) there was also a large flat-roofed building sitting beside the house of indeterminate usage. The house itself was four-and-a-half stories and built in a semi-modern spanish style that is typical of south Florida architecture. In the fog, it rose out of the ground menacingly, casting a shadow that crossed over us and into the yard of the neighbors across the street.

There were no lights on anywhere, and as I turned into the driveway I had the fleeting feeling that we were turning into some kind of trap, but a tap of the horn—as instructed—lit up the house like a christmas tree and opened the gate with only a faint whirring sound. I pulled in front of the house on the u-shaped

driveway, where I tried to get a glimpse of the mystery building but remained disappointed as there were no windows or doors. The only bit of information I did glean was that it was connected to the house via a greenhouse-like walkway.

I put the car in park, got out and stretched my legs while Rosa and Anthony clambered up the marble steps towards the entrance. They were an impressive set of stairs, four sets and three landings with equally impressive railings, downward from the roof onto the dimly lit patio. I followed after them, more slowly.

By the time I had reached the top, the door had opened but there wasn't anybody in it. Anthony and Rosa were looking at each other with puzzled expressions on their faces, but I was too tired to play any games and just barged right on into the house.

What most impressed me about the interior of Mauricio Lucia's mansion was the way it matched the exterior so well. The same whitewashed marble used on the steps carried right in through the front door, and the walls inside were as richly detailed as the ones that faced the elements, carved as if by hand out of a deep red-brown granite. The chandelier in the foyer hung from a spindly frame that virtually disappeared into the color of night, so perfectly shaped and positioned was the skylight.

Still no people, I said to myself as I continued inward, set down my carry-all.

"Where is everybody?" I said aloud.

"He said he'd meet us at the door," Rosa said. "I just talked to him a little while ago. Maybe he's downstairs busy with a film."

“So, what do we do then?” Anthony asked. He was obviously uncomfortable in this setting and I didn’t blame him; both of us were just small-time guys at heart and were bothered by such grandeur.

“Let’s go downstairs and see if he’s there.”

“Do you really think we ought to do that?” I said. “What if we walk in on some kind of important scene or something?”

“Okay, then let’s just stand here.” She planted a foot and leaned back in an exaggerated stance of annoyance.

“Fine, fine, fine,” I said.

Downstairs turned out to be the concrete structure without any windows. We walked towards the left from the lobby in the sky-lighted passageway and it led to a ramp that went far down into the ground and stopped at a set of gigantic metal doors. The building I had seen outside wasn’t really a building at all; it was the roof of a bunker.

The doors at the foot of the ramp, like the front door of the house, were unlocked and the doors themselves opened with a well-oiled mechanical ease. Crossing across the threshold revealed an ornate hallway leading in both directions with three identical sets of doors. Antique-looking wall sconces threw small cones of light back at the highly detailed walls, and the carpet was so soft underfoot that I couldn’t tell that Anthony and Rosa were beside me without looking.

“This is the studio,” Rosa whispered. “He’s got it set up so that he can do three different projects at one time, but the walls are moveable inside so he can rearrange the place to suit his needs.”

154 “Fine,” Anthony said distractedly. “Which door would he be behind?”

“Let’s try number one first,” I said. This wasn’t Let’s Make a Deal—we could get to all of the doors anyway.

Number one opened into what I supposed was a bar scene, a television suspended above the bar blaring out what I deduced to be a taped football game. Half-empty glasses sat on the bar itself, surrounded by realistic little pools here and there. The lighting was appropriately dark, and there was even what looked to be an evening streetscene in the window.

“Manhattan,” Anthony said.

“Where are the people?” I asked.

Room number two was like the phone center that I had seen on the Unsolved Mysteries broadcast a few nights ago, all padded dividers, humming computers, ringing telephones and bluish fluorescent lighting. It was also similarly bereft of people.

“This is gettin’ spooky,” Anthony said.

“I guess he’s behind door number three,” I said.

Rosa went first through door number three, seeing as she was the one who had brought us down here in the first place, and as I shuffled in behind her I almost stumbled over myself when I abruptly halted to take in the scene.

We were in the Oval Office.

No small amount of effort had gone into creating this place; it was exactly as I had remembered from news broadcasts, its walls curving between their panels almost imperceptibly; the waist-high wood detailing around the edge; the slightly off-white paint; the utterly blank wall to my left and the artful clutter on my right.

The pictures along the wall, on top of a drawered table of Jackie and the kids.

The polished oval table with its massive blotter and the green marble-finish Parker pen. The small stack of papers lying in a neat pile on the left.

The massive crystal ashtray, even with the requisite Cuban ashes.

The black leather chair with its back to me, behind it the view out into the garden and beyond that, the black wrought-iron fence, Pennsylvania avenue and the derilects lying in front of the fountains in the park across the street.

A hand on the armrest of the chair, a fat cigar with pungent blue smoke spiralling slowly away from its tip. He was obviously expecting us.

"Mister Lucia has a flair for greeting people," Rosa said to Anthony and I as she calmly walked over to the chair and laid a hand on the big shoulder. "Long time no see!"

Her hand came back coated in red and when the chair did a slow turn as she screamed and crumpled to the floor I saw Maurizio Lucia for the first time. He looked perfectly serene except for the cracked left lens of his glasses and the blood flowing out of the eyesocket behind it.

"Small-calibre handgun at very close range would be my bet." The homicide detective was a stocky guy with a pasty-white face and a pathetic comb-over wrapped in a Columbo-esque trench-coat. "I'll do the report tomorrow morning, loo. Yeah. Okay. Bye." He flipped his cellular phone shut and turned to face us.

He'd arrived on the scene about an hour after we discovered the body, Rosa having made the phone call. We were sitting at the fake bar in the room two doors down, but I could still hear the flashbulb of the forensic pathologist popping through the open door. "What exactly are you doing here?"

“Mister Lucia is—was—my friend.” The reason it had taken so long for the detective to arrive was that we had driven to a Budget rent-a-car and had come out with a white Ford Escort, leaving the old Lincoln in the airport parking lot. “I was going to introduce him to my friends here.”

“Tell me, when did you arrive in town, mister...Sparacino?”

“Just came in today. We haven’t even had time to go lookin’ for a hotel.”

“And which airline did you fly?”

“We were supposed to be on the five-ten from Toronto on Delta,” I said, “but we bought cheap tickets and they overbooked so we got bumped to the seven-thirty.”

“And you, miss Janssen? Did you come in from Toronto also?”

“No, I flew in from L.A. About an hour earlier. While I was waiting, I called up Mauriccio, and he was still alive at seven. If only I could have known...” I was afraid she might overdo it but was also afraid that the detective would notice it if I shot her a look.

“And you walked in on the body when?”

“Just five minutes before I called you,” Rosa answered. A mite too fast.

“Okay, thank you. If you’ll permit me to, I recommend you stay at the Marriott near the airport. The price is not bad at all, and it’s within easy reach of the precinct.” He paused, smiled, then said, “You will, of course, have to stay in town until we are finished with the investigation. Here is my card in case you think of anything else to tell me.”

Hector B. Partain, it said. *Detective Second Class, Homicide.*

“Second class is right,” muttered Anthony as we walked

out to the Ford Escort.

Second class or not, Partain was right about the Marriott outside of the airport. Not only was it relatively inexpensive and comfortable, it put us within striking distance of the Lincoln should the need have arisen.

Once again, I settled myself alone into a room, once again sat glumly staring at the television. It was about eleven-thirty when I decided I ought to call home.

“Hello?”

“Just wanted to hear your voice again,” I started in. “I might be late coming home. The man who hired us just got himself murdered.”

“You get out of there right now,” she said calmly. It was a sure indication she was either angry or frightened; while most people get agitated, Susan just calms herself into a stupor.

“I can’t. We haven’t been paid in full yet.”

“How much have you been paid, then?” she asked.

“A hundred thousand.”

“Get out of there right now. I don’t care if you have a hundred thousand, I don’t care if you have nothing. Just get yourself out of there, please.”

Maybe it was the combined force of the rain slamming into the windowsill and the rotten day I’d been having. Maybe it’s just because I didn’t want to leave without completing the deal. Whatever it was, I suddenly found the phone resting back on the receiver and myself sitting cross-legged on the bed, staring out the window, where a lone cabbie was hunched inside his car, oblivious to the storm that was erupting around him.

Chapter 24

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 8TH

I didn't sleep that night and after an unknown number of really poorly made non-pornographic late-night movies, I showered, shaved and walked down the six flights of stairs to the lobby of the hotel. I didn't know how long we were expected to stay in town, didn't even know how detective Hector Partain was even supposed to get through to us, but I figured that a check of messages was in order.

There weren't any, but in the lobby I found out how Partain was supposed to get through to us, because he was sitting in one of the creamy leather sofas, holding a cup of steaming coffee in his right hand. Across

from him were Rosa and Anthony, who had obviously arrived just a few moments before I did, judging by the look of their faces.

"And a good day to you, sir," he called out across the lobby. "I trust that you rested well last night?"

"You trust wrong. I didn't sleep a wink. The rain kept me up all night."

"Never expected Florida to be like this, did you? They say that a major tropical storm is on its way up here. If I was you, I would get out of town as soon as possible. Then again, it isn't possible for you to get out of town right now, is it?"

"How long do you expect us to stay in town?" I asked him,

"Well, now, we're not really sure," he said. "The investigation is really going nowhere right now. But what will probably happen is that we'll interview you later this week."

"How late does 'later' mean?"

"Thursday or Friday, depending on what the results of the autopsy and evidence analysis are. Probably Thursday, but don't get your hopes up."

"I have to be back in L.A. By Wednesday," Rosa said.

"Shooting on *Blood* starts then. It's my first real role."

"Well, ma'am, we'll do what we can to accommodate you, but frankly with all of the crime in this city I don't think we'll be able to fit you in that early." Pout.

"What I came down here to ask you for, and I'm glad sir that you're here, is just some clarification on a couple of points for our report. You said that you called up immediately after finding the body but your fingerprints seem to be all over the rest of the house. I don't understand how you could have called us in right after you found the body, seeing as it's obvious that you did some exploring."

"As we have already told you," I said, trying to mimic his tone

but not wholly succeeding, “when we arrived at the house, the door was unlocked. Naturally, being suspicious, not having heard any response to our calls and rings, we walked in and tried to find mister Lucia. When we didn’t, that’s when we went downstairs to the studio.”

“Thank you. My other question actually has to do with your arrival on the scene—we would like to know if you had seen any other automobiles when you arrived. The lab techs have found a second set of tire tracks in the gravel leading up to the home—because of the storm, the mud kept the impressions all the way up till now.”

“Wouldn’t the rain have washed any kind of tracks away?” Rosa asked.

“You’d have thought so, now, wouldn’t you? But Florida mud is weird that way.”

“Well, I didn’t see anythin’,” Anthony said, then turned towards me. “You?”

“I was too busy looking ahead to notice any tracks, but if you’re asking about cars, I don’t remember seeing any. I’m sure I would have remembered.”

“Interesting tracks, the ones we found. We ran them through the FBI crime lab’s computer, and couldn’t find hide nor hair of a match, even fifty years back. The tires must have been some sort of one-off, a very important clue in my books.”

“Do you think you should have looked back further?” I asked. I couldn’t resist a little bit of needling.

“There were no records before 1943. The fire that burned down most of downtown wiped out the police building, too—or so they tell me. I only moved here from Tallahassee five years ago.” He paused, shucked on his beige overcoat. “Well,

I don't want to be taking up any more of your time. I'll call and leave a message for you about when you can come downtown to make your statements. Until then, don't stray too far away from home now, okay?" He picked up his hat, a dove-gray Borsalino that must have cost five hundred dollars, made a gallant bow, and strode out of the lobby, looking back every ten seconds.

The tires were a set of Avon Touring SPs, which had been manufactured in England in 1960—and which had been fitted to all presidential limousines up to the present day. The particular tires mounted on Kennedy's Lincoln had been made using a special kind of compound on the outer edges, a "hydrophilic" rubber that was supposedly attracted to water, giving better traction in ice and snow. Additionally, the inside walls of the tires had been fitted with bulletproofing, and they were also impervious to flats. All of this technology made the tires some of the heaviest ever made—one of them alone weighed over seventy-five pounds.

"What are you thinking?" Rosa had just finished downing half a glass of orange juice and had speared a strip of bacon.

"I don't know. Doesn't it seem to you that we've gotten in just a little bit over our heads here?"

"Tell me about it," Anthony said. "I thought this would be the one quick job I could retire on."

"Do you realize that since we started out on this trip, people have been dropping like flies around us? First, there was that woman in San Francisco. Then it was the two thugs in Oregon. Then the guy I ran over. Now this movie director."

"I'm tellin' you, we should never have gotten involved with this job. Kennedy's limo, that's just too much. We shoulda seen it comin'. What kind of idiots were we to think that this would be easy? Tell me, why did we get involved, anyway?"

“The money.”

“Look, guys, don’t you think you’re blowing it a bit out of proportion? I mean, murders happen all the time.”

“I have never seen any dead people in my life save for funerals,” I said, “you, coming from L.A. Might be acclimatized to it, but I’m certainly not. Have you ever seen this many bodies in the space of what, a week?”

“True.” The last bit of bacon found its way home and she excused herself to “powder myself up.”

“There’s gotta be more to this than we know. Somebody is after that car real bad, and if we don’t be quick about findin’ out who that is and what they want and how we can give it to ‘em, we’re dead meat.”

“So right, my friend. But how do you propose to do that?”

“You used to be a cop, right?” Rosa had returned from the washroom, her face newly made up. “Have any friends in Miami that could keep us up-to-date on what’s going on?”

“You’ve been watching too many T.V. shows,” I said.

“Nah, she’s sorta right. I don’t know anybody on the force right now, but there’s a guy I know lives out in Lauderdale that was a homicide detective till he took early retirement about five years ago. I’ll call ‘im up, see what I can do.”

“What good will a retiree cop do us?” I asked.

The house was a faded pink bungalow, overgrown by bushes on all sides. It was located on a street that, if I hadn’t actually driven there myself, I would never have believed could exist in Lauderdale, Florida’s city of lights.

The street was a cracked and rutted affair of fifty-year-old concrete with a slipperiness excaberated by the rain. and by the time we had finished jouncing down it, the Escort’s stiff

springs and hard seats, coupled with my fifty pounds of excess flab, had left my back in very poor shape indeed.

“Just a minute.” Anthony unbuckled his seatbelt and swung open the door.

“Wait up.” Rosa followed him.

I sat back in my seat, closed my eyes, and turned up the radio. What was I supposed to do now?

The first and most obvious option would be to just leave right now—unrealistic to say the least, but at least something the family would approve of. It wasn’t something I could really consider, though, since I didn’t want to shoulder the guilt if Anthony—or God forbid, even Rosa—got into any sort of trouble.

Plus, if I were to do so, I would lose out on my share of half a million dollars. A tidy sum at any time, it was especially attractive in the light of the cuts coming in my pension plan and the completion of my son’s fifty-thousand-dollar-a-year ivy league education.

But to stay would be risky, much as Susan had told me, what with the murders that seemed to be occurring at an alarming rate around us. Until we figured out who was responsible for killing Margaret Lucia, the two thugs in Oregon, and Mauriccio Lucia, we would never be safe, because it was these people that we needed to hand the car over to. Keep it and it would get us killed, I was sure of it.

Therein lay the biggest problem—I had already committed myself to staying subconsciously, just hadn’t decided how exactly I was going to go about saving my skin at the same time. This was, of course, the logical first step in the process but I had no idea where it would lead or what it would cost me. Nor did I particularly care at the time, save for myself coming out of it alive.

The opening of the door coupled with a sudden roll of thunder woke me an indeterminate amount of time later, and I opened my eyes to see a classic boozier in the seat next to me, complete with tan peacoat, hat mounted ever-so-slightly off-kilter, and the distinctive smell of someone who has gotten into it rather early in the morning.

“Eli Masterson,” he said, sticking out a hand. “How d’ya do?”

The hand was rough and craggy, an odd shade of gray, but its grip was still firm. “Good,” I replied.

“Anthony here tells me you have a bit of a problem. Now, I’ve been out of the force for a few years but I think I can help you. Most of what you’ll be looking for won’t be with the police department at all.”

“How so?”

“Cost-cutting.” He frowned, and I guessed that he’d been laid off. “Most of the important work nowadays ain’t even done in-house. They subcontract it out to places that can do it faster cheaper better.”

Anthony and Rosa had slipped into the seats behind us, and I looked back at him to ask “what now?”

“What we’re gonna do is drive down to central records, find out who’s doing the work on the case. Then I give you guys the names, we go and find the places, see what we can see.”

“It’s that easy?”

“It is when your sweetheart is the office manager down there.”

I-95 in Miami is an eight-lane affair each way and even at eleven in the morning monday is stuck in perpetual gridlock. By the time we had taken exit 4 taking us downtown, it was

closing in on one in the afternoon, the rain had stopped and the sun had come out—suddenly making me very hungry. I dropped off Anthony and Eli at the front door of the modern steel-and-glass police station and went with Rosa in search of food.

Miami is a place not lacking in such regards and it wasn't long before we'd found a little Mexican place called Enrico's off Flagler street, a couple of blocks away from the shore. It was only a little while later that we were walking down the coast at a relaxed pace, the wind mussing my hair and the sand seeping into my shoes.

"First impressions of mister Masterson?" I asked.

"I like him, personally—he stinks of booze and looks half-sloshed all the time but he has a sharp mind, so far as I can tell." She took a gulp of her soda. "I'm not really clear on his connection with Anthony, though."

"Not something that I care much about." The taco that I had ordered what unexpectedly hot, searing the roof of my mouth. I tried to drown it in 7-Up but only partially succeeded. "I care more about how he will be able to help us."

"I don't even know what we're supposed to be doing right now. One of my best friends is dead, I've seen you run somebody over—everything is in limbo right now and I'm finding it very difficult to assimilate everything. I'll really miss Mauriccio—he was a great man."

"If he was such a great man, who would have any motivation to kill him?"

"It's the movies, remember? Everyone's an enemy. You could have somebody you rejected for a part, a competing director, slighted crew members, former lovers, coke dealers, anything." A schlurp as she finished off her soda.

"Was he a user?"

“Not as far as I know.”

“I think you left out politicians. From the movie that I saw, he’s likely to have some of them after his hide too.”

“He’s been sued so many times by people—especially politicians—that he’s made movies about, but nothing ever really came of the trials; all of the suits were settled out-of-court and at significant expense to the studios. I can’t think of anyone who would be angry after a multimillion-dollar settlement.”

“For some reason, I don’t think that money is at the root of all this,” I said. “From what I’ve seen of the people following us, money is absolutely no object. These are thugs with thousand-dollar suits driving around in Cadillacs, for God’s sake.”

“What, you’re saying it’s some kind of personal thing?”

“It’s got to be. There’s no other explanation. And this ‘personal thing’ as you call it is a strong enough motive for its master to get his hands dirty—murder is not your average form of expression if you’ve got a problem with somebody.”

“That’s because you’re from Canada,” she said. “Down here it’s the easiest way to settle personal problems. Hell, where I come from—Lubbock, Texas—it’s legal to carry a concealed weapon there.”

“First things first,” I said, signalling for the bill. I hadn’t realized we’d been chatting for so long. “Let’s find out about that evidence.”

Chapter 25

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 8TH

The forensic work on the Mauriccio Lucia homicide was being handled by a firm called KwikTest, housed in a small one-level building a few blocks down from Worth avenue on fifteenth in Palm Beach.

It was a nondescript structure that blended into the countryside, made all the more invisible by the breathtaking view of the Atlantic on the other side of the road. Behind the customary chain-link fence, the red-and-white 'beware of dog' signs, rested a pale stucco buildings with triangular sections of blue glass at each corner and spaced along the front façade.

I killed the engine and rolled to a stop

about fifty yards down from the front gate, which had a security card reader and a set of ominous-looking black video cameras pointing downwards.

“I’ll stay right here and wait for you,” I said, reclining the stiff bucket seat.

“Not a chance,” Rosa said. “This was your idea.”

“Not true. It was friend Eli’s. Since he’s a friend of Anthony, it was Anthony’s fault.”

“We’re all going down,” said friend Eli. “It’ll make all of the work faster.”

“It will also get us caught faster.”

After picking them up at the police station in Downtown, we had returned to Masterson’s home in Lauderdale to pick up what he called his ‘do-all kit,’ a gym bag chock-full of electronic devices and basic mechanical tools that allowed him to “get anywhere I want to go.”

Out from the trunk had emerged a pair of sturdy wire-cutters that weighed about ten and a half pounds, and into the chain-link fence they went. The fence wasn’t electrified, and the links gave way easily, quite a surprise due to what I had seen earlier on our approach. When we slipped through, I heard no dogs rouse themselves, and our passage was unhindered throughout the cautious jog towards the building.

When we reached the door (what I assumed to be the back entrance,) we were momentarily stopped and I thought we would have to go back until—out came the gym bag again—a motorized lock pick much like the one we had been using on the Lincoln emerged. I groaned and within seconds we were inside the temperature-controlled, vaguely formalin-smelling environment of a crime lab.

It wasn't that I had ever been inside one before, mind you, but I had read my fair share of mystery novels, and they had been relatively accurate, so far as I could tell. The hallways that we stepped into from the glass staircase were tiled in vinyl, and had been rubbed shiny by years of hard use. The fluorescent lights were bluish in the light that they cast, and walls were painted an institutional off-white.

"Where do we go now?" I whispered. Much as I had read, there were differing opinions on where records were stored.

"Anywhere with a computer," said Masterson, who was squirming out of his peacoat. The temperature was a little bit warmer inside the building than outside, and the smell had gotten quite a bit stronger. "But first, personnel."

"Why personnel?" asked Rosa.

"Most people use anniversaries and birthdays for their passwords. Plus, when we get there at this time of day, it's likely to be empty. And from the looks of it, you need some kind of ID card to get around this place. Personnel would have them if anybody did."

"Shut up," Anthony said.

"No, I'm serious—I mean, where else—"

And he was immediately pulled into the women's wash-room, the door of which we had been standing beside talking. I was in a second later.

"What's the meaning of—"

"Guy turnin' the corner behind you." He mouthed some numbers and then peeked out the door. "Okay, come on."

Flush.

"Aaack!" but it was just Rosa coming out of the stall.

"Don't scare me like that."

"When you've gotta go, you've gotta go."

After about half an hour of wandering, we ended up on the second floor in an office about halfway between the two staircases, facing the bare lawn out back. At almost six in the evening, the office was deserted and due to the blue-tinted glass, I couldn't see much of what was going on inside. All that distinguished it from the other rooms was a screen-printed metal sign reading "216: Personnel" mounted above the ubiquitous card reader.

"Now, got somethin' for that?" Anthony said.

And he did! Out flashed a credit-card sized metal plate, painted black on both sides and attached to some kind of souped-up calculator that, when inserted into the slot, started flashing numbers by in a blazing succession of LCD digits. Then a click, a green light, an unlocked door.

"Files and a computer," Masterson said. "Perfect."

He literally leapt towards the cabinets, lockpick in hand, and had the bottom drawer of the fifth in a row of six open within seconds, had extracted a pile of brown file folders. Within a few more seconds he had fired up the computer—it looked like an old UNIX terminal—and was busily trying combinations of user IDs and passwords.

"Bam!" was this appropriate language for a fifty-plus year-old retired cop? "Here we go—ballistics report; autopsy results; tox readings, everything you wanted to know."

I walked over behind the white metal desk, craned over his shoulder. "Interesting. Can we print out a copy, or should we just stay here and browse through it?"

"I think we can get a printed copy, and it'll be better if we can get out of here as soon as possible."

172 "Yeah, this place is makin' me feel dizzy," Anthony said. "I think it's the fumes."

“I think it’s the spirits of those dead people they probably have in the fridge downstairs. They’re after you,” Rosa said, chuckling.

A few more keystrokes and there was a box on the screen saying ‘Printing: page 1 of 83...press [esc] to cancel.’

“Eighty-three pages? What?”

“Where are they comin’ out? I don’t hear no printer.”

“Oh, right here. I forgot to turn it on.”

It was a daisy-wheel printer as old as the computer, maybe older, and it was as loud as the IBM selectric that I used for copywriting many years ago. Clack, clack, clack. “Can’t we hush that thing up?” I said.

“Jackets, everyone,” Masterson replied, and we all handed them over to him, and he piled them on top of the printer. The noise was still noticeable, but I didn’t think it could have been heard outside the room.

The documents we had printed were almost useless to me; they were a mess of technical and medical jargon that I couldn’t wade through, and the two and a half hours that we had spent waiting for the documents to print were wasted; all we really needed was the first five, the summaries that were to be given to the police investigators. But the pile of jackets on top of the printer had conspired against us, as we had been unwilling to remove them, lest the noise leak out.

At least we had been able to get out at all—turns out there were dogs, but only after seven o’clock, when they were delivered by a man dressed in black driving a black van. They had started barking, and I could even hear them chasing after us, but thankfully we slipped through the fence with time to spare, and were off and running by the time I saw the

slobbering dobermans through the rear-view mirrors.

Florida Rain is different from all others. It doesn't slap rudely against windows; no cracking sounds are to be heard even during the most dire of storms. True to the state's laid-back lifestyle, even gale-force winds could only produce a light whipping against the plate glass of my hotel room. It was a noise that could easily put you to sleep and I had to work hard not to as I went over what the results had said.

Mauriccio Lucia had died of a gunshot wound to the head.

That was obvious even to someone not versed in criminology. What was more interesting, and what I only gleaned after wading through the ballistics reports for the third time, was that he was killed with a special type of bullet—a "hydra-shok" that was not only rare, but a type that was not released into mass distribution—over ninety percent of hydra-shok sales had been to government agencies.

Was Lucia in trouble with the government?

The gun that had been used to kill him was unique too. The ballistics testers had found no rifling marks on the hydra-shok bullet; that's what had made it so easy to identify—so either the gun had had its barrel smoothed down (an extreme unlikelihood, given the fact that the bullet wouldn't have fit tightly in the barrel afterwards,) or that we were dealing with some one-of-a-kind pistol.

Ironic, I thought. A gunshot: so brutal, swift, direct.

The bullet used: so subtle, refined, mature, even elegant; unobtrusive.

Scenes from *The Day of the Jackal* cycled themselves in my mind.

Was somebody rich and well-connected enough to hire a professional assassin to bump off what was, realistically, a showbiz

also-ran?

Thirty minutes later, I woke up from a fitful nap, which I hadn't had any intention of falling into. It was nearing eleven o'clock, and I wasn't yet ready for sleep. I had too many things to think over, way too much to work out before I had any right to doze off.

Like, who killed Maurizio Lucia?

Who killed the thugs back in Oregon? Who killed Margaret Lucia?

Why did Maurizio Lucia, and hence Margaret, want the Lincoln in the first place?

What was it about the Lincoln that was causing all this trouble?

How was I going to get out of it?

I had noticed a sign stuck on top of the TV/VCR Combo in the room apologizing for the lack of any movie channels, but suggesting a Blockbuster Video that was only five minutes' drive away from the hotel, which was supposed to offer a "wide selection of titles."

There is never a bad time for research.

I drove over there in the Escort, and—saints be praised—it was open 24 hours. The store was huge, artificially cold and at this time of night, with only me and three other customers wandering, felt strangely like the Ford archives back in Warren. The carpet was a thin industrial one, the clerk at the counter sleepy-eyed and pimple-faced.

TV's hung from the roof, suspended over rack after rack of video titles. If they didn't have it, the screens claimed between thirty-second clips from some new releases, you could take something else home for free.

Well, there wasn't much chance of anybody wanting to take out the entire Mauriccio Lucia collection—all of them, from Nixon's Finish on, were on the shelf, a layer of grime covering each of their black plastic cases.

The kid at the counter, whose blue-and-yellow uniform looked about three sizes too big, tried to subtly raise an eyebrow at me as he punched up my selections on the register. He was reading a Japanese Manga comic book—in the harsh light cast down by the fixtures above us, the characters' improbable dimensions and outrageously colored clothing (what clothing there was,) seemed all the more ridiculous.

"Everybody needs a bit of trash once in a while," I said. "Helps you appreciate the good stuff that's out there."

But he was already lost back in his comic book. I crumpled up the bill, stuck it in my pocket. The crinkling sound it made annoyed me all the way home.

The movies were uniform in both quality, theme and execution.

Visuals static, recycled (I saw that bar in the basement once in each movie.) The music canned, dramatic only to very indiscriminate ears. The lone man, struggling against the system, eventually being controlled by it. The man dying. The politicians at their posh parties, waltzing under what were supposed to be crystal chandeliers in what were supposed to be trendy Washington gathering places—which were in fact, the foyer of Lucia's own mansion.

And Rosa Janssen, always the obedient secretary of the hapless hero.

176 Mousy hairdo. Thick glasses.

Nothing like what she really looked like, and, after having

seen some of her performances in the past week, nothing that fully exploited her potential. Maybe the movie that wasn't directed by Lucia would be her big break.

Why had such a talent been given such parts when the hero's sidekick slash lover was so uniformly bad?

Motive enough for murder? It's the movies, she had said. Everyone's an enemy.

Chapter 26

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9TH

I knew how we were going to find out who wanted the Lincoln.

“Look, no matter where we’ve gone, there’s always been—uh—negative happenings,” I said.

“Always,” Anthony agreed.

“Negative things which were not of our doing.”

“Right.”

“Which means that there’s been somebody with us all the time that has been causing those negative happenings.”

“What, you think I’ve been the one bumping off people?” This from Rosa.

“No no no no no,” I said. “Not that at all.”

Though it did get me thinking. "I mean somebody following us, somebody else, another side, if you will, that's after us—or more likely, the car."

"Okay," Anthony said. "You're right. I was feelin' the same thing. But how do we find out who it is?"

"Right now, we have two cars at our disposal."

Nods all around.

"You're thinkin' that one of us takes out the Lincoln, as bait like, and the others follow."

"Sort of," I said. "I mean, our rental car isn't exactly conspicuous. Maybe we can follow these guys, find out who they work for?"

"How we gonna do that if you're still in the car? They still'll be followin' you, won't they? Think they'll go home without it?"

Not something I had thought of, and a definite stumbling block.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry," Rosa said. She was playing the ultra-girl this morning, all smiles and bubblyness. "I'm sure that he'll be able to lose them."

"Me? I thought one of you would drive." But all I got were blank stares in return.

I checked the rear-view mirror again and found the comforting yellow glow of the Escort's lights as I spun the wheel and turned onto the 970 out of Coral Gables. We had been cruising all over the place for the last hour and a half and I hadn't yet spotted a car that had been following me for any period of time.

Not that they weren't there, mind you—I had no illusions as to my pursuers being poorly funded—I just hoped to go on long enough to force at least one cycle so that at least one familiar car would have to reappear.

At the stoplight, the chirping of my cellular phone interrupted the rhythmic dub-dub of the engine.

“Still okay over there?” Anthony had his own phone and we had resolved to check in every five minutes.

“Just fine, though I haven’t yet seen anybody we should be going after.” The light turned green and I accelerated away from the light.

It was when I was checking my mirror a few seconds later that I saw it, a black 1992 Buick Park Avenue—the one with the supercharger—with chromed alloy wheels and tinted glass. I fumbled with the phone, hit the pound button and shouted “There he is!” in the phone’s general direction. Now that I knew they were there, I didn’t want to let on that there was somebody I was on the phone with.

Crackle-static-snap.

“It’s the black Buick!” I yelled, hoping they would get it. I was at a stoplight again, and a kid in a red Chevette was looking at me funny. I stared at him for a moment and then smiled. He turned away.

As he moved away from the light, I yanked the wheel, swerved over into the left lane and clipped the yellow onto the A1A. Much to my chagrin, the driver of the Park Avenue had no respect for the Rules of the Road (as one of my many examiners had told me numerous times,) and had followed me straight through.

A pair of headlights, obviously stranded at the red light, appeared behind me. *Back in business*, I thought, and stomped on the gas pedal.

A1A isn’t a busy road on the best of days, and on Tuesdays it is particularly deserted. Too narrow to be used by trucks, and too far out of the way to be used by commuters, I-95,

with its wide lanes and easy access to every important tourist site superseded it long ago as the Floridian road. A shame, given the beautiful view out to the right as you go down it.

But I didn't have the time to think about the view right now—there was an intersection coming up ahead of me, and the light was green. I flicked on the turn signal for a left and just before crossing spun the wheel hard right and careened onto a poorly paved, pockmarked street with abandoned red-brick industrial buildings on the left and low-cost clapboard houses on the right. The Buick doggedly followed, its tires wailing as its driver fought to keep it from understeering itself through a lawn. He succeeded—but only by a hair, as the car crashed down to the road after a brief meeting with the sidewalk.

One left, then another, not bothering to signal, not even bothering to pay attention to where I was going, not caring save for to get around a corner before the black shape appeared in my mirrors again. I was slowly widening my lead on him—the SS-100X, unfettered by emissions controls and breathing through a set of four Weber carburetors, produced over five hundred horsepower—and even with the extra weight imposed by the armor plating and electronic equipment, was surprisingly fleet of foot. But he was still there.

I bent down to the phone again and the car clipped a corner. “You still there?” I shouted as the phone leapt from the console into the blue leather passenger's seat.

Static. “Barely. Slow down, will you?”

“How am I supposed to lose them—” I started, but uh-oh, here came a tractor trailer coming head-on. I swung back over into the right lane as it barreled past, air horn blaring.

182 I was halfway down another block after having made another left when I heard the crunch, and the air horn all over again—this

time, a low, continuing, dolorous tone. I stomped on the brakes—no anti-lock here—and skidded sideways to a halt.

“You catch that?” I asked. The phone had landed on the floor but I had it in my hand now.

“Yeah,” came the reply. “I’m guessin’ you can stop now.”

I reversed the car and drove slowly back towards the wreckage. The truck had caught the Park Avenue on the left-rear corner, and its trunk and fender, true to American tradition, were dented but not too severely. The car still looked quite driveable. Good.

The driver had one of those eminently forgettable, yet immediately familiar faces—save for his leather bomber jacket and the frown he was now wearing on his face, he could have been anyone’s next-door neighbor.

As I sailed past and rounded the corner (a right, finally,) I saw the Escort with a white-knuckled Rosa at the wheel, parked around the corner from the accident. Anthony was on the seat beside her. I gave them a smile-and-wave, picked up the phone and said. “I’m going back to the hotel. You can take things from here,” and hung up, goosed the Lincoln down the street before either of them could say anything back.

“Okay,” Anthony said. “Here’s the deal. We waited for like an hour and a half after the accident, then they got towed away.”

“We followed the tow truck all the way up to palm beach.” Rosa ran a hand through her hair. After the rain of the last couple of days, it was sweltering in south Florida, with temperatures that were teasing the hundred mark.

We were sitting in my hotel room, a Domino’s italian

sausage pizza on the bed. I was sitting on the bed in front of the pizza, facing the TV; Rosa was leaning against the dresser, and Anthony was sitting, apparently uncomfortably, in the chrome-and-leather chair by the window. They'd gotten back a few minutes ago. I had ordered the pizza just a little bit earlier.

"Then we gotta wait for the tow truck." A bite of pizza was obscuring his voice. "—then we waited for another half hour before they come out and got into a cab."

"They spot you?"

"Hell, no. A white Escort? You must be kiddin'. I think that's about the most common car in these parts 'cept for the rentals."

"Good," I said. "So where did they go?"

"You're never going to believe this," Rosa said.

She was right. I didn't.

Suddenly everything came together. And detective Hector B. Partain and court orders notwithstanding, we needed to get out of here right away. After making a few phone calls, I flung the clothes out of my closet directly into my suitcase, zipped it up with a sleeve still hanging out and hauled it down to the car.

Anthony and Rosa followed a couple of minutes later. "I need an aspirin," she said as we swiveled the car out of the driveway and into the rain.

Chapter 27

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10TH

John was starting school today.

Which meant that I would miss his customary first-day call, his tirade about the unfairness of labor day, the description of how the leaves were changing in New Haven.

Instead, I was in a car, on the road, heading north on I-95. The rustling leaves and the clear blue sky meant nothing to me today. Nor did the conversation going on around me make much sense. As clearheaded as I was this morning, after two hours I already felt that I was driving in a stupor. Passing cars that would normally interest me were just blurred dots going in different

directions, their taillights like animal eyes; traffic signs were inconsistencies in the sky's color.

By noon we had zipped past Jacksonville—Savannah came a couple of hours later. By that time, my senses had come out of the fog and I was seeing things with an improved clarity, if not improved disposition. After the adventure with the Park Avenue, my eye was wandering more, looking for familiar cars, and seeing them all the time—after all, Florida is a state full of tourists; most of those tourists drive rental cars, and most rental car agencies only have a limited number of cars in a limited number of colors. The traffic spread out a little thinner as we crossed the Georgia border, but not by much—the Olympics had started and there were a fair amount of rentals around, too.

Anthony and Rosa were asleep on the back seat, his head rested on her shoulder, the perfect picture of a happy couple. I wondered what it was that had drawn them together in the first place—certainly Rosa was beautiful, but for Anthony to have had a relationship that had lasted this long—I'd known him since the third grade and trust me, this was a record—there must have been something else.

My eyes focused back on the road ahead and in the quiet solitude of the car, accompanied by only the hushed burble of the engine and a quiet but unintelligible song coming out of the radio, I wondered where my own was going, and the picture didn't look too good at all.

Susan's call, so many forgotten nights ago, should have been a wake-up call, but it wasn't: instead, I had gone blithely on without any consideration towards her. Whether it was the money or the excitement or the fear, I just couldn't have gone home that night—now I found myself wishing I had. With what we were up against, it would have been the better idea.

At five in the afternoon, we were rapidly approaching Fayetteville, North Carolina, and I was bushed. Nobody had traded seats with me all day, and the two lovebirds were asleep in the backseat—having been in the same position since lunch. I took exit 396 on the outskirts of town, pulled into a combination gas station/diner, and before getting up and going inside, looked my sorry self in the mirror and let my first tear in fifteen years drip from my eye.

The room was a comfortable one, if a little small for the three of us. The walls were panelled in hideous fake wood and the carpet was a red-and-gold shag, but the beds were agreeably firm and the blankets warm. There was also a 32-inch RCA television hanging down from the ceiling.

I flipped of the evening news and settled back into bed. Anthony and Rosa had dozed off immediately after changing—they hadn't been awake for one straight hour yet. As I reached for the nightstand, I realized that, besides not having contact with my family, I hadn't had any contact with any fake people either—the last book that I read was on the flight to L.A., and I couldn't remember where I had left it.

The TV went back on, the volume went down, and eventually I fell asleep to the sound of David Letterman joking around about William Kennedy Smith and the (in) famous beach house in Palm Beach that Rosa and Anthony had described to me earlier.

Chapter 28

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 11TH

North Carolina is a foggy place at seven in the morning. The grass is damp, the soil treacherous, and the neon of the vacancy sign blurred. A blanket of mist covers everything indiscriminately—the doorknob of our room, the windshield of the car, the trees around us. Getting on the road and moving is not a very confidence-laden experience.

I was sprawled in the backseat with a newspaper I had purchased at the first gas station we had stopped at. The most interesting article was an exposé of the mafia organization run by Charlie Dixon, which included a fascinating sidebar of a never-photographed yet very infamous assassin called

Michael Tarn.

Rosa was driving and Anthony, true to his nature since the beginning of the trip, was dozing, his head on her shoulder. The radio was shut off, the only noises the occasional flipping of the pages, the swish of the windshield wipers.

It was a shame, because on a good day this would have been a fantastic road to drive down.

“Whoa!”

Rosa burst into life in the front seat and I found myself flying towards her. The back of the passenger’s seat stopped me.

“What’s goin’ on?”

The windshield had turned completely white. “I can’t see a thing,” she said.

“Defroster,” Anthony said. She did and it didn’t do any good. “Wipers.”

They came on by themselves, then, having been set to intermittent. The white coating mysteriously went away. Rosa sighed, and we all rolled our windows up and down through a cycle to clear them. “What is that stuff?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But I don’t care. Let’s go. We have to be there by tonight.”

“Not feeling well today, are we?”

“Not after yesterday. I’m tired.”

“So am I.” this from a groggy-eyed Anthony.

“You are tired.” I pointed a finger, tapped his left temple. “You slept all day yesterday. You did not do any driving. You dozed off at dinner. You dropped five minutes after getting to the motel. You are tired.”

“I—” yawn “—’m tired.”

“Then what am I?”

I'm happy to say that Rosa drove fast and well, and we breezed by Richmond and Strasburg at over ninety, and were actually about three hours ahead of schedule when we pulled into the parking lot of a brand-new Holiday Inn outside of Washington. After bringing our bags inside, we drove into town, the rush-hour traffic facing us on the way in, parked in a garage two blocks away from Pennsylvania avenue, in the basement of an office building with a "discounted" late-rate of \$18.00.

"What a rip-off," I said as we emerged from the lot. At this time of year, the sun was still hot and the pavement was still steaming. I hadn't realized that the car's thirty-year-old air conditioning had been that effective.

"Welcome to Washington, the nation's murder capital," Rosa said, working the kinks out of her frame by wagging her arm around and pointing at things. The six hours of driving didn't seem to have diluted her spirit one bit. "On your left, a drug transaction in progress. On your right, peeking just over the edge of the roofline, the U.S. Capitol."

"Yes indeed. Let's save that for tomorrow. I'm getting hungry."

The bar was one of those dark quiet ones, on K street near seventh, and was also quite empty—I suspected that the politicians down at the capitol spent late hours, especially in a year like this one, leading up to an election.

The countertop was scarred walnut, the fixtures rotting brass, the bartender greasy and the food uniformly awful. There was a TV perched on the end of the bar, its vertical hold slightly off, so that the sportscaster's head was at the bottom of the screen while his torso remained up top. The sound

A l w a y s c o v e r y o u r b l i n d s p o t

was turned down low so all that came out of him was a low mumble.

When the muted roar of the fans came back on, Anthony turned to me and said, “How early do you think we should get up tomorrow?”

“Does it really matter?” I said. “We’re don’t have any kind of itinerary planned.”

“What about the capitol? I thought we were—”

“A phone call should do it. Besides, think that if we just barged in there, we’d be booted in a second. Instead, maybe we can spend the morning seeing the town, visiting the monuments, seeing the cemeteries. This is the first time I’ve ever been here.”

“Me too,” Rosa said, after sipping her martini. It was the first time anyone on this trip had had a drink, so far as I knew.

“Maybe we could even do some sightseeing tonight.”

Chapter 29

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 12TH

In the morning, between the hours of seven-thirty and nine, we waited in a line in front of the White House, only to spend five minutes being thoroughly, painfully frisked and twenty-five being chaperoned down hallways with doors cordoned off with blue-velvet ropes. Polished doors leading to probably empty, unlit rooms at this time of the morning. In Washington, business is really done at night, where flesh is pressed and cash changes hands at trendy parties.

After lunch we climbed to the top of the Washington Monument, a pristine white structure with a dingy green-painted interior, with weathered wood steps and windows

made blurry by years of uncleaned fingerprints, growing moldy around the edges.

"We'd better make that call," I said as we descended the stairs. I didn't know how early the politicians went home from work to get ready to go to it, but I didn't want to take my chances, didn't want to drag my feet longer than I had to.

"Agreed," Anthony said. "Wher're we gonna call from?"

"Right there is as good as any," I said, pointing towards a telephone booth on the corner. It was currently unoccupied and in a place as busy as this one, I hoped that we wouldn't be noticed.

"Let me do the talking," Rosa said, tapping me on my shoulder.

"You sure?"

"Of course. I'm the actor here, I think I have the best chance of getting us through. Maybe then you could talk to him."

"Not something I really want to do. You can do that too, if you want to make the initial call."

The next few minutes were something of a mystery, seeing as public phones are rarely speakerphones; the only things I could hear were the occasional blat from the earpiece and the calm, measured, almost devious tones of Rosa's voice—I wondered once again how someone this talented could have been stuck with projects like Maurizio Lucia's films.

Then all of a sudden it was over and the phone was back on the hook with a clack. The people started milling around the booth again, though I was sure that they hadn't stopped; I could hear the sound of my breath and could feel my heartbeat return. "So what did he say?"

"He agreed to meet us tonight," she said. "In the parking lot of the museum of natural history at ten-thirty."

Which left us almost eight hours' worth of nailbiting.

A sliver of light spilling out from underneath a door was the only illumination in the parking lot and I had to swerve to avoid nicking a black Cadillac limousine that was parked with its prow stuck way the hell out into the lane. I moved closer to the door and reversed into a handicapped spot a few steps away—hey, this was a presidential limousine after all—it had the right to park there. Besides, it was late at night and the Museum of Natural History was closed for the evening.

We walked over to the door and eased it open, entering into a brightly lit area with “A1” painted in purple on the wall and a bank of four elevators, each with their doors painted purple, on the opposite one.

As the door behind us snicked shut, I heard a car door open behind it, the sound almost completely muffled, and more clearly heard its latch catching when the passenger closed it. I pointed at the door, sidled up beside it, and held my breath.

Rosa was carrying the bag of money and ducked behind one of the joists of the elevators., her blurred and distorted reflection visible in the shiny paint. I hoped that no one would notice. Anthony remained standing in the middle of the floor, the strangely warm light from above tinting his hair a yellowish brown. His appearance was outwardly normal, his nervousness only belied by the sweat rapidly gathering on his brow.

The door opened and the darkness flooded in.

There, flanked by two burly bodyguards in sunglasses and heavy blue overcoats that were so well-tailored that they hid the guns I was sure they were carrying, was the man we had come to meet. The man that had been dogging us so long. And likely the man that had ordered the deaths of at least

five human beings in pursuit of the thirty-year-old car we had parked outside.

Senator Edmond Fitzgerald.

His hair was a steely gray that refused to be tinged any color by the lights, despite its glossy sheen. He was wearing an impeccably tailored, albeit severely cut, black suit with a starched white shirt and a blue-and-maroon striped tie imprinted with what looked like a school crest.

“Senator Fitzgerald,” I said. One of the guards had his hand in his pocket and I thought it unwise to make any lunges like I had been thinking of doing earlier. Rosa emerged from her alcove in the elevator, and we clustered around each other on the landing, sweating because of the pressure, or in the case of his troupe, clothing that was horribly inappropriate for this time of year. “I take it you have seen the car outside.”

“I have seen it. Might I suggest that we continue our conversation somewhere cozier, hmm? I have an office upstairs waiting for us.” He didn’t wait for an answer, but punched a button on the elevator. It slid open instantly. It had been waiting.

If you have ever visited MNA, you know that even in the daytime, parts of it are creepily eerie—at night not only are those sensations heightened but they pervade the whole building.

We got off on the fourth floor, which consisted predominantly of windowed offices looking out onto the brightly lit but quickly fading Washington skyline (people were too smart to stay in the city for too long, this was, after all, the murder capital of the world.) One of the bodyguards was stationed in front, walking about ten miles an hour too fast for me, but the other one was behind and walking just as fast so I had no choice. Edmond Fitzgerald, as per the bodyguards’ suggestions, was near the back, sandwiched between Rosa and myself.

“This one,” he said, pointing at an office, and the bodyguard did an abrupt right turn, holding out his left hand into the hallway while he flicked on the lights, gun drawn, scanned the room. When he grunted we followed him in.

The walls were painted in the same color as antique parchment—a delicate creamy brown that suggested ineffable quality and years of care. The plate-glass window had suddenly turned reflective in the night and the only thing we could see in it was our own reflections. It was fogging up quickly; the room was not air-conditioned and the additional presence of six bodies was too much for the window to handle.

Fitzgerald sat behind an oak desk as massive as the hood of my Cadillac, in a padded leather chair not unlike that which Mauriccio Lucia had been shot in. One bodyguard stood behind and slightly to the right of him; the other one stayed by the door. I settled myself into a chrome-and-vinyl chair that had been obviously wheeled in from another room; Rosa and Anthony remained standing behind me.

A hand signal from Fitzgerald to one of his accomplices produced a brown leather briefcase. “In the suitcase,” he said, “is five hundred thousand dollars, which I think is the price you had previously negotiated.”

“You are welcome to count it in front of me. Then we will go back to the parking lot where one of my associates will drive you to your hotel.”

“Why is it that you want this thing so much?” Anthony blurted. I could have killed him right there. “I mean, Kennedy, he was only a distant relative, right? You never got to meet him?”

“Why such the fascination with his car?” Rosa said. She

was next on the list.

"I did meet him once." Fitzgerald smoothed back a lock of hair that had fallen into his face. "And I went for a ride in that car. It's what inspired me to go on into politics, meeting him."

"You're never going to be able to show that car in public," I said, resigned to the fact that we were going to have a discussion. I relaxed myself in the chair. The associate by the door stood there with the briefcase in hand, a puzzled expression on his face. He looked toward Fitzgerald for assistance, but he was too busy thinking.

"I don't need to. I just want to have it."

"What was so important about it that you killed four people to get to it?"

"I killed no such people."

"Okay, you hired people to do it." I started ticking off my fingers. "Margaret Lucia. The two thugs that had bumped her off. Mauricio Lucia."

"I did no such thing. I have no idea who these people are or what you are talking about."

"Oh, but you do. After all, you, so enamored with JFK and his past should know about the film that Mauricio Lucia was making when he died; you should know that the Kennedy estate is suing him for several million dollars. And you should know that he refused to settle out-of-court on this one."

"Yes, I knew about the film. But hundreds of people do, hmm? How can you be sure that I am the one that had him killed? This is the movie industry we are talking about—everyone is your enemy."

I decided to try another tack. "You sometimes travel in the same circles as Charlie Dixon." It was only last night that the blip of a TV broadcast had finally gotten through to me—I knew I

recognized that suit and hair from somewhere.

"I know of him; I don't see where you get off saying I am friends with the man. He has a rather distasteful reputation."

"Come on," Rosa said. "It's common knowledge—and we're not her to make a value judgement."

"Yeah, we just want to get paid," Anthony said.

"And Mauriccio Lucia is—was—connected."

"I still fail to see where you are attempting to lead." He ran a fine-boned hand through his hair. The long fingers disappeared. "Please get to your point. I cannot waste all of my time here with you, hmm?"

"Charlie must have told you about Lucia's plan for the movie."

"And if he did?"

"Well, obviously you wouldn't be lettin' him drag your poor family name through the dirt." Anthony unclasped the top button of his shirt. The night was getting colder but the air in the room seemed to have heated up appreciably.

"In case you forget, my family's name has been bandied about plenty already." Fitzgerald wasn't sweating a bit, even in that wool suit. "I hardly think that a B-movie by a has-been director could do any additional damage."

"He may not be Oliver Stone, but Bleeding Hearts still grossed over twenty mil—that's still a coupla million viewers." Thirty years ago, Anthony had worked as a grip on a movie set. For about a week and a half. "Could hurt somebody who wants to run for president, right? Another Kennedy exposé could really screw you in November."

"Plus, this one was supposed to be his comeback," I said.

"His return to fame," Rosa said.

"Little people like that director can't hurt me."

I suddenly realized what kind of a person we were dealing with here. It was what I later started calling the Little People syndrome, though I'm sure that somebody has a better name for it. Here was someone with such a grand ego that even film directors were 'little people.' I wondered who was a 'big person' to Fitzgerald—and then started on a new tack.

"Gossip says that Charlie Dixon is helping you line up cash for a campaign." It had to be somebody with money and power, I thought. Either one alone wasn't enough.

"And if he is?"

"A very dangerous man."

"A very powerful man. A very wealthy man."

"Somebody who has an immense amount of resources at his disposal." I was on the right track.

"Very true, very true."

"A veritable army of people waiting on his beck and call."

"Yes."

"Including somebody named Michael Tarn."

"I only know of Tarn by reputation. But, yes."

"A professional killer. Only works with a .22, never leaves a mess. Uses special bullets. No expense or effort spared."

"That is what I have heard."

"How much did you pay Dixon for his services?"

He was silent for a minute, rubbed his ample chin. "I may have grown up in Boston, but I was born in the south. Tupelo, Mississippi."

"A beautiful part of the country," I said. I had been down south a couple of times and was always surprised at the natural wonders to be found there.

"Very dangerous," he continued. "When you go out in the woods and everything looks so pretty—the mosses and the wild-

flowers, the ferns, ferns everywhere—it's best to stay on the path if you value your life, because going off in the brush or veering into dark places, that's where the snakes dwell." His hands formed themselves into a steeple as he waited for my reply.

"Are you a snake?" Anthony asked. "'Cause snakes don't scare me. I used to work with them and they're easier to control than you think."

"I paid him fifty thousand." Oh, he was a snake all right.

"First, you waited for us to steal the car. Then followed us to San Francisco, where you bumped off Margaret Lucia in the boathouse."

That steeple was still there. His grin was almost beatific.

"After bumping her off, you sent those thugs after us. But we didn't have the car then, you didn't know where we had hidden it after the hospital because your men were too busy finishing off the job they hadn't done right the first time."

"Good help," he said, "is hard to find these days."

"So then you caught up with us again in Oregon, but you were too late because Mauriccio Lucia had sent Rosa—" I pointed at her "—to make us an offer."

"Only a temporary setback."

"And there were more to come." I had no idea where I was going with this, I had no tape recorder, no way to get this on record for the police. But just the same, I didn't think I could stop. Ticking off my fingers, I said, "Reno, Omaha, Memphis. Every time you failed to catch us, bring home the car."

"Even Miami," said Anthony. "Driver was stupid enough to get hit by a truck."

"Yet here we are, meeting face-to-face."

"Not because you found us," I said. "Because we found

you, we want this over with.”

“It will be over with soon.”

“Tell me,” Rosa blurted uncharacteristically, “why you had to kill Mauriccio Lucia!”

“His death was necessary.”

“What, because he was going to make a movie about you? He made movies about everyone!”

“Yes, but he had commissioned the theft of my uncle’s limousine to use in it. I could not let such a travesty be carried out, could not have had history marred by an inept director’s bumbling hands.” The smile had disappeared from his face and his eyes had taken on an intense gleam. “But let us not talk about that. I am here to pay you, to get the Lincoln back. I assume you wish to count the money.”

I wanted to and did. While I was doing so, I asked, “When was Lucia killed?”

“Moments before you arrived. In fact, Tarn was climbing from the second-story bathroom window as you went downstairs.”

“Why not wait until he had the car in his possession? Why kill him, then have to chase after us?”

Before he could answer, Anthony jumped in. “Dixon,” he breathed. “He knew about your connection with Dixon, didn’t he? Threatened to expose it to the public, maybe even stick it in his new movie.”

Fitzgerald didn’t answer and was glad that he hadn’t. I had finished counting the money and wanted to get out of there as soon as I humanly could. I clapped the briefcase closed, looked towards him and said, “It’s all here.”

“As of course it should be. I am not here to cheat you, hmm?

202 Now, I think that you will give me the keys to the car and we can go our separate ways.”

“That won’t be possible.” He scowled, and I moved quickly to explain. “There never were any keys per se, but there’s a motorized lock pick that we used. It’s still in the ignition.”

He nodded, saying, “My associate will drive you back to your hotel.” he stood up, adjusted his coat, looked at his gleaming gold Rolex and then extended his right hand.

“I must say it has been interesting,” I said. His hand was cold but firm.

“Let’s hope we never have to be interesting again, hmm?” He flashed a signal at his ‘associate’ and we started out of the room.

It was in the dark hallway, standing and waiting for the elevator to come back up, that I heard that whizz and saw Anthony’s leg fly out from under him.

I dropped to the ground and grabbed Rosa’s arm. The floor was old vinyl over a concrete foundation and very, very cold. I saw blood on Anthony’s leg, flowing out of his pants onto the floor in a steady red stream. I pulled him around a corner, was propping him up when Rosa came around the corner. It seemed to take hours, but probably happened in a few seconds. The hole in Anthony’s pants was only a little pinprick.

Michael Tarn.

I pulled up Anthony by his shirt collar, around another corner with Rosa following us. The elevator door had slid open.

“We’ve got to get him off the floor,” I whispered while trying to pull him down the hallway. I hadn’t realized how fast we were moving until I stopped and almost dropped to the ground under his weight. “He’ll leave a trail.” I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and stuffed it underneath Anthony’s jeans; the blood slowed to a trickle but I knew the effect wouldn’t last long.

We shuffled down the hallway, turning corners randomly. I heard voices behind us, probably Fitzgerald giving orders to his henchmen. The elevator doors had closed behind us but I hadn't heard anyone step onto its metal floor.

Footsteps—the unmistakable sound of rubber on vinyl, a light squeaking followed by a crackle as the shoe lifted. Somebody was coming down the hallway after us, but I could only see him in profile, could only make out the little gun that sat comfortably in his right hand.

I rammed myself and Anthony through a door and the flooring became wood, the temperature significantly warmer. Massive cabinets lined the walls on either side of us, faced in a dark wood but with modern stainless-steel handles.

The only illumination was the fractured red light cast by an exit sign that looked like it was half a mile away. I couldn't see any other doors. There was no place to go.

"The doors," Rosa whispered. "Hurry, he's coming." I grabbed a handle at random, pulled it out, and we hefted Anthony onto it, rammed it shut, and had ourselves similarly stowed not much later. I picked a spot near the end of the hallway, and before sliding myself in, punched the handle of the door, which was marked with red, and set off the alarm.

All the while I could imagine Michael Tarn's profile in the frosted glass of the entrance. I slid back into the drawer as quickly and silently as I could, then crossed my fingers, praying that he'd think we went out the other side.

The door was old and squeaked when opening. I reached over to cover my mouth (for what reason I don't quite know,) and that's when I discovered what I was lying on top of.

Good thing I did reach over to cover my mouth, because I my

gasp would have been extremely audible.

It was a body.

A very old one. Mummified, possibly—I'm not really a historian or a scientist.

That's when I remembered the reading I had done in a bookstore last night; the Museum of Natural History was a veritable repository of famous dead people. Everyone who was anyone had their bones here. Pathologists were conducting supposedly specialized testing to track changes in the way humans work, and Geneticists were trying to figure out what, if any difference, a conqueror's bones had from a normal man's—what made the conqueror so special.

As I held my breath, I speculated who I might be sidling up against.

A click and a whoosh below and to the right of me.

He was searching. He knew we were in here somewhere.

Click. Whoosh.

Why couldn't he have taken a hint?

Click. Whoosh.

Heavy, labored footsteps approaching the door. Somebody not used to running, somebody accustomed only to a stately walk.

Click. Whoosh.

Squeak of the door opening. Muttered voices, stuff I couldn't hear.

Click. Snap.

"What do you mean we've got to go? They're—"

"Cops are coming. We cannot stay in here and be caught. Let them explain themselves away—lunatics locked up with mummies, who's going to believe them?"

Whoosh. "Okay, let me just finish off this row." Click.

“No, we must get out of here.”

Click. Whoosh. “They have the money.”

That was true—I patted the briefcase. The smell of the leather was overpowering, but was comforting in such an enclosed space.

“I can afford it. I cannot, however, afford to be placed in prison, hmm? Now, let’s go. The keys are already in the car.”

Click. Whoosh.

Then silence.

The motorized pick was in my pocket. I could feel its bulbous end grinding into my thigh. I padded my hand around the surface that would have been in front of me if I had any kind of spatial perception in that enclosure, found the latch, and, after about three minutes, a bloody middle finger and a welt on my thumb, got it open.

Whoosh.

“Where are you, guys?”

Pounding of a door here and there.

Click. Whoosh. One, two, they came out. Anthony’s leg was coated in blood, the handkerchief lost somewhere in the drawer. He was slipping in and out of consciousness, and Rosa and I had to carry him towards the elevator, and then we went down down down to the parking garage.

So this is what death looked like.

Not the horror on a man’s face when you surprise him with it; the agony and helplessness of a face that knows it’s coming, can do nothing to stop it.

Death reduced to detail.

Doctors speaking technical words in an unbroken litany. Green surgical smocks, little masks hiding their emotionless faces. Stainless steel operating table, fluorescent lights, blipping

machines with digital readouts. Aides milling around the body, poking sharp shiny implements into it, extracting.

Perfect incisions, brilliant stitching.

And still they could do nothing.

Anthony died at 2:38 A.M., from a massive loss of blood incurred by a .22-caliber bullet wound to his right calf. He had barely lived through the ride to the hospital, had passed out when wheeled into the emergency room.

They did the best that they could.

And always he had that look on his face.

What for?

Chapter 30

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 13TH

I rolled the Lincoln to a stop on the 1500 block of Pennsylvania avenue, a couple of blocks down from the White House, just across the street from some derilects bathing in the fountain of water spurting from a fish's mouth.

The engine purred to a stop for the last time and I got out, threw the motorized pick out behind me, I don't know, don't care where it landed.

Rosa Janssen had left on the 12:30 American flight back to L.A. She had taken a quarter of a million dollars with her—what was supposed to be Anthony's share, I was sure that he would have wanted her to take

A l w a y s c o v e r y o u r b l i n d s p o t

it.

I left the leather bag with my money on the back seat.

I had started smoking again last night. In my pocket, a pack of Marlboros with two left and a Bic lighter. I extracted the lighter, lit up, inhaled the gases and sat down on the curb. Somebody was looking at me oddly, but I didn't care.

As it was nearing its last inch, I took one last stroll towards the car, flung the butt into the back seat. Then I returned to my spot on the curb and watched first the money, then the interior, and then the whole car, as they were engulfed in flames. When the fire reached the fuel tank, the car jumped a foot in the air, let out a loud crack, then distributed its smoldering armored pieces all over the block.

"G'bye buddy," I said, lighting up my last cigarette.

Chapter 31

It was as ugly a bird as I had ever seen.

A grey seagull, its beak oddly bent, its body out-of-shape, one discolored wing that looked like it was missing a chunk out of the front.

I twirled, it tumbled, it squawked.

It soared.

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Laurance Yap was born in Manila in 1977. He emigrated to Canada in 1980, at the age of two. Since then, he has lived in Calgary and Toronto.

He is currently completing his final year of high school at
Earl Haig Secondary in North York.

Always Check your Blind Spot is his first novel.

C O L O P H O N

This book was designed and produced by the author using Macintosh computers and QuarkXPress. It was typeset in WordPerfect 3.5 Power Macintosh and NisusWriter 4.0. Spelling checked using Thunder 7.

Type is set in Caslon 540 and chapter openings and running heads are set in Caslon Three, both from the Adobe Type Library.

