

Prologue

When Doctor Steinberg tried to set a date for the next session the man said, "We'll get back to you." Then the patient rose from the couch where he had been seated, paid his bill in cash, and walked to the door. The psychologist was sorry to see him go. This was the most interesting case he'd ever come across. Neurotic, aging yuppies, worried about success and the lack of fulfillment and happiness in their lives, were, as far as he was concerned, basically a pain in the butt, but Phillips was different. This was a patient who wouldn't put him to sleep.

Multiple personalities are rare, though not as rare as once thought. Usually they existed separately in an individual. One in which the personalities were so well integrated was one for the journals. They, he was interested to note that he could so easily use a plural pronoun for him, weren't at all upset at their condition. In fact, they'd adapted to it finding a way to use the strong points of each of the personalities when the need for that particular trait arose. To his disappointment they weren't interested in exploring the past and discovering what traumas had caused this condition. They claimed to know, to have taken care of it, and told him forcefully that it was none of his business.

Instead, they'd used him as a group therapist to settle a few disputes about scheduling. With five of them it got complicated. After heated discussion, Frank agreed to end his workouts earlier so he could take a shower on his own time. Elaine promised that she wouldn't go to any more movies that started fifteen minutes before someone else was due to take over what they referred to as the driver's seat.

As he understood it, a car wasn't a bad analogy. The passengers had the option of looking out the windows and seeing what was going on or sleeping, fantasizing, or talking. They apparently could make comments and suggestions to the driver, and this was an issue. One of them, Joe, was religious and often got offended at the others' activity. One complaint was that he had a tendency to quote from the Bible while one of the others was making love.

The doctor had offered to continue at no fee, but they refused forcefully. He'd thought about offering them money, just to have them answer a few questions, but he couldn't bring himself to go that far.

What he really wanted to know is why the woman was there and what her relationship was to the others.

After the door closed, he pulled out his notes and reluctantly admitted that he didn't have nearly enough to write an article for the journals. There was a lot they weren't telling him, like exactly how they earned a living.

Joe - organized, logical, able to get up before 6 in the morning. Health nut - tried to make sure they ate a good breakfast. Moral, ethical, strong religious beliefs. Handled finances.

Frank - Tough, angry, driven. The sergeant who assigned tasks and kept things together. Ex marine. Knows martial arts and weapons, wants to buy a motorcycle. But he can be conned. In the session he had traded a prime Saturday night time slot for a promise that he would be consulted by Paul as to which woman he should try to pick up. Liked women, but not the complications they brought into his life and though he would not readily admit it, had trouble picking them up.

Paul - the poet who drank far too much and fell in love with every woman he met. His conquests seem to provide the primary sexual outlet for the rest of them.

Elaine - tender, nurturing, and compassionate, an outgoing person who was able to get strangers to tell her their darkest secrets over a cup of coffee. The den mother for the others. The mother they never had?

Willie - the crazy one who was kept in the closet most of the time. Was willing to take incredible risks. Once went hang-gliding during a thunderstorm. Could not be depended on for household chores. According to the others he could not be trusted with women, liquor, or razor blades.

Willie was the one who worried the doctor. Willie had the potential of killing himself or others. They had allowed him out only briefly, and that was enough to convince Steinberg that he was out of control. Even though Frank claimed to have killed people while serving in the Marines, he was intact, not someone to pick a fight with, but not a free-floating menace either. The Doctor suspected that Frank had let Willie do the actual killing which was why he exhibited no evidence of the stress syndrome that plagued so many vets.

Willie, he suspected, actually liked it, and that was dangerous. Dangerous to all of them. Willie was, he thought, to the rest of them what a gusting crosswind was to a tightrope walker.

Chapter 1

When the phone rang at two thirty in the morning we knew it probably meant business. Joe was the one who was given the responsibility for answering the phones and handling most of the public end of the business. Besides, he was the one who woke up the easiest.

"Phillips here."

"Hey, sorry to wake you, but I've got a live one." McCormick was a criminal lawyer who specialized in getting the black sheep of the upper crust out of "jams", as he called them. He wasn't sorry to wake us, but he paid well.

We sat up in bed, Joe already had a pad and pen at the ready, and had switched to the speaker phone. "What you got?"

"A gooey mess. Young lady went slumming with some of her friends. The night ended badly with her escort getting himself killed, probably something to do with the ounce of coke the cops found in the glove compartment. The girl was driving, and it seems like she ran one of the perps down. The DA is still deciding what to do with it, but I'm betting I can get her out on bail before dawn spreads its golden glow through the holding pens."

"What do you need?"

"I need someone to baby-sit her. And to find out what went down. There's more to this than meets the eye."

"Where and when?"

"Manhattan - Part 3, we're lucky we got Judge Brice, he trusts young white kids from good homes. As soon as you can get here."

'Tell him the rates went up since the last time we worked for him,' Frank chortled, 'this sounds like one we can really milk.'

Joe thought about it for a minute, "I take it we can expect the fees to be generous?"

"You bet, her parents will do anything to keep their precious daughter out of the slammer."

'You always did have a way with words, Joe, but I think we'd better get a price out of him before we get moving.'

'Look Frank, once we get the case it will be too late for them to do much negotiation. What we have to do is get there and get ourselves involved.'

We got out of bed and slipped into a worn, but still serviceable, suit. Since we didn't know when we were going to be back, we turned on the answering machine, and picked up the gym bag that Joe kept packed and ready by the door.

'Should we wake the others,' Frank asked?

'Naw, let them get some rest. They're used to waking up in strange situations. Besides I want to talk to you about Willie.'

'Ok, you worried about something?' Frank was the one closest to Willie, the only one Willie would listen to when he got agitated.

Joe locked the door, double checking it as he always did, 'Not worried, but I don't like the way he's been making noises about wanting more time. I was thinking maybe we should go back to that shrink, and see if he could do something.'

'I don't think so, not right now. We've had a pretty good balance the last few months, and shrinks have a way of rocking the boat. Anyway Willie's got a point, when's the last time he had some time to himself?'

'Two months ago, and we ended up in that club where the queers dressed up in leather and did things to each other that would make the Hells Angels blush.'

'So. What was the harm?' Paul asked as we pushed the button that sent the elevator down to the garage, 'He didn't do anything did he? By the way, where are we going?'

'The harm was that I don't like queers, and Elaine started having weird sex thoughts again. You know how I feel about that,' Frank answered.

'Take it easy Frank. Elaine has got a right to be confused. She's the only woman here with us, and her plumbing isn't exactly the way she wants it. And she gave in on the clothing issue.' The elevator doors opened, and we stepped out. Joe asked, 'Which car you want to take?'

Frank loved their good car and didn't want to see it mangled. 'Take the junker. We're going to have to park on the streets near the court house. If we need flash we can switch them later.'

'Unless we get the job of driving her home or someplace.'

'You've got a point, Joe, but if a junkie messes the car up, you got to let me take the sucker out.'

'Just remember to wear gloves, it doesn't do us any good if our knuckles are all torn up when we got to shake hands with our client.'

'And let me drive.'

Joe ceded grudgingly and gritted our teeth as Frank pulled out onto the deserted, rain washed streets of Manhattan. Paul slipped back into his world as we hurtled towards our next paycheck.

She was pretty even though she looked like hell. There was a still damp vomit stain on her blouse, her hair was tangled, and her eyes told of having gotten an intensive education in the holding pen. Elaine, who had wakened on the ride over, took a look and said to her, "Just hold it together for a little while longer. Pretend it's a play you're in."

The girl looked up at us and nodded. After a minute she stopped gulping air and seemed to settle down. We turned to the lawyer, who said, "We're due up in about fifteen. If the old man gets back with his bank books in time I'm sure you'll be able to take her out of here. In the meantime, I want you to start working on the mother. She's saying that everything will be fine, that once they get out of here she'll be able to take care of anything." He shook his head, "I don't know much, but the dude she ran down had a street name, 'Easy Money', and, if my guess is right, he ran with a bunch of other guys with street names. Even though they might not call themselves a gang, there are aspects of this the mother isn't going to be able to take care of."

Elaine took another look at the daughter, "Unless I miss my guess, the reason we're here is because she didn't even come close to taking care of everything."

The lawyer nodded.

Joe asked, 'What do you think Frank, how do we approach her?'

'I never was much good at talking to rich folks, but you better let me handle the part about how if things get tough they're going to need someone who knows how to take care of himself.'

'Ok, I'll lead off, and when I say, "I have some experience in these matters," you jump in with a couple of sentences. But don't get too graphic.'

'Something like "They could hurt her pretty bad. I wouldn't guarantee that cosmetic surgery would be able to restore her?"'

'Yeah, that'll do if you forget the cosmetic surgery part. What I want is that part of your voice that sounds like you gargle with gravel. But you can leave out saying dese and dose.'

"Mrs. Finch, I'm Phillips, your attorney called me." For someone who had been dragged out of bed in the middle of the night and was having a major crisis, she looked remarkably composed.

"Yes, though I'm not sure why."

"Right, it is a precaution, but my guess is that your daughter may accidentally have gotten mixed up in something that's a little bigger than he can handle from a legal end."

"What do you mean?" The woman asked, not looking at all like she wanted to hear the answer.

"The police report indicates that there were some rather unsavory elements involved in the incident, and there remains the possibility that they may not be entirely willing to let the courts settle it. I have some experience in these matters," -'take it Frank,'- " Frankly, Mrs. Finch, I believe your daughter may need some protection for a while, until the facts get themselves sorted out."

"You mean a body guard?" Her voice and her expression each conveyed distaste.

"Not a nice idea is it? But I assure you that it's better to take the precaution. Some of these characters are pretty uncivilized, and I don't think your daughter should be exposed to any risk of physical harm."

"Physical harm?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm equipped to handle someone whose idea of settling this is to carve his initials in her cheeks," - ' FRANK!' The woman blanched. 'Frank you promised.'

'She needed a little push, and I didn't tell her what would really happen.'

'I'll take it now.' "I'm sorry if that upset you, but," he swept his hand around the packed courtroom, "you can see that she isn't exactly in her element here."

The woman's eyes darted quickly around the room and settled back on ours. "Very well, but just until we can determine if there is a threat against her." They had to be rich for her to have such an obvious dislike of spending money.

The dear daughter was being charged with drug possession and a count of manslaughter tossed in by a playful assistant district attorney. The husband returned with the bank books just in time to keep her from being shipped to Rikers.

Now that we had the job Frank took the lead. He scanned the faces of the underclass that filled the hall looking for any that showed any interest in her. They made it through the lobby and were halfway out to the street before he saw the signs of the ambush. Two men, overgrown kids really, moved from behind a bus shelter. To the right there were was another man, he was huge. He had about twenty pounds

on us we guessed, but was shorter and thicker, bulky enough to block the sidewalk by himself.

It was possible that they were recently released muggers looking to score cabfare home, but we doubted that. It was too late to head back inside, "Wait here," we said, stepping forward.

"Yo man, we got no beef wit you," said the closest man. "We just want a few words with the young lady." He stopped, and put his hand in his jacket.

Frank didn't bother to reply; instead he stared at the man, and listened hard for the steps that he knew would be coming from our right.

With a client to impress it was better to let the bad guys make the first move. Then it was important to keep our ass from getting pounded, so Frank had to counter it just right. The big man moved well, but not too quietly. Frank took a quick glance to his right and then moved. He moved towards the lunging hulk, found the center of gravity, and let the laws of physics do their thing. There was no weapon as he'd expected, so he was able to use all his energy in directing the large man's flight towards the two who were hanging back ready to take advantage of whatever happened.

They weren't ready to catch the large man who crashed into them like a pro football player trying to score a goal. They all went down in a heap and Frank was on top of them before they had a chance to untangle themselves. With the quiet efficiency he'd learned years ago, he reached down and broke four fingers on each of the two hands which were exposed. Next he kicked the large guy in the nuts, and then stomped the knees of the man who'd spoken. He would have a beef with us now, Frank thought, as he heard cartilage pop followed by a muffled scream. The other one was starting to get up. Frank grabbed his broken hand, and pulled him to his feet. Our other hand grabbed the man by the neck and lifted him clear of the ground. "I got a message for you. Don't fuck with the lady; she's got friends you don't want to meet." He punctuated it by slamming the man into the glass panel of the bus shelter. For a second it held but then the panel bent and exploded in a shower of shards that tinkled merrily as they fell onto the concrete.

The large man had rolled off his partner and was curled up in a ball making little mewling sounds. The third man was sitting up holding his knee. 'Let me take this one Frank.'

'I don't need to kill him, but if we ever see him again, he's yours.'

We stepped closer. The man stared up at us. Frank said, "If I break your back you won't feel the pain in the knee, what do you say?"

The man tried to scoot away, then he reached for his pocket.

Frank couldn't let that happen. Our foot flashed out, broke the man's right arm. We hoped across the body, and kicked again, and broke the other arm. 'My turn,' Willie swooped down a strike aimed at the neck. Frank took control long enough to direct it to the jaw. He would be eating through a straw, but at least he'd be breathing.

'Spoilsport - at least let me hurt the other guy.'

Frank's adrenaline was too high for him to resist and he watched as Willie wordlessly stepped up to the fallen giant. The man was in a lot of pain, not much of him was exposed, Joe jumped in, 'Hey the others are watching, leave him be.'

'Sure Joe,' Willie said, and reached down and patted the man on the cheek. The man made a move and grabbed our ankle in one of his huge fists. Willie swung the other foot, our toe hitting the man's mouth. The hand relaxed and we jumped away, but not before Willie kicked him in the mouth again, just to make sure some dentist would have a clean slate to work with.

Joe forced him out, jumped into control and had us turn away and walk back to where the others were standing. They were huddled together like a miniature wagon train, Frank thought, as we dusted off our hands and looked up and down the street, making sure the bad guys hadn't brought any backup. While we were getting our breathing back to normal, we waved them towards us and guided them around the fallen bodies towards our car.

"Perhaps Catherine would be better off if she stayed at our place in the Hamptons for a few days," said Mrs. Finch.

We nodded, "That might be for the best," Joe replied.

Chapter 2

Mr. Finch, saying he had pressing business, and Mrs. Finch, who claimed equally important engagements that she could not possibly break, returned to their townhouse while we drove Catherine east along the still deserted Long Island Expressway. Frank made sure we didn't have a tail then, keeping a sharp eye out for cops, let the car cruise towards the dawn. Catherine settled into the seat and watched us from deep inside her hollow eyes. She smelled of vomit and fear. After a few minutes Elaine asked, "Feel like talking about it?"

"No."

'Ask a silly question...,' Frank mused, 'Why don't you ask her if she'd rather be back with the dykes in the holding pen?'

'Crude, where ever did you learn to talk like that?'

'Crude but effective darling.'

"Ok," Elaine continued, "but it's got to be a shock having one of your friends killed, you in an accident and then getting arrested. It certainly isn't how you had the night planned."

Catherine sat up a little straighter and said, "Look, I don't want to talk about it - ok? I appreciate what you did outside the court. But you're going to get paid for that. Stick to the protection and leave the other stuff for the shrinks."

Frank jumped in, "Hey, take it easy. I don't give a damn about the shrink stuff. I just want to know what I'm up against. Are those guys the only ones who are interested in you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your mother would ask, 'what ever possessed you to go to Harlem,'"he imitated her voice as he said that- "I know better. My question is - was that ounce the cops found the whole deal or was it a taste?"

"I don't know, John, the one who got killed was handling that. I was just there because I could get the car tonight."

"Well, was John dealing to a lot of people or was it just party supplies?"

"He always had coke. I never had to pay for it, and I guess he sold some. Look can we cut the twenty questions?" She turned and looked out the window at the landscape which was slowly gaining a gray form as day approached.

'So what do we do? Baby-sit the bitch until some bad guys come to play patty cake,' snarled Willie? 'Give me the next twenty miles and I'll have her talking.'

'In twenty miles you'd have her babbling and it would take all the king's shrinks to put her mind back together again.'

'Well about time you joined us Paul,' said Joe, 'how's the hangover?'

'Not too bad considering you only let me have two drinks, next time I'll have to order doubles.'

'Well you missed all the fun, you could have written a poem about the sounds of snapping bones and dripping blood.'

'Glad I missed it. Who's the girl?'

'Back off, she's a customer.'

'So? Some of my most intense romances have been with damsels in distress.'

'All right that's enough.' Frank's voice cut through the chatter in our head. 'We'll have plenty of time to find out what makes her tick when we get to where we're going, Joe you got the directions right?'

'Yeah, the place is way out; when we get to Riverhead you just follow the signs to Montauk. By the way, I get the feeling there's a lot more to this one than meets the eye. I have a feeling this one's going to take us places we haven't dreamed of.'

'Yeah?'

'Yes, there was something about Mr. Finch that gave me the creeps.'

'And all this time you told me you don't believe in gut feelings, Joe. Something about scientific method, wasn't it?'

'Look Frank, I'll bet you got the same suspicions too. What father is going to let his precious little daughter ride off into the night with a hulking menace he'd just watched demolish three men on the streets of New York?'

'You got a point there. Still, he did get the idea that we are the good guys. But I'd sure as hell want to ask her a few questions. That's what parents are supposed to do when they bail their kids out of jail, it's part of the job specifications. I didn't hear even one "I hope you have learned a lesson."'

The house was well beyond cottage, even more than a house, but slightly less than a full fledged mansion. There was a top of the line security system, what had to be five acres of grounds, and a view of the ocean that was going to get exciting as hell when the next hurricane

comes to play. Although it had lots of glass, it wasn't impossible defensively. The two live-in staff let us in, clucking over Catherine's condition, and giving us the look that told us they'd be counting the silverware after every meal. They showed us to a small room in what was obviously the servant's wing. It was small, had a lumpy bed, and induced outrage. It took Joe five minutes to convince the rest that it wasn't worth arguing about immediately. 'First rule is don't push the help unless you like your toast burned, your coffee weak, and your food cold. Once they see we're protecting the heiress, then they'll come around.'

It was Elaine who heard the doorknob rattle. She woke Frank who slid out of bed and yanked the door open. Catherine took a couple of stumbling steps into the room. Frank pulled the killing blow he was prepared to deliver and caught her by the arm. "Well, good morning. Miss - Are you feeling better? By the way, we'll get along better if you don't sneak up on me."

'Frank, be nice and maybe you ought to consider putting some clothes on.' Catherine didn't pull away, didn't seem to either realize or care that we were naked. "I woke up and didn't know where I was. I was having a dream that some people were after me, and I was scared."

Frank moved his hand up to her shoulder, 'I'd better take over Frank.' Elaine took a step back and pulled a pair of shorts from their bag. We stepped into them and finished dressing by pulling on a tee shirt. "Ok, can I get a cup of coffee around here?"

Catherine led us into the kitchen and watched as the cook got a cup out of the cupboard and poured us a cup. We then followed her out onto the large weathered deck which over looked the beach.

Elaine took first crack at her, "This is a nice place."

Catherine nodded, "I always felt safe here when I was growing up. That's why I was so freaked out earlier."

"It's going to keep eating at you until you let it out. You know that don't you?"

The wind blew through her hair, she had showered and looked a lot better for it. If she had smiled and adopted a slightly relaxed position she could have been the picture of a carefree soul. She nodded, "Yeah, I kept dreaming about it last night." She took a deep breath, "Why can't it be over?"

"It may be, for all we know, but we want to make sure."

"What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with who was in the car, how long you knew them, and what they were doing there."

"There were four of us. John, he was going to have a party later and he told us he needed to replenish his supply. I went because I had a car, and Marsha, she was sort of his girl, and then there was Eddie, I guess he was my date."

She stared out across the beach at the crashing waves, "John went into the bedroom, and came back with a briefcase, then we went down to the garage and drove up into Harlem."

"Did he say who he was going to see?"

"He said he had to meet his man on a certain corner. On the way uptown I saw him open the briefcase and I saw it had a lot of money in it."

"How much?"

"I don't know, but the bills were twenties or fifties and there were four stacks held together with rubber bands."

"Did you see anything else in the briefcase?"

She nodded, "yeah there were some vials and bottles, I'd seen him use them to test dope at the apartment, to show us how pure it was. He got off on having dope that he claimed was as pure as Mother Theresa. And there was a gun. He put it next to him, between the door and the seat, when we crossed into Harlem. When I saw that I began to get scared."

She paused, Elaine commented to the rest of us, 'At least she had the sense to be scared.'

'Right Elaine, and she went ahead and did it anyway, that doesn't get many points.'

Elaine was set to defend her, but Frank cut that off by asking, "So what happened?"

The sweet innocent kid took a deep breath and continued, "We drove to some place, it was in the middle of a bunch of burned out buildings, and we pulled over to the curb on the left. Another car came along on the passenger side and the man rolled down the windows. He handed a small bag across and John does this test on it. He was making something of an ass of himself doing it, telling them how he was never going to get burned. Then he passed a bunch of the money across, and reached out to get a bag they were holding. I didn't see it happen, but he slumped back and there was a knife in his throat. Then I saw a bunch of guys moving towards my side of the car on the sidewalk, and I guess I panicked. I hit the gas. One of them jumped out in front of the car, I

think he may have had a gun, and I couldn't avoid hitting him. Eddie is in the back yelling, 'Go. Get the hell out of here,' and that's what I did. About a block later I ran into a double parked car, and that's when the cops showed up."

"Tell me about the money again."

"It was thick stacks, it looked like there was a whole lot of it."

"Did John and the man say anything you remember?"

"Yeah, he said 'I got the loot, you got the toot?' The other guy I couldn't hear very well. John did his whole 'I only buy the very best' routine, and it was obnoxious. Then when he passed the case across he said, 'don't get nigger rich with all this green.' I couldn't believe it, what an asshole."

"That was when they killed him?"

"Yes, just about then. They made it look like they were about to hand him a canvas bag."

"It's a miracle he lived that long."

'Cause of death should have been enlarged asshole.'

'Yeah,' Willie chimed in, 'it was so big he fell through it, turned himself inside out.' He chortled, 'can you imagine it?'

Before he could get started on the possibilities Frank asked, "Did you get a good look at the people in the other car."

"Not really, I was real nervous, and I didn't want them to see me either."

'I'll bet they think she can identify them.'

'That's a good bet. Something else about this smells wrong.'

Chapter 3

The psychologist arrived in the middle of the afternoon. She was young, with curly perm-ed hair, and the self-satisfied look of a person whose career is firmly on track. We guessed we'd underestimated the magnitude of Catherine's parents' concern.

She introduced herself then asked, "So what do I call you?"

"Phillips."

"Phillips? Isn't that rather formal? What's your first name?"

"I don't use it. Just Phillips."

"So what are you doing?"

Too late we realized the notebook was open on the table. "Just a few notes."

With the self-assurance of a professional who is used to delving into other's private domains she bent over the table and read aloud.

Reflected off a thousand wavelets
The Sun gave the sea a sequined collar.
The gliding gull a pendant
Which swayed as it nestled
Between the swellings of her bosom.

Drawn to the edge of the unbridgeable
We stare at the unreachable horizon
with the yearning of lovers
who know true love will
Never come to pass.

She looked up at us quizzically, "Notes, huh? Are you the same guy who I heard breaks bones the way other people chew gum?"

"Let's just say I'm a man of many talents."

She gave us a penetrating look. It was neutral, but penetrating. Paul was good at penetrating gazes too, not Frank's stare that made your bladder contract, but a cool detached look which was quite disarming.

She pulled up a chair and sat across the table from us. "I'm Diane Johnson, Catherine's parents asked me to come out and do an evaluation on her."

"And what have you learned?"

"Not much. She said she wanted to be left alone."

We nodded. "That's the message I've been getting. I think she means it."

"She's a very troubled girl."

"Not so much troubled as fucked over."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. My guess is that she's getting zip from her parents, except for as many credit cards as she can carry. She's looking other places for love and attention. She's willing to do anything to get attention and or praise."

She smiled, "You're getting into my area of expertise."

"Not really, I'm not putting twenty dollar words into it."

"So what happens next?"

"The lawyer is going to find a way to get her off, then when I'm unable to assure the father that his daughter is safe."

"You think someone will come after her?" She interrupted. Her eyes told me this was a new dimension for her. She wasn't used to violence.

We shrugged. Frank answered, "Who the hell knows? Good chance, there are no crazies like cocaine crazies. We'll never know what was really going down, at the very least she's a witness to a murder, in any case, the odds are that someone, somewhere, is going to want to talk to her. So, the way I see it, is the parents are going to be searching for an appropriate place to send her to."

She nodded, but it wasn't a convinced nod. "If someone tried to kill my daughter I think I'd do more than that."

"Hey, they are doing everything they can think of. They've hired me, and now you. This kid's got more legal talent behind her than is currently sitting on the Supreme Court. Besides, out of sight out of mind, if you catch my drift."

Her face took on a sad look. It reminded Paul of a social worker they'd had once, long ago. He replayed the memory for the others, "That must have made you feel horrible." It had been and he wanted to tell her about it. He wanted to let loose and cry and feel her arms circle him. 'Forget it kid. She's going to be out of our life tomorrow. There ain't a thing she can do for us.' Frank spoke from experience. He'd been bouncing in and out of the foster home system for two years before Paul had emerged. He knew the ropes. Plus, Paul had been in hiding through most of it, born of a need to please a third grade teacher whose classroom had provided a sanctuary from the madness at home. He'd hidden under the bed the night the police came and took them away.

'Damn it Paul, why do you have to keep bringing up the fucking past. You know we're a geek and there isn't anyone out there who's able to handle us.' Paul shrank back, and listened halfheartedly while Elaine defended him. 'You and your macho shit Frank, it sometimes gets out of hand. You got anything better to do than make friends with this woman? You're so afraid of your feelings that you keep them in a jar with the lid on.'

'And when we take the lid off, guess who comes to play?'

The psychologist was saying something. " ... ought to get used to it, but I still find it hard to understand how parents who've got all that hers have can't find the time to get involved."

"Just because they've got it made on the surface doesn't mean they've got it together inside. My guess is they don't have anything to give except their checkbook."

"That's pretty cynical, isn't it?"

"That's real, and what you'd expect from a private detective who's nursemaided more than a few of these kids."

She seemed to think about it for a minute, and then asked, "So how did you become a 'private detective and nursemaid?'"

We had a little debate about how to answer that. Frank was all for spitting out a putdown that would teach her to mind her own business, but Elaine said, 'we're going to have to work with this woman.' She then answered, "Probably for the same reasons you took up psychology. Wanting to help others, wanting to be in control, and a little bit of being nosy." It came out without a hint of accusation, as a confidence, and it brought a smile to the woman's lips.

"Yeah there is always that." She pushed back her chair and stood up. "I think I'll give it another try."

Frank said, "Five bucks says you aren't going to get anywhere with her, and could you bring me something to drink when you pass through the kitchen on the way back?"

The woman gave us an odd look and crossed the deck and passed through one of the sliding doors into the house.

Paul took up the pad again.

**"The waves slide up the beach
like the tolling of a bell
The rhythm is the heartbeat
of the planet
that spins alone**

in the void."

'What the hell does that mean?'

'Maybe we should ask her.'

The woman, with a slightly chagrined look on her pretty face, was emerging from the kitchen with two glasses of orange juice. 'Juice, couldn't she at least bring a beer?'

Joe said, 'It's good for us. I'll drink it. That way we'll enjoy it.'

'Yeah, ok, but don't talk to her any more than to thank her. She doesn't need one of those has Jesus saved your soul speeches.'

'Jesus loves you too, don't forget that.'

'No. Jesus loves *you* and that's enough for *us*, and don't forget it.'

"Thanks, this really hits the spot," Joe began, but before he could go on about the beneficence of the Lord, Paul slid back into the driver's seat of our consciousness. "Is this your first time working with Catherine?"

She nodded, "And it looks like it's going to be the last, she told me to, 'fuck off and take the gorilla with me.'"

"Did you know the Gorillas are basically shy and gentle?"

Frank groaned, 'that's a terrible line, and don't you dare start flirting with her, we've got enough problems as it is without having a romantic attachment with a shrink.'

She smiled, "I read that somewhere." After a second of staring out across the beach she asked, "So how did a shy gentle poet get into your line of work? By the way, I liked your poem."

Paul smiled for us. We actually were quite proud of his writing, even though some of us thought it was a little sloppy and sentimental. "Thanks. You'd be amazed at how little this work requires muscle. A lot of the time it's like this, just sitting around waiting for something to happen."

"Yes, but when that something happens, you can't always be gentle. The lawyer gave me a pretty detailed account of what happened when you came out of the courthouse. He said it was like watching a movie. Weren't you scared?"

"When something like that happens you don't have time for fear. Besides, most of the time you are dealing with bullies who don't have much skill fighting because they've gotten by on intimidation, and, as you know, scratch a bully and you'll find a scared child. Sometimes it takes a pretty deep scratch though"

'Where the fuck do you get this stuff? Have you been reading mysteries again?'

"You make it sound easy." Her face and tone showed interest.

"That's the secret, once you've convinced the other guy that you are going to break more of his bones, it gets easy."

"And how do you convince him of that?"

"By hitting first and breaking something."

She shook her head, 'Congratulations, you've just convinced her you're a sociopath.'

'It takes one to know one. Let me be. You'll see this will work out in the end.'

She asked, "I guess it has its glamorous moments though."

"Like sitting on a redwood deck, basking in the sun, watching the ocean while talking to a pretty woman? This is about as glamorous as it gets."

'Watch it Paul!'

"I feel funny sitting here doing nothing."

"You're not doing nothing, you're getting paid. Never forget that."

"Speaking of which, I told them that I'd call and report in." She stood and walked into the house again.

It wasn't thirty seconds before we heard her calling our name, not quite a scream, but close enough to get us moving at full throttle.

The psychologist and the daughter were tugging at a pocket book. It had to be the shrink's because the kid didn't have one when she'd come out of jail. The psychologist was trying to be calm about it, but the spoiled kid was positively determined to get it.

We stepped behind the kid, reached down and picked her up by her ankles. She gave out a shriek and in a second let go of the strap. Her tee shirt slid down and we got a good look at her body. That was another thing the kid had going against her. She was too good looking for her own good. Her figure was going to get her a lot of attention from men who weren't interested in her mind. "Put me down, you gorilla."

The line about gorillas being gentle seemed like it wouldn't work too well here.

Frank had assumed command, and he spoke, "So you can get another chance to borrow someone's car keys and split? I may have hair growing on my palms, but I'm not dumb." We let her go and she did a little bounce off the floor. It sort of took the wind out of her sails for a minute.

"I think you'd better call and tell them that she's thinking about taking a powder and ask them if they mind if I handcuff her to something."

"You wouldn't dare." The brat spat out the words.

Spoiled brats bring out the best in all of us, but in Frank especially. He reached down, grabbed her by a wrist, and then half dragged her over to a piece of modern sculpture in the living room. It was big and ugly, but its construction of stainless steel offered a number of suitable ways to restrain her. She tried to claw at our face as we pulled out the cuffs and slapped one end on her wrist and the other on what looked like a large strand of looped spaghetti.

The shrink was on the phone, and Frank took the opportunity to inspire the kid towards obedience. "Be good or I'll give you the spanking you deserve."

"You'd like that, I'd bet." She rattled the cuff, shaking the sculpture some, but to no other effect.

It takes much more than that to embarrass Frank, "I just might. And who knows? You might get so you like it too." We turned and walked into the kitchen oblivious of the cursing that followed like a boat's wake.

The shrink had just gotten through to the father and was trying in a calm and collected way to tell him that things were not going well. We leaned against the butcher-block kitchen counter and listened for a while. After a couple of minutes she handed us the phone. "He wants to talk to you."

Before he could say anything we informed him that his daughter was handcuffed to his sculpture, and that, in our opinion, it was only a temporary solution.

"So what do you suggest?"

"She looks like she may be detoxing. I think she needs to be in a hospital where they lock the doors."

He said, "I was thinking along the same lines. Do you think you could get her to The Institute in Hartford tomorrow?"

"I think so. I'm going to want someone to go with me though," and caught the shrink's eye. "It's at least a five hour drive, and I'm not going to be able to watch both the bathroom window and door at the same time."

The shrink nodded.

"Who do you suggest?"

"The shrink, 'does anyone remember her name?'

'Diane something.'

'Thanks,' - " The psychologist, Diane. I'll have to see if she's available."

We cupped the phone. "You interested in taking a drive to Hartford to lock her up in a funny farm tomorrow?"

She nodded, "Yes, of course." Her expression indicated that she didn't like our nomenclature, but that was her problem.

"Yeah, she's available."

He then told me the name of the doctor in Hartford and explained how he was late for a meeting. The line went dead before he could tell me to take good care of his little girl or ask me to tell her that he loved her.

Chapter 4

We decided against using our car, a yellow sports job with a monster engine which had been put together by a man who owned a chop-shop and owed us for a considerable favor. It had South Dakota plates which identified it as a 1967 Ford pickup and identified the owner as Joe Rain Cloud, a warrior who had long since passed on to a happier hunting ground. The registration wasn't a complete lie because the horn was original, the rest of the car, the Jaguar body, the Chevy engine, and assorted other bits and parts came from a number of other vehicles. It was fast, very fast, but it lacked sufficient interior room for three, especially when one didn't want to be there.

"Listen, Catherine, you obviously aren't happy about this little trip. But think of it this way, when you get there you are free to try and escape to your heart's content. Until you get there you are advised to shut up and behave. If I have to I'll toss you in the trunk."

She didn't appear to take this threat seriously so we opened the trunk and showed her how she would just fit if she pushed her knees up next to her ears. That quieted her down some. The shrink came out of the house just as we were helping her out of the trunk. She raised an eyebrow, and Frank explained, "I was just showing her that she had a choice of accommodations for the trip. I believe she's chosen the back seat."

We left about three in the morning so we could beat rush hour by a comfortable margin and get to Hartford as soon as the admitting office opened.

The trip was uneventful until we pulled off for gas and coffee just inside Connecticut. We were standing behind the gas station gazing at the bathroom window, when we heard a scuffle. We moved around the side of the building just in time to see Catherine start to run towards the pumps. She was not trying to be furtive about it, as she was stark naked. "Help, rape," she yelled. The shrink was about twenty feet behind her and we followed. She ran to a semi that was parked with its engine idling at the edge of the lot.

We jumped in the car, wheeled it around and got to the truck about the same time as she did. The trucker, a big hairy bear of a man was climbing down from his cab. She had certainly gotten his interest. He managed to get between her and us and was obviously settling in to defend her honor when the shrink came running up. "She's an escaped

mental patient who we're taking to a hospital in Hartford. I'm Doctor Johnson."

He looked at her and then at me, "What about him?"

"He's with me, he's driving."

"It's a lie," Catherine screamed. "They're taking me to a place where they make porno movies."

It wasn't a very good lie. But the man did not appear all that happy at the prospect of losing his claim on a young, good looking naked woman. "So who am I supposed to believe?"

The shrink took a card out of her bag and handed it to him.

The kid was humming. She said, "She's a fake, you can get those printed up anywhere," before the guy had a chance to read it.

"You could call the hospital," I suggested as Catherine climbed up the side of the truck and slithered into the cab. He turned too late making a grab for the door just as she slammed it closed. We moved around to the other side, but she got that door locked before we could get to it. From our perch on the side of the cab we got a good view as she slipped behind the wheel and started experimenting with the gears. The driver had mounted the other side and was pounding on the window with a beefy fist. There was a noisy clashing of gears, the truck jerked, the engine roared, and she twisted the wheel. We were almost bucked off, but held on as she succeeded in getting it moving. The driver was bellowing loudly now. We could almost tell what he was saying over the roar of the engine. She wasn't used to a manual transmission, but she had the truck moving at about ten miles an hour and that was enough to make us consider how wise it was to be hanging on to the side of the cab. She just missed the pumps and, by hauling on the wheel, managed to get the truck headed in the general direction of the road. Unfortunately it wasn't an unobstructed route and the right side of the front bumper rammed one of the two very tall poles that held the gas station's logo up high enough to get the attention of those who were passing on the turnpike. With a crash that would have woken a hibernating bear the truck came to an abrupt stop. We were thrown off, and, from our position on our back, watched as the sign oscillated. Once, twice, it swung in an impossible arc. Then the leg she'd struck buckled, the sign crashed down across the trailer and smashed into a pile of tires outside the service bay. It was a stupendous experience of sight and sound. As an added bonus the truck was hauling a load of turkeys on their final ride. The pole split the trailer open and there was an explosion of startled fowl that avalanched down onto the parking lot.

We were engrossed in watching one of the tires rocketing towards the office when she jumped from the cab and headed back alongside the truck. She tripped over a wounded turkey and Frank was able to wrap a hand around her arm and bring her to bay.

The driver appeared about thirty seconds later and tried to grab her other arm. He had trouble getting close as we were in the midst of a mob of hysterical turkeys that was growing as more cascaded from the truck.

A crowd which included all six people who were at the station was starting to gather. We were thankful when we spotted the shrink driving the car across the lot towards us.

We passed out a business card belonging to the lawyer who'd hired us, told them that he'd handle all claims generously, and, before anyone could object, had her cuffed in the back seat of the car and were moving out of the lot.

"Nice going kid, you got a career in trucking waiting for you. Maybe I should have left you there, because that guy didn't look like he had any reservations about hitting women. Someone's going to have to knuckle a little sense into you sooner or later."

Catherine wasn't making much sense, she said something about how this was all a plot designed by her father, so we turned on the radio, and suggested to the shrink that maybe we'd better stick to back roads for a while.

When we got to the hospital Catherine refused to get out of the car and Frank was forced to sling her over a shoulder and carry her into the admitting office.

This was clearly not the way things were usually done in this rather genteel place, but it wasn't something they were unprepared for either. Two men in honest-to-god white coats materialized, wrapped her up in a blanket and carried her into an inner room that muffled her shrieks considerably.

The shrink wanted to wait until all the red tape was tied in neat little bows, but we told her it was time for breakfast, and that, if she insisted, we could drop by later to make sure that everything was bureaucratically copasetic.

Over coffee Frank said, "You know, if we hadn't been involved in that mess at the gas station it would have been pretty funny. By the way, thanks for being on the ball and bringing the car over when you did."

She nodded, "You're welcome. And you're right; it was pretty funny, except I had the feeling that it was going to get a lot less funny when the cops got there. Did you notice that some of the turkeys were headed up the embankment towards the highway?"

"That must have livened up rush-hour some."

She nodded, took a sip of her coffee, and said, "So what do we do now?"

"Well, we can go back to the funny farm and check on her, or we can let them worry about her. Then we've got to get back, get my car and get paid for this fiasco."

"Aren't you curious about her, about what's going to happen?"

"I'll tell you what's going to happen. She's going to stay there for six months or a year, until she convinces them that she's ok - or daddy gets tired of paying the bills. Then they are going to let her out."

"And?"

"And she'll probably find another way to fuck up her life."

"You're certainly an optimist."

We decided to take the ferry from New London to Greenport rather than fight daytime congestion in the city. It made for a leisurely day as we managed to just miss one boat and had to wait an hour and a half for the next. We would have been just as happy to have reclined the seat and gotten in a nap, but the shrink wanted to talk. Catherine, she confided, reminded her of herself when she was younger. She confirmed our belief that most of the people who go into psychology were pretty confused themselves.

She described her childhood in very dramatic terms. The thing was it didn't sound all that bad to us, and pretty soon the explanations of how a lack of nurturing and affection had molded her got to Frank.

Joe, Elaine, and Paul had been napping and were caught unaware when he let loose. "Look, you're feeding yourself a bunch of bull-shit. You called your parents limited, but, so far as I can tell, they tried. You had it a lot better than a lot of people. You had a home, even if your father did split, you were never out on the street having to decide between begging and stealing or renting parts of your body to strangers."

"And you were?"

"Yeah and a lot more. But the point is that you've got to put it behind you and go out and live your life."

"You're saying your childhood had no effect on your life."

"No. I'm saying it doesn't matter. Feeling sorry for myself because I saw my father killed isn't going to pay the rent."

"You saw your father get killed?"

"Yeah, and I watched the cops drag my mom off for doing it."

"Lord, that must have been terrible."

"That wasn't half so bad as the foster home they put me in. It taught me to appreciate my parents."

"Are you in therapy?"

"Naw, like I said, there's nothing to be gained from bringing the past back."

'What the hell are you doing telling her about all this? You know that we made a deal.'

'You guys got us into it. You made friends, you made her feel comfortable enough to confide in us. Besides, she needs a bit of straightening out.'

'Come on Frank, let it go, besides what are you doing still in the driver's seat, the job's over. I want my time.'

She was watching him closely. "So you are saying you don't ever get any feeling that come from places you can't explain."

"Look I've got my ways to cope, just like you've got yours."

"What about women?"

"What about them?" Frank didn't like the tone or the contents of the question.

"Are you in a relationship?"

"I go out with some women, but there's nothing that I'd call serious."

"Why not?"

"Because, for the most part, they turn out to be emotional cripples of some sort or another. Because I haven't found the, quote, right woman, unquote, yet." 'And because we'd never get the three quarters majority that getting involved requires.' We walked away.

That quieted her down some, but she was like a dog with a scent. We were standing at the rail staring at the receding coast when she came up to us and asked, "Do you want to be a private eye forever?"

"Nope, but I haven't figured out anything better yet."

"You don't have any dreams?"

We turned towards her, "Sure. lots of them, but they aren't real."

"You interest me, Phillips, the tough guy poet, the cynical romantic, it's not a combination you run into every day."

"Well, doc, I don't think I can afford your fees."

"I wasn't speaking professionally."

Frank found his mind blank, then he heard, 'Ok Frank, you blew it. Let me take over before you make a complete ass out of yourself.'

'Shut up Paul, I'm doing ok.'

'Give it up Frank, Elaine and Joe are behind me on this.' There was a murmur of agreement. 'Lets face it guy, you don't know how to deal with women.'

She was waiting for him to reply. 'Ok, but you'd better not get us into anything we can't get out of with one phone call.' We turned to her, and smiled. She certainly was attractive even though she'd been up for most of twenty-four hours. "What about you, I'd be willing to bet that you have men lined up wanting to call."

She nodded, "Yeah, you think you have the lock on emotional cripples, I attract them too a bunch of guys who want free psychotherapy over a cup of cappuccino."

"That must make you feel needed."

"Needed and used."

"Yeah, I seem to attract women who want me to make their previous boyfriends leave them alone."

"Do you do it?"

"Not unless they are very pretty."

She laughed, "So what do you do when you're not being a detective or body guard?"

"Lots of things. You saw the poetry, I also like outdoor things like hiking and stuff like that."

"You ever been sailing?"

"Nope. This ferry is probably the longest sea voyage I've ever been on."

"Would you like to go sometime, I've got a boat over in Sag Harbor?"

"You have a sailboat?"

"Yeah, I'm not quite the self absorbed person you think I am. I find that being out on the water gives me a chance to get it together."

Paul had always wanted to go sailing. It was his kind of thing - or he imagined it would be, at harmony with the wind and the sea, away from the noise and stress of the world. "Sure, that would be nice."

"How about today?"

"Today? I've got to get my car then we've got to go get paid, or maybe you don't need get paid?"

"We'll handle that over the phone."

"I've got to check and see if I've had any calls." 'Good that will give us an out.'

She pointed off to the left. "See that island over there? There's a little cove up behind it, it will take us about an hour and half to get there. We drop anchor and catch up on the sleep we missed last night. Then tomorrow we head out there," she swept her hand across to the left, and, with any luck we'll be able to see some dolphins and maybe even a migrating whale or two."

"You don't have to work, don't you have patients?"

She shook her head, "No. I work like you do, on an exclusive as needed basis. And I don't know about you, but my fee for this one is going to pay my expenses for the rest of this month."

Frank was growling about how sailboats were for men who lisped. Joe was concerned about the business and missing bible study class, but Elaine was all for it. 'According to the schedule tomorrow is my day anyway, so I say we go.' "You must do pretty well to be able to afford a boat."

"I don't do so badly, and I've found there are a lot of folks who aren't afraid to pay for help in an emergency."

"Ok, what the hell. So long as you promise not to try and take advantage of me."

She gave us a slightly strange look, then leaned close and kissed us on the cheek. Before we got things straightened out she was walking back to the car and we could see that we'd be docking inside of five minutes.

On the boat she was even more self assured than she was on shore. She told us to stay in the cockpit as she moved about the boat tying ropes here, letting others loose, and otherwise getting the boat ready for sea. She let go of the anchor line and, with a burst of energy raised the sails. For a moment they fluttered, but she stepped into the cockpit, took the rudder stick and headed us out to sea. Paul was in love. Elaine was enjoying the sun and the sea, and the others had retreated into their shells. "It's really quite simple," she began, and then launched into an elaborate description of what it is that makes a boat sail.

"I always imagined it was the wind hitting the sails and pushing." Paul said as a way of telling her he wasn't understanding what she was telling him.

"Well it is, but that only works if you're going the way the wind happens to be blowing."

"Isn't that the way to go, or are you one that's always fighting against the tide?"

"That's your department, I would imagine. At least that's what all the detectives do in the books I read."

"You mean, fight for the oppressed against the corrupt forces that seek to enslave them?"

"Yeah, and you do that, don't you?"

We nodded, "When the occasion arises."

With a smile on her lips to let us know she wasn't entirely serious, she asked, "Perhaps inspired by the injustices of your childhood."

Paul smiled back, "If it was inspired by them I'd be leaving packages of dynamite."

She didn't reply and instead concentrated on sailing for a couple of minutes. She pulled out a chart and showed us where we were going. "With any luck we'll have the place to ourselves. It's a little tricky getting in and most people pass it by."

For the next half hour we watched as she guided the boat through a channel that wasn't on the chart, between a couple of rocks, which seemed close enough to touch, and then behind a spit of sand. Once she'd dropped the anchor and checked to make sure it was secure she disappeared into the cabin. In five minutes she reappeared with a plate of sandwiches, two glasses of orange juice, and a black bikini that told us that our guesses about her figure had been on the conservative side.

"Well!"

"Usually when I'm here and there aren't any other boats, I don't bother with this. But I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea."

Paul sipped at the orange juice wishing it was a beer, and tried not to stare at her breasts. "I'm not sure that I'm not going to get the wrong idea anyhow."

She laughed, "So now that I've let you into my secret world, what do you think?"

We looked around, "It's beautiful, not what I would have imagined. I used to have a place that was a little like this. There was this railroad cut behind the house, and the guy who ran the group home told us that he'd beat us if he ever caught us going down there. Of course I went every day. There was one part where someone had abandoned a car. The car kept the rain off and it was surrounded by bushes, so when I was there it was as though the rest of the world didn't exist. I used to go there a lot especially when things were bad for me."

She was, we noticed, looking intently at us. "It was the one place where I could be me. Where I didn't have to always be on my guard, where I could let myself out." Suddenly the memory of the first time Willie had really gone off was in our head. It was a blur, there was an empty wine bottle, and we were beating it against the side of the car and then it broke and the pieces glistened in the sun. One piece, a sharp curved triangle, was especially interesting. Holding it so it caught the light and reflected a piece of the outside, then seeing how it fit the hand, and how the point could push in on the skin until the skin was ready to split. It was like the piece of glass that had cut our father's neck. It was what seemed to be our blood destiny.

'Snap out of it, Paul,' Elaine was screaming and it startled us. Diane must have seen something on our face, because she backed off a little. Trying to explain, we went on, "Doesn't it ever bring out your dark secrets?"

"Dark secrets," she repeated. She exhaled softly, but completely. "No, not here, not on the boat." Her eyes grew concerned, does it do that for you?"

"Remembering the other place did it for a second, but I was remembering a time before I had them under control."

"Control," she mused moving a little closer. "I wonder if we are ever really in control?"

Paul wasn't entirely sure of this himself, Willie really scared him, but he didn't really want to get into a discussion of it, not right then so he borrowed some of Frank's ideology. "Of course. It's not absolute, you can always be run over by a truck, but you can learn to check out the street before stepping out into traffic."

"I was thinking of our pasts. I mean I asked you to come here with me because I was scared today, and being scared makes me lonely, it makes me need people."

Her hand was lying on the cushion between us. We reached out and took it. She stood and pulled gently. We rose and stood facing her for a long moment before taking her in our arms. For a shuddering sad moment Paul wished we didn't have to hide, wished we were only one who could pay full attention to her.

She was crying, and Paul, who was used to having women weep in his arms, didn't understand why. Usually they told him about a broken heart before dissolving into a saline rush, this had come with no particular warning or clues.

We tried to keep our hands on her shoulders, but they seemed to wander of their own volition. The hug turned to an embrace, the touch to a caress. Her hands came up under our shirt and Paul gave up all hope of avoiding deep romantic involvement.

We lay on the cockpit cushions staring up at the darkening sky. We idly touched her breast - watching as the nipple stiffened slightly. Paul ran our hand down her back, over her ass and down her hip a way. We spoke slowly as Paul composed.

**"The secret that lies
within my heart
has escaped
and courses through
my veins and fills
my head with fear.**

**My soul, a noisy chorus,
cries for a moment
when it can be still
and listen to the waves
lapping at the shore."**

We moved our hand so that it cupped her breast again.

**"I feel your beating heart
beneath your quivering breast
I want to fill it with
the joy I can not grasp.
In my temples I can hear
the echoes of my nervous heart
as I fight back a tear."**

We felt her chest expand as she took a sobbing breath, and her arm pulled us tightly together. Her head nestled between our shoulder and neck and we felt the wetness of her tears.

Joe woke with the sound of gently lapping water inches from his head. He felt the warm softness of her body curled up next to ours, and

he immediately edged away. He needed to pray for his soul and Paul's. He feared he would be denied any chance of paradise, by the wanton actions of his other selves. Perhaps he could save her. She certainly needed the comfort of the Lord if she was forced so to seek solace in the pleasures of the flesh. Maybe if she could hear his message she could help convert the others too. He checked the schedule to see whose turn it was to be in conscious command and was annoyed to see that it was Elaine's day. He needed talk to Elaine. Maybe she would cede her claim to him in exchange for a promise to allow them to go to one of her Mother Earth services. That would be a sin, but not the same size sin as if they spent the day here in carnal crawling.

Her hands were moving. One on our back, the other curled around our leg. He did not trust himself to speak. It might wake the others. He shut his eyes tightly and remembered the foster home where the woman had caught Frank masturbating. Tied naked to a chair with ice cubes piled on his lap, his palms beaten with a belt until they were puffy and blistered. That was his beginning, Joe remembered, asking God to forgive his sins. Accepting the pain as just punishment and feeling his heart soar as he gave himself to Jesus. And Jesus had come to him and had taken him to a meadow that was filled with sheep. They'd watched the lambs play and Jesus had told him that life was good.

He tried to return to that meadow, because the memory of the ice-cubes didn't seem to be working. He tried to pray, but Paul shouldered him out of the driver's seat and put our body in gear.

We rolled over and looked into her bright beautiful eyes. Paul felt as though he was on an elevator as her lips brushed our ear and she whispered,

"The union for which I have longed
with such untold desperation
has finally come
that is all that I know."

We were lost in the sensations of her warmth and love. She eased us out of the bunk and up onto deck where in the early morning light we stood an island in a fog. She hung a ladder over the side. Then, holding hands, we stepped off the deck and plunged into the weightless warmth of the late summer sea.

Chapter 5

Sitting in the cockpit watching the steam from our coffee rise from the mugs to join the low lying fog, we slipped into the profound hush of the setting. For once all of us were quiet - each occupied with private thoughts. As peaceful as it was, it was also somehow unsettling. It was as though something was going on that we weren't quite aware of - something which was just out of reach - beyond our control.

After a few minutes, she said, "You know, this is not like me at all. I haven't done anything this impulsive in a long time."

We nodded, "It's not something we do everyday either." Too late, we realized the mistake in the pronoun. Maybe she wouldn't notice.

"We?"

'Try to brazen it out,' "We?" 'Good you sounded properly confused.

"You said 'we'."

"Did I? I guess it's because," - make it good, Paul thought, "I'm feeling like a different person. Going from tension to relaxation makes me feel that way."

She turned on the seat and faced us. The look in her eyes told us we were facing the shrink not the person. "Look, it's none of my business, but if there's anything you want to tell me..."

"I want to tell you that you are especially beautiful with the fog as a backdrop." She smiled, but her eyes remained intense, we continued, "I guess I'm just not an open kind of guy. Not used to talking about myself."

She nodded and said nothing. That was a typical shrink trick, and it pissed Frank off. 'You got a choice, get her back to bed and get her mind off this, or I'll tell her to butt out.'

We reached out and put a hand on her knee. Paul was the best at being able to look women directly in the eye, and he stared at her until her eyes softened some.

"Lets go down below and try an age old remedy for soul sickness," we said.

She didn't say anything, but her eyes were getting softer by the moment, then they began to sparkle, and she laughed. A moment later she said, "Even though I've been leading a virtuous life these last few years, it doesn't mean I've been dead in here." She touched her head

with a finger. "I've had fantasies about having a man on this boat, a man like you, tough, with a touch of danger about him."

Paul knew exactly what to say, "And what happened in those fantasies?"

"I remember sitting in the cockpit one morning like this one, when the fog was thick, and imaging that I was making love to a man, up on deck." She stood, dropping the towel from around her, "Here I'll show you."

She led us up onto the deck and had us sit on the sail that was folded on top of the boom with our back leaning against the mast. Then she stepped across us and rubbed her silky firm stomach against our face. Slowly she lowered herself, pausing to tease out lips with her breasts and nipples before settling onto our lap. Gently and slowly at first, she made love to us. Her body engulfed ours as she took her time climbing through degrees of pleasure. She seemed to savor each second - occasionally rising from our lap to prolong the passion. Then, with a fury, she became a writhing possessed woman releasing something from deep inside her. Her hands, which had been gentle and slow, clutched our shoulders like talons. Her soul sucking at ours, she triggered a primal response. Our arms wrapped around and crushed her against us. Together we were caught in the center of an explosion of our innermost needs.

"I feel so wicked," she said when her breathing had returned to normal and we had moved to a position that no longer required delicate balancing. "I like feeling this way. I like the idea of being able to put on my clothes and walk down the street without anyone being able to guess how wild I really am."

We didn't say anything, but hugged her a little tighter to show her we were listening and interested. "Do you feel that way when you walk down the street, knowing that you could beat anyone who messed with you?"

"I used to, I guess sometimes I still do, but it's not a part of me I have to hide."

"I would guess you hide the poet side of you?"

We laughed, "Yeah it wouldn't be appreciated in some of the places we go."

Again, twice in less than an hour, what was it about her that made our defenses so loose? Had she noticed?

"And what kind of places are those?"

"You know, masculine places, the gym, poolhalls, the occasional tough-guy bar."

"Oh, do you drink?" She said it calmly, but we'd felt a reaction travel through her body.

"Sometimes, why, don't you?"

"No." There followed a long pause, "No I haven't had a drink for close to eight years."

"That's a long time."

She didn't say anything. We had the feeling that there was a slimy secret swimming near the surface, and Elaine jumped in, 'Don't push her on this one. She'll tell you if and when she's ready.'

Abruptly she sat up and pulled away slightly. "What is it?" Paul asked, halfway hoping she wouldn't tell.

When she turned and looked at us we saw that her eyes were on the edge of tears. She picked up the towel and wrapped it around her body. For a few seconds she chewed on her lower lip then said, "The one thing I've learned in my work is that everyone has some problems, and that one of these problems is often not being able allow yourself to trust other people." She wiped her eyes, and went on. "One of the hard things about being a psychologist is that you always have to look as though you've got it together. You can't have a patient come in and find you crying. I've always had trouble trusting other people. I know that you don't consider my childhood traumatic, but I've been hurt pretty badly, and there was a time in my life when I used booze to try and make things better." She paused and took a deep breath, "I guess that's why I was so effected by seeing Catherine carried into that room. That happened to me once, a long time ago."

We waited for her to go on but after a minute prompted her by asking, "And?"

"And? And I guess it's the freedom I'm feeling with you here, in some ways it's a little like I've been drinking, I mean I'm doing things I wouldn't ordinarily do, like letting you really know who I am. Like really letting go sexually." Her voice seemed to catch in her throat as she continued, "And what scares me is that I don't feel like you're able to trust me the way..." she stopped and turned and stared out across the water. "I really don't have any right to ask you to, among other things it's my choice to open up the flood gates the way I am, but it goes back to a very old pattern. I always went after people who were remote and cold. I was setting myself up to be hurt from the first time I said hello."

She fell silent and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.
"Don't mind me, I'll be OK," she said using her professional voice. She started to stand and Paul, suddenly feeling awkward, stood too. We opened our arms and drew her close. "Just relax," we began, trying to figure out what to say next.

She stiffened, "I'll be OK, just give me a few minutes."

"There's one thing I've learned in my work, and that is not to believe it when someone says they'll be OK." 'Good Paul,' said Elaine. 'Why don't you take a break and let me try and talk to her for a while?'

'So long as you let me back when things get sexy again.'

'She's hurting and you're thinking of seduction, haven't you had enough?'

'She's hurting, and there will be no better medicine. The sex was so good it scared her. I'll let you take over in a couple of minutes. Let me play the poet for a bit first.'

"When fog descends
it hides the sky and
blurs the shapes of things we know.

It is a place to hide,
and a place to fear.

Inside me
this cloud
hides the roots
of my fears
and conceals
the true nature
of my desires

It keeps me from seeing clearly
that which lies before
and holds me
in the prison of my past."

"Jesus," she muttered. "You amaze me." She pressed close and then asked, "Let's go below, I'm getting a chill."

We followed her down below and pulled on our clothes while she went into the bathroom. Frank started the debate, 'You've got to get us out of here as fast and as far as you can. This is getting too heavy.'

Joe jumped in, saying, 'she's obviously searching for a spiritual source, if you would let me tell her about how Jesus has entered my life...'

'Stuff it. You had your time when you signed us up for that spiritual retreat. If I remember you and the woman who sang solo had a religious experience.' Elaine dredged up a memory and a chastened Joe slipped back into the shadows. 'What we've got to do is allow her to get to know Paul, and our sensitive side.'

'Hey, a minute ago you wanted in.'

'That was a minute ago, but there's a kicker, you've got to tell her about your drinking.'

'What about my drinking?'

'That it's out of control. That you need help.'

'What are you trying to do?'

'I agree with her,' Joe chimed in, 'I'd like to wake up with a few less hangovers, especially on Sundays.'

'Look it's hard enough to be sensitive in here without a little help. Lots of poets have taken a comfort in booze.'

'Let me finish. She wants us to open up to her. She has just let us deep into her innermost self. Now I don't think that any of us wants to tell her about how there are five of us crowded in here like a basketball team in a Toyota, but if Paul talks to her about his drinking she'll see that as being open, in most people that's about as open as you can get.'

'I still don't like it.'

'It's the only thing that's going to get us out of here without a major scene. Besides, it doesn't mean you're going to have to give up the sauce.'

Paul was still thinking it over when the door opened and she came out of the bathroom. She had a set to her face that was mostly shrink, but there was a touch of scared in her eyes.

'Go on, you got to break the ice.'

"Could you make us a cup of coffee?" Paul paused hoping he wasn't being too dramatic, "I have a couple of questions."

She had moved to the stove, and was standing with her back to him. The second sentence froze her in place. "I guess I want to ask you about, you know, drinking. You know, you asked me if I drank earlier, and I said that I did. And you said you used to?"

She'd turned towards us now, the kettle in her hand. "Yes?"

"Well I don't know, but I've been noticing that drinking is getting different for me lately. It hasn't been doing what it used to for me."

"What did it do for you?"

"You know, it would loosen me up, made it easier for me to laugh, and forget the things that were bothering me."

"And now?"

"And now, I don't know, it's like I have to drink harder, more I guess I mean, and it doesn't make me feel so good. One morning I woke up and found I'd written sixteen poems about death, a couple of them were about suicide."

Suicide is a word that lights up the eyes of every shrink in the universe. She feigned calmness, turned and put the pot on the stove and then said, "And this is a new feeling for you?"

"Yeah, I used to sit in bars and write poems about green meadows and golden sand. I used to write about waiting to be struck by love, I used to get a lot of girls that way."

"Good Paul, you've got her hooked. Keep ending your sentences with something she can ask you about."

"When did you notice it was different?"

"I don't know. It didn't happen all at once. And I can still go out and have a good time sometimes, but I can't tell when it's going to happen."

She sat on the seat across from him, the kettle was beginning to make its pre boiling noises, and we looked at it.

"How often do you drink?"

That was not as simple a question as it seemed. Paul went out and drank every night he was in control, but since he was sharing time with the others it wasn't every night. Frank went out drinking too, but it was different for him. "I guess whenever I can, not every night, but a lot."

"Do you get pretty loaded when you go out?"

"Usually. I mean I mostly remember the night before and how I got to where I wake up. Only once did I forget a girl's name, but it was ok because she'd forgotten I was there, and was too busy throwing up to notice when I left."

She smiled, got up and moved to the stove, "Sounds like a swell time."

"It would have interested you, she got real strange when she was drunk."

She poured the coffee, and handed us a cup.

"So what do you want to know?"

"I guess I'm wondering if I need to cut back or something."

"What do you think?"

"I think you're playing shrink, I want to hear from the person who was talking to me up on deck."

'God you're good. Too good. You keep this up and she's going to really fall for you.'

'Would that be so bad?'

She looked startled for a moment, "you know, you're right. When I was in the bathroom I put back on my shrink costume." Then she paused for a moment, "Look I think you know the answer, and if you don't, you'll figure it out. But right now I've got to work at keeping me together. The costume I put on - I'm not ready to take it off again. And I'm sorry. I more or less asked you to open up to me, and when you respond, it scares me. I guess opening up to you the way I did freaks me out." She paused, "I was at the point where I was this close," she held up her thumb and forefinger, almost touching, "to falling so deeply in love with you that I wouldn't know my own name." She walked over to the steps and climbed through the hatch. Once outside she turned and poked her head inside. "I've got to ask you to give me some space here. It looks like the fog isn't going to lift soon, so we've got lots of time. Can you do that?"

'All right, you've got her on the run. Give her room, the odds are 3 to 1 that she'll end up telling you she can't get involved now.' "Ok." Too bad she doesn't have anything to drink. Paul reached into the bag and brought out the notebook. He wanted us to write down some of the poems of the night before. He wanted the others to go away so he could think about what she'd said, and how close it was to what he'd been feeling. He also wanted to run up on deck and tell her everything about us to say that he too was on the edge of losing himself in his love.

Like a breaking wave
coming in to shore
Lifting my feet
Sending me tumbling
in a silent irresistible rush.

My world becomes tiny
horizons lost
time becomes sluggish
as my life rushes
out of control.

Caught in the moment

**I tense and try to fight
the overpowering force
that grips me
Until I relax and enjoy the ride.**

We were concentrating and didn't hear her come back down into the cabin. She laid a hand on our shoulder, but Paul ignored it until he finished a verse.

"You certainly can concentrate."

Paul nodded, "It's like I'm in another place. Once I was in a bar writing and two guys next to me got into a fight. I knew something was going on, but I didn't care. Afterwards they told me that one had tossed a bottle and it had passed two inches from my head."

"Speaking of bars, I want to finish what I started earlier. I'm not about to tell you that you have got a problem. Like I said, I think you know that something is wrong." She sat opposite us and said, "I can tell you how it was for me. I can tell you how I was trying so desperately to keep things together, and how in the end everything came apart. I can tell you it's been better for me ever since, but as you can see, I can't claim to have it all together."

She paused. Her gaze drifted away from his face and back again before she continued, "Sometimes the loneliness, or whatever it is that makes me feel hollow inside, gets strong. It got strong yesterday, and I wanted to fill it with you." She smiled, "And I was doing a pretty good job of it for a while there. But I fell into the trap. I tried to loose myself in you, and that doesn't work. That's what happened this morning."

'Hey it sounds like she's getting ready to give you the brush-off.' Paul wanted a drink more than he had in some time. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying, that I'm attracted to you, but I've got no business falling in love with you. I don't know you well enough, and I don't think I'm capable of maintaining a proper level."

"What do you mean by a proper level?" Paul asked even though he knew exactly what she was trying to say.

"Well, say you go into a bar and you order a drink. If you order another and another, as fast as you can drink them then you're pretty sure to get drunk. If, on the other hand, you were able to order one and then maybe an hour later another, you wouldn't. I can't do that with

booze, and it seems like I can't do it with a man, or with you in any case."

'Not only a brush-off, a major league brush-off,' Willie chortled.

'What do you know? The way women leave you is screaming as they run.'

'Except for that one you picked up in a bar, remember? The one who said she wanted to kill herself?' Willie brought back the memory of a sad mousey girl, the one who had asked Paul to hurt her until he finally turned her over to Willie. For two weeks she'd clung to us saying she wanted pain so she could forget the past. Finally, to get rid of her, Willie had more or less sold her to a madam who specialized in rough trade. Occasionally he went back and paid her a visit. She seemed to be happy finding some sort of security in belonging to someone, even if it was a madam.

'You've made your point, Paul said, "You're saying that falling in love is like getting drunk?"

"If you do it to get away from yourself. If you do it recklessly," Diane answered.

"But if you don't do anything reckless in your life, isn't that pretty boring, and aren't you denying yourself the chance to change?"

She nodded, started to answer, but caught herself, "Hey who's playing the shrink here?"

"I wanted to talk about what you were saying earlier too, about the part of having fantasies, and how I think it's good to try and live them out."

'That will put her on the defensive, sure enough.'

It did. "Look I'm still embarrassed by that."

"Don't be. Let me ask you, were you scared by the feelings you had when you let go of your self control? What are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid I'll get caught up in something I can't get out of, and that... that the dark side of me will break out. Don't you see, I've worked very hard to make a normal world for myself and it makes me real nervous when the boat gets rocked." She turned, and moved back out onto deck. In a minute she called in, "I think the fog's lifting a bit, I'm going to head us back in."

It wasn't a question, and we didn't respond. We listened to her purposeful stride on deck as she raised the anchor and started the engine. We were tempted to go out on deck with her, but the majority voted to leave well enough alone.

Chapter 6

It was late when we got back to our apartment. The answering machines blinked telling us there were people who wanted to talk to us. Elaine had managed, through sheer force of will, to wrest control and avoid stopping at the bars that attracted Frank and Paul. Fortunately they were attracted to different sorts of bars, and so their strength had not exceeded hers.

One machine was hooked up to our personal line, the number we gave out to women and other assorted people. The other was our money machine. A call on it meant that someone wanted to see us about business.

"Hello Phillips, look you got to call me right away." It was McCormick, and we guessed that Catherine had found a way over the wall around the funny farm. Or maybe some turkeys had come home to roost. We hit the pause button and checked the mail we'd brought up with us. There was an envelope from him, it contained a check for the amount we'd negotiated, plus a thousand dollar bonus. It was the bonus that settled it, we'd compromise and work even though the wolves were temporally at bay. At least we'd listen to his proposition.

"Call me anytime, day or night, as soon as you get in." There were other messages on the tape, but we assumed they would be follow ups to this one.

"Where have you been? Listen I think we've got big trouble. Catherine's father gone missing, and I think he's been kidnaped." His voice sounded less than five steps from panic city.

"Think? Have they called or sent a note?"

"I don't know."

"Did you ask the wife?"

"I asked, but you have to understand she was in my office last week asking me to refer her to a good divorce lawyer."

"And she's claiming she hasn't heard anything. Maybe he got wind of it and took advantage of the moment to go off to Rio with a new friend."

"That wouldn't be like him."

"I believe it was me that once said, 'never be surprised by what people who are in the middle of a divorce will do.'"

He didn't laugh, so Frank asked, "So what do you want me to do?"

"Can you check things out for me? Check out the wife and I was thinking maybe the dealers who were involved in the thing with Catherine are involved some way."

'Ask him who's the client,' said Joe, 'Who's going to pay us?'

"Who's paying the freight on this one, from what I can tell you don't have a client?"

"He's the client."

"Suppose he doesn't want to be found." That seemed like the most probable scenario, and men who didn't want to be found didn't eagerly pay their bills - unless they wanted ot go away, but that was a collection plate of a different metal.

"Then I'll pay it personally. Look, it's been close to thirty six hours, I'm worried."

'Worried about his best client.' "Ok, but I get double rates if I have to go play with the dealers. Is that were you want me to start?"

"Yes, I don't know, what do you think?"

"If they've got him and haven't contacted you, then he's probably dead."

"They might have called the wife."

"He would have told them to call you."

"So where do you want to look?"

"You tell me, you know this guy. Let's say he was more upset than he showed about having to lock his kid up in a loony bin. Where would you expect him to go to have a bender?"

"I don't know. That doesn't sound like him." The normally unflappable man was flapping like a confused chicken.

"It doesn't sound like a kidnapping either, not without a note or a call. Unless we go with the scenario that the wife is deliberately stalling the kidnappers so that they'll kill him so she won't have to bother with a divorce. That sounds pretty remote. Might make a good book though, but I expect it's been done."

"You were the one who said never be surprised."

"Tell me, who's got the money in that marriage?"

"He does, she's got blue blood but a red bank account."

"Ok I'll get on it. Do me a favor. Call her and ask if she's heard anything. Tell her he's got to sign some papers or he could loose a lot of money. Maybe that'll shake her up. I'll be here working on some other angles."

As soon as he hung up Frank let Elaine into the seat and had her fire up the computer. 'I know,' she said, 'check his credit cards, see if they're being spent.'

'You got it.'

'You know that's illegal,' said Joe. 'Maybe we should call the police.'

'Forget it,' Elaine's fingers flew across the keyboard, 'I say we try American Express first. That's the card he'd use if he was going to Rio.'

'And if the cocaine cowboys have him they're probably playing a tune on his master card.'

'If it's the same to you I'd rather go looking for him in Rio than in East Harlem,' said Frank.

'Shut up will you. I'm getting in.' Elaine concentrated for a couple of minutes then sucked up his charges for the last two months. 'I don't see anything in the last two days. Let's go play with master card.' She slipped out of the connection with don't leave home without us and called a different computer. 'I hope the password still works, you guys haven't been letting me stay current.'

The screen changed colors, and she was in. 'Ok, let's see what he's got.' Her fingers flicked a few keys, and then his file came up. 'Would you look at that credit limit? I've seen third world countries with less. Oh-oh his balance is up there too.' she scrolled down a screen, 'Ok, we've got some action here.'

'What is it?'

'I'm going to have to go to another table, this only shows the vendor's account numbers, but they are recent, there was one for one hundred forty-three less than two hours ago.' This will take a minute.' The printer hummed, and spat out a couple of sheets.

We grabbed it and she entered the last account number into a different screen.

It took a minute, then it flashed, "Ramada Inn, Hartford Connecticut."

'What? Why would he go to Hartford?'

'Either he wants to be near his daughter, or someone wants him to be near his daughter and maybe there with him.'

The other phone rang, when we heard it was the lawyer on the answering machine, we picked it up. "I spoke to his wife, she doesn't seem concerned about him, but I think she's hiding something."

"Would it surprise you to know he was in Hartford an hour ago?"

"How do you know that?"

"Don't ask."

"So when are you going there."

"First I'm not sure he's still there, second I'm not sure he wants anyone butting in. I don't like working for people who haven't agreed to pay the bill."

"I told you I'd pay. And I'm sure something is going on, what's he doing in Hartford?"

"Visiting his daughter would be my guess." It didn't sound right, but it didn't sound like a kidnapping either.

"He isn't that good a father. You said that, remember?" McCormick paused.

"I admit it's a little out of character, but."

"Look, you want the job or not?"

"I'll admit I'm curious. Ok, I'll do some more checking and if it looks like he's still there I'll go up and nose around."

'Elaine, was that hundred forty dollars checking in or checking out?'

'There's no way to tell. I'd guess it was checking out. That's the way they usually do it. Lets look at some of those other charges.'

She called up other vendors and compared them to the printed list. 'Last night, a restaurant, earlier today, a hardware store.'

'That man's never been in a hardware store in his life.'

'And how about this one? One car from Hertz and another from Avis. He hasn't turned either of them in yet, because they've only got a credit hold on his account.'

'That's enough, let's get going, bring the small computer. I have a feeling we're going to be following credit card slips for a while.'

Elaine disconnected herself from the electronic web and said, 'You haven't told me what a great job I did.'

'I'll tell you in the car.'

Chapter 7

The Connecticut state police force has developed the radar trap to the level of a fine art. We had two top of the line radar detectors concealed in the dashboard, but were still cautious. As a result the trip took a little over two hours, and we had only hit ninety once. Frank had decided against calling the Ramada in Hartford because he was afraid of spooking the father. He'd decided that he would first check out things at the institute and had concocted a reason for needing to speak to Catherine.

The street next to the institute was broad and well lit, but we immediately spotted a rental car parked under a tree about halfway down the block. 'Bingo.' We circled the block and found a space from which we could watch the car and a large section of the brick wall that circled the Institute.

About ten the lights in the building started to go out and half an hour later we saw the dome light come on in the rental car. He had been there, he must have been scrunched down in his seat. We were not prepared for what happened next. Dear old dad took a bundle out of the back of the car, unrolled it on the sidewalk, and then bent down to adjust something. As we watched the bundle seemed to grow and then impossibly took the form of an inflatable boat. 'What the hell?' He turned it over so it was upside down on the sidewalk. Then looked up into the darkness of the tree that overhung the sidewalk. The branches moved some, and we saw that he intended to use the boat to cushion her when she jumped. He certainly was clever. Not many people would think of using a boat to help someone escape from a landlocked loony-bin. We wondered if this would be a propitious time to come strolling down the sidewalk and decided that it would be as good as any.

He did not see us as we emerged from the car, as he was concentrating on the tree. As we got closer we heard him say, 'It'll be ok, trust me. The sooner you jump the sooner you will get what I've got waiting for you in the car.'

Frank stopped, having decided that his arrival should be closely timed with hers. There was no sense in spooking her.

A leg, then two, hung down, it turned out to be a drop of less than eight feet. He pushed the rubber boat a foot to the right and then she fell. The rubber boat was a good idea, but it acted a little like a trampoline. She bounced to her feet and then went sprawling on the sidewalk.

"A nice night to break out of the loony-bin isn't it," Frank began. Catherine cowered against the wall and the father stood with his mouth open. He reached out, took her hand, and led her towards the rental car. We continued, "I would guess that we shouldn't just stand around though, you never know when the men in the white coats will get wind of her little breakout. That rubber boat is an interesting touch, do you want to bring it, or are you going to leave it behind?"

The father turned towards us. "What are you doing here?"

"Just a little follow up service. McCormick is worried about you. He's afraid you've been kidnapped."

"Well, as you can see I'm fine."

"Yeah." 'And he isn't going to pay the bill.'

"Look," he said looking around quickly, "you're right we've got to get out of here." He opened the door of the car and helped Catherine in. We reached behind him and unlocked the back door and got in unassisted.

He started to argue, but took another look up the deserted street and scurried around the car to slide behind the wheel.

Catherine was rooting through the glove compartment, "Where is it?"

He took a nervous look at us and then reached in his pocket and passed something to her.

"It's nice to see a father who's willing to do things with his daughter. So often today parents don't have time for their children."

"What are you doing here? Why are you following us?" This time the tone was different. There was less surprise, and a touch of indignation was creeping in.

"I really don't know. I guess I thought that we could save gas and other natural resources by carpooling."

He pulled to the side of a dark street and turned in the seat.

"You've been paid for your services, they are no longer required."

"You are right, and I was meaning to thank you for that bonus, it was very generous of you." I patted him on the arm, "I guess I'm doing what a salesman might call a follow up call. I want to make sure everything is all right."

"Everything was fine until you showed up." His voice had that fine patrician edge to it. It made Willie want to uncap his teeth.

Catherine was dipping into an envelope as though there was no tomorrow. We said, "You might have her go gently on that stuff, I expect her tolerance is down a little."

"Look," he said, "how about I hire you to get lost?"

It was tempting, we were already at least five feet over the edge of where we belonged, but there was something about his desperation that made us want to get to the bottom of things.

"How about five thousand, I'll write you a check." He reached into his pocket. We wanted to watch him write a check so when his hand came out wrapped around a small, but completely lethal .22 automatic, we were surprised.

'Will you look at that? This guy is playing for keeps.'

'Except he's got the safety on.' Frank flicked our arm out like a striking cobra. He grabbed the wrist, twisted and then pulled back with the pistol in his hand. Dad was hunched over cradling his wrist in his hand.

"Gee, are you ok?"

He nodded, but his breath whistled through his teeth. Catherine was leaning against the door, oblivious to anything taking place outside the pleasure centers of her brain.

We took the bullets out of the gun and tossed them out the window. They made a little clatter as they struck the pavement, and would provide interesting litter for someone in the morning. "I guess I've got a few questions," we began, "but I can ask them as we're going where-ever it is that we're going."

"I think you broke my wrist, I can't drive."

We took the precaution of reaching over the seat and removing the keys from the ignition before switching places with him.

The mostly depleted envelope was lying unattended on the seat next to Catherine. We handed it to him saying, "Maybe this will make it feel better."

He feigned disinterest then took it from our hand, acting as though he was taking it out of politeness. He didn't keep up the facade for very long. He tapped the envelope and sucked up the remaining powder with the air of a man who has done this before.

It told us several things and gave us a possible universe of reasons as to why he was breaking his daughter out of the funny farm. It didn't put it in much focus though, so we asked, "What is it, does she have something on you?"

He wasn't paying much attention. He was twisted around trying to reach into his right pocket with his left hand. We guessed he was looking for another envelope, and decided that our questions could wait.

We put the car in gear and drove until we reached a nicely deserted industrial district.

By the time we got there he was feeling a lot better, he told us that he'd obviously underestimated our worth and suggested upping our fee for getting lost to ten thousand. The more we thought about it, the better it sounded, except that we suspected he was willing to go even higher, if we were patient.

"So what's she got on you?"

"That's none of your business."

"Pulling a gun on me made everything my business," we told him. Beside us Catherine was beginning to return to the world of the semi-conscious. We turned towards her, "How much do you think we can get out of him," we asked, not really expecting an answer.

She slurred her words, "Got him by the balls," the idea that we might be willing to help her struck home, and she turned to him. "Isn't that right daddy?"

He nodded. Then, forgetting his injured hand, he launched himself towards her. "You little bitch you're going to ruin everything." We let him grab her, because we were hoping he would say more, but when his hands got near her neck, we stopped him with a tap on the point of his chin.

It didn't faze her at all. "Maybe you can be useful after all." The way she said it made me realize that all her breeding and high priced education hadn't gone completely to waste.

We showed her the gun, "So why did he want to kill you?"

She shrugged. "He doesn't want me to tell. And I won't give him what he wants."

"Tell what?"

"Tell what I know about him." She was looking longingly at the gun and, I suspected, reviewing what she knew about inheritance laws.

We tried to figure how we could put some of this to our advantage, but Joe came up with a good point, 'Whatever happens here it's going to be messy. Sooner or later one or the other of them is going to kill the other and we don't want to be within a hundred miles of it when it happens.'

Frank agreed, wishing he'd gotten the man to write out a check before he'd knocked him out. He drove the car to a sewer grate and dropped the gun down, then he turned around and headed back to the Institute.

She hadn't liked the idea when she finally caught on, but by then the men in the white coats were standing around the car waiting to help her back to her room. We explained little, and drove away as soon as we saw the gate swing closed.

Daddy came to just after we'd parked the car. We'd taken the liberty of filling out a check for ten thousand and asked him to sign it. When he balked we reminded him that it was indeed possible that he would have regretted killing his daughter, and that by helping him think it through we had saved him a heap of legal bills. We told him that if we'd been able to figure it out, the cops would have too. His signature was a bit cramped, but it looked good enough for a bank to accept. So we wished him luck and started to get out of the car.

"How much would you want?"

"If you are asking what I think you may be asking, don't."

"It would be worth a great deal to me. A great deal."

"Why don't you pay her off?"

"It's not that way. She's being stubborn about something."

Being a parent is tough these days. We shook our head, "You'd better think it through again. Murder isn't going to work." It was then we realized that the incident in Harlem might not have been quite as random and senseless as we'd thought. The question was could this man have set it up? He wasn't showing good planning tonight, although the rubber boat showed a streak of ingenuity. Well, that was blood over the morgue floor now, and our best bet was to get out while the getting was good. We opened the door and got out before he could start talking again.

He opened his door too, but we ignored him until we got back to our car. "Go back to the Ramada, get a good night's sleep and then go visit your lawyer in the morning. Maybe he can help you."

He stood there cradling his injured hand watching as we put the yellow monster in gear and headed off into the night that wasn't nearly as dark as the inside of his heart.

We got back to the city at two thirty and decided it was time to see how McCormick liked being awakened at that hour.

From his tone he was pretty used to it. He wasn't happy at our insistence of seeing him in person and when we spied the young blond thing in his apartment we knew why.

On the way back we'd decided to play it straight with him. Except for the check of course. We told him about the evening's discoveries including the fact that we would not be amazed if it turned out that he'd

tried to kill her before, and that he was, in our estimation, a loose cannon who would try again. The lawyer took it all calmly. Then he thanked us for our efforts, and said, "I suspect you are putting the puzzle together improperly. While it is true that Catherine has been, shall we say, difficult - for some time now, I seriously doubt that he would go so far as to kill her."

We thought about arguing that a man who helps his daughter escape from a funny farm with a loaded pistol in his pocket is not a man who has decided to forgive and forget. But we decided that the lawyer was a man who clearly had his own agenda. We were helped in that decision by his handing us a check for five thousand dollars and telling us that it included a bonus for such prompt work.

Chapter 8

Joe had us stop and deposit the checks in an automatic teller, and then made the mistake of letting Paul, Frank, and Willie join forces and make a substantial cash withdrawal.

The semi-civilized places that Paul frequented were all closed and the choices available were suitable to only the moderately and seriously demented. We settled for a place in the basement of a warehouse. It was a drink-until-you-fall-down kind of place. The decor consisted of the night's casualties who would occasionally be moved into interesting or compromising positions by who were still conscious.

Willie ordered a beer, then proceeded to try juvenile pickup lines on a very mean, very drunk lesbian who was wearing fingerless gloves set with spikes. She ignored us for as long as she could, and before she could do something about it we felt a hand on our shoulder. "Hey Phillips I thought you were dead." We turned and saw a very tall man, who described himself as being of the African American persuasion. He was dressed in a leather suit which was cut like a tuxedo. 'I know him, said Frank,'- "so how are you Maurice?"

"I don't let many people call me that, where have you been?"

"Let's see. I'm into interior decorating now and I spent May in Florence re doing one of the Medici palaces. Then I flew"

"Then you flew to England to do a little job for the Queen."

"How'd you know?"

"I had to come in behind you. They didn't like the idea of ornamental rattlesnakes." He looked over our shoulder and continued, "by the way that woman looks like she's getting ready to hit you with a bottle."

Frank bent forward and lashed out behind us with our right leg. It was a lucky shot which lifted the woman off her feet and sent her crashing into a punk with blue spiked hair and red ribbons laced through his ears. "Still haven't lost it have you," the man asked as they watched her try to get to her feet?

Frank drained our beer and threw the bottle at her. It hit her in the stomach. She bent over and fell forward. "I see this place hasn't gone yuppie yet."

"We had two of them in last week. Someone set their clothes on fire."

Frank nodded and said, "So what's with you?"

Maurice lowered his voice and said, "I actually got something to talk about with you." He led us away from the bar and over into a corner. "I heard that someone who looked a lot like you got into a little thing outside the courts."

"Yeah? What if it was so?"

"Well, I heard a word that there was no need for you to do any follow up. Apparently whatever went down was finished. Of course there's a couple of guys who joined the list of chumps who would like to help you take a walk off a tall building."

"Won't they be surprised when they learn I can fly? What else do you know?"

"Not much, apparently it was piece work, it went down and nobody cares any more. What's it to you?"

We shook our head, "Nothing much, just some rich white folks being dumb. I'm out of it now."

A woman materialized out of the dark. She was almost as tall as he was, and would have turned heads even if she'd been five feet tall. "Hey man, my ride's here, got to go," he said as he slipped off into the dank darkness.

We wondered for a minute why that dress didn't explode off of her, but gave it up and went back to the bar. There wasn't much happening and Willie had to settle for a discussion of the best way to make bombs that were booby trapped so they couldn't be defused.

The next morning came about three in the afternoon. We allowed ourselves to lounge around until six before Elaine decided she wanted to do a little more poking around with her magic electronic fingers. 'I want to see what that guy really has in the bank.'

The world was full of surprises. Our check was going to clear, but not by that much. She kept finding two mortgages to every account. 'See if she's got any trust funds that might revert back to him,' Joe asked.

'You've got a nasty mind even if you won't admit it,' Elaine said as she called up the credit bureau again.

A few minutes later she looked at a couple of printouts, and said, 'we know a few things. First they had gobs of money once upon a time. They had to - to be able to setup a trust fund like that. We also know that right now daddy's got a net worth that could be spent in two hours at Sears. He's been taking out loans for the past eight months. The money from them went into his accounts then went away. His financial

picture would be a lot better if he could get his hands on those trust funds. Especially since he's got a balloon loan due in a little over two months, and if he can't re finance it he'll be out on the street. And I mean that literally, it's a mortgage on his townhouse.'

'So he's trying to get at her money?'

'That would be my bet. He's sent a lot of money overseas.' 'What do you think? Blackmail, extortion, or a drug habit the size of Miami?'

'He's an amateur when it comes to drugs, even she couldn't put that much up her nose.'

'She said, "I've got him by the balls."'

'Maybe she knows about the balloon loan.'

'Why are we doing this? Who cares?'

'I certainly don't care, I'm mostly nosy, but I'd like to know why and where all the money went.'

'So what's it going to be? Whose day is it anyhow?'

'It was supposed to be my day,' said Joe, 'and I had wanted to get to the Metropolitan.'

'Well the museum's closed.'

'I certainly don't want to go out drinking again.'

'What about Diane? She called.'

'Haven't you had enough women for a while Paul? No. I want to do something uplifting, maybe a movie.'

'How about going to Soho and taking a look in the galleries?'

'That's a good idea Elaine. We can go someplace nice to eat, maybe have one glass of wine with dinner.'

'This dinner had better not come out of the motorcycle fund.'

'Don't worry Frank, it will come out of the general fund.'

Looking like we were someone who belonged there had gotten us into the opening. It was a trick we had learned and used often. Once inside we were going several ways at once.

"It's so commercial now. I don't know if you can still consider anything art anymore."

"And what do you suggest - that artists starve?" She was pretty, in a pale much too thin kind of way. Joe had started talking to her because she wore a silver cross on a chain around her neck. He was beginning to wonder if she wasn't wearing it for some other reason than to proclaim her Christianity.

"I didn't say that, but I think that selling a tee shirt that's stuffed with crumpled up playboy centerfolds is a bit much. While you can't

get away from politics entirely, you don't have to shout it from the rooftops and then charge twenty thousand dollars for it."

She didn't respond and moved off towards another work. We decided not to follow. 'This is a bore, can we go somewhere and get a drink?'

'No, tonight we're going to take it easy. We'll stop at one more gallery before we go home then we'll get to bed and start living in the daylight like normal people.'

Before we could get ourselves agreed to leave, the door opened and a Norse Goddess walked in. She was about our height, 6-3, wearing a dress that told us a lot about her anatomy and was probably illegal in at least eleven states. Her face could have pushed its way onto the cover of any magazine in the world.

She made the woman we'd seen with Maurice look like a poorly dressed transvestite. What was it like being that beautiful, we wondered? Was her ego bigger than a blimp from all the attention she had to get. Or was there an insecure little child, like in all the rest of us, or in our case a playgroup?

She headed straight for a well-dressed business man who was staring at her and who was doing a half-way good job of keeping his mouth from hanging open.

She got to within five feet of him, before her face twisted into an evil smile that did not mask the hate. She reached into her bag. 'Boring huh?'

The man started to move backwards, and we guessed there was some history between the two of them.

She took what looked like one of those vials pharmacies use for dispensing large portions of antibiotics, removed the childproof cover, and poured its contents over him.

We'd expected to see some pills, or maybe liquid, but what came out somehow didn't look like pills, and it certainly wasn't liquid. He looked at his jacket and began to scream as he frantically tried to throw it off.

Because we're nosy we moved a little closer and saw little bugs crawling on it as he flung it in our general direction.

There were some on his face too, and he was well on the other side of apeshit. Crabs we wondered? He lurched towards us and we saw that the bugs had little red marks on them.

The woman was standing with her arms folded across her chest. The smile remained but the hate had been replaced with a look of satisfaction.

'That's my kind of woman,' said Willie.

'Why,' asked Elaine?

'Because, you biologically ignorant slut, those little critters are black widow spiders. I wonder where she got them?'

One of them must have bitten him because he gave a loud scream and started slapping his face.

'I wonder if she's doing anything afterwards.'

'Making some Assistant District Attorney's night I would expect.'

The woman took one last look and then turned and headed towards the door. We decided to follow at a moderately discrete distance.

Outside, she headed north, seeming oblivious to our presence behind her.

Behind us we heard screams and shouts. She walked quickly but that was mostly a function of her incredibly long, beautiful legs.

At the corner she had to stop because of a parade of trucks barreling towards the entrance to the tunnel to Jersey.

"That was the classiest attempted murder I ever saw."

She turned, her eyes, just a touch wider than we'd expect. We handed her a card. "I'm a private investigator, I believe there may be a need for my services in the future."

'Willie, will you cut it out?'

She took the card, and looked at it. "Phillips? You may be right." Traffic had eased and she moved across the street. We walked along side her, in case she had more to say.

"So Phillips," she said as she reached the sidewalk, "just how do you think you can help me?"

That was a pretty good question. She'd either tried to, or succeeded in, killing a man in front of fifty witnesses - each of whom would be able to identify her from a hundred yards in a dark room.

"You might need someone to find some mitigating circumstances when this incident comes to the attention of the legal system."

"I've got all the mitigating circumstances I need. And I'm not worried about the cops, but I could use someone to escort me into this place," she had stopped in front of a chic bar. "It will keep them," she gestured at the men visible through the window, "from hitting on me."

Down the block a police car was pulling up at the gallery. "I would have expected a more elaborate getaway."

She smiled, "They won't be bothering me."

A siren approached as an ambulance barged through the yuppie traffic.

She opened the door, and we felt we had no option but to follow her in.

She ordered a triple shot of cognac, and drank it as though it was root beer. We settled for a glass of red wine, figuring we might need to keep our wits about us tonight.

She was more than beautiful, there was an animal sensuousness about her that set off the hormones of every straight man in the room and was strong enough to make some of the gays reconsider. Up close the effect was magnified, it was as though we were plugged into an electric outlet. Willie used its confusing power to sit himself firmly in the control seat and, as Joe watched helplessly, he strapped himself in. He ordered a double wild turkey bourbon as a chaser for the wine and then asked, "So, how did you get those little buggers into the vial?"

She smiled, "Very carefully."

We were seated so we could see the street through the window behind her, not that we were paying that much attention, but it was a little hard to ignore the rather frenetic activity as a number of police cars screamed past. "Are you sure you wouldn't feel safer a little farther from the scene of the crime?"

"I told you," she began in a tone that told us that she didn't like to repeat herself, "I'm not worried about the police."

OK, we guessed that was a healthy attitude, but still we got nervous when a couple we remembered from the gallery came in the door looking for a much needed drink. They took a look at her seated at the bar and immediately ducked out. We wondered what the odds were of them finding a cop and telling him about where she was. She told us her name was Matilda and that she wasn't interested in bearing our children.

When Willie had asked her that, she hadn't batted an eyebrow. Her answer came smoothly as though she was used to answering such queries all the time, and, looking at her, we were sure she was asked that a lot.

We suspected something was happening because customers stopped coming through the door, and the pedestrian flow on the sidewalk dropped to almost nothing. She had ordered herself another

drink and sipped it calmly. Willie thought about asking what the man in the gallery had done to her, but decided against it.

Then the door opened and three of our least favorite detectives came through. When the maitre'd intercepted them they pointed to the bar and walked up behind her.

They had done this kind of thing before, we could tell because they timed it well. One second they were asking each other what they were going to have, the next they had guns out and pointed at us. Immediately a mob of uniformed cops, who plainly did not have reservations, came streaming through the door.

Those patrons who were using or holding coke and other fun substances got nervous until it became obvious that we were the center of attention. Even then they were as uptight as a yuppie watching his BMW get towed to the pound.

Willie worked hard at keeping his poker face, and not moving a muscle. She, on the other hand, ignored them, and continued to sip from the snifter.

"Put the glass down slowly, lady. Then put your hands on the bar."

Our hands were already on the bar in plain sight. They weren't going anywhere.

She took another sip then lowered the glass. "If you are police officers, you may look in my bag. In it you will find some documents which may interest you."

The detective who was covering me, an unsavory man by the name of Thomas, snatched the bag, and handed it to another detective who had come in behind them.

We watched as the detective fumbled with the catch and then took out a passport. For the benefit of the others who were watching us, he said, "It's a passport, a fucking diplomatic passport, from someplace called the Maldiv Islands."

The lead cop, with whom we had a history of confrontations, said, "Let me see that," and leaving us with one gun pointed at each of us he turned through its pages rapidly.

He looked up at her for a moment, handed the passport back to the other detective, "Take down the number and all that shit, and call that asshole at the state department. Make sure it's real." He then turned to us, "And you, Mr. Phillips, what, may I ask brings you out of your sewer?"

Willie was about to tell him that he was returning from a date with his wife, when she answered. "I was interviewing Mr. Phillips for a position with the embassy. In fact, I had just decided to offer him the position of chief of security. If he takes the position, he too will be covered by the provisions of international law that relate to diplomatic immunity."

We tried to not look amazed. The detective did not do very well at his own attempt. "You are going to hire this nutcase to work for you?" He paused, "Come to think of it, you two might make a good pair. Last year he pushed a man in a wheelchair under a subway. It was the A train wasn't it?"

It was also self defense, and he left out the part that the man had a shotgun and had just blown away a couple of tourists. Of course he'd been trying to shoot us at the time, and they had provided pretty good cover.

He closed his mouth, and the detective who was standing behind me said to Matilda, "You might be interested to know that the man from the gallery made it to the hospital alive. They're not giving odds yet. It seems like he had a heart attack on top of everything else."

She took the news with the aplomb of a New Yorker reading that his politicians are crooked. She took another sip from her glass. Down at the end of the bar the detective on the phone to the state department was yelling. "You got to be kidding. There's no fucking way we can do that."

The detectives around us put their guns away, and one of them walked down the bar and retrieved the passport.

As he handed it back Thomas said, "I doubt that you care, but if you give this guy diplomatic immunity it will be like giving a kindergarten fifty pounds of plastic explosives to use as modeling clay."

She took the passport and slipped it back into her bag, turned to us and asked, "So are you interested in the position?"

"So long as I can call in an outside exterminator if there's a spider infestation."

She smiled, "No need. I take care of those myself." She removed a card from her bag, and handed it to us. It was embossed with a fancy seal, "Consul General of The Maldive Islands, M. Jenkins," and a phone number. "Call me tomorrow morning after ten."

With that she stood and walked out of the bar. It took all the other's strength to keep Willie from dashing after her. The cops had all

left and the room was starting to buzz as the patrons compared notes so as to get the story ready for inclusion in their cocktail party routines.

The bartender brought us another drink, "On the house," then he hovered around hoping we would fill him in on what had just happened. Since the man was paying for the drink, we told him that it had all been a misunderstanding. That the lady was an old friend who was in town looking after her ailing mother, and that the cops had suspected her of some crime that had turned out not to have been a crime after all. He didn't believe it, and brought us a check which included her drinks. We thought about telling him that she'd been responsible for her own tab, but let the matter drop.

Chapter 9

We would have gone home, but the mysterious spider lady had sent our hormones into triple overtime. Besides Frank and Willie thought that a night's cruising might get Paul's mind off Diane. It didn't. He sat at the bar and wrote poems about impossible love while getting drunk on self pity as much as on the booze. We got home about two. The others were lost in a variety of thoughts, some drunken, some lustful, and were not paying much attention to what he was doing. As a result none caught on when Paul called Diane.

She answered the phone with a sleep slurred voice.

"Diane, It's me Paul."

"Who?"

"Paul, you know Phillips."

She recognized the voice, and our own slur. "I thought you said you didn't ever use your first name? Have you been drinking?"

"Yes, but that's not why I called."

"Why did you call?"

"To tell you that you were right."

"Right, about what? Your drinking?"

"Maybe that too, but about my secrets. Remember how you noticed I used the word, 'we'?"

"Yes."

"Well you were real close to figuring it out. It's a secret we don't tell anyone, and I wouldn't be telling it now except they aren't paying attention and I'm pretty drunk."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I am Paul, I'm the one you were with on the boat most of the time."

"Listen Paul, or Phillips, or whatever, why don't you go to bed, and call me tomorrow?"

"No, wait a minute. This is important. Remember how you said that I was hard to figure out. The tough guy - poet, remember, well that's because the tough guy is Frank. He's the one who drove most of the time."

She didn't reply, but she didn't hang up either. "You don't know how much I wanted to tell you about it on the boat, but the others wouldn't let me. In fact, they'll have a shit-fit if they find out I called you."

"Paul, this is amazing," She paused, clearly not sure what to say next.

"Listen. One reason I called you is Frank and Willie are getting involved in something that I don't like the looks of. Frank's in charge when we're working, at least most of the time, and I don't know when I'll be able to call you again. But I wanted to say that I really liked you and had a good time with you."

"Well I should hope so." There was a long Pause. "Where are you now?"

"At home."

"Give me the address, put on a pot of coffee and start drinking it. I want to talk more about what you've told me."

Paul hung up and followed her instructions. He was sure he wouldn't get to sit in the driver's seat for a long time after they found out, but this was important. He was tired of playing second fiddle. He was tired of the way things were. He didn't want to give up on Diane. He passed the time by writing poems. They usually didn't bother him while he was writing.

"You look like hell." She didn't look so good either. She looked like she needed coffee more than we did.

"Well I was pretty drunk, and while I was waiting I began to get scared. The others are not going to let me into what we call the driver's seat for a long time after this."

"Where are they now?"

"Asleep I guess. But Joe's due to get up in a couple of hours and he'll wake the others when he finds out."

"How many are there?" She was operating in pure shrink mode. Even the kiss she'd given him when she got here had been perfunctory.

"Five."

"You said something about a couple of them doing something that you don't want them to do?"

"They met someone, a woman. They're going to see about working for her, but they want other things. I guess I wouldn't mind except she's dangerous. We saw her pour a vial of spiders on some guy earlier."

"I heard about that on the radio on the way in. He's dead. You were there?"

"Yeah it was quite a show. She poured black widow spiders on this guy."

She made a face. Paul guessed she was not a spider fan. "And they like her?"

"Yeah. They think she's their type. They aren't very good with women. I'm not much good at karate and can't hit the side of a barn when I shoot. That's their job, women are mine."

'What's going on?' It was Frank.

"Oh shit they're awake. So you think I've got to stop drinking completely?"

'Can't a guy have some privacy?'

'Not when we share the same brain, what's she doing here?'

She switched easily. "Yes, that's the only way for most people."

'What's she doing here?' Frank was not happy about the situation. He was using the voice he used to get people to talk when they didn't want to.

'I got drunk and called her.'

'It's four in the morning.' Elaine joined the party, 'What's going on?'

'Lover boy called the shrink, she's here telling him that he's got to stop drinking.'

Willie chimed in. 'We're going to need sleep if we're going to look good for the broad tomorrow. Get rid of her.'

Paul didn't want to, but realized that he might get away with the disclosure if she left soon. "So you said you were going to give me a list of places."

"Just call intergroup it's listed under A.A. in the phone book, they'll hook you up." She was good at taking hints. A kiss on the cheek and she was gone.

Detective Thomas flipped through the file. This could very well be the one he'd been waiting for he thought. He was proud of never having taken a bribe or skimmed any of the other pies that had occasionally presented themselves to him. When he'd joined the force it had been idealism that kept him straight. Later, when he was a little older and more jaded, if not wiser, he watched some of his coworkers succumb to the temptations. Most of the time it was little stuff. Most of the time they got away with it. But when a good guy named Ron had gotten bounced for a twenty dollar "tip", he'd decided to bide his time. Sooner or later the right situation would probably come along. It required a few circumstances, cash - mega cash, preferably no witnesses or, at the very most, one person - someone who could be trusted never to

talk. That meant he couldn't be a lowlife who would drop the dime to get out of a jaywalking ticket. Also, he wanted the money to be free and clear. He didn't want anyone behind him wanting it back. A fatal car crash involving coke dealers on the way to a buy had been his best hope for a while, but as retirement began to creep up on him he was willing to consider other options.

Blackmail wasn't the perfect swamp to go hunting in for his potential nest, but, if he kept an eye out for the alligators he thought he could make it work just fine. The victims would be happy enough to know the leach was off their veins. The leach would best case be dead or else somewhere secure for an extended period, and nobody else would be the wiser. This case fit the bill, and then some. There were tons of money lying around somewhere, and no complaining witnesses. When the Chief of Detectives had told him that they weren't so interested in a conviction as they were in stopping the racket, he knew he had something of a green light. He also realized that he was going to have trouble doing it alone.

He thought of all his friends on the force, but none of them had the balls and the brains for the job. It wouldn't do any good to do the job halfway. Not when the woman was as dangerous as she was.

It was either very late or just before early, he couldn't decide, when he thought of Phillips. He didn't like the guy. Phillips played fast and loose with the law and sometimes took him for a sucker, but he was smart and got results. And he wasn't so straight he'd object to a finder's fee. As a bonus, if the case got put away someplace dark he might rise a rank in grade. The more he read the better he thought the potential to win the lottery here as any case he'd seen lately.

He wouldn't have thought of Phillips for the job except that he'd run into him the night before having drinks with the principle in this case. There was no mention of him in the file and he had to think he was a new player. And if there was one thing he could be sure of, Phillips wasn't going to play it straight. The information in the file could be valuable to a man like Phillips, who was willing to bend any way necessary to pick money off the ground or off a tree.

He closed the folder and decided he'd wait until the honorable hour of six before barging in on Phillips. It gave him time to put his feet up and imagine he was sitting on the aft deck of his fishing boat as he trolled the Gulfstream in search of the perfect Marlin.

The tabloids had gone wild with the story. Paul was glad for the diversion, they weren't asking about what had really happened last night. The victim, who they reported had died, "after several hours of agonizing pain," had been a senior partner in a very old and very staid brokerage house on Wall Street. They further reported that his beautiful blonde assailant had been captured, but that the police had released her for reasons they would not divulge. They quoted several patrons of the bar who had described us as a "mysterious hulking associate."

We were reading the Post's version which stopped just short of having her depart in a UFO that landed in Washington Square Park when the phone rang. It was our friend detective Thomas. He had been up all night from the sound of him, and it added to his sunny disposition. "Stay there, I'll be by in ten minutes."

It was enough for us to decide to finally get around to returning the library books that had been due in 1978, but reason prevailed when we realized that for once we were actually pretty close to 100% clean on this one. That made for a nice change, and he wasn't as bad as your average rabid librarian. At least when he didn't have anything on you.

He had to use the soft sell. Phillips didn't take suggestions let alone orders. He'd probably slugged the doctor who slapped his butt when he was born. He could go either way on this one, but Thomas reasoned, he was likely to go the way that offered the biggest pile of cash in his pocket. He'd decided not to ask for any cash up front. He didn't want Phillips to have even a milligram of anything on him before he had a ton of shit he could use back.

Give the man some very useful background, promise further assistance, and step back and wait for things to happen. That sounded about right. Besides, he wasn't sure he wanted to go up against a woman who livened up a dull evening by dumping killer spiders over you. He hadn't lived this long by taking chances when he didn't have to.

He scowled as he came into the apartment. "How the hell do you afford this place? I couldn't afford a closet in this building."

We didn't explain that we'd been able to negotiate a good deal with the landlord because he felt he owed us for saving his life, and rescuing his wife and daughter from the clutches of some moderately nasty folk. This was after he'd made a series of bad mistakes when he tried to evict an apartment full of drug dealers from another building he owned in a less prestigious part of town. We simply shrugged.

He shrugged and got down to business, "About last night. We got witnesses that put you in that Gallery. We got witnesses who say you followed her out of the place."

"So?"

"Do you know who she is?"

"A woman named Matilda," We pulled the card out of our wallet, "Jenkins. She's got a piece of paper that makes you guys go away like it was a magic wand. Also, she's the kind who can carry a grudge along with the best of them."

"You can say that. The cops at the hospital said the guy screamed for four hours before he died. In between screams he told them a story. They'd been lovers about a year ago, that she'd bled him pretty good, and then apparently in an attempt to scare her he told her he had AIDS."

"Did he?"

"Him? No. He told the guys last night that it was as though she'd put a spell on him, that he'd turned into a robot. You know, 'you want a million dollars to go shopping? Sure, here you are.'"

"So?"

"It turns out that she took a trip to the Maldiv Islands a couple years ago, as a tourist, and came back as the Consul General. It seems that she doesn't spent too much time on governmental work, and we think she's got a whole string of men strung up by the balls. We've had a couple of complaints about her, one came from a wife whose husband had committed suicide after making their ten million dollar nest egg disappear. When the detectives on the case started investigating, they found that she was diplomatic personnel, and dropped it. Then a couple of months ago a guy shows up at police headquarters and goes to the commissioner because he's got a letter of introduction from some Senator. He tells the same story, but he gives us juicy details. He says she gets him to do wild things, that she makes video tapes, and then asks him for very large presents like stock options."

We wondered why he was telling us this. He certainly wasn't leaning on us and we weren't used to that.

"So the commissioner calls around and gets the detective who was working on the first case. He ends up having to tell the man he should have kept his pants on. But he keeps the file open."

"She sounds more and more like my kind of woman, why are you telling me all this?"

"Well, this thing last night brought a lot of pressure down on me, and I was sitting in the precinct last night thinking about what could be done about it."

"And you thought you'd appeal to my sense of civic duty and have me check her out? Or should I simply ask her to stop?"

"I figured I'd leave it up to you. I also figured that if she wasn't bullshitting about getting you diplomatic immunity of your very own, you might have some elbow room."

"So you actually want me to go to work for her?"

"Yeah. There are a lot of things we could forget."

'Speculations on your part that are based on evidence that doesn't exist. What does this guy want?'

"I don't get it. So she's working a sweet blackmail scam. This is the big apple; the home of a hundred mad dog killers, what makes this so important?"

"It's the quality of her victims. You know how the system works. A junkie dies, we hardly blink. These guys they got names that go back to the Mayflower some of them, and they get caught in a game of three card monte and we start a task force."

"And you think that I can take care of it for you?"

"Sometimes you got to fight shit with shit. You might even find that it pays well."

"I'll remember that." But there was a bell ringing somewhere in the background - rich man whose fortune decides to take a walk.

"I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll call her and see what's going on. She offers me a job that gives me a magic piece of paper that can make you disappear, I'll take it. After that, I'll think about volunteering to show little kids how to build shaped charges with plastique."

"Hey I didn't know who she was when I said that."

"It seemed to be as good a recommendation as she could have wanted."

Chapter 10

We thought about asking him if we could see the file, because it would have been nice to know if the daddy of our favorite spoiled brat was listed as one of Matilda's victims, but the time wasn't right. And, knowing the cops, they probably were only onto a small piece of the picture. Still, knowing she had been taking people for ten million a pop made for some interesting employment opportunities. It also didn't have a cop offering to do what he could to help us. There probably wasn't much, but it was a card to keep up our sleeve.

Paul and Elaine tried to talk Willie and Frank out of calling her, but they were love-struck and our fingers went to the phone.

"Are you really looking for work," she asked?

"You bet."

"The detective last night didn't seem to think much of you."

"I like to view that as a recommendation."

"OK," She paused for a moment. When she spoke again her voice was as smooth as a milkshake, and as deep as one that had been made with double extra chocolate, "You want the job, you have to pass a little test."

"Like what?"

"There's a man, Roger McMillian, works down on Wall street. He owes me some money. I want you to go and pick it up for me."

"And?"

"Bring it to me - here at the Embassy."

"Do I need to know how much he owes?"

"No, he knows."

"Cash? Or will you accept a check?"

"Anyway you can get it, I prefer bearer bonds."

This lady is no amateur, we thought.

"Is my finding him part of the test or do you want to tell me where I'm likely to find him?"

"The test is getting in to see him and getting the money. His office is at 55 Wall."

After we hung up, we took our one really good suit out of the closet and grabbed a cab down to Wall street.

Fifty-five Wall isn't an office building, it's a fortress. There were discretely armed security guards all over the lobby, metal detectors, and a system of visitor elevators that shunted visitors off to secure waiting rooms where staff can come to sign you in. One look at the set-up told

us that it wasn't going to be a case of smiling the perfect smile at a secretary and breezing into his office, but then we hadn't expected a test from the spider lady to be easy.

Getting him when he came out wouldn't be easy either because there was a garage in the basement and we suspected he took a private elevator directly to his limo. The suit was almost too good for the part, but maybe we could make it work. From our hip pocket we pulled a leather case. Inside nestled a genuine NYPD detective's badge. We approached the desk and flashed the badge. The security guard had us show it again, and copied down the number. He asked for photo Id, and again we reached into our bag of tricks and provided him with a dog-eared card. These two items had cost a fair amount of money, and had to be used with caution, but they could sure open doors when all else failed.

When I told him I wanted to see Roger McMillian he frowned, "He sent down word that there were to be no visitors today."

"Why do you think he did that?"

He shrugged, after all, he only worked here. We went on, "I'm working on it. You want to call, that's OK."

He picked up the phone, "Tell him it's concerning the Selcheck case. He'll know what I mean."

After a couple of minutes he got approval to go up, and was met at the elevator by an earnest young man wearing a suit that was a couple of cuts better than his. "I'm afraid Mr. McMillian is busy right now. Can I help you?"

"No."

"Perhaps you can tell me what this is about?"

"No."

"Well I'll have to tell him something."

"Tell him it is urgent, that it shouldn't take very long, and that it is very confidential."

The earnest young man nodded gravely and asked us to wait while he phoned. The office was a swell joint. The rugs on the floors were burgundy red, and complemented the walls which were made of oiled wood panels. "He's free now, it turns out." The man led him down a hall, through an outer office where four attractive secretarial types were clicking away on their computers.

The man's office had a view that put lower Manhattan at his fingertips. The room was large and filled with a complement of what looked to be expensive pieces of art. Mr. McMillian came from around

the desk showing not a bit of the uncertainty that we would have expected. He dismissed the minion with a flick of his hand. He pointed to a comfortable looking chair and settled into its mate. They faced each other over a low marble coffee table.

"So what can I do for you detective?"

We needed to feel him out a little, before deciding which direction we wanted to take this. Might as well let him go on believing we were a real cop for a while. "I believe you know a woman named Matilda Jenkins." His eyes changed as I said her name. He stood up abruptly. "She says you owe her some money. I'm willing to bet she's got you in the middle of a sweet blackmail scheme."

He was pale, but he was also furious. "Did she send you? I told her that I was through paying."

'That guy is at the end of his rope,' said Elaine.

'But he's still got some fight left in him,' Frank added.

'What are you two talking about,' asked Joe?

'Look, Joe, there are a lot of ways for us to play this game. I don't think the one we want is to become her little lackey.'

'I'm glad to hear that, I was starting to get worried. I mean I'm glad that Willie has the chance to find a girl who's suitable, but'

'You mean find a girl you don't have to worry that he'll end up leaving in plastic bags in a landfill somewhere,' Frank said.

'Hey I never did that.'

'You were planning to. Remember I was there too. So what about this guy?'

'I was thinking that maybe if we could get him on our side we could use him.'

'How?'

'More will be revealed later, now let me change the angle a little. Let's see what happens.'

"I would guess she does not see it that way, sir. She apparently feels that she has something on you and that she can bleed you some more, that, of course remains to be seen." Frank kept it low key, hinting there was an option somewhere.

"Wait a minute, who are you working for?"

"At the moment I'm an independent operator."

"But you're a cop."

"Not exactly. As I said, at the moment I'm not working for anybody. In fact, you might call this a mutual employment interview."

His eyes came back into focus a little. "Why are you here?"

"To see how you want to play it."

"I don't understand."

'Make it simple for him.' "As I understand it you presently have two options. You can pay her, or you can not pay her and see what happens. She sent me here to be one of those things that happens when you don't pay."

"You're here to try to get me to give you some money to take to her?"

We nodded. "If that's the way you want to play it. But you said that you're through paying." We paused for a moment then continued, "I can convey that message to her if you wish." We made no motion to stand.

He stood behind the chair he'd occupied briefly, and raised his hand, "No, give me a moment please."

He turned so he was looking out the window. "It's funny. I've got a situation with two choices. You could say of each of them 'there is no other choice'. She says she wants money, but I know better, she wants to crush me. She wants to drive me to the brink of suicide, and then stand there as I go off the ledge."

He turned back, "I don't know why I'm telling you this."

"Because you have to tell somebody. And because you suspect that my entry into the game may constitute a change."

"A change, how?" It wasn't hope that filled his eyes, but we could tell he was ready to grasp at any straw that floated near.

"I don't know yet," but we were working on some angles as fast as we could. 'How about a good old fashioned con?'

There would be foreign banks, and that complicated things, but we had a glimmer of an idea. "What if you offered her information instead of cash?"

"Information? What kind of information?"

"Say you told me to tell her that you had nothing available right now because every penny is tied up in something that is really going to move. It could be a stock, a commodity, anything. But it would be specifically selected information."

"Go on."

The idea was getting a little clearer. "How would you like to turn the tables on her and get back every penny you've given her?"

He moved around the chair and sat down again, "I've dreamed of it, but, you see, she's got something."

"Let's not be afraid yet. That's what got you into this position."

The doubt left his eyes, and he leaned forward. We went on, "You can probably help figure out the details better than I can. Think back over the ten greatest scams in the past twenty years. I'm sure you've seen some beauties."

He furrowed his brow. "But."

We held up our hand. "No buts, not yet, two minutes ago you were talking about going out the window and I don't think you're too far from seriously considering that option. Maybe it's a long shot, but keep an open mind for a minute."

He nodded.

"Say I told her you were working on something that was going to get you a five fold return on your money. Tell her maybe we could make you let her in on it. Entice her that there's a chance you'll end up in jail, but at least you'll have some money."

"She'd like to see me in jail, she said so once."

"OK. So you work a setup a little like three card monte except you use corporations instead of cards." What we had in mind was the classic handkerchief switch, but we didn't expect him to know what that was.

We spent the next hour brainstorming, and learned why he'd risen to his position of power. He was very good, too bad he had a weakness at the zipper.

Chapter 11

"So what did you bring me?" Her outfit didn't expose nearly as much flesh as the one she'd been wearing the night before, but she was still stunning. She was wearing a well-cut business suit. It gave her a certain look of graceful power, sort of like a battleship carving a path through the sea.

"I don't know what you've got on him, but he was putty in my hands. The trouble is he's broke, you must have hit him pretty good already." She didn't say anything.

"After he finished crying, he told me that he was putting his reputation on the table, and that he had a scheme that was going to make a lot of money if you'd only wait a bit." We paused, and reminded ourselves never to play poker with her. She sat there like a statue.

There was nothing to do but go on. "Well, I started thinking, and maybe this isn't the way you want to play it, but if you wait a bit he'll be able to pay, or if you want, maybe we can get in on some of the action."

"Tell me about it."

"OK, I'm not all that good with this kind of stuff, but I made him explain it to me, because I had the feeling you might be interested." We took some notes out of our pocket, "I wrote some of it down, maybe you can understand it better than me."

With that we launched into the sucker's side of the con. There was a pile of money just sitting somewhere. Except it wasn't cash it was the drilling rights to some place in what used to be Russia. We could get our hands on it if we could post some cash. In the street con it was supposed to show you were honest, in this case we would call it equity or working capital. It had a host of good players, Japanese and Belgian Banks, defaulted real estate, and a couple of preplanned hostile takeovers that would spread some paper on the defaulted real estate. "He's got the name and the wood paneled office, and he managed to take out a loan to get it off the ground. His problem is that it's going to have to start off small, because his funds are limited." We paused, "If you'd left him a little more to play with he might be able to really make some good money."

She was interested, but very cautious. We threw in the clincher, "He wants to keep it low profile, just a few million, because he says that

if it gets too big he'll end up in jail. He wants to enjoy the money not spend a few years locked in a cell with some guy who decides to teach him a whole new view of his sexual orientation." A quick pause, "By the way, what do you have on him anyway? He's more eager to please you than a pack of puppies."

She smiled at that. "Let's just say he developed some unusual tastes and I'm capitalizing on them."

She stood and came out from behind the desk that had the seal of the Maldave Islands carved in its front. She was the first woman who had actually stood eye to eye with us. It was easy to see why men would do anything for her, and the clear coldness in her eyes explained why they would keep on giving. We wondered if maybe we weren't juggling rattlesnakes.

"I don't like it. I like cash, not promises."

'Oh oh, there it goes.'

'Give it a minute.'

"Suit your self, me, I'm going to put my rainy day fund into it. I've got some cash under my mattress that I can't put in a bank without a few questions coming up. This will not only dry clean it, but it will make me enough to quit the business."

"You're going to invest in it?" The tone of her voice told us she didn't like the idea that an underling was playing in the same arena as her.

"Yeah, I've seen a lot of cons, and this is about the sweetest I've ever seen. The idea of sticking it to a Japanese bank kind of appeals to me too."

"I thought you were going to come work for me?"

"The money can work for itself, besides I'm not sure I passed your test."

She moved closer. Her intense eyes seemed to be trying to read the writing on the inside of my skull. Then she wrapped her arms around me, and locked her lips on mine. It was like kissing a piece of heavy earth-moving machinery. But nicer. She had the power in her to move mountains, but there was the feeling of tons of cold steel just behind her hungry lips. We let Willie out, he deserved a bonus, and he was the one least likely to get ground up into gravel.

After the preliminaries, she revealed a fondness for nude full contact karate, and we moved to her private gym which was set up in the basement of the townhouse. She was continuing the test. If we failed we'd end up in a dumpster. She was good, and didn't seem to mind the

occasional scissor kick to the stomach. She avoided strikes to vital areas, which led us to believe that she might not be feigning her attraction to us. After five minutes, which is a long time in full contact karate, we got her into a submission hold, except it was clear that she was going to force us to break her arm and dislocate her shoulder before she would utter the release command.

It turned into a battle of wills that was going to last all day, until we told her the joke about the three nuns and the orthodox rabbi.

She laughed, the ice was broken, and we ended up doing what we had hoped to end up doing. Willie was in heaven. She was a woman who wasn't afraid to take a punch, who knew enough tricks to keep things interesting, and who had a body most men would gladly give vital pieces of flesh to touch.

Chapter 12

The next day we reported to work at 55 Wall Street as Roger McMillian's new personal assistant. This ruffled the earnest young assistant's superbly tailored suit a bit, but we figured he would get over it. Maybe he would see it as a learning experience.

Roger had spent half the night working on the scheme, and said, "it's so beautiful, they'd make it illegal if it wasn't already." There were three stages to the plan, the first two would make money the way flees flocked to a shaggy dog. And the third, the third gave Roger's eyes a fire that probably hadn't burned since she'd shown him the videotape and turned him into a whimpering beaten puppy.

There was a lot to learn, fortunately Elaine was good with computers, and she was able to get a system in place that could keep track of the five dozen balls we had in the air.

In two days we had a fifty page prospectus printed up complete with photos and descriptions of the bogus real estate packages. Four phone calls had gotten very pretty stock certificates printed up for a half dozen corporations. Roger spent a lot of time on the phone to people in Belgium and Japan. He suffered some attacks of conscience, "I've invested fifteen years of integrity into these business relationships, and now I'm involving them in a major swindle."

"If it works the way it's supposed to, they won't even get touched. Remember, the idea is to suck her dry."

He nodded, brightened by the prospect, and went back to the phone. We didn't tell him that if she didn't bite we were perfectly willing to sacrifice his reputation to the cause of making ourselves rich, but that could wait for the appropriate moment.

Coincidences started happening. Our friend Detective Thomas started running into us so often we had the feeling that he was keeping an eye on us. Since we don't believe in coincidences any more than we believe that judges are honest, we paid more attention to the detective than we ordinarily would have. He was looking for a payoff, we could smell it. He also wanted to know what was going on. We didn't tell him, but we whetted his appetite by asking what he wanted to do when he retired. One time his mask slipped a little and he said, "Fishing. I want to buy a boat big enough for me, a hundred cases of beer, and maybe a blonde. Then I want to put a message on my machine that says, 'If it can't wait, tough.'"

We took some pains not to piss him off too much, you never knew when a tame detective might come in handy.

In the evenings Roger stayed in the office fitting the ten thousand little pieces into place, and we went up to the embassy to our second job. The first half hour was a careful recounting of just how deep Roger was getting himself in. He was, by our count, past the 200 counts of fraud plateau. She ate that up, but the entrée was our showing her the charts Elaine had generated on the computer that showed how the money was going to be rolling in by the truckload. From what Thomas had told us we guessed that she had more than enough already socked away, but for folks like her, the concept of enough was pretty vague. We played her like a harp, one time telling her that if she had enough to invest she would end up being able to buy all Donald Trump's outstanding notes, call them all at once, and then leave him standing on Fifth Avenue with a shopping bag, and carfare to the men's shelter.

The plan was to buy options on everything from defaulted shopping malls to Florida swamps with supposedly great untapped gas deposits underneath them. These options would be sold back and forth from one of our companies to another, each time pushing the value up. In two weeks we would leave for an around the world trip to get foreign banks to buy a piece of America while it was still available at a great discount. There would be three waves of junk bonds, and then we'd send the money to come nice quiet out of the way places and hand over the stock for the companies which would by then be quite worthless. The idea was for her not to know about the last step, and for her greed to let her get herself in over her head. It was going to be like landing a big fish on flimsy fishing line, but the slicker we got the better we felt about it.

At first she had only wanted a small piece of the pie, but at the end of the first week, as we lay panting slightly on the mats of the gym, she'd said, "Want I want is to be able to fill this room with gold coins."

"But where would we make love," we asked?

"When I have that much, I'll have power and that's better than sex."

We believed her. We also knew we had her hooked.

Willie was uncomfortable with that, not that he had any scruples, but he didn't want to put a premature end on what he considered to be the match of the century.

Something had happened, or, was happening, on the case. Detective Thomas got a report that Phillips, the woman and a prominent Wall Street guy had all flown to Europe together. First class. On the Concorde. Phillips wasn't going to Europe because he couldn't get a good suit here, he was going there because that's where the money was.

Since her money was in European banks it made sense for her to accompany us on the first leg of our journey. When she saw the blank stock certificates in our hotel room her eyes lit up. There were going to be a thousand shares issued in the parent company, Roger and we were each getting fifty, and at that moment she decided she wanted five hundred and one of the rest.

Roger expressed surprise, "Even with an insider discount, you're talking a lot of money. We'll have to show a lot of cash on the books to get away with that."

We'd figured that she'd probably hit twenty men for between ten and twenty million each. So we were not surprised when she pulled out documents showing deposits of three hundred million in a variety of hidey holes.

The stock certificates had cost us five dollars a piece for printing, and we made a production of signing five hundred and one of them over to her.

Because she was a hidden partner she did not accompany us to the banker's offices, and so was unaware that Roger had basically passed the time of day with them while we stole as much of their stationary as we could get my hands on. She also was not present when we decided to issue ourselves preferred stock as a bonus.

Elaine cooked the books with a blow torch and every night we showed the Norse goddess letters of agreement from the banks, who, we led her to believe, were acting as her partners. She also had the computer send a stream of faxes to a machine we had hooked up to the other phone.

In the evenings we held meetings to make her feel like she was a part of the plot.

"The meeting will come to order."

"Why do we have to go through all of this Roger? Just do it." She feigned boredom at these meetings, but if you looked closely at her eyes they blazed like sun striking gold statues.

"I want to keep things as close to legal as possible. You might not think that important, but I do."

"Just humor him, he's going to make you richer than rich."
Frank reached out and stroked her leg under the table, and was gratified to see a shift in the warmth in her eyes.

"Ok, but make it fast, will you?"

"Surely. There is a motion to sell 50% of our stake in Grand enterprises to Summor Corporation. For this Summor is willing give us 50,000 shares of preferred stock, and 20 million in bearer bonds, which will mature in one year. Further, they want an option to purchase the remaining 50% at the same price. They are willing to give us an additional 5,000 shares of stock, and 2 million in bonds for the option." He paused, "Any questions?"

There were none. "Very well. In the absence of any questions the chair considers the motion passed."

He signed a legal looking document and placed it in a red leather folder. "Just one more. We are now acting as the board of Summor Corporation." He pulled out some papers from a different folder, this one was blue. "Summor corporation has been offered 20 thousand shares of Diverse Trusts, and bonds with a face value of sixty-five million for our property known as Grand Enterprises. We have, as you know just acquired this property for less than this and stand to make an immediate and quick profit from this sale. I further move that we take the equity offered by this deal and with it issue new bonds which will allow us to bid for the purchase of a set of properties which are being packaged by a holding company known as Rommus Properties. I believe that we will, in turn, be able to make a favorable deal with the same company which has just purchased this last package from us. If there are no questions I will assume the board's vote of confidence."

He signed some more papers. "Tomorrow morning at breakfast we'll make another fifty million." He stood and headed towards the door, "If you will excuse me - I have some calls to make."

We were willing to excuse him. Frank and Willie had to find a way to keep her from thinking too hard about what was going on. She couldn't be allowed to suspect that the whole project was being fueled by her funds.

The phantom tanker fleet was purchased by issuing more bonds, we did not use the word junk, that were exchanged for her stock certificates. She didn't object, because she made, on paper, two

hundred million on the deal, and the bonds had cost ten dollars a piece to print. They were pretty enough to use as placemats.

Once Elaine had gotten a handle on how the computers in European banks worked, she went looking for deposits that Matilda hadn't revealed to us and found that she has another twenty million in a holding company that basically controlled some Swiss bank accounts.

The next day an opportunity came along to purchase a fiber optic cable network in Georgia, but it required an infusion of fresh funds. "I'd hate to let it go, but we've got everything committed until we can get the Japanese Banks to buy us out," Roger said.

She smiled, and wondered if a certain holding company could pledge its assets, in the name of the common good.

Roger thought it might do very well, and two faxes later we gave her some stock certificates in yet another new corporation.

"This is all very well and good," Roger said as we took a taxi to the airport, "but what's going to happen when she finds out what we've been up to?"

"I suspect she'll be a mite pissed off."

"But what about the, you know, the tapes."

"You might offer to buy them for a hundred bucks. By then she'll need it. Of course you'd probably want her chained down when you made the offer. But there's another possibility. As you know I'm the head of security for the Maldivian Embassy, and under my orders I've had a crew in there replacing the security system and checking for bugs while we've been playing let's make a deal over here."

"Did they find them?"

"They said they found a lot of stuff, but, of course, I told them not to look at any of it. My hunch is that they probably found them, but we won't know for sure until we get back."

This news seemed to relieve him, but he wasn't going to be happy until he tossed the tape on a bonfire.

Matilda, at our suggestion went off to an exclusive little place in the Swiss alps to await the avalanche of money that would be coming from Japan.

Chapter 13

We'd never been to Japan, and discovered that it was not constructed with people our size in mind. We were tempted to take the scam one level further, and get the Japanese to buy her worthless holdings, and transfer the funds to our special out of the way places. It would double our already considerable profits.

Roger cautioned against it. "We got what we came for." His fortune was restored, and as per our agreement we were holding a very big bag that contained the rest. We realized that we had more than all of us could ever spend, and that it was enough. We listened to him talk about how good it felt to be free of her as lithe young women walked on our backs.

Paul wrote a poem about watching the golden sun fall into the sea seven miles below us, as we ate something not very memorable.

The pilot had taken his time eating his dinner. It was a long flight across the Pacific, and chewing the not quite sumptuous dinner broke the monotony. If anyone had a right to gripe about the decline in quality of airline food, he thought, it was the crews. He took a routine look at the instruments, and wondered if he was coming down with a cold.

He looked out the window to his left and saw that the giant red winged bats were about to attack. He was ready for them, he thought. Instinctively he disengaged the auto-pilot, and, with a strength bred of terror, simultaneously pushed on and turned the control yoke in front of him.

The 747 tilted forward and tipped on its right wing as he began the evasive maneuvers he knew were needed to save all their lives.

Beside him the co-pilot was rudely awakened from his near nap, and watched as the horizon disappeared and the sea filled the view through the windshield. He looked across the controls to his partner, who was shrieking, "Bat Attack from starboard," into his microphone. The pilot had flown a lot of miles, and knew when to pull back on the yoke so as to avoid the spin that would send them plummeting into the sea. A 747 does not handle like the plane he'd used when he had experimented with aero-acrobatics, but his instincts kept us from falling from the sky for the moment.

In the back a flight attendant who had managed to hang on through the first maneuver, lost it as the plane pulled out of the dive and went to three Gs. She fell across our lap, and instinctively we put out an arm to hold her as the plane tilted ninety degrees to the left and seemed to fall another ten thousand feet.

The copilot, watched his uneaten meal sail across the cockpit, and reached out to re engage the autopilot. Then he slammed the senior officer in the face with the heavy metal clipboard they used for the preflight checks. The pilot took his hands off the yoke and brought his hands to his face. "They got me," he yelled. The copilot rammed his fist into the man's stomach. The autopilot was valiantly trying to bring the plane back to a semblance of level flight, but the sea looked awfully close to him, so he left off his assault and pulled back on the yoke. The plane shuddered as though it was sliding on a washboard, a klaxon went off, and a computerized voice said, "Approaching load limit. Ease your controls."

He ignored it until he could see some sky through the cockpit windows. What was wrong with the captain, he wondered, as he again turned his attention to him?

The clipboard had made a nasty gash across the forehead and bridge of the captain's nose. He sat there staring at his bloody hand.

The flight engineer who had been smart enough to remain strapped into his seat came forward. "He went crazy or something, can you watch him until I get us straightened out?"

The man nodded, and stood over the pilot while the copilot determined that they were indeed returning to course and altitude, and that there were no major warning lights flashing.

The flight attendant did not seem upset that our hand was firmly fixed on her right breast even though the plane had stopped trying to jump out of the sky. After a moment she stood, straightened her clothes and moved off in the direction of the cockpit ignoring the cries from the passengers behind us.

Although the airline tried to keep it quiet, it was revealed that the food on the flight deck had been laced with a powerful hallucinogenic drug, and that it was a miracle that only the Captain had eaten the tainted food. There was wild speculation as to which terrorist group had been the first to launch a pharmacological attack on a civilian target, but we had another hunch. There was an artistry to it that made us suspect it's author to be the same person who had allowed the press to invent the term "Death by Black Widow."

We wondered if she had gotten wind of our double cross, or had she decided that we were dispensable? Either way, it made us cautious as we emerged from the terminal at Kennedy.

The cab driver did not indicate that he thought it unusual that we thoroughly searched his cab for cobras and bombs before getting in.

Chapter 14

The doorman had three large cardboard boxes in his little room off the lobby.

The boxes appeared to be sealed, and we knew he was much too scared of us to have considered peeking inside. Most people tip the doorman at Christmas. We'd learned it was even better to tell him that his good service had earned him the right to be able to walk for another year.

As we got off the elevator, we went onto full alert. There was someone crouching at the door to our apartment, a woman, not big enough to be Matilda. Roger was babbling nonsensically as he struggled with one of the cartons. We had our arms full with the other two and debated dropping them.

The person must have heard us, she stood up and turned, it wasn't a wandering tupperware lady, it was Diane. 'You sure can pick them Paul.'

She was holding a sheet of paper in her hand. "I was just leaving you a note. You didn't return my calls, I was worried."

"I've been away"

It didn't seem like a good idea to stand in the hall blathering, so we unlocked the door, did our thing with the security system and were almost bowled over by Roger as he excitedly pushed his way in.

"Where have you been?"

"Here and there." Roger ripped the tape off a box and started pawing through it. He tossed tapes this way and that, some clattering as they fell onto the floor.

We wanted to take a look inside the box too, but Diane had to be dealt with first. "What do you want?"

'Jesus Frank, can't you at least be human?'

"Who are you? Frank, I'll bet."

"You got it. Paul's not here right now, if you leave your number I'll have him get back to you."

Roger was into the second box now. "Here it is. My god, you don't know how good this feels." He started banging it against the wall, the plastic making loud noises, but none that included cracking sounds. He stopped. "Maybe I'd better check and make sure it's the right one. She's sneaky enough to have.." He broke off and walked across the living room to the VCR.

Before we thought to do anything he had the system on and a life size Matilda appeared on the projection TV on the far wall. She sure was beautiful. Beyond beautiful, there was something feral about the way she moved. The leather jumpsuit that seemed to have been sprayed on added to the image. A naked Roger entered the picture and began to lick her boots. The clothed Roger stood to the side of the screen, his mouth was open. If we'd been closer we wouldn't have been surprised if he was drooling a little.

Diane had turned and was watching too. This would give her a few more things to ask questions about. On the screen Matilda took a hold of his collar and led him towards a set of chains and shackles that were hanging on the wall behind her. He had an expression usually seen on the face of a little kid at the circus.

We moved across the room and hit the master power switch and the screen went dark. Bending down we ejected the tape, and handed it to Roger. He stood looking down at it for a minute. "I can't believe that was me."

"And you'd do it again if she gave you the chance wouldn't you?"

He looked up at us, and slowly nodded. "Yes, I think I might."

We took the tape from him and led him out onto the terrace and tossed it into the barbecue. After dousing it with a lot of charcoal starter we handed him a box of matches. Eagerly he took it and, after a moment of fumbling, tossed a flaming match in to the kettle. It lit with a whoosh, making him to take a couple of steps back. We left him watching the flames of his past passion and went back inside.

Diane was still there. She was holding a Polaroid photo in her hand. It was a picture of a naked Matilda. She seemed to be masturbating with a large hand gun. Diane handed us the photo, "Quite a woman."

It wasn't a question, but it was. "Yeah." It wasn't an answer, but it was.

We bent down and looked at the names on the tapes. We recognized some of them, a senator, some of the guys we couldn't keep straight who hung around city hall, and one that was tantalizingly titled, "The Bishop."

"So how have you been," she asked?

"Good."

"Look, we need to talk."

"You need to talk. I need a shower, I just got off a plane from Tokyo. Want to join me?"

'Frank, you're a real scumbag.'

She took a step back, "Not with Frank, I want to talk to Paul."

"He's not available right now."

Before she could react Roger came back in and walked over to us. "Phillips, I don't know how I can repay you. I've got my life back. You know burning that tape was better than all the things I did with her." He reached in his pocket and pulled out his checkbook. He quickly wrote and signed a check then handed it to us.

We took it. Two million dollars. It was good, we knew because we'd put the money in his account when we'd been shoveling the rest into our own. It was about ten percent of what we'd recovered for him, it seemed fair. We shook his hand and let him out the door.

She had turned and was watching us. "If I sign this over to you, will you go away?" We handed her the check.

'Jesus we at least ought to get a good-bye quickie for that.'

She looked at the check, then back at us. She was about to cry. We didn't want the ink to run so we took it from her and put it on a table.

"Why can't I talk to Paul?"

"Because he's gotten us in enough trouble as it is. Besides it isn't his turn."

"When will it be his turn?" She was clutching at straws.

"In about two years." Frank began to unbutton our shirt. "I was serious about really needing a shower."

She took a step back. "Why do you hate me?"

"Hate?" We paused, "no, it's not hate. We just don't have any use for you."

"It's her isn't it?"

"You do have to admit that she has certain charms. And before you get all red eyed and jealous, remember that I'm not Paul. Not that he has that good a track record when it comes to fidelity."

She turned, her expression had changed, her face was softer. "It must be hard for you."

"What?"

"Leading all these separate lives."

"Hard? No. Not exactly. The logistics can get tricky, but not hard."

"What about love?"

"Paul loves you, or, at least, he says he does. I've got a thing going with her. It may be more lust than love. That's what Elaine says,

and she may be right. I don't really care it seems to be what I want right now. Maybe I'm not ready for anything else."

"So tough." She shook her head, "You must have really been hurt to have ended up with such a wall around you."

"Paul told you about all that." He'd spilled the beans in Europe one night.

"No, I think he only told me a little bit. Maybe he doesn't know it all, maybe he didn't want to remember it, but it took a lot more than he told me to get you where you are."

Frank finished taking off our shirt. "If you're going you'd better go now, because I've got to arm the security system."

She took a step towards the door, then turned. "No. I'm going to call your bluff mister tough guy." She unbuttoned her blouse as she came towards us.

We'd had a plumber install four shower heads in the extra large stall. It was a good way to work the kinks out of sore muscles, and there was, of course, a lot of us to get clean. The stall was large enough that she could have avoided contact with us. Frank had decided not to try and push her right yet, and was not crowding her into a corner. She showed no shyness, and before long we felt her slick soapy skin rubbing against us.

There was a bench built into one wall of the stall and before you could say, 'cream rinse,' we were washing each other's backs simultaneously. Frank was not the patient gentle lover Paul was. He tended to put a lot more animal into it, but if she objected she wasn't saying anything about it.

Afterwards, as we were toweling each other dry, she surprised us by suggesting, "How about taking a look at what's on some of those tapes?"

We'd been planning on it. All of us were far too nosy to put them on the grill before checking at least some of them out. She was doing a pretty good job of calling our bluff. Of course we could always have Willie go the next round with her. He might anyway if it turned out that she was turned on by the interesting things two people could do with black leather.

Chapter 15

It turned out there were a great many things you could do with black leather, some of which were new to Willie. He was enthralled with her style. 'She can make them dance like puppets, can't she?'

We watched Diane as much as we watched the screen trying to read her face. A few times it got to her, but for much of it she seemed to be in shrink mode. The particular brand of sex that kept repeating itself did not seem to be the key to turning her on, and after we watched the Bishop doing things with his crook that only a very lonely shepherd could have imagined, we turned off the show and led her into the bedroom.

Willie made a couple of moves, and she responded by threatening to use her teeth to detach some parts of us we'd grown fond of, so Frank took over again until Elaine asked for a turn. For some reason that turned all of us on, and we stayed up later than we'd planned to.

Joe got us up, but Frank knocked him out of the seat half way through his prayers. She was getting up as we came out of the shower. We were expecting her to tell us she had to be going, but instead she took a shower then made herself at home in the kitchen and fixed as good a breakfast as our limited larder allowed.

'Frank, you got to get rid of her. We've got to go see Matilda today.' Willie had convinced Frank that the only way we could deal with Matilda was to slam her so hard she'd decide it was better to lick our boots than to pour spiders down our shirts. It would also be better to hit her before she realized the true nature of the scam, that she had less money in the bank than your average homeless bottle scavenger. We knew she was in town because the new alarm system had a gadget that allowed us to monitor it from the comfort of our own computer. She'd returned four days ago, a time frame that made us wonder if she could have been behind the incident on the plane, but we decided that there was nothing to be lost by considering her as tame as a nest of water moccasins.

Frank had agreed not to press Willie on doing something more dramatic because he was pretty sure that she was as taken with us as we were with her. There was something there. Getting to it might be a little tricky, but it was, he was pretty sure, doable.

Diane showed no signs of leaving. Finally Frank said, "Look we're going to pay Matilda a visit. I don't think you want to come along."

"You're wrong. I want to see this woman. I want to watch how you tell her you've got her blackmail tapes. Besides, I'm still waiting for Paul."

We were about to argue, when Willie said, 'let her come. One of three things will happen, 1. Matilda will have her for lunch, 2. She'll get to see a good sex scene and will realize she's out-classed and leave, or 3. We'll both have her for dinner.'

It made sense. "Suit yourself, but you'd better understand that we're not going to protect you if she decides to see how you look in that cage." The cage had featured prominently in the video that had the senator barking like a dog and playing fetch the dildo.

"You won't mind if I introduce myself as your resident head shrinker will you?"

Frank decided that chaining her to the wall upstairs and slapping a gag in her mouth might be a good way to gain entre and keep Matilda from guessing what was really going on for a few minutes.

On the ride over we gave Diane some ground rules. "Say anything about tapes, money, or the man you saw last night and we'll break your jaw so badly you'll eat through a straw for a year." We paused as we swerved and made a pedestrian hurry a little. "In fact, to be safe, keep your mouth shut period. This woman and we have some things to work out. Things may get a little rough." We hoped Willie and Frank were really ready for how rough things could get. If they could get her to roll over, fine, but it seemed to Elaine that there was a question as to who was going to roll over first. Of course there was a little advantage on our side. Matilda could get Frank to walk around panting, but Willie, as much as he admired her, would feel as little remorse at killing her as he would if he splashed paint remover on the Mona Lisa. We also had something she wanted and couldn't get if she shot us the minute she saw us.

Elaine was betting it would be necessary because she'd already tried to kill us once. Unless the airborne incident was simply a warning. With her it would be hard to tell. Her idea of subtle was a bit different from the rest of the world's.

As she came to the door we realized she was not trying for subtle today. Her outfit was the one she'd worn in the polaroids and the videos. A jumpsuit, black leather, looking as though she'd been poured

into it. The zipper was undone to the point where it exposed enough of her breasts for us to remember that her body rivaled Yosemite as one of the most beautiful places on earth.

"Hi, did you have a nice trip? Who's the bimbo?"

"She's my resident shrink, she wanted to meet you."

"Did she? Well we have some things to discuss, you and I. Maybe she can keep Dr. Reinhold company. He's been spending a little time upstairs in the playroom. He sends his regards."

Dr. Reinhold, that brought back a lot of teeth that had been knocked out. It also meant she knew all about us, or at the least, a lot more than we were comfortable with. Once, years ago, before we had learned the ropes, we'd been forced to use an insanity defense. It had gotten us six months in a nasty hospital instead of twenty years in a much more nasty place further upstate.

We'd told him a combination of fact and fiction, but the insanity part was real. That was why we were there after all. Willie had gotten carried away and then refused to let go, and the cops had arrived before Frank could activate our getaway plan.

The shrinks had been quacks, but the drugs they gave us affected Willie more than the rest of us, and we'd been able to find ways to keep him more in check, so the six months hadn't been a complete waste.

She watched us for a moment and then continued, "Let's cut the shit. We need each other. You need me because I've got you the way I've gotten every man I've ever met. I touch a place in you that no one else ever has - or ever will - and you know it. I'm willing to bet that, Willie, your precious Willie, has changed the rules. He's incapable of killing me, but he's still capable of getting you locked in a rubber room somewhere where you would be better off dead. You know what I'm talking about." She paused seemed to be trying to see if her words were having any effect. They were, but we hoped she couldn't see it.

She moved close, reached out and touched our face lightly with her finger tips. As her hand slowly wandered down our chest she continued, "I need you, because you've got the money and you've stolen some other things that have great sentimental value to me."

Her hand paused at our waist for a second then slid down a little more, "I also need you because every so often I need a man who's hard to break." Her eyes grew hard, but her touch remained soft, like a butterfly dancing on our lap.

It didn't matter how she'd figured it out, it did matter that we'd seriously underestimated her, the way she'd underestimated us once. It

mattered a lot. We realized we'd never been quite so close to getting our ribs served to us as rack of chump. Willie was holding onto about half of our consciousness, and Frank was about as potent as a lovelorn puppy. A heady feeling of love and lust overflowed Willie's beady little self. "Hi, doll, it's good to see ya." He brought up our hand, ran it up across her ass, and continued up to her breast.

Elaine had wanted Frank to use that hand for a solid shot to her chin. She tried to get him to see what was happening. It was about as possible as getting a canary to read Plato.

Her other hand reached out, took hold of our shirt, and, with a move that was quick and sure, pulled hard. The thread holding the buttons was out of its league and surrendered.

Before the buttons hit the floor, we'd gripped the zipper and pushed the button that sent it down to the lobby.

She shed the suit like a snake sliding out of its skin, and things got white hot as acres of flesh met. We were aware of Diane standing off to the side, but forgot about her as the freight trains collided inside our head.

Her teeth nibbled our ear. Her tongue, found erotic zones not on any map. She whispered, "How would you like to die happy?" Some of us were willing.

Willie moved our hands and found some spots that seemed to distract her. As we rolled around on the cool polished marble floor of the foyer, we, one after another surrendered to a natural force that rivaled a tidal wave.

Frank, who usually had the best sense of self preservation, was the first to go. Elaine waited for her follow each kiss with a shot that would leave us paralyzed. It wasn't necessary, her thighs and her tongue tied us tighter than any nerve block.

When she came it was like a heavy surf crashing into a rocky shore. It took us over the edge, and we felt as though we were in a barrel going over Niagara Falls.

"What am I going to do with you? I can't keep you chained to the wall like the others." Her hand lay across the back of our neck, Elaine tried to tell Frank what she thought might come next, but Willie reminded her that we still had the money.

We rolled over and looked into her eyes from a distance of three inches. It was like looking down a couple of deep wells. We hoped she couldn't see bottom in ours either. We responded, "I've got the same

problem. You hold a grudge a little too well. I like life to be interesting, but you'd take it three steps beyond."

She toyed with our nipple the way a wolf cub plays with the injured prey its mother has brought home as an educational tool.

"You could give me back the money and the tapes, and I'd give you a thirty day headstart."

"Or we could get married in a state with community property laws."

She thought that was funny. So funny we had to check and make sure the nipple was still attached. Frank reminded her we weren't one of her sniveling puppies by slapping her rump with enough force to rattle a picture on the wall above us.

It seemed to remind her why we were both naked. She led us up to the top floor where, in the rear of the house, there was a room that contained, among other things, some furniture designed for sexual gymnastics.

Though heavily soundproofed, the room seemed to echo with the whimpering of its former tenants. Many of whom, we imagined, had not minded being confined in the steel cage in the corner where Diane was standing. She didn't look good. Her face was that pasty white that comes just before you vomit.

Quickly we realized the whimpering was more than a ghostly echo as something moved on the floor of the cage. "I believe you know each other," Matilda said, as the figure turned, and we saw it was our old friend Dr. Reinhold. The last time we'd seen him he'd been wearing a white coat, not a harness made of leather and chain. She went over to the cage, ignoring Diane completely, reached through the bars, and slapped him hard across the face. He didn't seem to feel it. He raised his semi-glazed eyes to her face. "Speak." The command had the same texture as the ringing slap.

He started waving his arms, "Quack, quack, quack."

He did a pretty good duck imitation. She'd obviously had him practice some. She reached up, pulled a cord, and a heavy drape fell over the cage. The quacking stopped after a moment.

She turned back to us. She was holding an evil looking leather strap in her right hand. It reminded us of a couple of the foster homes we'd lived in. "You've been a bad boy."

Joe knew it, but this why we'd developed Frank. He knew better, and he had a brother, Willie, who knew how to deal with this. Elaine breathed a sigh of relief when she felt Frank's mood change and the

puppy turn back into a wolf. Thank god he wasn't interested in rough sex, at least as a victim.

She pointed to a saw-horse. We moved towards it, but spun and caught her with a well placed kick to the side of the jaw. Frank followed it with another shot that caught her as she was rising from the floor, and watched with some professional satisfaction as her eyes went unfocused, and she dropped heavily to the floor.

'Willie, can you do it?'

'I want some fun first. Tie her to that thing.'

There wasn't much choice, she would come to before we resolved this.

Elaine, Joe, and Paul balked at experimenting with the assortment of painful devices that lay neatly arranged on the table against the wall. Willie went into a full fledged sulk that was only partly relieved when we had the good doctor do his duck routine again. 'I tell you I can turn her into a quiet little kitten. It may take a few days, but she'll break, and I'll bet we find the perfect woman underneath.'

Frank cursed his one point of wimp. He was pissed that we'd let Willie absorb all the parts of the splendid training the Marines had given us which allowed us to kill without thinking about it. Still that would have made him a different person, a person who would not have had the discipline to really master the martial arts. Willie had no use for technique. Except when it came to killing.

'So what are we going to do about this?'

'What are we going to do about that?' Elaine had us look over at the cage where the doctor seemed to be trying to lay an egg. Diane was huddled next to the cage. Her color was better, but her mouth was hanging open.

For all of his crudeness, Willie could have been a good con-man. He did have a way of selling things. He had us take a good long look at her. 'She's too good to throw away. Tamed, this one would be worth a thousand bimbos straight off the street.' All we would have to do would be to break off her fangs, he said. 'If you're the man we think we are, we should be able to quiet her down some.'

She was starting to come around. Her limbs moved with a fluid grace as she tested the bonds. She didn't struggle, just tested, then she let herself go limp. Her eyes opened. She turned her head until she spotted us. "This wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

"You'll make the necessary adjustments won't you?"

"Convince me." Her voice was like a velvet covered steel bar.

'What a woman, what did I tell you.'

In the cage the shrink started up again. He was going to be a distraction. And we might need that cage for other things. After giving her a light caress we turned our attention to him. He didn't want to come out of the cage when we swung the door open. He didn't even want to come out when we grabbed him by the ear. He was as nuts as anyone we had ever met. He babbled, he frothed, he presented us with a problem. It wasn't as though we could call an ambulance and send him off to ga-ga land. Cops came along with every ambulance, and we didn't want deal with cops, at least until we'd put on some clothes. And Willie wasn't going to put his legs into any pants until later.

'What do you do with a crazy shrink?' "Hey Diane, you think you can take care of this guy for a while?" She nodded and got to her feet. She led him out the door, he called her mistress, and, we noticed, she did not correct him.

This got our minds off Matilda's body sufficiently for us to get into a full blown argument about what the hell we were going to do next. 'You're going to get us killed Willie.'

'If you're so hot to kill her Frank, do it yourself. Paul's got his piece of ass, why can't I?'

'You don't know enough to be able to tame her Willie,' Elaine said. 'You've got a good fantasy going, but it can't work.'

Joe took the opportunity to sing a verse of Amazing Grace, before Frank shut him up.

Chapter 16

Being with Matilda made Willie stronger. Stronger than he'd been in a long time. He accomplished a lot in the next couple of hours. Joe was preparing himself for the rigors of eternal damnation, And the rest quickly decided that they would rather not watch. Besides it didn't really matter which one of us it came from, being in that much in love felt a little too good to resist.

Her splendid body was bathed in sweat. Her eyes had lost the cold stare that could cut through steel. And her voice had changed. It had passed through snarling and defiant to pleading and then to a quiet expressionless tone that agreed with everything Willie suggested. We had come to the point of admitting the possibility that Willie was indeed turning her around when Diane knocked on the door to the playroom. We didn't let her in and blocked her view with our body.

She said the doctor was quieter, because he'd taken a couple of pills she'd found in a bathroom, but he was still obviously way beyond the edge. She insisted on our helping her take him to the hospital. Right then, or she said, she'd call for an ambulance. Other than locking her in the cage we didn't have much of a choice. Willie grudgingly saw the wisdom and let us put on our pants. We left Matilda where she was telling her she was being given time to consider her options.

The hospital admission was rather painless. All it took was one egg laying imitation and the papers were signed and the rubber room prepared.

When we got back Willie had her park in the DPL zone not caring if her car got towed.

"What are you doing to her?" She asked as she pulled close to the curb.

"We were going to talk to you about that, we need some advice."

"Talk to me about what?"

Paul and Willie got into it so intensely that Elaine was able to take control for a minute. "Willie's in love with her. He's trying to tame her."

"Tame?"

"Yeah tame." Willie was back, "She's too fine a piece of ass to throw away."

Paul was not happy to see her eyes go sharp, cold and narrow.

"What's going on?"

"What I want to know is how do know when you've really broken someone, but not tooo far - not enough to take all the fire out of them. All we want is for her to forget about wanting to kill us."

"Break her? How are you doing this?"

"Using positive and negative reinforcement."

"Meaning?"

"Pleasure, and pain."

She gave us a look that would have withered anyone but Willie.

"Take me up there. Now."

"Bondage turn you on? Paul was too much of a wimp to ask, but since..."

'Willie you're going to get us locked up if you aren't careful.'

"We've brought someone to see you. Someone who is going to help us get you to forget about killing us."

Diane, we could tell, was freaked by the room and a naked Norse goddess tied to a rack. "Untie her this minute."

"She likes it." Willie ran his hand down her bound body, it made Matilda shiver. "Besides, she's not ready yet."

"Untie her, or I'm leaving, and I'll call the police the minute I find a phone." Frank suggested chaining her to the wall, but Willie said, "what the hell, maybe she's ready." He hit her so hard the breath whistled out of her body then untied her.

She sat up slowly, turning to us. Her eyes were different. "You're the first man who ever..."

"Get her something to wear."

Matilda turned towards Diane, "Who's the broad?"

"She's a friend."

"She as good as me?"

"You might be surprised." Paul got a one liner in before Willie closed up tight.

She turned back to us, "Well, I'll have to try harder."

She ran her hands down our arm. She picked a collar off the table and buckled it around her own neck. She looked at Diane when she said, "This dressy enough for you honey?"

Chapter 17

Diane clearly did not like the fact that Matilda was naked and sitting close beside us on the couch. Aside from the occasional press of thigh against our leg Matilda was very docile as we sat in the living room and talked. This relieved Elaine somewhat. Paul was pretty sure Diane was going to leave in a huff until a couple of her questions got Matilda started on her life story.

"My father was a Catholic priest. My mother was a Lutheran who was running away from winters on a Minnesota farm and ended up working in the rectory as a cook. It made for a strained upbringing. As you can imagine, there were a lot of secrets. I could call him father, of course, but never dad or daddy. In fact, I didn't know that the man I was calling father was my father until I was ten or so. He was a large man, as was my mother, and fortunately I looked a lot more like her than I did him." Her eyes were dull and lifeless as she spoke. It was as though she was talking about someone else, a person she was not all that interested in. Willie wondered if he'd gone a little too far.

"It was a small parish in the Bible Belt where Catholics are not all that popular. Even though I was born there I was a Yankee to the rest of the town. For some reason they never seemed to suspect our real relationship, and bought the story that my real father was a soldier who had been killed in the early days of Vietnam. The priest had been to Vietnam too, and had been wounded. The word around town was that his cock had been hit and that was why he'd become a priest."

"My father, the father, and my mother continued their relationship after I was born, but I guess he became a little more liberal in his adherence to the church's line on birth control because I was the only child they had."

"The town was not known for its liberal thinking. Men tended to treat women as though they were pieces of property if they were in long term relationships, or as pieces of ass if they just wanted a quickie. I was raped at fourteen by the drunk brother of the mayor." She paused, her eyes were cold enough to turn water to ice from ten feet away.

"The father decided that it would be best not to press charges because he said no jury would convict the sheriff. He was right, the man had something on most everyone in town, and, he could always make something up if he needed to."

She took a deep breath, her voice was slightly more animated when she spoke again, "I remember that was the one time my mother ever really stood up for me. She said, 'Then you've got to teach her so this can never happen again.' I didn't know what she was talking about, the war was something the father never talked about. I still don't know what happened to him over there." She paused for a second then moved on, "It turned out he knew a lot, he'd been in some special branch. I think I once heard him talk about the Seals or something." She took a breath, "I could tell he wanted to kill the man. The first things he taught me were killing blows. Whatever it was that happened in Nam as he called it, I guess the

same thing that gave him religion, kept him from doing anything about it himself. So instead, he taught me how to take care of myself."

"I was a quick learner, I motivated myself by thinking how much fun it would be when I reversed the tables on the sheriff. My father didn't have a lot of parish work and since my mother wouldn't pay her nightly visit to his room unless I showed her a new hold or killing blow in the evening, he had a lot of incentive to teach me all that he knew."

"I realized I was becoming pretty proficient when I broke his nose and wrist with a fast series of blows during one of our matches. He realized that it was time to send me off for further training, and arranged for me to spend the summer with a fellow ex Green Beret who ran a martial arts school in Chicago.

"The night before I left I went down to the bar where the Sheriff hung out. I went about eleven, I wanted him to be drunk enough so I had a clear advantage. I've never seen the point of having a fair fight if I had a choice." She looked us straight in the eye, and gave us a second to try and figure out what she meant by that.

Before we could figure out if she was sending us a message she continued,

"He was sitting on a stool at the end of the bar. He watched me come across the room and got a foolish smile. 'You decide to come back for more darling,' he asked? I said, 'Something like that,' and broke his nose. He fell off the stool and as he was getting up, I kicked him in the nuts." There was an evil smile on her face as she remembered. "He lay on the sawdust making little gasping sounds. The rest of the men in the bar didn't have much love for him so they just watched as I cut the crotch out of his pants with a straight razor. He knew what was coming because I told him. 'You've raped your last woman,' I said. He tried to fight, but, after I broke his arms, he didn't have a chance."

"It was incredible, I watched myself like it was a movie or a play and didn't feel anything. He did though. His scream was a beautiful song. Most of the men in the place were puking on the floor as I walked out. Nobody tried to stop me."

She looked at Diane, "I'm not boring you am I?"

The shrink shook her head, "No, go on." She certainly didn't look bored, but her shrink mask was slipping.

"Chicago was an education for a fourteen year old, especially since I looked closer to eighteen. There was a pimp at the bus station who offered me a ride. He stopped at his apartment on the way and tried to convince me to work for him. My mother had not brought me up naive so I was ready when he made a grab for me.

"He should have realized he was outclassed the first time I put him on the floor, but it made him angry, and he made the mistake of pulling a knife on me. I broke both his arms, kicked him in the balls, and popped a knee before he knew what hit him. As he sank to the floor, he started sniveling a little, and for the first time in my life, I was sexually aroused." She stopped and thought for a minute, "Yeah, it was the first time I was ever really turned on. I don't know why I wasn't with the sheriff. Maybe I was and didn't realize it." She shrugged, an act which caused her breasts to move. It took a fair amount of the rest of our will to keep Willie from fondling them.

"One of his other girls came out of a back room. Her name was Tina, she had marks across her face from a beating he'd given her that morning. When she saw him lying on the floor she started kicking him in the head. I stopped her after she'd broken his teeth, and together we came up with a variety of things to do to him that wouldn't kill him before we were done.

"We spent the whole evening doing things to him - things I'd dreamed about doing to the sheriff back home, but hadn't had time for in the bar. She knew a lot of tricks, and I learned a lot from her. In the morning we took him up to the roof, used ammonia to bring him back to consciousness, and then tossed him off into the backyard where the landlord kept his Dobermans."

"Tina took his car and drove me to the karate school, where, after they tested me, I began teaching classes and taking advanced lessons from the master. I kept in touch with the girl and on my days off she'd drive me out to the suburbs and put me on a bus for Chicago. We used to call it trolling for sleaze. Later she'd follow the pimp who picked me up to his place and we'd spend a few hours breaking bones and shredding flesh.

"I also spent some time with another student, a veteran who was pretty much my equal in Karate. I found that I got turned on during our sessions, and one night I let him take me home with him.

"It was then that I discovered that I liked hitting better than sex, but also knew, from things Tina had taught me, that sex was a way to get a man right where you wanted him. That was the way I wanted to live my life, you know, with the rest of the world right where I wanted it. I was sure no man would ever hurt me again, but the more I learned about men the more I was convinced that they were all pigs." She paused, "no, that's not quite right. There were some who were OK, but they were boring. Besides, looking like I do, you tend to attract all the assholes. I decided that I would make it my life's mission to teach men that women were not things to be taken for granted any more."

She told about going to college and her crusade against date rape. Then after she graduated she knocked around for a while and ended up working as a decorative secretary for the president of a bank in Chicago.

"He didn't come on to me until I'd been there three days. Lucky for me I didn't break his arm like I was planning to. Instead he bounced off the wall, and fell to his knees in front of me. He cried as he told me how bad a person he was, and told me he would do anything for me." She looked at Diane, "I've met others like him, sometimes you have to make love to them before they turn into lovesick puppies, but this man was ripe."

"I don't think I would have figured it out all by myself if he hadn't handed it to me on a platter. At least not so fast. By the end of the second week I was settled into a seven room co-op apartment, had a car and charge accounts all over town."

"Two weeks later I told him that I liked cash better than the jewelry he was giving me every day. At work I got a promotion and made him teach me about offshore accounts. He showed me how to make electronic transfers. I used some of the money to buy some camera equipment. It was a simple setup compared to I used later, but it was effective. When he saw himself in the pictures he pissed in his pants. It was then that I saw the full potential for what I was doing. I strung him

out. I got lists of rich men from him. That was easy for a banker. I learned how to scout my targets, and once I had the next two lined up and nibbling at the hook, I wrung him out and set him out to dry. The bank went under two years later because he started taking big risks to try and make back the money he spent on me and paid for the negatives." She paused and shook her head. "I heard he ended up in jail. I wonder if he got to like it there? I mean isn't that the ultimate fantasy for a masochist. What do you think shrink lady?"

Diane shook her head. "I'm not sure, but I doubt that prison is someplace that anyone can like."

"I'll bet he did. He was the one who suggested that I have a cage built. I'd like to think he liked it because he was the one who turned me on to the enormous potential. Three or four hours of work, two or three days a week, and I was making ten million a year. That was until one guy went and hired a private detective to get the negatives and teach me a lesson. He didn't do either, but I found it expedient to leave town before he came out of his coma and told the cops who he'd been playing with."

"That's when I took the world cruise, and discovered that certain political figures are good targets too. Money can only get you so far." She waved a hand indicating that the room we were sitting in.

"So if you hate men so much why do you like Phillips here?" Diane asked the question directly. Where was she coming from? It was not the question some of us wanted asked. The answer was something all of us were interested in.

She answered Diane's question easily. "He's the first man to say no to me. He's the first man I've met who doesn't turn into a puppy when I kiss him. Aren't we all looking for the person who's right for us? Besides, I was getting bored with what I was doing. I was thinking of branching out when he came along and taught me my lesson." She reached out and stroked our leg.

'If any of you believe any of that you're a bigger fool than the doctor who goes quack.'

'Shut up Elaine, you don't know anything about being a man.'

'You're going to find out a lot about being a fool if you don't see what she's doing.'

We were interrupted at that point by the doorbell. We left Diane and Matilda in the living room and went to the door where we were less than happy to find Detective Thomas.

Being in an embassy we were technically on foreign soil and didn't have to let him in, so we made him talk through the slightly opened door.

He was not a happy detective. "Look creep. I don't know what you're up to, and if I wasn't ordered to I would have left you to stew in your own juices, but I got my orders." He paused and spit on the marble steps. "The word is out on the street that your boss did something not nice to a guy. A guy who a certain other person in Brooklyn owes a large favor to. This certain person in Brooklyn usually specializes in other things, but they say he's going to come pay her a visit. The word is that they are going to bring a few friends along for security purposes."

"When?"

"The word is tomorrow. Early. If you want I could station a couple of men inside."

"No thanks."

He started to leave, but turned and said, "When this is over I'm going to be expecting a finder's fee."

"A finder's fee? For what? For solving one of your cases for you? Go back and fix a few parking tickets if you're worried about your retirement."

For a minute we thought he was going to blow. His eyes went large, his hand twitched in the general direction of his piece, then he realized where he was - with a closed circuit TV watching. After a second, he shrugged and walked back down the steps.

'We don't need him as an active enemy,' Paul pointed out.

"Hey, Thomas, hold on a second."

He turned and came up the steps, we saw what Matilda meant when she said men were sometimes like little puppies. It wasn't sex that lit up his eyes, but greed. "Listen, there's still some shit to straighten out, but when it's over there will be some big plates of leftovers."

He brightened at that and moved off.

We were more worried about the visit from the men from Brooklyn than we let on. Being a tough guy is one thing, but knowing whose teeth not to kick in is what had gotten us as far as we had come. She apparently hadn't worried about staying on the good side of anyone.

When we returned Paul half expected to see Diane lying on the floor with her neck bent funny, and Matilda waiting for us with a flame-thrower.

Instead we found them chatting comfortably.

"That was our friend Detective Thomas. He brought word that one of the guys you stung has a friend in Brooklyn who is going to be coming here to talk with you. This friend from Brooklyn is liable to bring a bazooka, and a bunch of his friends. You wouldn't know anything about that would you?"

Matilda thought for a minute. "It could be either of a couple of creeps. One guy told me he had friends who would eat me for breakfast. I didn't think he'd have the guts to try it. The last time he left here he was whimpering" She stood and walked over to a bookcase. "I've got guns here, of course."

The idea made us less than happy. "But," she continued, "There's a place that might be better." She put a slight smile on her lips and said, "Actually it's yours now, Phillips, if you cleaned me out as good as it seems you did."

Chapter 18

It was located three and a half hours from the city on the banks of a river in deeper woods than we'd imagined Connecticut to have. A small house whose most notable feature was privacy. "Nobody will bother us here." On the ride up she'd related that she had taken the deed as a temporary payment for silence from one of her pigeons. Once she saw the property she'd decided not to liquidate it, instead transferring ownership to one of the off-shore corporations she had set up to conceal her holdings.

It felt strange being a landowner, but as we walked down the sloping lawn to the river, we realized we could get used to it. The place came equipped with a small rowboat and a canoe, and immediately Frank began to lobby for a muscle boat. He also told Joe that he had three days to buy a trail bike or else.

'We got to watch how we spend the money. Word gets out that we're spending money in hundred thousand dollar chunks and a lot of people are going to get very interested in us.'

'So let the corporation do the buying. I don't care whose name is on the registration.'

We had a lot of time for walking because Diane and Matilda had gone into closed session almost immediately. On the ride up Diane had patiently explained what she thought they'd do - telling her over and over that it had to get better. That she had nothing to lose by ridding herself of the past. For some reason she seemed to be buying it. They spend the days doing that. At night we tried to teach her there was something to be said for having a "normal" relationship with a man. That made things a bit frosty with Diane, so we found it more comfortable to enjoy the outdoors. We weren't sure whose side Diane was on. Paul had hopes that she was waiting for Matilda to blow, or the rest of us to get tired of her which ever came first. He kept this to himself and kept looking for an opportunity to get back into the driver's seat.

We hadn't spent much time in the woods since Frank's tour in the Marines. The hill rose steeply from the river to a height of a hundred fifty feet. It was a mature forest with large trees rising fifty feet and providing such shade that the ground was moderately clear of underbrush. There was a small cliff behind the house which provided an opportunity for Frank to unlimber us, Elaine a place where she could see the river through a gap in the trees, and Paul a spot to contemplate and write, but that was all. When we were around them he was kept securely underfoot.

There were some abandoned fields at the top of the hill. It had been at least forty years since they'd been tilled, we figured, a guess based on the size of the trees that grew there. Here, there was a lot of underbrush, patches of bayberry bushes twenty feet across, clumps of laurel, scrub trees, and the descendants of the last hay crop whose bleached tan leaves came up to our calves. It was full of life, rabbits who would startle us by exploding from their concealed positions as we came up on them, the glimpse of a wary fox whose curiosity was greater than his caution, and deer, dumb but so graceful that their stupidity was forgiven. At least by Elaine and

Paul. Frank and Willie thought of them as mobile hamburgers. Our walks were more than just exercise, we were not as confident as she that no one knew about the place.

As the late afternoon sun was stretching the shadows we were skirting a tangle of bayberry when an instinct caused Frank to make us freeze and lower ourselves into a crouch which brought us below the tops of the bushes.

'What is it?'

'Wait!'

The semi-silence of the woods filled our head. Frank strained to hear what he'd sensed. Then the sounds of a breaking stick and a rustling of leaves came to us.

'A deer,' Elaine wondered?

'No. Men.'

Frank held our position for another two minutes until he had a fix on their route which would take them fifty yards from us. There were two of them, neither was at home in the woods. He planned a route that circled back and brought us around to a position behind and to the side of them. The two men took a straight route - blundering through rough ground that could more easily have been rounded. They carried guns, but, we were sure, were not here to hunt little furry animals.

We moved closer and let the wind bring us the stream of curses which flowed from the short man who followed the taller trailblazer. "I tell you we should have stuck to the road. You're going to get us lost, you son of a bitch."

They kept pretty close together, and Frank saw that grabbing the short one would involve some risk. Frank cursed the rest for making us leave the gun at the house, but secretly he was enthused at the challenge of us, armed with only a short knife, against two armed men. Ahead the old fields ended, and the steep hillside began. The two men stopped to consult a map and we saw that the leader had a compass. That explained the straight line. The fields offered a better opportunity for a quick ambush than did the more open hillside. Moving quickly and glad we were wearing brown and gray, Frank led us to a place where they would be forced to pass between a large laurel and a stand of young hemlocks.

"Hey Ed wait a minute."

"What is it this time?"

"I got something in my eye when you slapped my face with that last branch."

"Come on will you. We're supposed to be in place by six."

He pushed the branches beside us apart and stepped through. Frank reached out, grabbed him by the neck and hurled him facedown to the ground. A quick blow kept him quiet, and we sprang up as the second man pushed at the branches. He was saying "Hey Ed," when we hit him, stripped him of his rifle, and sent him crashing into the tangled underbrush.

"What the fuck?"

"Keep your hands where I can see them."

The man did not answer, and struggled to free himself from the bushes.

With one hand we grabbed his belt and yanked him free then roughly frisked him and took an expensive nine millimeter pistol from under his shoulder. We set him down near his still unconscious pal. It was four thirty, if they were supposed to

be set up somewhere by six it didn't give much time for a patient interrogation. That wasn't our favorite style anyway.

He hadn't lost all fight, but his eyes were glued to the rifle we held.

Making sure the safety was set we slammed the butt into the unconscious man's back. Willie was back. He did interrogations well, and with gusto. "That could have been your mouth."

"Who are you?"

"That's the question, but it goes the other way." We pointed the barrel of the gun at the man's face and let him look into its dark depths.

He swallowed. "Tell me about the picnic you are supposed to be at or," Willie took us a step to the side and hit the other man with the gun's butt again, this time on the back of the head. It made a thunking sound like a well-ripened honeydew melon being mauled at a supermarket.

The man shook his head. We moved closer and delivered a quick kick to the ribs that knocked him over. When he sat up, he felt the point of our knife pricking the back of his neck. That decided him - he started to talk. "Jesus, you don't have to do that. We're supposed to get someplace on the hill, and when we hear a whistle we're supposed to put a few rounds into the house down there. That's all."

He was telling some of the truth. "What's the rest of the plan."

He tried, "I don't know."

Willie had a special fondness for sharp steel. It showed in his eyes. "I shall demonstrate on your friend," He took the knife and sliced off most of the man's left ear. A lot of blood flowed. The man started to come to, but stopped when we kicked him in the head as we walked back to the other man. He started to get up, but lost his footing in his panic and fell.

Willie could do the singsong of the really insane very well, "Tell me what I want to hear and you'll keep your ear." He then tossed the other man's ear into his lap.

He stared down at the bloody piece of flesh, "Jesus, There are two boats. We're supposed to distract the people in the house while they come up and do what they got to do."

"What's that?"

"There's a woman there who we're supposed to snatch."

"Why?"

He shrugged, that was the truth. We could tell because he didn't look at the ear after saying it.

"Why not kill her?"

"I guess she's got something. We're supposed to search the place."

"For what?"

He shrugged again. "I'm supposed to guard her while the others do it."

"Who are you working for?"

"You don't want to know."

"Yes I do." There wasn't much time to fool around. Willie moved closer and placed the point of the knife under his ear. The man went white as a little blood ran down his neck. "What I hear is that we're working for a big man in the city." The knife bit a bit deeper, and he told us the name of a man who the newspapers

alleged was in control of a large number of unsavory enterprises. The same man Detective Thomas had warned us about.

"How did you know we were here?"

"We were supposed to do it in the city, but she lambded out here. I guess someone was watching her."

The rest of us found other things to do while Willie made sure these two wouldn't make life difficult for us by coming up behind us and then concealed their bodies.

This was being planned as a major operation. She really had pissed off the wrong guy this time.

They were sitting in the kitchen drinking tea when we entered carrying two rifles. "That guy you pissed off in the city, well, his friend decided it was a good day for a picnic in the woods."

"How did they find us?"

"Either they knew about the place, or someone followed us.

It doesn't matter, but when does. We've got some door to door Uzzi salesmen coming in about an hour."

Diane looked puzzled, but she'd caught enough to have fear etched on her face, "What do you mean?"

We kept it basic. "More men, with guns, are coming here. They are not coming to make a fourth for bridge."

The flat eyes and even husky voice told me Matilda still had another fight in her. She reached for one of the rifles. We let her have it, it was unloaded. Willie suggested that we kill her, go back and hump the dead woodsman back down and let the rest of the bad guys figure out what hadn't happened.

She stared at us. "That narrows it down. It has to be the man I got this place from. He told me he'd get me."

"That doesn't matter now. We'd better figure a way out of here." We moved to a chair and sat down, this was getting interesting.

"I don't like to run."

Matilda continued to stare into our eyes. With her fighting spirit back in place we felt a little less at ease with her than we had. We could see her trying to figure out the odds with and without us. "They are supposed to be coming by boat. They're supposed to make a grab rather than a hit, for what's that's worth." We offered the information to see if she'd bite.

"What else?"

"The two in the woods were not seasoned pros, but they had good equipment."

Her eyes focused on the door for a moment. "We could hit the boats as they come up."

"If they use the dock, and if there aren't any more boy scouts in the woods."

"You got a better idea?"

Not right then. Except maybe to take Diane and slip off into the woods leaving Matilda to pay her own debts. Except it wasn't Diane that Frank and Willie wanted.

The shore line was steep except where the yard sloped down to the dock. It seemed obvious that they'd come there. "They're going to be expecting covering fire from the woods."

She looked at Diane, "Can you shoot?"

We could tell it wasn't the question Diane had wanted to hear.

"What?"

"Never mind." She looked at us, "What about you?"

"Can I shoot?"

"What I want to know is will you shoot me in the back?"

"If I wanted you dead, I would already have done it."

Diane looked really scared now. She had a good reason to feel that way, especially since she didn't know the gun was unloaded.

"I don't want you dead, just under control."

She checked the gun and saw the clip was empty. It did not seem to surprise her. "This is my fight. I can handle it."

We stood, took Diane's hand and moved towards the door. "If my male chauvinism isn't appreciated I can take a hint."

Matilda moved and walked to a window seat. She moved a release we hadn't found and opened it up. She took out a box of grenades, a M16 and a bunch of clips.

She was now officially very dangerous. "We'll be somewhere on the hillside. The signal is a whistle. We'll pretend to be the junior woodchucks and will give you what cover we can."

She was intently checking her weapon. "And afterwards?"

"Afterwards, you can re think our truce. You'll be armed. Your choice." It would be a test. Maybe a little sooner than Willie wanted, but it had to happen sooner or later.

We dragged Diane out of the house and into the woods, before she could make a counter offer, maybe with one of the grenades she was stuffing into a rucksack.

We didn't go very far, in deference to Diane we went around the cliff face rather than up it. A boulder at the top provided good cover and a moderately clear view of yard and dock.

We saw Matilda slip into a clump of bushes on a rocky point ten yards south of the dock. She was good, we saw the bushes move slightly as she adjusted her field of fire and then she, to all purposes, disappeared. The story she'd told us hadn't included weapons training, but somehow we weren't surprised.

The hands on the watch moved slowly, we kept an eye on the hillside above us just to make sure there wasn't a backup team up there somewhere. A boat cruised up the other side of the river, too far away to see if it was a part of the attacking force.

The tactics would have been pretty good. Rifle fire from our position would have kept us pinned down in the house and would have drawn attention away from the force which would move up the lawn.

The whistle cut through the county quiet like a moray eel through a home aquarium. We fired off a few rounds, and watched as the bow of a boat came from behind the point and nosed up to the dock. Another boat was about twenty feet

behind it, we watched as the bushes on the point moved slightly, and a grenade arched towards it. Someone noticed and stood seeking a target, but it was too late. The crump of the exploding grenade, a cloud of smoke and then the fireball rising from the boat announced a shifting of the odds. Two men were out of the first boat, we shot the one who was moving up the dock and were aiming at the other as the point exploded as Matilda raked the boat with a full clip from her M16. She followed it with another grenade for good measure. It was probably not needed, but like the fudge on a sundae, it made for a sense of completion.

Diane had burrowed into the leaves beside us and moved only when we put our hand on her shoulder. The silence of the woods returned slowly as the echoes washed back and forth across the valley. When it was in place it seemed deeper than it had originally. The boats quickly burned and hissed as they sank. She remained under cover for another minute then appeared at the foot of the yard.

She stepped out on the dock and took a quick survey of the results of her work. She poked one of the bodies with her gun, then satisfied, she made her way back to the foot of the yard. She scanned the woods looking for us. Would killing those men remind her of her original plans for us?

We stood up and with an exaggerated move laid the gun on the rock in front of us. Diane stood too. "I'm not sure she won't shoot," we said without taking our eyes off the figure at the bottom of the yard.

"She won't," Diane said, "she says she's ready to enter a new phase of her life."

Matilda paused then using the same slow motion set her own weapons on the lawn.

"Or else she's trying to find a way to get the money back." Diane didn't say anything to that. We made our way down the slope and arrived at the kitchen door about the same time as she did. "That was a nice shot," she said.

"You did pretty well yourself," we replied, "what now?"

She took a look at the house, "Burn it I guess. Move out and put some distance between ourselves and the puzzle that will cause the local cops some concern."

We went upstairs and grabbed our bag. She took only a minute longer to grab her belongings. We met Diane at the car and watched as and watched Matilda pour something on the floor inside the open front door. She lit a match and did not stop to watch as flames enveloped the hall.

The junior wood chucks had left a car blocking the road. We briefly debated switching cars, but decided against it. Sooner or later we might run into any one of a zillion cops that would sooner or later respond to reports of numerous bodies polluting their nice clean neighborhood.

After pushing their car into a gully, we drove slowly down the road between old stone walls. We passed occasional farms and the occasional new house - a sign that suburbia was headed this way.

There was no sign of the police, no fire trucks, no ambulances.

"Why didn't you pick me off when I was on the dock," Matilda asked, as we turned north onto a larger road?

"I don't kill unless I absolutely have to."

"And you think you can trust me?"

"We figured we'd give it another chance."

A pistol appeared in her lap, it took a lot of control not to let go of the wheel and grab for it. She pulled out the clip, and handed it back to Diane. "Then I guess I won't be needing this."

She didn't need a gun to kill and we knew it. But Frank saw that as a gesture of true love. We reached over and stroked her cheek.

We studied Diane in the mirror and decided that she wasn't jealous. What was she, we wondered?

Chapter 19

The motel room was standard Holiday Inn. No brash colors, lifeless. We lay on one of the beds pretending not to listen as Diane talked with Matilda. If they wanted privacy they could move into the adjoining room so far as we were concerned. She was talking about how she her anger had consumed her for all these years. "I got over the rape a long time ago, it wasn't that. I don't know why I liked it so much."

Diane nodded her shrink nod, and waited for her to continue. She looked briefly at us then said, can Phillips join us in this?"

Diane looked over at us, "Well?"

"You heard it."

"Yes," we admitted, "what can I say?"

"Maybe you can tell about yourself and how you've learned to control your anger. At least how some of you have" Diane looked at her for confirmation.

She nodded, "Something like that. When I realized I was so very different from other people, I knew I had to make myself strong. I knew I had to protect myself from people that wanted to crush me."

We sat up on the edge of the bed as she went on, "When I was a child, I used to watch the other kids play. I never felt like I could join in. Two things happened. One was that a part of me felt absolutely alone, and another grew very angry, and swore that we would get even some way some day." She looked at us, "Was it like that for you?"

We thought back, and then with the film running, said, "I remember standing with our back pressed against the side of the school watching the swirling motion as the schoolyard full of kids exploded into joy on a warm spring day. While I was afraid of no other kid's fists, I needed a way to go up and ask if I could play with them. It was hard, but I watched other kids and mimicked them, but I could only do that when I put the angry and hurt parts of me under a blanket."

She nodded, "Did you get in many fights?"

Another memory, "Yeah, until Frank beat most of the other big kids. Then sometimes I would step in when I saw a smaller kid getting pushed around. That was one way to make friends, how about you?"

"Yeah. It was different with girls, but there were fights sometimes. I learned I liked them. It felt good when I made other people cry the way people had made me cry." She stopped, "but it also made me feel bad. This is where it gets strange, but the worse I felt about myself the stronger I got, it got so I could do incredible things without feeling bad about them."

"That's how we use Willie," we added. "He likes to hurt people, but he's not that stable, he does things that sometimes could get us hurt or killed."

"How do you shift between people so easily."

"It's hard to describe. Sometimes one will convince the others to let them in, in an emergency Frank can push them out. We have a lot of fights about who does certain things."

"Like what?"

"Like driving. Frank likes to drive, but he drives fast and Joe gets scared. When we go out for a fancy meal, we let Joe eat it, because he enjoys it, the best. If we just stop for a hotdog on the corner Frank wolfs it down. Elaine and Joe like the opera, and artsy films, sometimes they both share control when they do that."

"That almost sounds good. I wish I could have someone who could be normal inside me."

Diane's expression changed, she did not look happy at this turn. "You do have someone normal inside under the rage. You can let yourself out without going to all the trouble Phillips has."

"I guess so. I don't feel like a whole person. I feel like I'm flat like a picture."

"I'm still not convinced," Paul said, "I still wouldn't turn our back to her."

Diane nodded. "In what is called a quote normal person, unquote, there is a constant interplay of conflicting emotions, desires, and feelings." She took a deep breath, "Phillips, seems to have done this in a different way. Some people lead their lives repressing parts of themselves. They live their lives afraid of doing things, or are ruled by a iron conscious, perhaps religious based. The resulting lives are, as you described, two dimensional in a way." She paused, and took a deep breath, "I can understand where his different selves came from, but maybe they aren't so necessary now. Maybe he can work on them someday."

"Someday when pigs learn to play the harpsichord."

She stretched, looked at her watch and said, "Why don't we take a break?"

We asked, "Can I buy you a drink Matilda?"

She turned to us, "You'll have to. I'm afraid I misplaced my fortune somewhere."

Chapter 20

The cocktail lounge at the Holiday Inn was dimly lit, not as dark as a real dive, but still shadowy enough to let people know why it was there. We turned the few heads in the place when we entered. She turned more than we did, we suspected. A couple of truck drivers at the close end of the bar, identifiable by their baseball caps with the Mack truck logo, stopped their conversation, and watched us pass in silent appreciation of Matilda's obvious attributes. We guided her to a table against the wall, but with a good view of the door, and walked over to the bar to order drinks.

A salesman type was busy trying to impress the barmaid with his itsy-bitsy computer, and it took her a moment to come over to us. As we waited we felt the eyes of the others in the room trying to figure us out. We were not standard Holiday Inn fare, but then a lot of variety passed through these places. We ordered two double cognacs and went back to the table.

Matilda looked dubiously at the glass, "This isn't much of a drink."

"We'd better take it easy until you get a little further away from wanting to kill me."

She smiled, it turned on our hormones. Frank and Willie went dumb with love. Paul and Elaine told them, but they didn't care.

"A part of you's a poet right? Tell me a poem." It was a command, but gently delivered.

Reluctantly they let Paul out. The first thing he did was take a sip of the drink. He decided against using any of his stock repertory, and said, "It may take a minute, the occasion calls for a new one." He was glad to be out though he wished he was with Diane. Still this was a woman, one hell of a woman, and he decided to view it as a challenge.

She said nothing, but smiled, and took another sip.

"Standing at the door
summoning courage to enter
afraid to leave
the known behind.

To strip the past
and forget
that which drove
me for so long.

Called by the promise
radiating from
beyond the portal
knowing I must enter.

It will take all
that I have"

"No," we paused, "that's not right."

"Are the riches offered
a stray reflection
from a piece of my
shattered soul?

Or will the light
in her eyes
allow the hurt inside
to heal?"

Her eyes were locked on ours. "I wish I could do that."

"No reason you can't."

"Can we write that down?"

A stock poem came to mind,

"Poems scribbled
on cocktail napkins
grow soggy.
Ink runs
verses tear.

The words written
by the heart which
speaks in neon light
can not be read
in the light of day."

She thought for a minute than said, "so get some real paper." But before we could get up to go to the bar, she said, "That must have be a real winner when you are trying to impress some half drunk intellectual."

We gave her a sheepish look. She was right. It had worked more than once. The best the barmaid could do was to give us a small white pad and a stubby pencil.

She made us write out the first poem, then took the pad.

"Blank - not empty
simply not yet writ.
the difference lies
in the outcome."

She paused and looked into our eyes. She smiled, then wrote,

"Give me the ink
fill my pen

be there to
blot the tears

keep them from
drowning the words."

She reached to crumple up the paper, but we reached out and gently took it from her fingers. "Try another."

She took another sip of her drink, it was getting low. Ours was gone, so we took the glasses back to the bar for a refill.

There was a new patron at the bar, a trucker who had stopped for some drinks on the way, from the look of him. As we waited he said, "Where you and the lady going, pal?"

Paul especially did not usually take well to men who started off by calling us pal. It was better than those who called us chief, but not much. We tried to ignore him, but he said, "Don't you want to talk, you think you're too good for us working guys."

We turned to him, he was pretty big, but he was giving up at least forty pounds. "We're ministers of the word of God sir. On our way to spread the gospel."

"Turn the other cheek, huh?"

'Watch out Paul.' Frank said.

The man turned slightly on his stool, which suddenly shot out from underneath him. He was far from ready and fell. His chin hit the bar as he slid past. Matilda materialized at our elbow. "Hope you don't mind," she said.

The man was slowly picking himself off the floor. She reached down and gave him a hand. Before he could get mad, she said, "I don't like it when some closet queen tries to pick up my man." She was still holding his elbow, and we could see from his expression that she'd found a pressure point and was reinforcing the message.

He had reached the point in his drunkenness where it increased his stupidity. "This is between him and me."

The barmaid stood frozen, the double she'd been pouring was turning into a dozen. The manager was moving towards us. "I was explaining that we were ministers of God's word," we began.

The man yanked his arm free, but she swept his feet out from under him before he could do anything with it.

"He seems to be having trouble with gravity." She said as the manager arrived.

The manager took a look, "Shit, this guy's always trouble. I tell the desk not to rent to him, but they don't listen."

He was not a big man. The drunk had enough power to send him lurching with a roundhouse right as he rose.

She grabbed the drunk, put him in a hammerlock and pinned him against the bar. "Bar fights are so unseemly. Maybe we should step outside."

The manager was getting up slowly. The evening was not going as we had envisioned, but we thought, 'What the hell,' and said, "There's a door to your right."

She shifted her grip slightly, and effortlessly spun him towards the fire door. The drivers at the other end of the bar were off their stools, but seemed interested in the fight only as entertainment.

The door led out to the parking lot. Another trucker was climbing down from his rig, and he ambled over to watch, as she let the drunk go and took a step back.

"I don't fight ladies, I want him."

"I don't want him to hurt his hands on you, he has to play the organ at the prayer meeting tomorrow," she said, giving us a playful glance.

Frank muscled Paul out of the way. "I won't hurt my hands."

"No," she said, "if he insulted you he insulted me." Her right hand flicked out and delivered a loud open handed slap to his cheek that rocked his head. That decided him. He moved towards her, and with the ease of a judo master she launched him. He landed on his back in one of the low shrubs which an architect had used to try and make the transition from the asphalt lot to the cinderblock building graceful.

That flip got a few appreciative sounds from the audience, and his efforts to extricate himself from the bush got a few laughs. They stopped when he came to his feet holding a knife that he must have had in his boot.

Frank got ready to move, but she held her arm out. "Jesus, loves you sir, but you don't learn easy do you?"

Her foot swept up, knocked the knife away, then her other foot came out of nowhere and broke his jaw. It sounded like a piece of plastic being smashed underfoot. She landed on her feet and watched as he toppled back into the bushes.

She didn't bother to watch as he settled into a rather contorted pose. Instead, she took our hand and led us through the quiet crowd.

Our drinks were sitting on the bar. One was full close to the top. She reached for it then changed her mind and took the other.

"You move well."

"Not bad for a reformed sociopath."

Paul took a sip of his drink, "Well, shall we go back to our poetry?"

It was not to be immediately. The manager interrupted us saying, "Thanks, that guy has caused a lot of trouble here."

A trucker chimed in, "Where did you learn that move? I never saw it in any Kung Foo movie."

"That's because you can't pull it unless you want to land on your head." He took a deep look at her and then walked back to his place at the end of the bar.

"I guess we'd better call an ambulance," the manager said to the barmaid.

"Wait a second." Matlida stood on the bar's foot-rail, reached over and plucked a banana off the cutting board. She peeled it, and handed the skin to the manager. "Put this out in the lot first, I'd rather not have to spend the evening talking to any cops."

He smiled, and then dutifully went to the door and tossed the peel into the night. "Good thinking," he said as he returned.

"If I'm going to reform I'm going to miss that kind of thing," she said.

"We can still have the occasional naked karate sessions."

She nodded, "Let's get out of here, before the second act starts." As we walked through the lobby we saw a police car pull up outside. They ignored us as we passed.

Diane was not exactly thrilled by the recounting of the evening's highlight, but she was fascinated by the poems.

There was a period of some small awkwardness as we decided what the sleeping arrangements would be. We suggested to Diane that she might want to air her feelings, but she went into shrink mode and retreated into the adjoining room.

"She's in love with Paul you know."

"Yeah, she'll get over it."

"I'm not sure I mind, Paul's the kind of man I think of as a pet. What I like about you is that you're never going to beg to lick my boots."

"You got that right," we reached for her.

Chapter 21

We were just about at the point in the dream where we woke up sweating - a scream festering in the back of our throat. In jail, cuffed to the bars, being beaten by a procession of people who had tormented us in the past. The steel biting into our wrists as we struggled to avoid the blows. Then the cold steel circle of the gun barrel pressing into the base of our skull. Awake, it still seemed real, and gradually, over a tenth of a second, we realized that the cuffs on our wrists were real.

If they were real, then the gun was too.

Joe jumped out of the control seat in panic and Frank slid in and began to assess the situation. The bed sagged, there was someone sitting on it with us.

Fake sleep? Wait? No. "Matilda?"

"It isn't tinker-belle."

Shit.

'Hey Willie, this is your girl, you talk to her.'

"Hi Matilda, you need some more satisfying?"

"I always liked your sense of humor, and maybe I'll let you die happy, if you give me what I want."

"And what's that?" Frank had taken stock. Our feet were tied, the cuffs tight, the gun steady.

"I want it back."

"The tapes."

"Fuck the tapes, I want the money."

"Can it wait til the banks open? I've only got a couple of thousand in my wallet."

The gun pressed hard, 'Don't piss her off to much Willie.'

"In my bag, the computer, maybe we can hook it up to the phone."

"Already done. Tell me your access and confirmation codes."

'Easy come, easy go.'

Fight for time, "I've got them written somewhere in the bag."

The gun moved away, our briefcase appeared on the bed in front of us. "Tell me where."

'In the leather folder.' Elaine said. 'There's a trick to them.'

"In the leather folder."

'What trick?'

'Let's see if she can figure it out.'

'Elaine don't fuck with her.'

"Wait, there's a trick to them."

'You dope. If she punched those numbers in the bank would put a lock on the account for thirty days. I set it up for this.'

"What trick?"

"Elaine knows, but she's not telling me."

'Forget the money Elaine.'

'It's not that simple.'

The gun tried to commit an unnatural act with our right nostril.
 'She won't kill us until she gets the money right?'
 'Maybe. But it won't be much fun waiting.'
 We felt a hand slip between our legs, it wasn't there looking for fun. 'Elaine!'
 'You guys are pussys. Tell her that the account numbers are wrong. You have to add 1 to the first digit, take one from the second, add two to the third and so on.'
 "The account numbers," we said through clenched teeth, and we told her that part of the code.
 "Clever. nine plus four ... three right?"
 "Yes."
 She bent over a piece of paper on the table between he bed and the window. Frank tested the bonds again, but there was no give.
 "Now, what about the codes?"
 'How about we try let's make a deal?'
 "Elaine wants to negotiate."
 "Maybe the poet wants to write about the pain of having his heart broken."
 The heel of her hand slammed into our chest and slowed time for a minute.
 'Elaine?'
 'I'm thinking. Fake pain for a minute.'
 It wasn't hard. 'What are you doing?'
 'Figuring the odds of faking her out, against the odds of her letting us live anyway.'
 "How do we know you're not going to do us after we tell you?"
 "You don't."
 She got up and walked out of our line of vision. Frank resisted trying to struggle. In a minute we heard her return. She had Diane with her. She was cuffed too, but her legs were free.
 She looked like she wanted to scream, but the tape across her mouth was keeping her thoughts to herself.
 "She can't talk right now, but what do you think she'd tell you to do?"
 She must have twisted something, because Diane's eyes got real big. "OK."
 'Tell her the codes are off the same way as the others, but you start from the right.'
 We relayed that, she turned back to the table and Diane slumped to the floor beside the bed.
 'You'd better be straight on that Elaine.'
 Matilda said, "Ok, first let's see what the Bank of Zurich has to say. Now the customer code." A pause, "Ok so far. Account number." Her fingers tapped.
 "You live a little longer, congratulations."
 "What would I like to do? Move the money, silly bank. To," she picked up another piece of paper. "My account," she typed. Now for the trick - authorization code." Her fingers typed slowly.
 "Let's watch the balance drop." She hit another key, "There it goes." She laughed, "Thank you bank of Zurich."

It took her half an hour to go through the next three banks. When she finished, she folded up the computer and put it in her brief case. "The management will probably charge you more than they ought to for those calls. I'll leave you enough to cover it."

"That will make up for the drinks, you stiffed me on the night we met."

She bent down and looked us in the eye. "To bad you aren't a little more warped, we could have made quite a team."

"Until you ate me, like a spider."

She smiled. "Now, I'm going to surprise you. I'm going to let you live, because by the time you get out I'm going to be too far to chase."

She picked Diane off the floor, and, after ripping off her night gown, she arranged us in a most compromising position and shackled us to make sure we consummated the relationship.

She taped our mouth, and tested the bonds. Frank tested them along with her, and learned that she knew what she was doing. We hoped the maid would have a sense of humor. "I'm going to tell the desk that we want the room for another night and that they should not clean until then. Enjoy yourselves." She slapped Diane on her naked rump and left the room. Through the curtains we saw the car's lights come on a few minutes later and watched it drive off.

'You stupid son of a bitch. You let our defenses down Frank.'

'Wait til the third act.'

'Hey boys, you'll get another chance. She'll be back.'

'Says who?'

'Says the genius who thought this might happen and planned for it.'

We were interrupted in our discussion by the wetness of Diane's tears on our shoulder.

'Shouldn't we try something?'

We summoned up all the spit we could and started working on the tape across our mouth. We decided that Diane would appreciate a gentle hug, such as our bonds afforded, and were rewarded when by a little squirm in return.

Gradually, while not otherwise occupied, we got the tape wet enough so that it lost its hold on our lips. It tasted less than filet mignon, but it contained our daily quotient of hydro-carbons, so we chewed.

Willie liked the fact that Diane was tied up, Joe very reluctantly admitted he was turned on by being bound to her, and Elaine thought the whole thing was romantic, so the three of them joined Paul and took turns enjoying our predicament, as strand by strand we worked our way though the tape.

Freeing our mouth in time to utter some appropriate sweet nothings, was fine, but it didn't do us much good, even after we used our teeth and managed to take the tape off her mouth. "Sorry if that hurt."

"Thanks anyway," she took a deep breath then asked, "can you get us out of this?"

"I don't think so. She linked our arms, and it feels like she taped your ankles together behind me."

"Yes."

"Does it feel tight?"

**She kicked a little, "Yes. Can't we do anything?"
We kissed her.
She decided to make the best of the situation.**

Chapter 22

The maid had a sense of humor. Fortunately she hadn't gotten word from the office to skip the room be for the day.

"You want me to come back later?"

"No. Let us out."

"White folks do the damndest things. How did you get like that?"

"It's a long story. There should be a key for the cuffs in my pants pocket. We hoped they were our cuffs so the key would work.

It did, and we fell apart. We bent down and tore the tape off Diane's ankles. As soon as she stopped grimacing she ran towards the bathroom.

We had the same need and used the bathroom in the adjoining room. Through the door the maid asked, "Do you want me to make up the bed, or will you be wanting to use it again?"

We ignored her and after a moment we heard the door close. We made a note to leave her a nice tip. Though we would have appreciated a mint on the pillow to kill the taste the tape left in our mouth.

Diane was wrapped in a large towel as we emerged. "Well I told you it would be interesting," we began.

She looked at our naked body. "She left the bed,"

"Women. You never think of anything else do you," we said as we moved towards her. "With or without the handcuffs?"

She rubbed her wrists, "Without. And I want Paul."

'I hate to interrupt, but you might want to start thinking about what you want to do when she comes back.'

'Elaine, get off it, she's got the money, she's gone.'

'Not exactly.'

'Tell me.'

'The code, it fed into a pre-programmed sequence that directed the funds out of our account into another account I opened for such an emergency. She made a mistake. She didn't check her balances, she just saw ours go down and assumed.'

'If she had she could have killed us.'

'Not if she wanted the money, besides she enjoys it more knowing that people are thinking about what she did to them. Dead men have no grudges.'

"Hey Diane, Elaine says she wouldn't have killed us because she gets her kicks knowing that somewhere there is someone who spends a lot of time thinking about what she did to them. Is that so?"

Diane had insisted on driving the rental car, I've got to do something, I can't just sit," she'd said. She looked over at us. "She's probably right. Matilda had enough arrogance to enjoy that." She put her eyes back on the road, "Where do you think she is right now?"

"At an airport wondering why her credit cards don't work."

"Oh?"

We explained the trick Elaine had pulled. Her eyes tightened. "I can't predict how she'll react to that. She might care more about revenge than the money."

We nodded, "That's why we think it would be better to take the long way home."

"Long way via where?"

"I hear Canada's nice this time of year."

Chapter 23

"Is something wrong?" It was a rhetorical question, but it was the best we could come up with. She was sitting rigidly, her hands were locked on the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles were white, and tears were running down her cheeks. "Maybe we ought to talk."

She didn't say anything. Then, a few minutes later, she, at the last possible moment, turned the car into a roadside rest area. The tires screamed. The car lurched to a stop at the far end of the lot, and she turned to us.

"Anything wrong," she asked, her voice an octave and half higher?

'Paul you'd better take this one.'

'No thanks, I think Elaine can do better.'

'She's pissed at us because of the other woman, you know it, you've got to take your lumps. I'm not here to get you out of these situations - remember the one who told you she was going to kill herself, I told you then she was the last one I...'

"Anything wrong? You might say that. Between boatloads of gangsters and a woman who could out gun Rambo, I've come closer to being killed than I ever planned on. I'm still trying to figure out if what went on last night constitutes rape. Then there was the humiliation and as I'm getting over all of that - you tell me that the ranking sociopath of the Western World is going to be looking for us." She paused, took a deep breath, "No, Mr. Sensitivity, I don't think anything is wrong."

'Ok, ok, but you're going to owe me big time,' Elaine shifted us in the seat so we were facing her. "Paul's a real asshole isn't he?"

Diane sniffled, "They all are, is that you Elaine?"

"Yeah, who else? None of the others has the guts to face you."

"I don't believe this," she pounded the wheel with her fists.

Elaine continued, "You want to tell Paul just how big an asshole he is, tell him how it made you feel when he went gliding out of the room with her last night?"

That got her attention. "How did you know?"

"A woman's intuition, probably sounds strange coming from me, but it's as good as I can come up with now."

"I tried not to show it. I tried to tell myself it was a part of the healing process for her." She wiped her cheeks, and laughed, "Jesus, what is going on here?"

"Fact - Paul is an immature insecure jerk. He's got a pit of neediness that's deeper than the Grand Canyon. He's also terrified, of rejection and other things, so the minute a woman shows interest in him he runs like a little boy."

'Hey that's being pretty harsh'

"He does it all the time. Hell once he met a woman at a bar and things were going so well he excused himself, allegedly to go to the bathroom, but instead ducked out the door and left her sitting there."

Diane was nodding. "And her?"

"If I hadn't been there I wouldn't have believed it. You remember the film clips of the Beatles and how frenzied young girls threw themselves at the line of police that were guarding the stage?"

Diane nodded.

"Well that's the way it is for guys when she's in the same county." We shook our head. "It's like the full moon or something. She walks into a room and every male hormone in sight goes off like rocket fuel. I don't know where she gets it, some of it has to be her looks, but there's more to it than that, it's something animal, real basic biology. It doesn't hurt that she's a little more than dangerous too. I don't know why but that adds something top her appeal."

Diane was nodding, she was breathing a lot more evenly. Elaine went on, "Why is it that men love shit like sky diving, wrestling alligators, driving too fast, I think she appeals to the same thing."

"Can I speak to Paul?"

"If it helps Paul was not much of a player in it. Frank and Willie didn't give him a chance to be unfaithful. Wait a second, I'll see if I can get him to come out from under the bed."

'That was uncalled for.'

'I've calmed her down some, she probably won't rake our face with her nails, go on, take your lumps.'

"Hi."

"Paul?"

"Guilty. Look I'm sorry..."

"Don't be. What I want to know is - " She stopped. She turned the key in the ignition, and backed out of the space.

"What?"

"No. Never mind."

'What's going on Elaine?'

'I think she's just realized that she doesn't want to find out how you feel about her.'

'Because she'd have to figure out how she feels about me?'

'You've been reading my self help books again.'

'How about I say, Hey you knew I was pretty confused when you met me?'

'No good. No excuses, no putting any blame on her.'

"I'm a jerk. An insensitive asshole. I'm afraid of my feelings, and sometimes use women like a drug to make me feel better."

She didn't respond. "Look, this is all new stuff for me."

'What do I say next?'

'Shut up. Men don't understand that silence can be important too.'

'Since when have you ever been silent?'

She said nothing. Occasionally she'd shake her head, a couple of times she smiled, but for the most part her eyes stayed on the road and she showed no expression. At least she'd stopped crying.

"Did you ever," she said at last, her voice level and even - her shrink voice, "get involved in something that you knew was going to turn out badly? "Even though you knew it was going to be a disaster you kept going?"

'Paul?'

"Yes. I guess so."

"That's what's been going on with me. Ever since the first. I told myself that you didn't really need me to take Catherine up to Hartford. But I went. I couldn't believe it when I heard myself inviting you to go sailing, you remember that?"
There was a slightly barbed note to her voice.

"Of course," Paul answered, "I had a great time."

"Then when you called me that night drunk. I wanted to avoid you, because I was getting myself back to normal. I actually turned the car around twice. I knew it would end badly. The note I was leaving you said that, then when I saw you, I lost it even though I know it can't work."

"Who says so?"

'You bastard. Let her get out if she wants to.'

She hadn't expected that. She turned her head, taking her eyes totally off the road, and said, "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know." We all waited to see what Paul's silver tongue would come up with and kept a wary eye on the road for her.

She waited, eventually turning her eyes back to the road.

Paul, after a couple of miles had passed, cleared our throat then said, "I'm convinced that loneliness, or more specifically trying to fill the emptiness everyone feels inside themselves to one extent or another, is what makes people do the stupid and crazy things they do."

She nodded.

He took a breath and continued. "Sometimes, I think, the instincts may actually make us do things which we don't want to do, but which are ultimately good for us in the long run."

'1. Dig a hole. 2. Dig it deep. 3. Fill it with shit. 4. Take off your shoes. And 5. Jump in head first.'

"Explain that."

"It was the same with me. When we met out on the deck, what the majority of us wanted was to turn you off - get you to leave us alone. We've been pretty good at avoiding shrinks, and you can see why."

"But you didn't."

"No."

"Why?"

"Who knows? Loneliness, angst, chemical attraction, a horoscope cast by a bearded lady in Finland."

"A bearded lady in Finland?"

"You got a better explanation?"

"I'm not sure I care." She said it using her professional voice, but Paul, the seducer, Paul, who was realizing he was struck dumb by love for her, knew it wasn't the real her.

Without thinking that it might be slightly underhanded he said, "If that's the way you feel." His hurt tone said a lot more than the words, he turned our head and looked out the side window beside us.

She tried to wait us out, but couldn't, "You're a real bastard. You know that don't you?"

We turned our head, and caught her eye. "I was just saying."

She cut us off, "What I wish is, I was as big and powerful as she was so I could clobber you and not break my hand."

"We've still got the handcuffs."

A glint passed into and out of her eyes and she turned back to the road. "I'll keep that in mind. After I find a hardware store that's got chainsaws on special."

We laughed, "Chainsaws are a bit too kinky for me."

"Maybe Willie would be interested."

"One personality at a time, I could get jealous too."

Chapter 24

We ended up in Toronto, because she'd always wanted to go there. It was lower on her list than Paris, Athens and Egypt, but it was a lot closer.

The history between us and bankers has been checkered. Except when we were in the company of Roger and wearing a very expensive suit, there is a certain something about us that puts them on edge, makes them reach for the silent alarm when we enter the building.

We had used a credit card to buy a computer. Elaine had confirmed our balances in the hidden accounts, and had set things up to transfer some funds, once we opened an account.

The bank officer was cute, efficient, and a bit skeptical when we told her that a bank in Switzerland was waiting for an authorization to wire a large sum of money to us.

"This is a but unusual, especially for a non-Canadian citizen."

"I'm just a tourist, and have always found it convenient to have a local source of funds if I find something that strikes my fancy."

"But three million U.S. dollars?"

She seemed to be memorizing our face, so she could describe it to whatever authorities she contacted. "Oh, you have account minimums, how much more do I need to open an account?"

"None. We require no minimum balances. She looked at her computer screen, your account number will be," she read it off to us. We, in turn, fed it into the computer which she had reluctantly allowed us to plug into her phone.

"It shouldn't take long," we said, as we watched our balance across the sea drop.

She pushed a couple of buttons, and nodded. "Very good, that was fast." She was no fool. She switched screens and confirmed the transfer.

She was less happy when we told her our address was general delivery, but agreed to have our records sent to her for eventual pickup.

When we left the bank we had two thousand in cash, some blank checks and the promise of a new credit card in a day or two.

"How can you be so relaxed knowing she's going to be gunning for you?"

"Because I know I've got the advantage of having a resident shrink," We squeezed her shoulder and nuzzled her neck.

She was not so easily distracted. "Matilda really was a good actress wasn't she. I was convinced she really wanted help."

We considered it, dismissed it, then re considered it. We wanted to believe that she had been at least a little in love with us. We eventually decided against it, but it was a close vote. There would be a need to deal with her sometime soon, but not now. Not until we'd enjoyed at least some of the fruits of our labor.

We'd never been rich before. We'd never had the opportunity to indulge any fantasy. We turned in the rental car and bought something more robust, more suitable for Canada. We took it right off the showroom floor and had them cram in a few extra goodies. The spoken agenda was for Diane and Paul to get to know one-another better, and to give her some insights into the rest of us. She wore her shrink hat about a third of the time, another third she was a schoolgirl in love and the last third she retained for being thoroughly confused.

Paul was a basket-case too. His idea of a relationship was to put on his pants before dawn and slip out the door leaving a poem pinned to the pillow.

Elaine spent some of the silent time working on new safeguards to insure that Matilda would not be able to get our money on a second try. The first of these was to donate half of it to a variety of bleeding heart causes. She wedged herself in the control spot and resisted Frank's attempts to fund the NRA, and Willie's suggestions to aid beleaguered pornographers and the defense funds of some noted serial killers. The rest of the money she moved here and there, leaving a deliberate trail, then having large sums vanish in a cloud of smoke.

For two days it was fun. The third day dawned gray, and the rain brought a major depression to Diane. "If I was my patient I'd tell myself to get the hell away. That it wasn't possible to run away from life in the arms of a lover." She looked at us and added, "no matter how handsome and strong he was. I've got to go back to my own life."

"What about Matilda?"

"What about her? She's after you - not me."

"Frank's best guess is that she'll come after you to get to us."

She got angry. "So I'm dependent on you for protection until you take care of her, is that it?"

We nodded, "Something like that."

She didn't speak for two hours. She packed her bags and called a cab to take her to the train station.

We tried to dissuade her, we tried to go with her, but she slammed the cab door shut and ordered the man to drive off.

'Should we follow her?'

'No, let her go.'

'What about Matilda?'

'Why should we worry?'

Paul was beside himself. He'd always been able to be the one doing the dumping, and had been able to trade guilt for pain. This time was different. He didn't object as Frank took over, saying the honeymoon ended in divorce court, it's time to get a move on.

He was allowed two nights of closely supervised power drinking in Toronto before we started back.

The woman was back, but was keeping quiet. He was amazed at her ability to survive. Detective Thomas had no idea where Phillips was, and he wanted to know. He wanted to know because he wanted to get a part of the profits before the woman had another chance to blow Phillips. He was a little surprised that she'd

come back from Europe with all her body parts intact. He wondered what Phillips was waiting for.

Chapter 25

A week later we were back in the city. Elaine had spent the first few hours trying to get an electronic track on Matilda, but to no avail. The embassy was apparently empty, the phones un-used, and the car with diplomatic plates not piling up its usual quota of parking tickets.

The call told us we were wrong about that, "I've got the shrink bitch. Come to me if you ever want to see her in one piece again."

We liked people who got to the point right away. We moved the phone to the other ear. "I'm sorry but you've reached a noncaring sociopath. Please check your number and dial again."

We hung up, wondering if she'd call before doing a shrink-kabob.

We didn't really care (at least not a majority). Paul did, but only between the fourth and sixth drinks, and he was hiding in the back of our head with a nasty hangover. Elaine tried to get some points across, but the rest of us cut her off. Joe was convinced that she was a definite threat to our continued existence, and to his amazement found himself agreeing with Willie and Frank.

Willie still had some hopes of getting something going with Matilda. 'After a week chained to the wall, she'll melt in my hands.' This worried Frank who was convinced that she was going to have to be finalized, as he put it. If Willie wasn't going to do it, that left it to him. 'Maybe the cops,' he thought, but the concept was far too alien to even receive a second. Even Elaine wouldn't go along with that.

The phone rang again. Diane's hysteria poured out of the speaker phone. "Damn it Paul, she's going to really hurt me. She's going to do things to me that..."

It didn't work. Matilda came on the phone after we didn't respond. "You afraid to go the distance with me?"

"Not afraid, you just don't have anything I want."

"I've got her."

"Like I said."

"I should have killed you."

"Likewise I'm sure. Why don't you go somewhere else and do it over again?"

"Because I can get it from you much more quickly. Because you are going to have to come looking for me if you are ever to get a good night's sleep again." That was true, we had been on edge ever since returning.

"So what do you want?"

"You. And the money."

"I spent it."

"At the embassy in one hour."

She hung up on us this time, and we regretted not having been quicker.

Frank started drawing up plans while the rest of us argued about what to do. After about fifteen minutes it became clear that there was no good way that we could avoid the invitation.

It was time to get a little help.

The call came just as the detective was starting to give the whole thing up. "I've got a mob scheduled to storm the Embassy about noon. If you can give them a hand I'd appreciate it. Just hold them off until eleven thirty, then let them go. Any pieces you find are yours to keep, and you'll probably find a way to tell the chief that the case is closed."

Nobody would ever accuse that man of being a team player. He set aside his dislike as he tried to figure out how he could hide any of the pieces that Phillips was talking about.

Frank had solved the question about what to wear by changing into a set of overalls that pretended we worked for a cable TV company. He had us park a block uptown and led us into the rear of the block behind the embassy by artfully picking the locks of an apartment building's service entrance.

He also phoned a reporter he knew and arranged to get a good rumor going, a rumor that would get the television stations to interrupt their programs for a special bulletin. It took a while to make our way through the back yards, and up to the top of the building next to the embassy.

The news trucks were pulling up in front as we lowered ourselves down the back wall on a rope.

We hoped she wouldn't hear the glass break as we slipped into the top floor bathroom, and waited for five minutes to make sure.

The top floor was obviously little used, except for the very interesting room she used for filming her special videos. It was being used all right, having provided her a very convenient and secure spot to stash Diane while the spider lady undoubtedly waited in ambush downstairs somewhere.

She was slumped in the steel cage, shackled and gagged to boot, and she did not seem to be as happy to see us as we might have imagined. We thought about letting her out, and retracing our steps out the back, but decided that if the job had to be finished, it might as well be now.

We looked over the locks that secured Diane and realized that freeing her might take a few minutes we might not have.

There was a crowd in front of the building now. We could faintly hear chants coming from the street. If they burned the building it would be better if Diane wasn't chained to a steel cage.

Before we took off her gag we placed our finger across our lips in the universal signal for silence. She nodded she understood, but immediately began crying, and Frank was all for popping it back in when Elaine reminded him he had other things to do. We got some useful, but not unexpected information. Matilda was alone, she had a gun with her, and had mentioned something about frying us. She didn't know where Matilda was waiting for us. We left her huddled in a corner with instructions to go out the window on the rope if she smelled smoke.

The next floor was vacant too. Matilda had a surprisingly feminine bed, lots of ruffles and lace. The next floor down was the one where her office and the reception rooms were. It was up a flight from the street level entrance used by the staff, and had its own entrance from the marble steps that were now covered with reporters, cops and protesters.

The stairs angled toward the front of the building. If she was there we expected her to be in the back. Going down those stairs would walk us into her ambush just as surely as waltzing up the steps and ringing the bell. We retreated into her bedroom and had a short think session. Her bathroom was well appointed, but the plumber had used less than first rate materials for the pipes. Within a minute the water from the broken risers was moving quickly towards the top of the stairs. We moved to the back bath and repeated the act. Water pressure was down a little, but it added nicely to the flow.

We went back upstairs and told Diane to be patient. She tried to hug and kiss us, but there was no time for that, and no time to soothe her sensibilities before we went back to our impromptu ambush.

She had always moved well, but no matter how well you move, a staircase is a very exposed position.

She had a nasty looking gun in her right hand, and what looked like a cattle prod in her left. The grandfather clock which had looked so good on the top landing tilted towards her as we pulled on the fishing line we'd tied to it. The line was nearly invisible, but she saw it and fired a shot in our general direction. The clock toppled towards her, and she had to use most of her agility and all of her concentration to avoid being bowled over by it. It gave us a split second, Frank did not hesitate. He hurled us over the banister with our feet aimed at her shoulders.

She twisted away, but too late to avoid full contact. The gun was our first priority, and we grabbed her arm as both of us hurtled down the stairs. It was more luck than skill that caused us to land on top. But we took full advantage of it and wrenched the gun free, needing to break only two of her fingers and her thumb before she let it go.

We rolled away from her anticipated counter move and just missed being disabled by a blow to the back that caused things to go white for a second.

We aimed the gun at her, and watched as her quick eyes surveyed the situation. The water was starting to come down through the ceiling now, and was going to be a big mess for someone to clean up sooner or later.

A rock came through one of the front windows, setting off one of the spiffy alarms we'd installed. It startled her slightly. It was as good an opportunity as we'd ever have to kill her, but Frank's finger just wouldn't obey.

'Willie, which side are you on.'

'Give me control and find out.'

'Don't do it, Frank,' Elaine said, 'You heard him talking about trying to tame her. Look at her. She can't be tamed.'

She didn't appear to be ready to quit.

She popped her dislocated thumb back into its socket, then hefted the cattle prod in her other hand, as trying to figure out how to throw it.

She rocked back, faked a throw with the prod, and launched a very elegant kick at us. We ducked back and used her foot as a handle by which we were going to slam her into the floor. She wriggled free and went thump rather than thud. On her feet in a second, she looked at us. "Your problem is that you can't kill. You're tough, but if you can't kill you are going to lose in the long run. Remember - I like it - a lot." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a pill bottle. We doubted it was

spiders, but Frank decided he didn't want to find out, his finger found strength, the gun fired, and she smiled.

It was an evil smile, a smile that made Frank wonder what any of us had ever seen in her. "You jerk, you poor dumb psychotic jerk."

She took a step closer, and Frank fired again, aiming reluctantly for her magnificent chest. The sound of the shot was magnified by all the marble in the foyer, but it didn't slow her down. Frank's mind was working on too many things to figure it out immediately. She had taken the top off the vial, we pointed the pistol again, but instead of firing what we suspected might be another blank, we launched a series of kicks.

She was good, she was fast, but the first kick knocked the vial from her now numb hand. The second she deflected, without it doing any damage, but she was unable to avoid the palm strike to the side of her jaw.

It was like hitting a mule, but it rocked her some, and slowed her counter so we easily avoided it. We still had the pistol, if nothing else it would make a good club, but before we could make another move, some more glass shattered in the room to our left. Then there was the distinctive sound of a battering ram on the door behind her. The door was well made, we had surveyed it, but it could only hold for so long under concerted assault. We wondered if it was the mob, or the cops, or maybe Geraldo Rivera looking for a scoop.

The sound seemed to un-nerve her more than us. She risked a quick look behind her. We were sure she was wondering why the street in front of the Embassy was filled with a violent mob.

The ram hit the door again, we heard metal screech as it protested. When she focused her attention back on us, she discovered that we were moving through the door into her office. She followed quickly, entering the room with a leap that was designed to be followed by a roll.

Slamming a door on a pursuer was a trick we'd learned as a child. It works best if it is a heavy solid hardwood door, and the person who is entering the room is off balance, or, as in her case, in the air.

She landed hard, her back hitting the edge of a table, and was unable to put her feet under her immediately.

We used the time to throw a stone bust of someone, who we assumed to be the president of the Maldives Islands, at her. She caught it as though it was a medicine ball, but its momentum made her fall back onto a couch.

She tossed the bust aside and came at us. We partially parried her first blow that numbed our left arm, but were able to lay the pistol butt just above her ear with enough force to stun her.

Frank felt no compunction at following up with a strike that made her go from dazed to blank. She fell heavily, and as Frank was trying to decide what to do next the front door gave a sound of surrender. There was an inner door, but it would hold for only a minute. We left the room and climbed the stairs over the shattered grandeur of the fallen timepiece.

As we climbed the next flight we heard the second door shatter, and the sounds of an invading horde in the hall.

Diane was not in good shape, but she was able to cling to us as we used the rope to swing to the fire escape on the building next door.

There were cops on the roof, they shouted, but did not follow as we lit off across the back yards. The quick way was to unceremoniously lift her over the fences, drop her, and assume she would have the sense to land on her feet. It seemed to work, or else she was beyond complaining.

In four minutes we emerged from the service entrance to the apartment building onto a street that was seemingly untouched by the riot that we could hear taking place behind us.

We thought about wandering around the corner and taking a gander, but decided against it when Diane started to cry. It wasn't the tears, but the strange little shrieks she uttered between sharp intakes of breath.

We hustled her to the car and shoved her inside before we ran into any stray cops. It took her half an hour to calm down. The shrieks were replaced with sobs in a few minutes, but they returned when we got stuck in traffic in the mid-town tunnel for ten very long minutes.

We had no particular destination in mind, just distance, and it wasn't until we crossed into Nassau County that we thought about taking her to the boat.

When she'd quieted down some, we turned the radio to a news station which soon began its chronicle of horrors. "A major riot took place on East 67th Street today when some thousands of protesters stormed the Embassy of the Maldiv Islands. The crowd was there apparently in response to an earlier news story that reported that the Embassy was being used as a center for the distribution of large amounts of drugs, and that director of security for the embassy who was to turn over the miscreants to police at noon had announced that he was going to return the profits from this enterprise directly to the people." Our voice came over the radio. "After the arrests we will be distributing an estimated ten million dollars in cash to anyone who can claim to be a victim of drug abuse or a drug related crime." The announcer resumed, "It is unclear exactly what happened on 67th St. By several accounts the building was stormed by the mob which had grown impatient when the appointed hour passed. According to other reports the Police assisted the crowd in battering their way into the Embassy, and stood by while the building was ransacked. We will have more on this story when information becomes available."

"That was you."

"Yep," we replied modestly.

"What about her?"

"I don't know. I left her lying on the floor."

"I heard shots."

"Blanks. I have to give her credit."

"You left her where?"

"Unconscious on the floor. The crowd was about to get in and I didn't want to stay and explain that the story was a hoax."

"So she's alive."

"I would guess so. It would take more than being trampled by an hysterical mob to kill her."

"Where are we going?"

"To your boat, ok?"

"Yes. She knows where I live. She kicked the front door in when she came to get me."

"I doubt that she'll be in immediate pursuit, but it seemed the best choice."

Chapter 26

"We can't go on meeting like this."

"You're right." She smiled as she stepped out into the cockpit and surveyed the harbor. She looked better after twelve hours of sleep. She set her coffee down and pulled a book out of its place under the winch.

"What's that?"

"Tide table, I'm trying to see when it will be best to head out."

"Where are we going?"

"South, I thought. I figure we can hole up in the Chesapeake bay until the Hurricane season ends. Then maybe we'll get a little bigger boat and go find a desert island somewhere."

'This sounds like she's decided on entering into a long term relationship.'

'Sounds like it,' Paul replied. 'I guess there's nothing like a little kidnapping, to make you appreciate the security of being with us.'

'With me,' said Frank. 'And I don't like it. And neither will you Paul when you figure out that being with her means you're on the wagon.'

"Don't you think we ought to get some food, and whatever else we might need before we head into the open ocean?"

'Good move Paul, I'll go shopping with her and she'll have to realize we're totally incompatible.'

'No good.' Elaine said, 'The rest of us don't want to live on Mallomars and peanut butter.' A visit to the supermarket by ourselves was a trial, but with her it promised to be more fun than an eel in a condom factory.

"We might as well warn you," we said as we grabbed a shopping cart, "We sometimes have a little trouble doing things like this."

That perked her right up. "Trouble?"

"Well, we have different tastes, you might say. For example Willie likes raw liver, and Joe is pretty much a vegetarian."

"Paul too, if I remember?"

"Yeah, except when he's drinking."

That made her eyes go cold. "No booze on the boat."

'If we make an issue of this, we can get out now.'

She was watching us. "Excuse us a minute, why don't you go off and start, we'll catch up to you?"

"I want to see this, I'm interested in what's going on."

We looked up the aisle, the place was pretty much deserted. "We need to iron a few things out. It doesn't involve you."

"Doesn't involve me? I spent thirty four years of my life not even coming close to getting killed. Then I meet you and I've been shot at, chained to walls and to you. There's a woman out there who spent three hours describing how a course of sexual torture would help me get in touch with my feelings, and she's going to be looking for me. If I'm going to be on a boat with you, I want to know if there are going to be any more surprises."

"Ok, you really want to know what's going on?" Frank paused, "I, Frank, don't trust you, don't think that it's a good idea for Paul to get involved with you. I'm trying to talk the others out of this ocean voyage."

"What about the others?"

'Paul?' "I'm Paul. I want to go, but I'm still hurt about when you left us in Canada and I don't like the no booze shit. You want to be rigid that's cool for you, but where do you get off telling me what to do? here's Elaine"

"I'm looking forward to the trip, I want to get to know you better, but it isn't going to be easy for the others, especially Paul. You've got some work to do around relationships too, if you don't mind my saying so."

Diane was pretty amazed by the situation, we'd never paraded in front of her before. She shook her head.

"This is Joe. I'd rather be doing other things, but I feel an obligation to protect you as some of us got you into it, and it will give me time for bible study, especially if they aren't able to carouse. That leaves Willie..."

She must have seen something in our eyes. She took a half step back. "Hey, don't get nervous girl, you know if you're going to get involved you're going to have to get along with all of us. Sort of like your in-laws but a lot closer. I mean your brother in law doesn't watch you have sex, unless you have a nicely dysfunctional family." He paused, "I'm, as you know getting over a failed relationship, and I'm going to need a little comforting."

His eyes were fixed on her breasts. "I also want to talk to you about that night in the motel, the one with the handcuffs, you know some times us psychotics can see things in people that they try to deny themselves. That bitch might have been right about some things."

Diane spoke, "The way I count it, it's three more or less for going, Frank's against it, and what about you?"

"You going to fuck Paul?"

She blushed. "Or," Willie continued, are you going to give all of us a chance?"

'Jesus Willie, let up will you?'

'Just seeing what she's made of. Seeing if she's up for the rigors of a sea voyage.'

Diane, stared at us, her eyes were hard and cold. "You think you're man enough for me?" She took the cart from us. "If you're coming start shopping. If you're not, hit the door."

'More guts than I'd have imagined,' said Frank.

Willie conjured up a memory of her naked on the boat, 'let's go, it beats spending winter in the city.'

Chapter 27

It took us all afternoon to put the food away. We figured she'd spend the night at the dock, and leave in the morning, but she pulled out the charts, and fired up the engine as soon as we'd finished dinner.

"We're going now?"

"I like sailing at night, don't tell me you're afraid of the dark?"

'This woman's going to say something smart like that to me one of these days, and,'

'Shut up Frank,'

'No problem captain.'

She took us around the eastern tip of Long Island, and set us on a course that took advantage of the cool northwest wind. "We'll have to keep alert when we cross the shipping lanes, those tankers don't pay a whole lot of attention to boats this size."

As darkness took hold, we, through Paul's poetic eyes, understood what she'd meant about the beauty of night at sea. The stars were brighter and seemed closer, and the sounds of the boat sliding through the water, and slicing through waves seemed magnified. Diane was still in a bitchy mood, and after a couple of hours of occasional small talk, Elaine told Paul that she wanted to have a turn.

"At the supermarket, I told you that you were going to have to work some things through, I hope you didn't mind."

Her voice sounded startled, "Who's that, Elaine?"

"Yes."

"It's going to take me a while to get used to you switching like that. And no I wasn't upset by it."

"Do you want to talk about anything?"

She was quiet for a minute, "I probably should, but I'm not sure I want the others to hear. Can you do anything about that?"

"Not a lot, Paul especially is nosy. Willie is likely to be off somewhere fantasizing about feeding puppies to sharks or something. Frank's keeping watch for tankers, so he'll ignore what's going on, and Joe is mostly interested in saving your soul."

"Well," she hesitated, "I guess Willie was the one I was worried about the most."

"If he comes back, I'll tell you, ok"

"Yes, please." She bent over and checked the compass, "I guess it would be best to start with Canada. I can go forward and back from there, and I guess I feel I owe Paul an explanation."

'You bet you do.'

"What I was - was scared. I've been a shrink for nine years, but I've spent most of my time working with mixed up rather than really disturbed people."

"Before she came into your room that night, Matilda had me tied up and, talked to me for a couple of hours. I think she saw it as a way to get to you, to

somehow get you under her control. She was real good at that, she told me how she used to be able to get men to do anything for her. She's a very disturbed person. A pure sociopath, and that scared me and made me feel like I wasn't very good at what I do. I guess it would be like a mechanic who can put air in the tires and change the oil in a car has someone drive in who needs his transmission worked on." She paused, "and, when I wasn't seeing anyone I didn't really miss it that much, but starting with the first time on the boat, I started getting wrapped up in how lonely I was, and something you said about Paul hit home, about how when things started getting intense he got scared and ran. I have to admit I've done the same thing. Maybe I was doing that a little, but the other part was I also saw that I was getting myself involved in what had to be the most impossible relationship I could ever have imagined. I've had a zillion patients that's happened to, and it's been easy to point that out to them, and I've sat and watched as they haven't listened and have ended up getting themselves hurt."

"And you don't want to get hurt."

"I don't want to get hurt. I probably spend too much time looking at myself, and I know I'm far to rigid, but I guess I come by it honestly."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is I was a goody-two-shoes kid. I was second in my class in High School. I was near the top in college, and when I discovered how booze could let me relax I took to it like a fish to water." She paused, checked the compass, and sat down closer to us this time.

"Elaine, I've got a strange question for you."

"What is it?"

"What about sex?"

"What about it?"

"Are you attracted to men?"

Elaine checked to make sure Frank, Joe, and Willie were not listening before answering. "Sometimes, a little, women too, I guess if I had to answer I'd say I was bisexual. I went to a gay bar with Willie a few times, but nothing much happened."

"What about women?"

"Well when the others, Paul especially, are with women, I sometimes sort of eavesdrop, if that's what you call it. Anyway I enjoy it, while they're concentrating on the penis end of things I can enjoy the feeling of their bodies on me."

"The reason I asked was I was wondering if you'd put your arm around me."

"Sure." She turned some, and settled back as we wrapped an arm around her.

"You were also probably pretty curious."

"That too."

"Where was I? Canada, why I left. I was running, and when I got back I was pretty sure I had done the right thing until I went out in the boat one day and had wall to wall memories of you, or Paul or whoever."

"Then when she grabbed me, I wanted you to come and rescue me so badly. I knew you were my only hope. She had me for two days before you got home, and I came awful close to breaking. If she'd known about my drinking, and had offered

me a drink I probably would have taken it." She snuggled a little closer, "God she scared me, she was so cold, she teased me with pain and tortured me by letting my imagination go wild about what she would do to me next. She didn't do much really, that's the mark of a real pro, she said. She also, made me think about sex some. Paul or Frank, whoever it was - was right when he said she had some sort of animal attraction. That really confused me. She told me that after she took care of you she'd turn me into her lesbian love slave. I didn't believe it. But I did. I know that most people are a little bisexual, usually one side is repressed, with no problems, but she had a way of making me wonder about myself. I knew she would try and twist me just for the fun of it. I was praying that you'd get there when you came. I wanted you to sweep me up in your arms and take me away - and when you went downstairs, I thought I was going to die."

"Then I heard the shots and imagined you dead, and was waiting for her to come up and tell me, but then when it was you, I just sort of lost it. I don't remember much except you kept lifting me up and dropping me."

She squirmed in our lap and put her face close to ours. "You can change back to Paul if you want."

Elaine decided she didn't want, and kissed the offered lips herself.

'Hey,' Paul said, 'That's my job.'

'If we're going to have a long term relationship you're going to have to get used to sharing.'

Chapter 28

If nights at sea are beautiful they also can be very long. Fatigue and a cold front which was reported to be bearing down on them made them decide to head for safe haven at Atlantic City. The season was all but over and they had no trouble finding a dock near one of the casinos that wasn't built on the boardwalk.

As tired as they were, the prospect of being able to stretch their legs seemed more inviting than curling up in a cramped bunk, so while Diane slept we took a walk. 'Hey Joe, what do you say we take a look inside the casino?'

Joe had been thinking the same thing, he was curious to see the shrines at which the heathen worshiped the money god. It wouldn't be that different, he was telling himself, than seeing St. Peters if you were in Rome. He might not believe in the god, but it would be interesting to see. Still he was nervous about entering. 'You want to gamble don't you?'

'Gamble, no. That's for suckers, I've got a system I want to try out. With the five of us we should be able to keep track of the cards that are played, and it will be a sure thing. Wouldn't you like to take some money from these sinners?'

He'd never been all that good at asserting himself. Besides if they lost, as he was sure they would it would be a good lesson in humility for them.

Joe admitted it was a slick operation, the waitresses wearing outfits that practically threw their breasts at you, the ease with which Frank had cashed a check for considerably more than he'd anticipated, the way the tables drew customers to them. It would make for a good article for the church's monthly magazine. He would write it as an observer, and not really lie. Frank was having trouble with his system, and seemed to be having bad luck to boot.

'Let me try.'

'Go for it Willie,' he said disgustedly.

We got up from the blackjack table, and at Willie's direction went directly to the roulette wheel. 'You know the odds Willie, this is a sucker's game.'

'Right,' he said as he got three hundred dollars worth of chips and plopped them down on 13.

The croupier spun the wheel and sent the ball spinning around the lip. "No more bets."

Gravity took hold and the ball slid down onto the moving wheel, bounced twice, and settled in a slot. "Thirteen," the man said unemotionally, and immediately began to move a large pile of chips across the table towards us.

Before Willie could reach down to scoop them up, he felt a warm soft presence at his side, and turned to see a very good looking woman who was pressing her left breast against his arm. A moment later a man in a blazer, started speaking to her. "I told you to find another casino."

"Who are you?" Willie asked.

"Hotel security." The man fancied himself something of a tough guy. Willie thought it would be fun to make him cry, but decided against it. "Why are you talking to my wife?"

The man's eyes grew cold. "If she's your wife then you've got some questions to ask her."

"Like what?"

"Like why has she been arrested for solicitation twice in this hotel in the last month."

Willie turned to the croupier, "Cash me out."

He turned back to the security man and said, "When do you get off duty?"

The man bristled, but did not reply.

"Because I think you owe my wife an apology, and I mean to get it."

Another hotel man appeared and watched as Willie took the chips from the table. "Can I be of assistance sir?"

"Yeah, tell this guy that he needs to get another job."

She was hanging tightly onto our arm now and guided us across the floor to the cashier's windows. With a significant wad in our pocket she put on an impressive huff as we walked out of the casino.

Outside, she said, "Thanks, you did me a favor. Would you like me to do one for you?"

Willie leered at her, took her arm and steered her across the street to another hotel where he rented us a suite.

The hotel had spared little expense and had succeeded in making the room a very high grade of tacky. Willie took the money out of his pockets and spread it out on a table. He spread it out thinly so it covered a large area. "Look at that will you?"

'I don't like this,' said Elaine.

'What's not to like, Willie alone in a room with a woman, and a fully stocked bar?'

'Can't we do something?'

'Lay off you guys, it's my turn. Besides, she's not going to do anything she doesn't want to do.' He took us over to the bar and poured two large drinks.

She was looking at the money, her eyes were counting, the sultry look had been replaced with one of pure greed.

"I'm glad you're a pro."

She turned to us, took the drink, and licked her lips, using a lot of tongue in the process.

Willie gathered up the money into one large pile, and said, "It makes things a lot simpler. You want it. You earn it."

"That's pretty simple," she said, her eyes going back to the pile.

He took five hundreds, "This is for the dress." Our hand reached out and tore it from her body. Her eyes got scared for a second, but they eased as we pushed the money towards her.

Thumbing off a few more bills and piling them on the table he said, "this little pile is for straight sex." Another larger pile grew next to it. "This is for a little something extra. And," He pushed the whole stack closer to her, "It's all yours if you're willing to go all the way."

Her eyes flicked to ours before heading back to the money.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Do you care? For nine thousand dollars?"

She looked up from the money, but only for a moment. Willie knew he had her. "Nine thousand dollars for three hours, that's three thousand an hour. And I'll bet that you end up enjoying it too."

'Willie, we got to talk.'

'Bug off.'

'We talk or we'll let Joe preach a sermon and sing hymns while you play.'

'So what do you want?'

'A promise.'

'What, that I'll be gentle?'

'That you won't kill her.'

'What do you think I am?'

'An out of control sex maniac.'

'Well ok, so sometimes I get a little carried away, but it's my turn.'

'And no blood, you can't cut her.'

'Hey, I learned a lot from Matilda. I won't hurt her too bad. I won't kill her. I won't even get the sheets bloody. Maybe one drop here and there, that's all.'

She'd moved over to the bed, and was lying on it striking seductive poses.

"So what do you like big man?"

'Time to go. The meter's running, stick around though, you might like it.'

We turned to her, and Willie took great satisfaction as a look of fear came over her as she looked into her eyes. It took all our efforts to keep Willie from going that extra little ways that would push her over the edge.

As she left Willie said, 'She earned every penny, but I kept my word, she was able to walk out of here without a trail of blood.'

'Hobbled, would be a better description. And she's going to hurt for a couple of weeks.'

'The marks will be gone in three days. Four at most. And after a while she really got into it.'

'You mean before or after she fainted?'

'She came to right away, and at the end she kissed me when I gave her the money.'

Willie spotted a liquor store across the street. 'What we need is to get blasted, then maybe you guys will shut up.'

'Willie, you've got to get out. You can't do that.'

'Says who? I've got things I want to do.' Images of blood flashed across our consciousness.

'Damn it, you'll ruin everything.'

'You've got it backwards. You're the ones who are off. The longer you think we can lead a normal life the harder we're going to fall.'

'What the hell do you mean by that?' Frank, who normally supported Willie's rights, was clearly nervous.

'You know what I mean. With the four of you it's like walking a tightrope. One false step and you think you're going to fall., and you will if you keep the dark side of us bottled up.'

Willie paused and headed us towards a liquor store.

'Damn it Willie, I don't want to have to do it.'

'What? You can't stop me.'

'You know I can.'

We stopped. Willie said, 'You promised.'

'Yeah, but our life depends on it. You get us drunk now and something's going to happen. Something we can't dig ourselves out of and the chances are that life won't be worth living.'

'So is that so bad? Are you sure that it's worth living now?'

'To the rest of us, yeah.'

'You actually think that going back to the boat is going to mean that we're going to be able to lead a good life? You're full of it. You know that If I go, the rest of you are going to have to deal with all the shit.' He paused filing our head with a collection of horrors from our childhood. He ended them with the kitten that had been doused with lighter fluid. 'You know you aren't up to it.' It was good Elaine wasn't in control because we would have puked on the spot.

Joe spoke up, 'If we have to, we can deal with it.'

We felt him shrug our shoulders. 'I'll go, but I'm going to stick around and watch you fall apart. Sooner or later you're going to need me, and when you do I'll either let you die, or I'll make you give me what I want.'

He was gone. Paul slipped into control and steered us away from the liquor store and back towards the dock.

Diane asked where we'd been, and Paul lied skillfully enough to get us past her and into the bunk where we fell into a sleep that was punctuated by conflicting night-mares.

Chapter 29

'I want to do it again.'

'No way Willie. You had your fun, and that's it.'

'This time it will be different. I'll find some sicko who really likes it. Remember that bar up in the city we went to a couple of times?'

'No way. Don't make a fuss or we'll get the shrink to cut you loose.' Joe was sure we were going to burn in hell for yesterday, and he spoke before thinking.

'I knew it. I knew you were plotting against me. Well, all I've got to say is that you'd better be careful, because if you get careless and I get back in control, I'll never let go, at least not until they've got us locked up in a rubber room that's surrounded by a fifty foot wall.'

'Hey Willie, don't listen to him,' said Frank. 'We won't do that, but you have to remember that we've got to work together. You don't want to be stuck in a cell with us for the rest of our life.'

'Maybe not, but I don't think I want to be stuck with this shrink chick for much longer either. She's boring, and when is she going to start putting out for us again?'

'Soon,' Elaine said, surprising them all. 'It takes a little time, and disappearing like that made her a little nervous. Once we get to some secluded cove and the sun comes out, she'll come around. There's a wild streak in her too. Remember that time up on deck?'

'That's not wild, it's disgusting.'

'Easy Joe, compare it to Willie's last conquest.'

'So when are we going to get there? Why anyone would buy a boat that thinks eight miles an hour is fast is beyond me.' Frank was getting antsy. There was no room to jog, and doing situps holding onto the anchor was getting boring.

'Hey, we had a pretty good time last night.'

'Sitting in the cockpit drinking hot chocolate and listening to her talk?'

'It's better than talking to ourselves all the time, besides, I think she's really getting to love us.'

'Is that what we want, Elaine? Want to take a poll?'

'Yes, I think that's what we want, even if we can't admit it.'

'And you think she's the one for us?'

'It helps that she's a shrink. If anyone can handle the little something extra we bring into a relationship, it will be her.'

'The girl at the hotel showed she could take a lot too.'

'A little expensive though.'

'We got lots of money, don't you remember. We can buy what we want. Why should we have to get fucking involved?'

'Because our life is turning into one of Paul's poems. One of the sad lonely ones. You know, "The empty night casts shadows deep into my heart."''

'Hey that one wasn't so bad, you got the meter wrong.'

'You should talk Paul, you've been giving her the boyish grin again.'

'What if I have? Can I help it if she's the only woman in ten miles?'

The sound of the hatch sliding back ended the discussion for a while. She emerged, and focused the binoculars on a passing buoy. "We're making good time, and the forecast says it's going to warm up later." She smiled, the tight thin smile we were getting used to, and then sat on the seat opposite us. Then out of the blue she said, "You went out drinking when we got to Atlantic City didn't you?"

"Not me, but Willie had a couple, yeah."

"Willie? I thought you didn't let Willie out much." Her eyes were narrowed, and not from the sun.

"It's kind of complicated, but he won't stay in the background unless we let him out every once in a while."

"And what did Willie do?"

"Had a couple of drinks."

"And?"

"He gambled some in one of the casinos. Why?"

"Why?" She repeated.

We didn't fall for the shrink trick. So eventually she answered the question. "Why do I want to know? Could it be because I'm trying to figure out what I'm getting myself into? Could it be because I'm worried about you?"

"Worried about me?"

"Yes. Maybe I don't need to be. But I am. I have the feeling that you could start going through big changes pretty soon, and I don't know that I can help you with it, especially if some of you don't trust me."

'Elaine what's going on?'

"What's this about Diane?"

She drew her feet up on the seat and sat hugging her knees. The wind blew her hair, and pushed a tear across her cheek. "I guess it's about me too. Did you ever wonder why I don't have a regular practice?"

"You said you specialized in crisis situations."

"I do. But I got into that because I had a problem, a case that got away from me. It happened at the end of my drinking, and there are a lot of things I can blame, but the simple answer was I missed something and one of my patients killed herself."

"You think I'll do that?"

"No, I don't know, I just know that I couldn't handle it if..." She didn't finish the sentence.

"Wait. Are you seeing yourself as a our lover or our shrink?"

She shook her head, but said nothing.

"Do you think it's your job to rescue us?"

She shook her head again. Her eyes didn't meet ours, which was just as well as ours were getting angry fast. Frank was ready to tell her where she could put her psychology text books, Elaine was confused, and not sure she shouldn't feel a little used. Paul wasn't sure he didn't like the idea of someone trying to mother us, and Willie gloated.

The silence lasted fifteen minutes before Elaine said, "Aren't we a pair?"

Diane looked up and nodded.

"You know what Willie says?" Paul asked, deciding he was willing to take a risk.

She shook her head, "What does Willie say?"

"He says what you need is to be fucked until you forget all that self crap and stop feeling sorry for yourself."

"He said that?"

"More or less, I guess you could say he was a bit more succinct."

"And a little more graphic, I'll bet."

"I guess you could consider, 'until she starts making little whimpering sounds and her eyes roll up back in her head, 'graphic.'"

She smiled again, this time it was not tight, it was a loose sloppy smile. A loose sloppy sexy smile, the kind that made Paul forget who he was.

The embassy fiasco had almost cost him his job, Detective Thomas thought. It was partially his fault for not keeping out of sight better. It also was that prick Phillips' fault for not clueing him in to what was going down. The only thing that had saved him was being to be able to report that the woman seemed to be out of business for the moment. Better yet she'd lost her job and her immunity, so he'd have a chance of nailing her the next time she made a move.

Phillips had blown town without so much as a good-bye card, let alone a cut of the action that he figured had to run into seven figures. He was thinking that it was better to invest in the woman's future than to wait around for Phillips to remember the debt he owed. He'd managed to do her a couple of major favors when the mob was looting the Embassy. One was getting her out of there alive - the other was letting her hole up in his apartment.

She'd made it up to him the next night, and then some. But, before the sweat had begun to cool, she was asking him if he could help her find the bad man who'd run off with her inheritance.

He prided himself for having stuck to his guns and gotten a promised percentage out of her before bankrolling her mission of revenge. He had the feeling she was going to come out on top. From what she'd told him Phillips seemed to have lost his edge. Or maybe his marbles. He didn't care which. Either one was enough of an advantage to let a pro like her take him down.

He could understand why men had thrown themselves at her feet. He'd thought about following her when she took off following a lead that headed south. He'd decided against it when she said, "I don't want our partnership to end like the last one." She'd said some other things too, but hadn't used words to say them.

Chapter 30

A fresh breeze ruffled the water. The sun's reflection was broken and shattered as though it was shining on a vacant lot covered with broken bottles. The waves lapped against the hull which tugged gently at the anchor line.

"When we look for a new boat, the first thing I'm going to check is how big the bed is," she said as she slid her thigh over our leg. "Not that I don't like cozy," She stopped talking and put her lips to better use.

Paul was feeling confined, and not just by the size of the bunk. He shied away, but Elaine slipped into his place before Diane could notice. 'This is getting stranger and stranger,' said Frank who found himself getting interested in spite of himself. She was far too mushy and clingy for his taste, but he rationalized that he had to make do with what was offered. Besides, his type, the cold remote ones, never seemed to leave their numbers.

Annapolis was a sailboat town. Diane decided to stop there to shop for a boat that was better suited for the voyage she had in mind. The voyage that recently had been extended to include Venice and the Greek islands.

The boatyard was glad to see us on a slow weekday at the end of the season. We discovered that people treat you very nicely when you tell them you are looking to spend large amounts of money and are willing to give them a chance to take it. We played the big spenders role to the hilt. Dinner in expensive restaurants ashore, a spending spree in a marine supply store for hi-tech waterproof outfits that cost more than business suits, and other bits of gear. There were three boats to choose from which had large enough beds, and were up to Diane's standards of seaworthiness.

Frank's warnings that Matilda could pick up on our credit card spree were cast aside as we got caught up in Diane's excitement. She crawled through engine rooms, listened intently to exhausts, and took test sails on the three finalists. At the end of the second day she turned to us, and said, "I think this is the one."

"We kind of like the one at the end of the dock."

She furrowed her brow, "Why?"

"I like green better than blue. Elaine says the bathroom is better."

"You don't buy a boat because of the color or the bathroom, which, by the way, is called the head." She then started to tell us all the good points of this boat. The yacht broker was standing patiently on the dock, and, in truth, we didn't really care. Besides, being able to steer from inside if it rained or someone was shooting at you appealed to some of us.

We nodded. "So let's do it." She threw her arms around us and then led us up to the broker's office to fill out the papers.

We tried to get her to register it in her name, but she insisted on having both our names on the papers. Frank who had masterminded our previous life in which our phone, gas, and electric bills each were made out to a different person, had a fit, but he was overwhelmed by Elaine who was intent on changing the curtains, and Paul

who was trying to come up with the perfect name, one which was amusing without being too cute.

That was not going to be easy, the others had some ideas too, 'I'd like something like Saving Grace,' said Joe. Willie came out of his sulk long enough to suggest 'Fido'. Elaine and Frank had no immediate suggestions but claimed veto power.

Another two days were spent transferring gear, purchasing food and other sundries, and getting ourselves to believe that we were, even superficially, what the broker had called, "A fun couple." We had broken in the bed the first night, and the night before we sailed, Diane called us, "dear."

Nobody had ever called us dear before. Not in living memory had any woman had a cutesy name for us. We said nothing until we could figure out how to tell her that she should not use such words without seriously offending her and cutting off our access to sex.

Chapter 31

"When you pay lots of money, sometimes you get what you pay for." Diane's grin was wide and infectious. A stiff breeze was making the boat move like the thoroughbred the broker had said she was. She slid through waves that had bounced the previous boat around. By trading up we had gained two miles an hour in our average speed, and a good audio system to boot. Joe was already making plans to send away for cassettes of sermons and a set of the hundred favorite hymns of all time.

Despite the increased speed of the new boat we wound up traveling about the same distance each day. Diane would, about noon, start scanning the charts for good anchorages for the coming night. More often than not she chose a place that was closer rather than pushing on. She was loosening up in other ways too, having adopted bikini bottoms as the uniform of the day except when cooking or the breeze turned too cool. Gradually we told her things which we'd never told anyone before. Paul's poetry bloomed, and Elaine began to keep a journal.

One night a couple of weeks later we ate at a restaurant that was situated on the edge of the inland waterway somewhere behind Cape Hatteras. Captain Tony's Dock and Dine - Food and Drink. The ramshackle dock was better put together than the meal had been, and the rest of the patrons seemed to know something about the cook, and sat at the bar drinking their dinners. The one thing to come out of it was the owner told us we could stay overnight at the dock if we wished. "It gives the place a touch of class," he confided to us. It gave Elaine an opportunity to plug our computer in to an 800 telephone number and do a little snooping. It was as though Matilda had vanished from the face of the earth as far as the banking and credit industries were concerned. She didn't bother to search much more because there was no telling what name she was using these days. She did notice that someone had taken an interest in us though. She'd laid a simple little trap to see if our records had been accessed and found that someone had taken a quiet look a week or so ago. They hadn't tried to tamper with anything and lots of people poked around financial databases, but she told Frank they ought to be on the lookout.

Fortunately the wind was from off the water which kept the most of the bar's noise and the exhaust from the kitchen's fans away from us. We were quietly sitting in the cockpit when the door to the bar flew open and a screaming woman emerged. She was immediately followed by a bellowing man who told her that she was going to get exactly what she deserved. The combatants were illuminated by the neon sign beside the door. He wasn't any taller than she, but he had a beer belly that gave him a fifty pound weight advantage.

She struck the first blow, and he proved he had no compunctions about hitting women by knocking her down with a right to the face. She got up and attacked again, he pushed her away, walked to his truck and took off into the night his tires spitting gravel and raising a cloud of dust.

The woman had wandered down along the dock cursing through swollen lips. "Maybe we should give her some ice or something," we whispered. Diane squeezed

our hand, but made no move. The woman walked past, and eventually headed back into the bar.

"I want you to congratulate me."

"Congratulations. Why?"

"I would have gotten involved in the old days. Diane the white knight to the rescue."

"What's wrong with getting involved?"

"When it's not my fight and I'm not invited?"

"I see your point."

she sighed, "I've seen this before, five bucks says he'll be back in an hour and they'll go home together."

Frank gave Paul a nudge, "I'll take that bet, and I'll bet you five bucks she leaves in some one else's pickup." We'd taken a good look at her as she passed. She was an attractive woman. We had also seen her undo the then top button her blouse before she went back inside the bar.

In the end we had decided that we had better things to do than stay up to settle a couple of bets, so we never learned the end of the story. She wasn't on the dock the next morning when we moved out into the early morning mist,

Chapter 32

Matilda watched the boat from across the bay and plotted her attack. This time it had to be done right. Twice he'd wimped out when he had a chance to kill her, she couldn't bet that would happen again. She couldn't give him another chance. She'd been sloppy with him, and that had to stop. The anger burned in her belly. She wanted to put her hands on him and feel his large body shudder as she took him places he'd never been before. Maybe, if she could, she'd take him away. Given enough time, she had plans for the bitch too, but he was first. She couldn't believe he'd taken up with that mousey broad. Usually men never touched another woman after they tasted her.

She shook off the stray thoughts. She hadn't gotten where she was by taking unnecessary risks. She'd gotten to where she was by getting people where she wanted them. It had taken all of her reserve fund, and a little squeeze on the cop to finance this. He still had her money and she was going to have to get it back before killing them. That was the complication, otherwise she'd simply blow the boat up. She was glad that wasn't an option - it would have been too quick a death for him.

She brought the engines down to idle. There was no sense in getting too close. The bay opened up in another mile, that would give her the opportunity to slip by without attracting any notice. Her plan was to wound him and then take him captive. It would take a while to get what she wanted out of him. That part she was looking forward to. She also would make sure the money was where it was supposed to be before she finished him off. She couldn't believe she'd allowed him to fool her the last time. About as dumb as a hooker taking a check, she thought. She'd been spoiled by men who were afraid to risk her anger.

She had resisted making her move the night before when they were tied up to the dock at the restaurant. She wanted to get them somewhere very private. Over the past few days they had shown a fondness for remote anchorages and she was betting that they would take a detour into a deserted bay up ahead. She would be waiting.

Chapter 33

The flare rose from the water to our right - like god drawing on the sky with lipstick. We were exploring a pretty bay, a backwater which stretched between nowhere and the backside of a Marine base, and hadn't imagined there was a boat within miles of us. Diane was already looking through the binoculars, and was giving us instructions, telling us to turn. "It's a power boat, seems to be low in the water. Furl the jib, and head up another five degrees."

The distance between us and the stricken boat lessened. We were busy firing up the engines, and striking the sails, and did not take a good look at it until we were pretty close. There was no one visible on deck, it rocked in the swells as it drifted, pushed only by the wind. As we approached, Diane took the controls and sent us forward. We were trying to figure out who had shot the flare, and why, when the bow hatch popped open and a yellow suited figure stuck his head and shoulders out. The wind blew the hood back from his head and revealed a mass of blonde hair we recognized. Her hands came into view holding an ugly little machine gun. Somehow we doubted it was filled with blanks, and decided not to worry about how she'd found us until later. Diane yelled, and we heard the engine throb heavily as she increased power. Matilda slowly turned the gun towards us, as we tried to figure out a move. For once Frank felt helpless. We were weaponless, too far to attack, but too close to evade the slugs that would soon start their flight towards us. If we dove into the water we would be dead a little later than sooner, and we would leave Diane alone. Our bow was bearing down on the boat, we could see her smile, as she looked down the barrel at us.

Closer, then Frank, desperate to do something, saw a chance. With a leap we cleared the lifelines and hoped to land on something moderately soft in the cockpit of the power boat. She fired as we moved, but her aim was complicated by the bobbing of her boat and our headlong leap. We felt something tug at our leg, and assumed it was a near miss. We landed on the engine cover and only just avoided bouncing overboard.

As we got to our feet we realized she was no longer standing in the front hatch and moved away from the opening into the cabin. We looked up and saw that Diane had decided to ram, and watched as the our sleek bow slammed into the boat near the forward end its cabin. The impact threw us down, which was just as well because she fired a burst from inside which shredded the fiberglass wall between us and her. The boat swung around as Diane pushed her way past. We thought about trying to jump back aboard, but another burst made us table that plan as we clung to the deck.

Our boat was past now and we saw Diane move inside the cabin. Under the gunnel there was a net and a fish gaff which would make a splendid weapon provided that she got within reach. We tossed the net up onto the cabin top where it clattered as it slid across the decking. With any luck she would think it was us. She fell for it and a fury of bullets ripped the deck. Deciding that huddling behind the engine cover had a limited future we took two steps and dove through the hatch.

The trick with the net had fooled her. She was facing forward, expecting us to come through the front hatch. Our entrance told her this was not to be, and she turned. There wasn't room to really swing the gaff, but we were able to thrust and hook the back of her thigh. The gun, we went for the gun, and hit the barrel just as it exploded in a fury of light and noise. The noise hurt our ears almost as much as the burning sword that seemed to have sliced our left hand.

The pain awakened Willie, who saw her throat open and undefended as she used both hands to wrestle for the gun. 'A mistake my dear,' our right fist slammed into the front of her neck. She bounced back, a hand reaching for us. Ignoring it, he reached out and in a move he'd only dreamed about, delivered a perfect finger strike to her eyes.

She tried to avoid it, but her head was jammed against the wall and we struck as fast as we ever had. There was an obscene wetness on our hand. Her mouth opened and she wailed exploding with a sound that reached inside our bowels. Frenzied, she came for us again, blindly striking out with a knife we had not seen her draw. Her thrust grazed our left arm, we delivered another chop to her throat. She made a sound like an overburdened kitchen blender and sank back. We tossed the gun out onto the deck, then broke her hand so she would let go of the knife. Blood streamed down her face from her eye sockets. We grabbed her by her hair and yanked her towards the hatch. The gaff was still embedded in the back of her thigh and we used it as another lever until the blood from our hand made it too slippery.

We sent her sprawling into the cockpit and scrambled up behind.

The big blue sailboat was close and bearing down on us full speed. We waved and hoped that Diane would see us. Further, we hoped the boat would be able to turn in time to avoid us.

We kept an eye on Matilda, pretty sure she was out of the fight, but ready to be surprised, as we had been before. The rest of us watched as the oncoming bow seemed to move slightly to our right. It was going to be close, and we grabbed the driver's seat. Our boat struck a glancing blow that bounced Matilda around some, put a white mark on the side of our hull, but otherwise did no damage.

Diane already had the engines slowing, and looked at us wide-eyed as she hauled on the wheel. We remembered Matilda, she was trying to get to her knees. We moved closer and kicked her jaw dropping her back to the deck. For the first time we took a look at ourselves. One or two rounds seemed to have passed cleanly through our left palm. Another had more than nicked our right calf, but had missed bone and arteries. The knife had left what would be a sexy scar on our biceps, and, combined, the wounds produced an impressive amount of blood. The pain had not fully arrived, but we could see the train down the track.

The sailboat was circling slowly closer. We waved Diane still closer and tried to answer all the questions we hadn't had time to ask before. When she pulled up, we tossed Diane a line. In a minute she has us tied along side, and climbed down beside me. "You're hurt."

We shrugged, "Not too bad."

"Is she dead?"

We shook our head. "Don't think so. Do you have a wooden stake handy?"

It wasn't that good a joke, but it was enough to set her off on a run of near hysterical laughter that left her leaning against the rail holding her side. We studied Matilda as she lay on the deck. Who the hell was she really? How had she tracked us? Frank reminded us of the credit card spree, and we decided the details didn't matter. We left Diane to watch and make sure she stayed unconscious, while we quickly searched the boat. It provided nothing of interest except two bags that were clearly hers. We tossed them up on to our boat's deck for later examination and returned to the cockpit.

Diane to our surprise, was sitting with Matilda's head in her lap, her once gorgeous face now a gory mask of blood. The eyes which had watched with glee as she'd turned men into whimpering fools were something out of a horror movie.

Diane was crying, her right hand rose, and we saw she held the knife we'd dropped on deck. She stabbed, but the knife struck Matilda's breastbone and did not penetrate. We reached out and took it from her, "That's Willie's job."

Helping her to her feet we guided her back to the sailboat and helped her up.

We turned and went back to Matilda. Willie remembered her naked and sweaty as he slid the knife in under her ribs searching for her heart. She arched her back, bled a little, and then was still. 'What a waste.' The rest of us were amazed at the feelings of sadness that raged through Willie. He moved our hand down and brushed her hair off of her face. Then as a kindness he brushed it back so that it concealed her shattered eyes.

'I hope you fucks are satisfied. You know you're no better than she was. You took her money and you killed her.' Willie's thoughts were bouncing off the walls of our skull like a gerbil at a cat show. He had us take another long look at her, a look we did not particularly want to take. He was making us take responsibility for his actions, and the rest of us didn't like it. 'I'm tired of taking the heat for us. From now on, you want somebody to clean up your shit, you do it yourselves.' He disappeared deep into our unconscious, and left us in a rocking boat with a body that needed disposing of.

Under Frank's direction, we lifted the engine cover and used the gun to break the fuel lines sending gasoline into the bilge. Before leaving Elaine had us stretch her out on the deck and arranged her hands across her breast. The climb back to our boat was painful and awkward.

Diane was at the controls. As we untied the line we nodded and she put us in gear. We held the line for a moment as we started to build up speed. We struck the flare we had grabbed from her boat. It lit and sputtered in our hand. We let the line go, and walked back on the deck staying even with the boat as we pulled ahead.

The flare bounced on the rail, but fell into the cockpit. For a moment we thought it might have gone out, but as the gap between the boats widened we saw some flames. In another minute there was a fireball whose heat pushed us back a step. Diane had brought the engines down near idle and was wrapping a towel around our hand as we watched the flames spread over the boat as we slowly coasted away from her.

'There had better not be such a thing as ghosts,' Elaine said, 'because if she takes a notion to haunt us, it's going to be every horror movie we've ever seen rolled up into one.'

It was an impressive pyre - suitable for a Viking goddess, and as effective, we hoped, as a wooden stake. Orange with a mantle of black smoke which rose as a temporary headstone. When the boat burned down to the waterline a wave swept across it, and, as if it was a magician's trick, it disappeared under a handkerchief of foam. We turned our attention to Diane's amateur first aid, and helped her stop the bleeding before we let her lead us down below and tuck us into bed. We were glad for the ocean going first aid kit, and had her fetch us some antibiotics, and a couple of industrial strength pain killers. As we watched her scurry off we thought that maybe being mothered wouldn't be so bad. We clung to that thought as we heard the engines throb and felt her bringing the boat to a new course.

FINIS.