

Dreamtime

A Troy Adam / Mangrove Bayou mystery
by Stephen Morrill
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Chapter 1

Sunday, April 26

"Mac" McKay and Pongo Funt were tired, dirty and empty-handed as they struggled through thick underbrush a few miles southeast of the town of Mangrove Bayou, Florida. They didn't mind the tired, or the dirt. That was part of the charm of hunting. They did mind being empty-handed.

"Pongo, you said there was pig out heah," Mac said. He owned the car wash on Bay Street in Mangrove Bayou and he and Pongo were taking the day off. Mac was a tall man with a florid face and big belly and hair turning from brown to gray. He wore denim overalls and a faded red baseball cap. He used the barrel of a shotgun to push aside palmetto fronds and small saplings, keeping one beefy hand wrapped around the trigger guard so no branch would accidentally fire the gun.

Pongo worked at the car wash and was tall and emaciated, with black eyes that looked out onto a world his marginal intelligence never quite understood. He looked older than his mid-20s with his hollow cheeks in a narrow face deeply scarred by childhood acne, and a mop of unkempt black hair. Pongo wore green jeans and a matching green fishing shirt because he was a happening guy. He had a .44 caliber revolver that he liked to take out on hog hunts. If he could keep from shooting off his own foot, the gun was also good for stopping a charging wild hog.

"There *was* pig," he said. "Ah sweah. Saw some one night on the access road. We seen sign today, ain't we? Plenty tracks, droppin's, rootin's."

"Pongo, I can't make no sausage outta pig-shit. Where's the hogs?" Mac spit a wad of tobacco into the palmettos and pulled a packet of Mandarin Mint Chew out of a pocket in his overalls. Behind him, Pongo waited patiently while Mac dug out another finger-hook of chew and put it behind his lower lip. Mac handed the packet back to Pongo and walked on.

A few minutes later Mac stopped abruptly. Pongo bumped into him. "What?" Pongo asked. "Snake?"

"Ditch." Mac stepped aside so Pongo could look. There was an old drainage canal running at a right angle to their track. "That's it for me," Mac said. "Too tired to wade across that and get all wet. Water'll get in the boots." Both men wore snake boots of knee-high heavy leather. "Let's work back towards the truck. Ain't no pigs out here today."

They turned left and had pushed a hundred yards through the brush along the canal edge when Mac stopped again.

"Now what?" Pongo asked. "Another damn ditch?"

"Car," Mac said. "Top a one, anyways."

Chapter 2

Monday, April 27

The two officers on duty were out on patrol and, but for chief Troy Adam in his office in back, the Mangrove Bayou police station was silent. Troy was at his computer typing up the weekly report summary. He would email one copy to the town manager, and print a copy for the mayor, who was not a computer and email sort of person.

Troy's official title was Director of Public Safety and each week he compiled a report on police, fire and medical events. The fire department was volunteer, the town clinic staffed by one doctor and a nurse. The town hall was an L-shaped brick building that housed the clinic, a small office for the volunteer fire department, the town administrative offices and, occupying the short end of the L, the police department. The second floor was a large meeting room and storage.

They'd had, in the past week, Troy wrote, two fistfights in bars, one stolen bicycle, one break-in with some stolen property, a half-dozen drunk tourists told to not pee on the beach, five speeding citations and nineteen warnings.

There had been several cases of parking in the wrong places. Unofficial policy was to ignore illegal parking unless someone bitched about it. A few residents were bitchy and Troy's minions would spring into action and write tickets. Writing tickets to tourists was not a good long-term strategy for a town dependent upon repeat business, but ignoring resident complaints wasn't a good long-term strategy for a police chief wanting to keep his job. And Troy had only been hired the previous June — after the Tampa police department had fired him.

The doctor had reported two cases of bad sunburn, a citizen who managed to get a finger in his table saw, and a very fat woman who fell out of a tree she was trimming. The woman would be all right, though the doctor opined that the planet was badly bruised. The man still had nine fingers and thumbs to go and the doctor had suggested to him that he take up some new hobby, probably not piano playing.

The fire chief's report said that the volunteer fire department had responded to only one emergency and Troy had to smile at the report.

Friday, April 24 at 7:13 p.m. responded to call at 520 12th Street. No fire. Opened doors and windows to ventilate house. Asked woman present to shut off damn smoke detector before we all went deaf. Advised her that twenty minutes was much too long to cook an artichoke in the microwave, especially with no water. Advised her to buy a new microwave as she would never get the smell out of that one.

Weekends were usually more lively for the police department, but this past Saturday and Sunday had been quiet and there was no one in the four-cell lockup in back.

Reading the reports, Troy wondered how a Florida resident got a sunburn in April. Caucasians usually got tanned whether they wanted to or not. Tourists, who looked like ghosts next to the natives, could burn in summer in less than a half-hour. Doctors who

treated melanomas in Florida were legion, and wealthy. It was even possible, in the summer, for Troy to get a bit darker. Being part African-American, part Asian-American and part Euro-American, he was already a light mocha color. Mayor Lester Groud said he was beige. Because of that and his straight black hair and slight eyelid fold, a lot of people assumed that he was a Seminole or Miccosukee. Troy Adam had never met his mother or father, and had grown up in the Orphans Home in Troy, New York. He was, in fact, named for the town and the first man in the Bible.

Rudy Borden ran the gas station and garage on Bay Street next door to the car wash. He called at ten-fifteen. Troy looked at the caller I.D. and swiveled his chair around to look out the west windows at the Sunset Bay boat ramp. He put a foot up on the bottom desk drawer he rarely closed, leaned back in his chair and picked up the phone.

"Talk to me, Rudy," he said.

"Morning, Chief. Thanks for the towing job yesterday. That was a tough one. Took half the day and after dark even. Still, appreciate the business."

"Serve and protect," Troy said. "And flip some cash your way when I get the chance. What's up?"

"That car I hauled out of the canal back in the woods. You got to come look."

"Because?"

"Because there's a damn skeleton in it. That because."

"A human skeleton?"

"Of course a human skeleton. Think I'm calling to tell you I found a raccoon?"

"No shit? Who is it?"

"How the hell would I know. It's a skeleton. You know, bones."

"Oh. Of course. Not every day we find a car in a canal with a skeleton in it.

Sounds like important chief business."

"Ya think?"

"Don't touch anything. Be right there." Troy went to the station lobby and got the Bad Words Jar out from under the desk there. He added a dollar. Besides curbing most of the bad language around the station, the jar paid for a monthly pizza-and-beer party for the troops.

Three minutes later Troy pulled into Rudy Borden's service station, auto repair and trailer rental. Rudy actually serviced cars, from pumping the gas to checking under the hood to washing the windows. Other than here, Troy had not seen anyone do that in thirty years. Rudy thought the notion of sitting inside and staring out the window at people pumping their own gas from his tanks was stupid when he could hustle out there and make friends and maybe earn a few extra dollars selling quarts of oil or other items.

The car Rudy had hauled in Sunday evening sat dripping beside the station's two-bay garage. Troy walked over to look. The car was a rusted and muddy mess. Here and there a flash of white paint still showed. Rudy was standing at the back and looking into the open trunk. The car had an odd smell, swamp mud with its sulfur, plus ... something more.

Mac McKay had walked over from the car wash next door when he saw Troy's Subaru Forester pull in. "Still driving Japanese," he said. He shook his head theatrically. "Finally got made into the permanent chief and you gone all slant on us." He turned to one side and spit on the asphalt.

"Christ, Mac," Rudy said. "Unload on someplace you own."

"Oh. Sorry." Mac scuffed a boot across the brown splatter as if that might make it go away.

Troy regarded Mac with amusement. "Actually, Mac, I *am* slant. A little at least."

Mac was unapologetic. Political correctness rolled off of Mac McKay like water off a pelican's back. "How come the town council ain't got you no real po-lice car?"

"Cheap bastards."

"Hell," Mac said. "They voted to make you into the chief. Made permanent, anyways, after eight months probation. But you still got to drive around in a runty personal car? Can't they see buying you a set of official wheels?"

"Apparently not. And make any more fun of my car, Mac, and I'll take my staff's weekly-washing business elsewhere."

"Where? I is the only car wash in town."

"Oh. Good point." Troy turned to Rudy and pointed at the muddy car in front of them. "What's all this, then?"

"We got us a 1995 Ford Escort sedan," Rudy said.

"I'll take your word for it." Troy looked at the car a moment and then back at Mac. "Mac, where, exactly, did you find it?"

"Don't you want to see the skeleton?" Rudy asked.

"In a minute, Rudy." The skeleton would be patient, Troy knew. Interviewing witnesses as quickly as possible was important. "So, Mac, where, exactly, did you find the car? I know you called it in to the station. My officer on duty took the call and sent Rudy and his truck out to fetch it. Tell me more."

"I was hog-huntin', out south of Barron Road behind Oyster Bay. Me and Pongo. Skinny kid, works for me. Worked my pick-em-up back in far as I could on a old trail and we walked in from there. Circled 'round but didn't scare up no hogs. Found the car in a skeeter ditch when we was headin' back. Could tell right off it'd been there a long time. Had to walk another mile or so to get to my truck, then drove back to town and called your office."

"If you couldn't get to that spot in your truck," Troy said, "how did the car get there?"

"Ah. You is new here. That parcel was logged out twenty years back and then left to regrow. Back then there was dirt trails for the logging trucks and they ditched it for the skeeters and to make the ground more stable for the trucks. When the trees were gone they just abandoned it all. Trails are mostly light brush now but you can walk on 'em in places. Me, Rudy here, and Pongo, all had to clear off some stuff, little trees and big bushes, to get his tow truck in there."

"It was a tough afternoon, Chief. For sure," Rudy said. "Had to use a chain saw a lot. Mac got one from his house before we went out. Hate sawing on palmettos. Like cutting into a hairy sponge. Had to break down the chainsaw a dozen times to clean crap out of the sprocket."

"Sure. Whatever," Troy said. He had no idea what a chain saw sprocket was. "So, Mac, you found the car."

"Yep. Never would have seen the car at all," Mac said, "wasn't for the drought bringing down the water level in some of them canals, the ones don't go to salt water no more. Evaporation must have lowered the water level just enough. Just an inch or so of the roof showin', and all muddy water."

"You or Pongo check inside the car?"

Mac shook his head and started to spit. He looked at Rudy and half-choked. He turned abruptly to walk quickly to the street in front of the gas station. He spat out a gob of tobacco and scuffed it around with a boot. He walked back, slower now, with a small sack of Mandarin Mint Chew in one hand. By the time he rejoined them he had a fresh "lip" of chew and was stuffing the bag into his overalls. Rudy looked disgusted but said nothing.

"You or Pongo check inside the car?" Troy asked again when Mac appeared to have his swallowing under control.

"No, Chief. Figured whatever was inside was long dead anyway. Didn't really want to see."

"I can understand that. You get the GPS coordinates off your cell phone?"

Mac shook his head. "Ain't got one of them smart phones. Don't need no phone smarter than me."

Troy turned to Rudy. "How about you? You get the coordinates off a cell phone or GPS?"

Rudy shook his head. "Sorry, Chief. Never thought of it. I'll know better next time."

"Well, let's all hope there won't be a next time."

"Got that right," Mac said.

"All right," Troy said. "I'll need the exact location when we can get a map. I'll send someone out but we need to know where to go. Mac, can you come to the town hall with me when I'm done here?"

"Got my business to run, cars to wash."

"Mac, I think even Pongo can figure out how to push that big red button that starts the pull-chain and the brushes. Rudy, how did you get the trunk and doors open?"

"Crowbar for the trunk. The release didn't work. Cable's frozen or broke. Doors were easy; windows were rolled down. Not that we really needed to open the doors, except to wash out the mud"

"Don't do that," Troy said.

"What? Wash out the mud?"

"Leave all that for my evidence specialist. We'll want to screen the mud, sift through it for any clues."

"No skin off my nose," Rudy said. "Where you want to do all this? I could haul the car over to your parking lot."

"Best to do it right here," Troy said. "Fewer times the car is moved the better."

"Damn," Rudy said. "Make a hell of a mess."

"Cost of doing business with the town, Rudy."

"I guess so." Rudy looked at the muddy car a moment. "There's no license tag. Body's in the trunk. Skeleton, at least."

Troy walked around to the back and looked. The interior of the car was half-filled with mud but the trunk had only a heavy layer of silt that had filtered through the joins in the body panels. He could see a few bones and the top of a skull. The skeleton looked as if it had been folded and put into the trunk. *Or*, Troy thought, *someone had climbed in and folded himself or herself*. There were a few scraps of cloth embedded in the silt.

"Something else, Chief," Rudy said. "No VIN. Somebody popped the VIN plate off the dashboard."

Troy looked and nodded. He tried the glove compartment which, amazingly, opened with a little tugging. Except for some mud, it was completely empty. "So much for a quick ID of the owner," Troy said.

"There's another VIN on the frame underneath," Rudy said. "And one someplace on the engine block."

"I knew that," Troy said. "Most people don't. Newer cars have VINs right on the driver door frame." He took a deep breath, which reminded him that he was standing next to a car that had been submerged a long time in a muddy canal, with a body inside. *It's just mud*, he thought. *Not rotting flesh. Yes, that has to be it.*

"Okay, I'll call some people. Leave things alone. It's not going to rain so there's no need for a tarp to cover this. Close the trunk but don't latch it."

"So how did the guy die?" Rudy asked. "Was he murdered? He didn't pop the VIN, climb into the trunk and then drive himself into that canal."

"Doesn't seem likely," Troy said. "We'll have to ask whoever stuffed him in there ..." he sniffed at the car again. *Just mud ...* "when we find the whoever."

Chapter 3

Monday, April 27

Back in his office, Troy called the Collier County medical examiner and got someone headed his way, a half-hour drive from Naples. He called Tom VanDyke, his officer who doubled as evidence specialist, and told him to come in to work, get his kit and camera, and get out to Rudy's and work with the M.E. people when they arrived.

Mac McKay showed up a few minutes later and parked out front on Connecticut Avenue's dead-end in front of the police station.

"Got a spittoon?" Mac asked, looking around Troy's office.

"No, Mac. We don't have a spittoon," Troy said. "There's no rail out front to tie up your horse, either. Go use the toilet in the restroom. And don't miss or I'll arrest you for littering."

Mac grinned as well as one can grin with a wad under one's lip and went to the restroom. He joined Troy at the large-scale map on the wall in the break room and pointed to where he had found the car. Troy sighed. He had hoped this would be the sheriff's problem but it was well inside his jurisdiction.

Mac McKay went off to resume supervision of his large red button and Troy called in Bubba Johns from off-duty and told him to go out with Juan Valdez in one of the department trucks to check the area where the car was found. Bubba was the best tracker in the department and he could look around for a hundred yards in all directions from the canal. He'd have no problem finding the spot. All the officers had department-issue smart phones with GPS — as did the trucks, of course — and, anyway, Rudy Borden's tow truck and Mac McKay's chain saw would have left an obvious trail. The odds of Bubba and Juan finding any useful clues after what was probably many years were slim, but the effort had to be made.

"And Juan, check that canal too, a hundred yards each way for any debris, anything that may have floated out of the car, anything useful," Troy told Juan.

"That will be muddy water, mostly mud, and deep," Juan said.

"When you signed on here, nobody promised you a rose garden," Troy said. "You're the official police department diver. So go diving. It's really only about three or four feet deep anyway, if the roof of the car was showing."

"I thought I was the department SCUBA diver," Juan said. "As in Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus. You know, for deep, clear water with colorful coral and pretty fish."

"You're promoted to diver-in-general and that includes snorkeling in muddy canals. If you want to haul along your tank and gear, be my guest."

"My only extra pay for this is one free swear-word per month," Juan said. "Now that I'm promoted to diver-in-general, do I get more money? Maybe a promotion?"

"You drive a hard bargain," Troy said. "From now on, two free swear words a month."

"No money? Just another fucking swear word?"

"That would be the one. Can't promote you because we only have two ranks here. Me, and everyone else."

"Don't worry, little buddy," Bubba said, patting Juan on his head. "If you don't come back up I'll wade in and pull you out."

"Get out of here, you two," Troy said. "I have important police chief things to do."

Troy turned to his computer and started to fill in a report about the skeleton. There wasn't much to write at this point but he knew how these things piled up if you didn't get an early start. Besides, he thought, writing up things and printing them out and putting them into file folders and file folders into filing cabinets that lined the wall to the left of his desk gave him the illusion that he had things under control.

Angel Watson, the petite blonde officer who doubled as their in-house computer guru, thought filing cabinets had gone out with buggy whips, or maybe spittoons, and Troy suspected she was right. But he liked to feel the papers and the folders when he sat and ruminated on cases, as if some additional clues would slowly percolate into his brain through his fingertips.

Chapter 4

Monday, April 27

The 911 line had a distinctive ring and when it lit up Troy said, "Shit!" A second later the police cellphone on his utility belt, which had the same numbers in it, rang too. He grabbed that and turned it off, then he picked up the desk phone.

"This is Colonel Thaddius M. Bach," a deep voice intoned, "and I am the commandant of the Florida Christian Military Academy." The man paused.

"Colonel Bach, the school is the one out on Airfield Road?"

"That is correct."

"So what's your emergency?"

"Ah. One of our young men has fallen down a flight of stairs and is injured. We need an ambulance."

"I'll get one on the way. How bad are the boy's injuries? Is he breathing? Got a good pulse?"

"Yes to both of those. Hurry up with the ambulance."

Airfield Key housed, not surprisingly, a rudimentary airport with one paved runway, one large hanger and some tie-down pads on the north side of the airstrip. One of the aircraft in the hanger was Lee Bell's Cessna Grand Caravan. There were other aircraft parked outside. A long line of expensive homes, including Lee's, lined the island on the south side facing the Collier River and, across that, the larger island of Barron Key and the main town. There was also the last Calusa shell mound left in the area, on the east end of Airfield Key, and the Osprey Yacht Club on the west end. The Florida Christian Military Academy was a large structure near the east end. Troy had never been inside.

When he pulled into the drive at the school he was stopped at a pair of closed wrought-iron gates. A short length of chain and a padlock secured the gates. The gates were tall and a ten-foot brick wall extended to either side to the corners of the property. The wall was topped with razor wire. Troy could have sworn that the town had an ordinance governing the height of fences and enclosure-walls that specified four feet, maximum, in the front of the property. Maybe he had imagined reading that. What Troy could see of the driveway beyond curved away to his right and behind some bushes.

There was an intercom and a camera mounted on a pole by the gate. Troy pushed the button on the intercom and waited. In two minutes he pushed it again and also honked the horn. *Should have brought a department Suburban*, he thought. *At least its horn sounds more manly*. He honked again and cringed.

The intercom squawked at him. "This is private property. Whattya want."

"I want in. I'm Troy Adam, the police chief here," Troy held up his badge in front of the camera. "Did an ambulance just go in?"

"Sure did. We had orders to let it in. Nobody said anything about letting you in. Besides, shouldn't you have some kind of police car?"

"In my opinion, yes. But I don't. Call whomever issues permissions and say the chief is here and expects entry ASAP."

Eventually, two large white men in brown uniforms with trousers bloused into patent-leather combat boots strolled into view around a curve in the driveway and stared at him through the wrought-iron gate.

"Lemme see that badge again," One of the men asked. Troy got out of the car and walked to the gate. He held up the badge and the man peered at it through the gate. "Give it here," the man said, putting his arm out through the gate's wrought-iron bars.

"No," Troy said. "Cops don't give up badges or guns. If your eyesight is that bad, I can give you a business card. Assuming, of course, that you can read."

The man didn't answer that. He got out a radio and called someone. "He's a damn Indian but he does seem legit," the man said. He listened a moment and then put away the radio. "Open her up," he said and the second man unlocked the gates and swung them open.

A few minutes later Troy was parked in a circular drive in front of what looked like a two-story concrete prison block. The building was painted dark gray and the windows were all barred. There was no sign announcing this was The Home of the Fighting Panthers or that the school cookie fund-drive for the senior class trip was underway, or that the PTA meeting was Thursday. Another large brown-uniformed guard stood by the front door. No one else seemed to be around, which Troy thought odd for a school.

Inside, Colonel Thaddius M. Bach was waiting in the lobby. In case there was any doubt, Bach wore a military-style uniform with a large name tag reading *Colonel Thaddius M. Bach*. Bach was tall, two inches over Troy's six feet, and fat, probably weighing close to three hundred pounds. His gray hair was cut in a stiff flattop and he practically reeked of starch. Like his men, Bach's pant legs were bloused into the tops of patent-leather combat boots. Troy, who emphasized starched uniforms for his own troops, was impressed.

"The boy took a tumble down the stairs," Bach said. He pointed to a grand staircase sweeping up to a second floor landing. There was a small pool of blood on the floor at the base and even from where he stood Troy could see blood spatters on some of the steps leading up.

"Where is he now?" Troy asked.

"We took him out the back way and into the ambulance," Bach said. "By now I imagine he's on his way to the hospital."

"Wondered why I didn't see the ambulance out front. You have a separate service drive that goes around back?"

Bach nodded. "The side drive you must have passed as you came onto the grounds." He started to say more but a large guard came in and called him aside. They conferred for a moment and Bach turned to Troy. "Apparently, your local doctor is afraid to use the ambulance," Bach said to Troy. "He called a helicopter. He didn't deem it necessary to tell us that or I would have forbidden it. It's been and just gone."

"You object to helicopters?" Troy asked. "We're a long drive from a hospital. All hospitals use them these days."

"We object to anyone, anyone at all, intruding upon private property and upon our carefully-maintained discipline and routine. And we especially dislike surveillance from the air." As he spoke, Bach's voice rose from bass to baritone and his face flushed.

"I don't think the hospitals use black helicopters yet," Troy said.

"We don't find the burgeoning influence of the United Nations and the International Triad to be amusing, Chief Adam."

"Geez, I'm sorry. I had no idea the Naples Community Hospital was so ... connected."

Bach ignored that and they walked through a long corridor to the rear of the building and outside. Along the way they passed two intersecting hallways. Troy looked left and right down both and saw only closed doors. "Your classrooms?" he asked.

Bach nodded. "Dormitory above, of course. And some of our ... assistants ... live in too. They have rooms upstairs. That's so we can have someone on duty twenty-four-seven. I live in a detached apartment behind the school."

"Are these guys in the brown uniforms the assistants? And what do they assist in doing? They look like guards to me."

Bach nodded. "In effect they *are* guards. This is not some kindergarten for sweet and innocent children. We teach the hard cases here."

"Why don't I see any kids? Or teachers? Or anyone?"

"I had the school locked down. All teachers and students are in the classrooms behind locked doors until I give the all-clear."

"All that because a kid got hurt?"

"No. All that because there are outsiders on the premises."

Outside, at the rear of the building, they stood at the edge of a grassy field with a rough oval running track extending from the building down to the river, a distance of about a hundred yards. A service drive curved around the building and the boxy red town ambulance truck with *Rescue* painted on the side in gold lettering was parked where the drive ended. The high brick walls went down both sides of the property and across the back at the river. These, too, were topped with razor wire. In the distance Troy saw a small medevac helicopter buzzing its way north toward Naples. Doctor Vollmer and his nurse were packing up some things and two more heavyweights in white faces and brown uniforms were leaving, one carrying an empty stretcher.

"How did he look?" Troy asked Vollmer.

"Bad," Vollmer said. "Got him stabilized and onto a back board. You'll have to check with the hospital later to learn more."

"Did anyone on that chopper take any pictures of us?" Bach asked one of his men.

"Not that I could see, Colonel. They just picked up the brat and took him away."

"Good, good," Bach said. He turned to Troy. "And now that the crisis has passed, it's time for you and the doctor to get out too. We don't permit visitors."

Troy looked at Vollmer and his nurse. "You guys done here?" Vollmer nodded. "Go ahead and get back to the clinic," Troy said. "Write me a report. And Colonel Bach, I think I'll stroll around the grounds until I feel at home."

"You ... you can't just do that." Bach's face started to flush again.

"Not a Simon and Garfunkle fan, I see. But yes, I can. You have given me consent to make a legal entry and now I leave when I feel like leaving." Troy turned and walked through the back doors and into the building.

Bach's two men stepped forward to grab Troy from behind. Before they could, Troy spun and stiffarmed one back. He took out his .45-caliber Colt Commander and held it at his side. "Do not make some mistake here that you will regret," he said to the two men. "I'll blow you each in two first and then arrest the bits and pieces."

The men looked at each other and back at Bach. They didn't seem about to burst into tears, hug his knees, and beg Troy's forgiveness. They looked like big, tough mercenaries in combat boots and starched uniforms waiting for orders. Bach waved them away. "Why are you getting so paranoid, Chief?" he asked.

"I came here expecting to find a school and kids and teachers. You know, the chattering of high-pitched voices, the smell of sweat and cheap spray deodorant, bulletin boards with colored pictures up on them. Guy at the front gate called me a 'damn Indian' which I am not, incidentally. So far, all I see are high walls topped with razor wire, barred windows and gates, and large white men in brown shirts. Looks like a pep rally for Mussolini."

Bach frowned. "Well, surely not. We're a legitimate school, even if not the sort you are accustomed to. I apologize for the intemperate remark at the front gate. Would you please leave us now, so that we may get back to work."

"Go ahead and get back to work. I'll just hang out a while. You'll hardly know I'm here."

"We can't do our jobs with some policeman standing around. You'll frighten the children."

"These being the children not already frightened by your brown-shirts and the razor wire and barred windows? You want to talk about fire regulations?"

Bach thought a moment. One of the guards said, "Want us to toss this jerk out on his ass, Colonel?" and Bach waved a *no* to him.

"I guess we'll accommodate you, Chief, if that's the only way to get rid of you. Would you like a tour?"

"In the worst way."

There were about forty boys in the building, ranging in age from maybe ten, Troy estimated, up to sixteen. There were some classrooms, though Troy saw no sign of any science labs or much in the way of teaching equipment. The classes were small, probably because the wide age disparity meant there were not too many of any given grade level. Some rooms were empty, others held a half-dozen kids each and large uniformed white men Bach said were teachers. Even the teachers wore the uniforms and boots.

"Do these 'teachers' have credentials," Troy asked. "And, just out of idle curiosity, are any of your staff any color besides bedsheet-white?"

"As a private religious-based institution, we're exempted from certain of the public-school rules," Bach said.

"So the answers to my two questions are 'no' and 'no' again," Troy said. "Who are these kids? Why are they here?"

"We at the Florida Christian Military Academy deal with the hardest cases," Bach said. "They are drug addicts, gang members, troubled in various ways. The local schools have failed to correct their behaviors. Their parents have given up on the system and turned to us. Most are from poor families and the state subsidizes their attendance here. We teach them discipline, respect, reverence, and obedience."

"Gee. Sounds like the Boy Scouts. Do you also teach them history, mathematics, biology and social studies?"

Bach smiled. He was warming to his subject. "We teach them what they need to know. These are not Boy Scouts, not by any definition. We also break them of drugs and build them up physically."

"That what you were doing with that kid we just medivac'd? Building him up physically? Just how sick was he before you helped him?"

"He fell down the stairs ..." Bach was going on but he had lost his audience. They were upstairs now and in a long dormitory with rows of bunk beds and footlockers. Troy was staring at a kid sitting, sort of, on a bunk and with a small automobile tire around his waist. Even though the kid was about twelve, the tire fit closely and clearly would not slide down farther than the boy's hips. There was a padlocked chain around the tire and down between the boy's legs to keep him from pulling it off over his head.

"What's this?" Troy asked.

"Encouragement," Bach said. "Peter, here, wets the bed. He'll wear that for a while to remind him to do better. Won't you, Peter."

"Ye ... yessir," Peter said. He appeared to Troy to be shaking and it wasn't cold in the upstairs barracks-room.

"He wears this twenty-four hours a day?"

"Certainly. He can urinate, despite the tire. If he needs to defecate we remove the tire temporarily."

"Peter, how do you sleep?" Troy asked the boy. Peter stared up at him a long moment and then, shaking, looked to Colonel Bach.

"I answer the questions around here," Bach said. "The boys know not to talk to strangers. That's another thing we emphasize here at Florida Christian Military Academy. Military discipline is a great teaching tool, as I found in my career in the U.S. Army and which I have applied here in the educational milieu."

"Strange," Troy said. "I was in the Army too. Nobody made me wear a car tire."

Bach shook his head. "Don't concern yourself about it. It's a simple, standard, non-corporal form of punishment. As for Peter, he can sit beside his bunk, slide the edge of the tire underneath, and sort of lean back against the bunk to sleep. I've seen him do it."

"I hate to ask this, being as I'm a law enforcement officer, but is any of this even remotely legal? Why don't I just arrest you and your gang of brownshirts on the spot and put you into my jail?"

Bach smiled and shook his head. "We're legal. You are welcome to check with your attorney or with the State of Florida Department of Education. Or just ask any of the parents who send their children here if they object. After all, they may remove their children at any time. They choose not to, so we must be doing something right."

"I'll do that. Do you honestly think making a kid wear a tire will break him of bedwetting?"

"We'll find out," Bach said. He looked down at the kid. "Peter and I together. I have other ... inducements ... too."

"Ah. But what would Jesus have said? I mean other than, "Suffer the children."

Bach smiled. "*Matthew*. But what Jesus meant was to permit the children to come into his presence. He didn't mean they 'suffered' physically.

"I knew that, Colonel. But they seem to here. What price the kingdom of heaven?"

Chapter 5

Monday, April 27

"Who thinks you can make a kid stop bedwetting by putting a tire over his head?" Lee Bell said. She and Troy were having dinner, the crabcakes at Bert Frey's Crab Shack on Second Street. She was still picking at her food. Troy had almost finished his order.

"Colonel Thaddeus Bach, for one," Troy said. He got some hot sauce out of a small steel pail and sprinkled some on his food. Where every other restaurant in town seemed to be decorated with old and rusty nautical oddments for the tourists, Bert's place was a bare room with picnic tables. The crab and fish were excellent; the local fishermen brought their catch up to Bert's rickety old dock behind the restaurant. The third meat on the menu, chicken, was ... varied. Bert Frey was the town's licensed trapper and locals suspected Bert didn't always practice catch-and-relocate.

"And who would drive a car out into that back country and fall into a canal," Lee said. She was wearing tight white jeans and a reddish-orange Embry-Riddell tee-shirt that almost matched her shoulder-length hair. Troy still wore his uniform.

"Nobody," Troy said. "Not even back then when the track was passible for a car. You planning to eat that last crab cake?"

Lee pushed her plate across the table. "So you assume a murder? The person who belonged to that skeleton didn't crawl into the trunk all by himself."

"Don't know yet who the elected victim is. The M.E. is working on that up in Naples. But, unless the car owner was the sort to carry a toolbox around in the trunk, someone planned ahead enough to bring a screwdriver to take off the license and pry off the VIN. You're not drinking?" Bert Frey served beer. Troy didn't drink at all and Lee only drank when she didn't have to fly the next day.

"Got a morning flight to Key West," she said. "Some fishing buddies heading down for a week. I guess they chartered a boat."

"Well, there are many kinds of fishing one can do in Key West," Troy said. "Not all require a boat."

"Maybe come October, we can go down for Fantasy Fest," Lee said. "We'll both strip off our clothes and get body-painted. Stroll up and down Duval Street."

"I don't think so. Police chiefs do not walk around naked in public."

"You could just wear the gun belt." Lee grinned. Troy loved her grin even more than her smile. The smile was incandescent but the grin promised more. "That would be a big hit in Key West."

"It's a duty belt. Handcuffs too — and don't even go there," Troy said. "And I'd rather no one but me saw you naked. And — trust me on this, I'm a trained investigator — you don't need body paint. Not many women with six-pack abs"

"Why thank you. I do work at it. So do you. Am I going to see you naked later tonight or do you have some important police chief thing to do?"

"Actually, I had thought that sleeping with you *was* part of my police chief duties," Troy said. "I'll have to get with the mayor to see if that was in the contract."

"You do that. I'll go ask Lester if he can just assign someone else, someone with more time on his hands."

Troy looked at his watch. "I have time now. Let's go take a stroll on the beach."

"You're one of the few people I know who still use a wrist watch," Lee said.

"I'm old-fashioned."

"And what's with the beach thing? You don't do beach. It's even sort of old-fashioned."

Troy nodded as he got out his wallet to pay the bill. "Think of it as foreplay. Got to walk off all these crab cakes anyway. Later we can work on those abs."

Chapter 6

Tuesday, April 28

This time the dream seemed different. Even asleep, Troy sensed that. In the dream, Billy Poteet put the knife to Wanda Frister's throat. "She's mine," Poteet shouted through the hurricane-driven rain.

"Put the knife down. We can help you," Troy shouted. In his dream he wondered what had happened to Billy's gun or the other officers who had been standing nearby.

"I'm never going back to prison," Poteet said. "I'll kill her if you come closer." He fired a shot at the police truck.

Troy couldn't shoot. Poteet was using Wanda Frister as a shield. The rain was coming almost horizontally now and Troy realized he was sitting down in almost two feet of water. When he looked up again the teenager was standing behind a Chevrolet in the parking lot and pointing a water pistol at him. "I give up" the boy said, and he dropped the water pistol and Troy killed him with two shots to the chest.

"Another one?" Lee Bell asked. Troy was in her bathroom. He had just vomited into the toilet. He washed out his mouth and nodded.

"They get more and more weird," he said.

Lee frowned. "Can you talk about it?"

Troy washed his face. He felt a little better. "Don't you have a flight in a few hours?"

"Yes. That charter to Key West. But I'm up now. Talk to me, Troy."

"Not now. Thanks. But I'll go to the front room and read a book. I can never sleep after these. You go back to bed."

"Well, at least tell Dr. Groves about it."

"I will. Promise. Not that he's much help."

"You don't get to decide what's helping and what's not," Lee said. "Not at this point, anyway. Talk to Groves."

"Yes dear."

"Promise?"

"Yes dear."

Lee looked at the notebook Troy kept in her bathroom. There was another in his own bathroom at the Sea Grape Inn. "Did you write it down yet?"

"I will. I will. Go back to bed."

Lee kissed him and left. Troy sat on the toilet and wrote out a description of his dream before he forgot the details. Then he went out to the living room, turned on a light by the sofa, picked up a history book and lost himself in the world of Ur of the Chaldees.

Chapter 7

Tuesday, April 28

The Collier County Medical Examiner had removed the skeleton from the car that Todd MacKay found in the drainage ditch. The car, now hosed out and the mud inside carefully screened for any clues, was sitting in the parking lot behind the station with a tarp over it. Troy had the VIN number off the frame. It had belonged to a Messalina Morris, whose driver license record said she would have been twenty-five at the time the last license tag and registration was issued, in 1998.

Troy searched the database and found a missing-person report on Messalina Morris, dated August 5, 1998. The Collier County Sheriff's Office had a paper file and Troy called and asked to have that scanned and emailed to him. When it came there wasn't much to look at. Troy added that to the file.

The girl had not shown up for work. Her fellow employees had looked around for her, gone to her apartment, and beat on the door. The Naples police had turned over the usual rocks. She lived in a rental apartment and no one there had known her or known what had happened to her. The rental agency had produced a key, let the police search, and let the parents clean out the apartment. Her car was gone too and, finally, everyone assumed she had just driven away to some other state. Her co-workers went about their business and forgot Messalina Morris. The Naples police didn't forget but Troy well knew that a missing 20-something-year-old, when there was no sign of any crime, was not something that got a full-court press.

Messalina, Troy read, was the unmarried daughter of Townsend and Lucretia Morris, who lived then on Jupiter Island on the east coast of Florida. If Messalina had any boyfriend or girlfriend or even any casual friends in Naples, nobody knew about it and no one came forward. Apparently she had moved to Naples only eight months before she disappeared. The case wasn't closed — missing persons cases were never really closed — but no one was looking for her either, after all this time.

There was a photo of Messalina in the file too, a pretty, dark-haired girl bent forward from the waist, in shorts and a tee-top, laughing into the camera with some backdrop of oak trees draped in Spanish moss. Her college years were behind her and the excitement of life and job just beginning. There would be boyfriends, girlfriends, a husband, children. A career and retirement to spend on cruise ships and in visiting her grandchildren.

Well, maybe not, Troy thought. He sighed. He had a picture frame in a desk drawer and he printed out a copy of Messalina's photo and mounted that in the frame and set that on the corner of his desk.

You and me, Kiddo, he thought. *Together, we'll find out what happened to you. And who made it happen.* He realized that he was assuming the skeleton was Messalina. Probably was, he decided. He'd made mistakes before, making assumptions, but this didn't feel like one.

Two items in the otherwise dry and lifeless file made Troy's eyebrows go up. First, Jupiter Island, he knew, was among the most expensive real estate in Florida and possibly the United States. There were wealthy families living in Palm Beach, just a few miles to

the south, because they didn't have the status or money to afford Jupiter Island. And Messalina Morris had worked for Florida Dreamtime, a huge nursing home conglomerate. The chairman of the board of Florida Dreamtime, and mega-millionaire in his own right, was Ronald "Rono" Zadorney. And Ronald "Rono" Zadorney was currently running for governor.

"This is looking more and more like a hairball," Troy said to his empty office. He turned sideways, put his foot up on the open desk drawer, leaned back and stared out the window at the Sunset Bay boat ramp, the file folder in his hands. The Sunset Bay boat ramp didn't seem to have an opinion.

The intercom buzzed. "Sergeant Rivers on line one," June Dundee, the dispatcher, said. Kyle Rivers was a sergeant for the Collier County sheriff's office and worked out of District Six.

Troy reached over and picked up the phone without sitting up in his chair.

"How's life down there in Everglades City?" Troy asked.

"Ev City is quiet at the moment," Rivers said. "Got her tamped down for now. Caught a guy last weekend poaching gators out of the national park. That was sort of exciting. Kind of retro. I mean, who does that any more?"

"I have a skeleton in the trunk of a car we found in a canal."

"A human skeleton?"

"You think I'm talking about some raccoon?"

"You lucky bastard."

"A 1995-model car with no plates, so no way of telling how long it's been there. Likely since 1998."

"Accident?" Rivers asked. "Years back, a lot of people went into canals. Before guard rails. Usually found the cars in the winter when the water levels dropped. Usually didn't find any bodies. Just fat and sassy gators hanging around."

"This was out in the boonies. Deep in. Couple hog-hunters found it. Old overgrown logging road and one of those drainage canals they dug for mosquito control. No tag, title, papers, or even the dashboard VIN. Skeleton in the trunk, not the driver's seat."

"You lucky bastard."

"You said that already. First thing I did was check the map to see if I could shove it down your throat instead. No such luck. You calling just to congratulate me?"

"Calling because you're luckier than you even knew. Got a report from Naples Community Hospital. The downtown hospital. They have a kid there, 13-year-old boy, they say is in serious condition. They say it looks as if he was beaten within an inch of his life."

"Know the case. Happened yesterday."

"Yeah. Some kind of alternative school there in Mangrove Bayou. You do what they say or they beat the crap out of you. Apparently they're not Catholic nuns with rulers."

"Actually, the staff look like they would work for Mussolini. Big guys all. Starched brown unis with combat boots. Screw up and they make you wear a car tire around your waist."

"Really? What would you wear to accessorize that? Anyway, the Collier County S.O. sent over a deputy to talk to the doctors and the kid in the Naples hospital. But they want you to take the case over."

"It's my case anyway. Happened on my turf."

"They know that. Just touching base here. Don't be so sensitive."

"You spent half your time hearing people call you a parking-ticket writer, you might be sensitive too."

Rivers laughed. "Suppose so. Funny thing is, you don't even have parking meters. Come to think, nether do we down here."

"Thinking of buying one."

"What good does one parking meter do?"

"Mount it on a kid's wagon. Pull it around in front of any car with an out-of-state tag. I read once about a town out West that did that. If the owner moved the car they moved the wagon too. Put it back in front of the car wherever the owner parked it."

"Way to impress the tourists. You run this by the town council yet?"

"Thought I'd save it for a slow time."

"You do that. My mind boggles at what you guys in Mangrove Bayou would consider a slow time."

"You call just to humiliate me or was there some actual purpose?"

Rivers laughed again. "The kid in the hospital. The main office assumed I'd be the nearest in-charge. I told them you were perfectly capable of handling it."

"I am. We are. Serve and protect and if someone beats the crap out of you, we come by later with a mop and bucket." Automatically, he reached for his wallet. He'd owe a dollar to the Bad Words Jar on June's desk.

"You can't be everywhere," Rivers said. "You do what you can."

"I know. Sometimes it doesn't seem enough."

Rivers hung up. Troy thumbed the intercom. "June, I'm going up to Naples, to the downtown hospital. Check on that kid we sent there yesterday."

"You could just use a fucking phone."

"That's 'You could use a fucking phone, Chief,'" Troy said. "And I like to do things in person. Are you putting a dollar into the jar?"

"Yes I am." June kept the Bad Words Jar and was the most prolific payer. "You owe a dollar too," June said.

"I was only quoting you. In fact, if it came to that, you should pay twice."

"Gimme a dollar."

Troy walked up front and paid. "I'm outta here before you sting me again," he said. "If any riot or civil insurrection breaks out, call me."

"Hell. I could handle that."

"I know. But I'd like to watch. And now you owe another dollar."

Chapter 8

Tuesday, April 28

Troy drove out Barron Road to U.S. 41. The intersection was notable to the rare passing driver only by a flashing yellow light and a billboard with a bad drawing of a 1930s motorboat with some smiling fisherman and *Welcome to Mangrove Bayou — Sportsmen's Paradise* in faded lettering, Troy paused to look at the sign. He couldn't be sure but he thought there were more bullet holes in the sign than the last time he had looked. *At least they don't shoot out the light*, he thought. *Considerate.*

He turned left to go to Naples on 41, what old-timers still called the Tamiami Trail. Troy always enjoyed the view eastward across the Everglades here. When he had been a police officer in Tampa he often used his days off to go canoeing in the swamps or sailing in Tampa Bay or nearby. But here he seemed never to take a weekend off as chief. As he drove, he rolled down the window so he could smell the marsh. *Got to figure a way to take a break now and then*, he thought. *It's been all work and no play since I started here last July. Even Lee says I need to take a break. I could lose her if I don't find more time.*

Troy contemplated that thought. He had been a bachelor all his life. He'd had a lot of girlfriends. *No, not girlfriends*, he thought, *just sex partners until I got transferred to some other place.* Lee was different. She was an actual friend and Troy had not had too many friends in his life. Lee Bell was smart, funny, self-possessed, with her own self-defined career, and drop-dead gorgeous. She had substance, Troy thought. Maturity. She also never failed to turn every male and even female head when she walked into a restaurant and Troy always found himself both happy to see that and a little annoyed by it too. *She's the only woman who ever made me feel possessive. And I could lose her if I don't find more time. I'd hate that, hate myself for letting it happen.*

At the hospital, Troy had expected to see a kid sitting up in a hospital bed waving a broken arm in a cast like a badge of courage. What he saw instead was a sheet-covered lump in the intensive care department, with tubes of all diameters running into him. Some had fluids going in, some had fluids coming out. The fluids were of various colors and Troy didn't want to ask. Troy hadn't yet seen Vollmer's report and he realized he had never seen the kid and didn't know the boy's name.

"His name is De'Marquise Williams," a doctor in the blue pajamas doctors liked to wear in hospitals said. His name tag read *Osborne*. Dr. Osborne had a stethoscope casually draped around his neck just in case anyone might think he was an accountant or airline pilot dressed in blue pajamas in a hospital.

"De'Marquise?" Troy said. "What race is he?"

"Does that matter to you?" Osborne said.

"Actually, yes it does. For the reports. Perhaps for the state attorney, should it come to determining if a hate crime had occurred. With a name like De'Marquise Williams he could be French or Welsh. Which is it?"

Osborne stared at Troy. "He's a 13-year-old black gangbanger from northeast Fort Myers."

"That would have been my next guess."

"We're not sure what happened to him or why, but we know the result," Osborne said. "He will probably live. He will never walk again. His lower spine was broken and the spinal cord damaged. He also has three broken ribs, a fractured skull, and perhaps brain damage we cannot yet assess. Right now we're just trying to keep the swelling down. Internally he's got damage to his liver, one kidney, and we removed his spleen. Oh, and somebody kicked one of his testicles up into his inguinal canal."

"Ouch."

"That we can fix easily. Not that he is going to care. I think the one kidney may have to come out too."

"All this from falling down some stairs?"

"That was the story we got. In my opinion you need to go arrest those stairs for assault with intent to kill."

"I'll look into it. Does he have parents?"

"Mom came by when she got off work last night. About four in the morning. Understand she's a nude dancer in some night club. They only let her see the boy because she's family. Name's Murial Williams."

"Father?"

Osborne looked at Troy. "Ask Murial. I got none on the records. I assume someone fourteen years ago fathered him. She ain't no Virgin Mary. I mean, we called her right off. Had her phone and address from the school's paperwork. And she says she will be along, 'by and by,' and then shows up early the next morning. Probably between screwing johns at some motel."

Troy decided to ignore that. Dr. Osborne didn't know any more about Murial Williams than Troy did. "Can I talk to him?"

Osborne shook his head. "He's too groggy anyway, but nobody can talk to him with that tube down his throat."

"He came here from the Florida Christian Military Academy, in Mangrove Bayou. Have you seen any other boys in here from that school?"

"I think so. Name rings a bell. Check with admissions records. But schools usually do send kids here even for minor injuries. For liability reasons. Better safe than sorry."

"I'm not sure that adage applies to Colonel Thaddius Bach, commandant of the Florida Christian Military Academy," Troy said.

He stopped by the records section on his way out and, sure enough, Florida Christian Military Academy had donated its share of bumps and bruises and several broken arms and legs. The hospital staff had duly reported some of these as child abuse to the Department of Children and Families, or DCF. They didn't know what happened after that. Troy asked them for a printout of those cases and they explained that hospital patient records were confidential. Troy explained that he would be back with an assistant state attorney, an investigator from DCF, and a lot of policemen. Such a crowd might disrupt the lobby and if they used a phone to call the hospital administrator, that person would tell them the police had every right to see reports of possible child abuse.

"Why didn't you say so," the clerk said. Troy drove off with copies of the records on the seat beside him.

"We're from the government," Troy muttered to himself as he turned south on the Tamiami Trail and headed for home. "And we're here to protect our turf."

Chapter 9

Wednesday, April 29

In the morning, Lee and Troy had breakfast on her terrace overlooking a pool and a long lawn stretching down to the Collier River. Lee usually wore white jeans with tee-shirts from Embry-Riddle University or other aviation-related things, especially when shuttling passengers or cargo around Florida on her Cessna Grand Caravan, but she was still in her red silk pajamas that matched her hair. Troy had on a fresh uniform; he seemed to keep half his clothes at Lee's house anyway. Uniforms he kept at her house, his rental condo, and in his station locker.

"Do you think that boy actually fell down those stairs?" Lee asked. Troy had told her about DeMarquise Williams.

"I think he fell down the stairs. The bloodstains more or less confirm that. I also think someone beat him half to death first."

"And then tossed him down the stairs as a way to explain the injuries?"

"Exactly. Didn't work though. Didn't fool the doctor at the hospital. Doesn't fool me. He would have had to fall down the stairs, then run back up and do it again, maybe ten times, to have so many injuries."

"But do you have any proof? I know you're a genius and that you intuit things sometimes, and you're usually right. But where's the proof?"

"Ah. Proof. So tiresome needing that. Makes my job a lot harder."

"Still, that's horrible," Lee said. "Here his mother sends him to that school hoping they would straighten him out. I'm sure she would have had no idea anything like this could happen to him."

"I don't know what she was thinking. I'm about to find out, though. On my way to see her this morning."

"Won't she be at work?"

"Works as a dancer in a club. She'll be sleeping in about now."

Lee stared at him a long moment and then turned to look out at the Collier River flowing slowly past a few hundred feet away. "Do you judge her for that? Do you suppose she's also a prostitute? A lot of nightclub dancers are, or so I hear."

"Is she going to make me think about my mother, you mean?"

Lee didn't look at him. "Yes," she said to the river.

"A lot of things make me think about my mother. Maybe she was a club dancer too. I have no way to know. Nobody knows who she was. There's actually no hospital birth record for me, did you know that?"

Lee looked back at Troy. "I had no idea. You must have a birth certificate. Everyone has a birth certificate."

"I do. Gotten for me by the director of The Orphans Home of Troy, New York. It lists place of birth as there at the home. That's not really true. I was probably born in an alley between two garbage cans. Maybe in some rent-by-the-hour flop house good old mom used to turn her tricks."

"And yet I don't detect any judgment in you about this woman."

"The doctor at the hospital assumed she is a prostitute. One thing I've learned in the police business is not to make assumptions about people or their motivations."

"Troy, you make assumptions all the time. I've seen you do it. It's what makes you such a good investigator. Where everyone else goes from Point A to Point B and then to Point C and so on, you just jump from A to D and you're 'way ahead of everyone else. You're an actual genius. Only police chief I know in Mensa."

"I'm the only police chief you know, period. And we call that intelligent intuition. The other is ignorant assumption. There's a huge difference."

"What's the difference?"

"I'll think on that. Do you have to know today?"

Lee punched his arm. "So you won't judge her now? What about after you meet her?"

"I'll judge her after I see her. Talk to her. People are much too complex to be prejudiced about them individually or as a class. You certainly aren't."

It was a delicate subject, Troy knew. Lee Bell was white and Irish and here she was seeing a mixed-race man, or at least someone Mayor Lester Groud called beige. This was not the 1920s Florida where white men had once burned to the ground the black town of Rosewood, murdered a number of black residents, and chased everyone else away. Troy had once visited the Rosewood site, west of Gainesville, on the road out to Cedar Key. All that remained was a small sign that said *Rosewood* as if there was a town there still, and a historical marker alongside a twenty-mile stretch of empty two-lane. Today the sight of a white woman with a black man didn't arouse the attention it once did and Troy was barely 'colored' anyway. There were a lot of white locals — his patrolman Bubba Johns was one, Mayor Groud another — who, thanks to their usual tans, were darker than Troy. Troy still regarded Lee Bell as courageous in her own quiet way. Of course, she was from Seattle and he was from New York, and Florida was a state that was more northern the farther south you went.

He put down his empty orange juice glass, kissed Lee goodbye, and drove north to Fort Myers to talk to De'Marquise Williams' mother.

Muriel Williams lived in a second-floor apartment in a project complex off Palm Beach Boulevard on the east side of Fort Myers. The four two-story block buildings surrounded a central parking lot of tired-looking cars, some of them resting on concrete blocks, with hoods up where the batteries had been stolen. The buildings had laminated red brick façades that had peeled off in places so that the underlying concrete blocks showed through. If it were possible for buildings to have feelings, Troy thought, looking at them, they exuded a sense of despair, of hopelessness.

One building had, on the outer wall facing Palm Beach Boulevard/State Road 80, a large sign announcing that this was Section 8 Housing and to call 911 to report crimes. *I bet that makes the residents feel ... special*, Troy thought. In his life and police career he had seen more than enough public housing and it always made him sad. The towns built impersonal buildings that looked like bad army barracks, moved in families or fragments of families — often upended from poor but clean neighborhoods that had been "urban-renewed" into oblivion — and then wondered why the forcibly-relocated poor didn't seem to have any pride in their government-assigned apartments.

Troy realized that there was not a single blade of grass, let alone a flower, anywhere he could see. Nobody had a window flower box. There were no gardens, no

lawns, no trees. Half the windows had window-mounted air conditioners hanging out of them in various states of disrepair and the water draining from those had stained the outside walls. Some windows had curtains, none colorful, and many had peeling plywood covering them. There had once been false shutters attached to the fake brick on either side of each window; now half of those had fallen off or come loose. There was a Dumpster with a sign asking people not to park in front of it. People had parked in front of it so that the truck could not empty it and it was overflowing, bags of trash on the ground in front, some ripped open, probably by dogs.

At least Troy's Subaru looked up-scale. The only new car was a Cadillac Escalade, black with dark tinted windows, being washed next to a building with a water faucet attached to the side, by some black teenagers in shorts and tee-shirts. One older man, late-twenties, Troy guessed, dark black, five feet ten with a shaved head and muscular, was supervising. The man wore a gray silk double-breasted suit with matching vest, and a white tie. The bottom of some black pointed cowboy boots peeped out from beneath the suit pants. He was waving at the car with a hand holding a Panama hat. He looked hard at Troy and his uniform and walked over. The hat had a wide gray hatband to match the suit.

"Who might you be? What are you doing in here?"

Troy looked at him. He put his hand on his Colt Commander at his belt. "Name's Troy Adam. Police chief in Mangrove Bayou, little ways south of here. You some sort of local *cacique*, what with the attitude, the nice suit, and that gun in your left shoulder holster?"

"And what, might I ask, is a cacique?" The man ignored the part about the gun.

"Sort of a pre-Columbian Caribbean tribal chief. But, in this case, a neighborhood gang leader."

The man smiled. He had a large gold front tooth with an inset diamond. "I like it. I would be a cacique then." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the car. "Those would be the Eighty-Eights. Or some of them."

"From the movie *Kill Bill* perhaps?"

"I do not know about any movie. Eighty-Eights because we are on State Road 80 and this is Section Eight housing. Are you here to talk to De'Marquise's mother?"

"That's a good guess. You're well-informed. What's your name?"

"Tag-Dog. You may call me Tag-Dog."

"Your mother named you Tag-Dog? Didn't she like you?" It had taken a few minutes for Troy to realize just how formal was Tag-Dog's speech. Odd, he thought.

"What my mother named me is my fucking business."

"Suppose so, Mr. Business. Strange middle name, though. And you do know that 'eighty-eight' is white supremacist code for 'Heil Hitler'."

"I did not know that. How odd. Why?"

"Because 'H' is the eighth letter in the alphabet."

Tag-Dog looked back at the gang members washing his SUV. He grinned, his diamond-set gold tooth briefly showing and turned back to Troy. "Well, strange though it may seem, none of us are white supremacists. But I thank you for the information. It amuses me."

"You're welcome. I'm going in to talk to Murial Williams. You got a problem with that?"

"If I did, would you go away?"

"Not on your life. Just curious. This is your turf. Thought I'd give you a chance to act polite. But I'm going in, with your consent, without your consent, over your dead body if it comes to that."

Tag-Dog managed not to fall down in a faint. "De'Marquise is one of us. His mother is not one of my fans. She sent him off to that school to get him out of the gang. She probably thought he would be safer. So tell me, what happened to him. I went to the hospital yesterday. No one there would let me see him."

"Officially, he fell down some stairs."

"Officially. You are an official. What do you think?"

"I think someone at that school kicked him half to death with their patent-leather combat boots."

"And when you know who, you will let me know. There is no need for your kind of justice here. We can handle it. We take care of our own."

"I don't know squat right now. But whatever happened, happened in my town, not the Eighty-Eights' turf. I investigate. I handle it. I make any arrests needing making."

"We shall see about that. I do not believe much in arrests. I like direct action. You are black, sort of. How would you feel if this had happened to one of your best friends."

"I'd probably feel like killing the thug who did this. But we live in a civilized society and we can't all be going around taking personal vengeance. And if you get in my way you're going to have a big problem," Troy said.

Tag-Dog didn't seem disturbed by that. "Are you not supposed to have some local oinker along with you?"

"I called the Lee County sheriffs. They told me to just do my thing. It's only an interview."

"Okay." Tag-Dog bowed and made a sweeping motion towards the nearest building with his hat in one hand. "Do your thing, Chief."

"One more item on our agenda, Tag-Dog."

"What would that be?"

"If, when I come back out, anyone has so much as leaned on my car, let alone keyed it, swiped the hubcaps, or anything else, I will seriously consider making your head into a doughnut. Am I clear on that?"

Tag-Dog looked at Troy's car and smiled. "You don't even *have* hubcaps. But I should not worry. We appreciate serious iron, rides with looks, good engines, not Jap Subarus. Say, you got a good stereo system, maybe?"

"Whatever came with the car. Still got a cassette tape player."

Tag-Dog burst out laughing. "You have got to be kidding me. Go do your business. Your car will be fine."

Troy climbed some rusting stairs, carefully not leaning too hard on a broken rail, and knocked on a door with half its paint gone. There was a light in the ceiling of the walkway in front of the door. It was inside an iron grille. He could see that the bulb was shattered anyway.

Chapter 10

Wednesday, April 29

Murial Williams was a light mocha color, a little darker than Troy, five feet six, one hundred pounds, thin-hipped and small-breasted and would have been more attractive if her nose didn't seep all the time. Troy estimated her age at forty or a few years older. He later learned she was only twenty-nine and had been sixteen when her son was born. She let Troy in while blotting a bit of blood off her nose and then off her ratty white terrycloth bathrobe which was stained from past leaks. Troy diagnosed excessive cocaine snorting and a perforated septum. Her eyes were dilated and the lights were off so that only dim sunlight percolating through drawn curtains lit the apartment. She was up early for a nightclub dancer, but Troy had called to say he was on the way. She was already smoking her first cigarette of the day. Judging by the full ashtrays scattered about the apartment, there would be many more yet to come.

"Saw you down there, talkin' to Tag-Dog." She said. She and Troy sat at a folding card table in the dining room part of a single large room that served as living, dining and, at one end, kitchen. "He's why ah got De'Marquise outta here, into that special school."

The apartment was furnished in Goodwill castoffs but there was a large new flat-screen television sitting on a cheap table in front of a broken-down sofa that was losing its stuffing at one corner. A chalk and black velvet drawing of Dr. King hung on one wall, next to a plastic crucified black Jesus. The kitchen counter had several pizza boxes, empty, and a hand-towel had been hung from the wall with *"I like to use wine when cooking. Sometimes I even put some into the food"* printed on it.

"Have you visited that school?" Troy asked.

"No. Read about it. They had a bro ... a bro-something. Thing with pages."

"Brochure?"

"Thass it. And the state paid for it. Some kinda voucher thing. Lawyer Donatello came by to talk to me about it. Tol' me it cost me nothin'. Said the people there would break De'Marquise of his gangsta style, teach him manners, make him into a stand-up boy ah could be proud of. Well, now he ain't never gonna stand up again."

"I had wondered how you could afford to send him there, Mrs. Williams. What do you do for a living?"

"A livin'? If you calls it that. Ah works at a club, the Coté Bravo. Ah is a dancer. Specialized. Ah gots other talents too." She gave Troy what she probably thought was a seductive smile and loosened her tatty robe a little to show some chest between her small breasts. The effect was lessened by her needing to blot her nose again. Apparently Dr. Osborne's assumption about Murial had been right.

"Specialized? How so?"

"Got me a snake." She pointed and Troy saw, against one wall near a hallway to the bedrooms and bath, a glass aquarium case with a vented lid. He walked over and bent down to look in. There was a constrictor, brown, about four feet long, looking back up at him. The snake stared at Troy. Troy doubted that he could outstare the snake. He walked back to the table and sat down.

"Thas' Bruno," Murial said. She blotted and puffed. "He's ma dinner ticket."

"Bruno. A snake with a name," Troy said. "Does he come when you call? Play fetch? Bring in the newspaper?"

Murial shook her head. "No. But tha cust'mers, they love what ah can do with that there snake."

"I bet they do," Troy said. He decided that he didn't want to know what she could do with the snake.

Apparently Murial wanted him to know. "Ah gots the mornin' free," she said. She shrugged out of the robe and stood up. "Ah shaves ma pussy. Thass so Bruno don't get lost in there," she giggled.

"I can see that," Troy said politely. He felt a little sorry for Bruno.

Murial laid the cigarette, still smoldering, in an ashtray and walked around the table and sat on Troy's lap. "You want to spend the morning. We can have some fun. You is a cop, so ah won't charge you nuthin'. Ah knows the rules."

"I don't think so, Murial. Thanks for the offer, though."

"You don' lak ma body?"

"I like it just fine, Murial. I'm just a little busy today." Actually, Troy had recently been seeing Lee Bell's naked body, and naked drug-abusing whores didn't even come close. He thought that Murial looked pathetic and he guessed that the cover charge at the Côté Bravo was low. But Troy didn't think he would mention that.

"Ah can get you more ... excited." Murial said. "We kin do a three-way. Me, you, and Bruno. It's special. Bet you never done a woman and a snake together."

"I've had no luck at all, Murial. But I get excited at green traffic lights. I'll pass."

"Come on. You is makin' me horny, hon. Gots another big TV in that bedroom. Got some porn you kin watch. Get in the mood. Rubbers no problem, gots a box a those."

"I bet you do," Troy said. He stood, dumping Murial on the floor. She picked herself up and sat down across from him and looked annoyed.

"Do you believe that story about De'Marquise falling down some stairs?" Troy said. He decided not to sit down again.

"Don' matter what ah believes. When the Man say somethin' to some nigger strip-dancer with a gangsta kid, the Man right. Besides, Mr. Donatello came by already."

"Who is this Mr. Donatello?"

"Lawyer. For that school. Said the school had to pay a pinnace. Don't know what a pinnace is but he talk pretty and he say they done owed it to me to make things right."

"He probably meant a penance," Troy said. "A pinnace is a small boat."

"Whatever." She picked up the cigarette. "Thought at first he was braggin' on his penis. Then he got out money. Before we fucked. Usually get the money up front."

"How much money did he give you, Murial? Not for fucking, for the penance."

She blotted and stared up at Troy and took a long pull on her cigarette. She took the cigarette out of her mouth and blew the smoke up to the ceiling. She looked back at Troy. "Ain't gonna say. But ah is okay now." She laughed and took in another long drag on her cigarette. "Me and Bruno sorta talked him outta a double payment." She smiled. "Mebbe more sometime soon. He laked me. Wanted be a regular."

"I'm happy for you, Murial. And for Mr. Donatello. And for Bruno. But what did you sign?"

"Who say ah sign anything?"

"I'm just guessing."

"You is sho a good guesser." Murial took another drag on the cigarette. It had burned down to the filter and she dropped that into the ashtray where it continued to smolder. She stood, still naked and took her time getting out another from a pack on the kitchen counter, sat again and lit up. She inhaled a long drag. Troy, who hated cigarette smoke, would need to shower and change clothes back at his office.

"What did you sign, Murial?"

"Well, Mr. Donatello, he needed a receipt. For the money. So the peoples back there would know he din't just steal it his own self."

"Just a receipt? Not a quitclaim or non-disclosure agreement?"

"Ah din't read it. Can't read all that good anyhow and them was long words, little, close together. He said it was just a receipt, not a ... whatever."

"He tell you never to talk to anyone about this? Or to never think about pressing any charges against the school?"

"Well, yes he did. Said that was part of the receipt. I talk to anyone, they can take back the money." She frowned at that and looked at her cigarette, which by now had an inch of ash. She reached to the ash tray but the ash fell off on the table top and she brushed that off onto the floor. "Come to think, guess ah shouldn't be talkin' to you now."

"That's all right," Troy lied. "I'm with the police, remember. But, Murial, I hope you put that money into a safe place." He waved his arm toward the door, the balcony outside, and the parking lot staffed by gangbangers. "This doesn't seem all that safe."

"Money's safe enough. Ah has hid it somewhere special." Suddenly, she stood. "Mebbe you better go. Mr. Donatello pro'lly wouldn't like you here."

"All right, Murial. I do hope for the best for your son."

"Shee-it. He ain't never gonna be best at anythin'. Best thing he ever did for his momma was to get hurt so Mr. Donatello would pay me money. You sure you can't stay? Watch some porn. Play with ma snake while ah play with yo snake?" She laughed.

"Rain check, Murial."

Downstairs in the parking lot, Tag-Dog and the Eighty-Eights were gone, with their Escalade, and Troy's car was untouched. He stood for a moment to let some of the cigarette smoke dissipate before getting in. He looked at the silent and dismal walls around him.

"Jesus H. Christ," he said aloud. "How can someone grow up here and even hope to be normal?"

— end sample —

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