

Obsession

A Troy Adam / Mangrove Bayou mystery
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Chapter 1

Monday, September 7

"Ironic, sort of," Paul Tedesco said as he drove through Immokalee, Florida in the rental car.

"Why is that, sweetums?" Penny Tedesco asked in her high-pitched childlike voice.

"Today is Labor Day. And we're looking for a laborer." He laughed his big, booming laugh.

"Well, it's just Monday," Penny said. "We likes to do this on Mondays because the trash truck comes on Tuesdays. I gets excited just thinkin' about it."

"Me too," Paul said. "Not like you get but I sure enjoy the chase. Builds up to the climax."

"And I likes that, sweetums. You know how I do," Penny said. She smiled happily. A few minutes later she pointed at an abandoned service station by the side of the road. "That there looks like a good spot to stop and change the plate."

"Yep," Paul said. He pulled over and parked beside the small building, the car facing out toward State Road 29. Immokalee was a small farming town surrounded by citrus groves and some vegetable fields. Half the population during the picking season, it often seemed, were Mexican workers. They migrated like flocks of starlings with the change in fall weather, picking in the north first and then working their way south. In Spring they would do the reverse, planting in the south first, then farther north as the weather warmed. They were just starting to fill up the boarding houses in town and the company-supplied barracks nearer the fields.

In the Spring, when the big Valencia orange crop came due, large trucks loaded with piled-high oranges would be racing around back roads, each driver trying to get in as many loads as possible per day. But right now all was peaceful and Immokalee dozed under a hot September sun.

Paul got out and opened the trunk of the rental car. He pulled out a license plate he had stolen months before and, using some small but strong metal clips, attached that over the plate already on the car. Vehicles in Florida had only the rear tag. The small clips were not obvious. He got back into the car and they drove on into town.

"Sweetums, don' you ever worry about the plate owner complainin' and the cops stoppin' us?" Penny asked.

"Unlikely. I stole two plates. I put the first one onto the second car and use the second car's plates on these rental cars." He laughed. "Most plates are screwed on with simple screws anyone can take off. The first car owner might notice his plate missing and report it but it's just on someone else's car. Doesn't point to us."

"But the second plate's stolen too."

"Sure. But most people don't know their plate number and never look at them anyway. So long as there's a license plate on their car they're not likely to notice that it's different. And we're only using it for a few minutes each time. Odds of any cop noticing anything are one in a million."

"That's a lot. I'd rather they was better odds," Penny said. "Kinda likes the danger. You knows what I mean."

Paul laughed. "Sure. In a chase it's fun to be the hunter but also sometimes fun to be the hunted."

"Never tried bein' hunted," Penny said. "Wonder if the sex would be even better."

"With you, baby, hard to imagine." Paul laughed again. "But I take the stolen plate back off as soon as possible. Some cop cars have scanners that read plates and run them automatically. The plate I swiped would not match up to this car. That's why I try never to let any cop get too close behind us. Always turn off down a side street if I see one even two blocks back."

He looked ahead. "Here we are. Unbutton that top button and look good for our guest."

They pulled into a home improvement store and parked in the lot. They had reconnoitered this store in their own car several days earlier but Paul Tedesco was a cautious man. It was midmorning and the weekday crowd of hopeful men who stood on the roadside just beyond the store parking lot had thinned as some were picked up for day-labor jobs and others became discouraged and went home or, if they had no home, to wherever they slept on a sheet of cardboard under a road overpass. There were only a half-dozen men left.

Paul put the car in gear and pulled out onto the road and stopped on the shoulder just after cruising slowly past the clump of men. He rolled down a window and waited. He knew there was usually an informal rotation system. In a moment one man came across the road and walked up to look in the driver window. "Do ya need some help today?" he asked.

Paul Tedesco had learned a lot about these people in the past few years. The day-workers despised the beggars who just wanted donations. Day workers wanted to work but they didn't get the chance as often as they wished.

"Sure do," Paul said. "Got some fence to put up. Bought the pieces here and had those delivered. I know how to put in posts and nail up stringers and the slats but I could use some help. Make the job go faster. What's your name?"

"Rual," the man said.

"Call me Bennie," Paul said. "Benjamin but I hate that. This is Sandy."

Rual nodded and stared at Penny. She gave him a wide smile.

"One day's work," Tedesco said. "I'll pay a hundred dollars because I want it all done today." This was well over the norm.

"I'm your man," Rual said. "Where at?"

"Over in Mangrove Bayou. But I'll bring you back here when we're done. Buy us both a beer at Los Hermanos up the street. I work here in town anyway. Hop in."

"You from around hereabouts?" Penny asked as they drove off with Rual in back. She had turned sideways in the passenger seat. Rual stared at her chest.

"Got to get some gas," Paul said. He pulled into a station. "You guys stay here. I'll do it." He got out and went into the station and gave the clerk five dollars while Penny kept Rual occupied talking to and staring at her.

Paul came back out and pumped the gas into the car. When no one was around he bent down and took off the stolen plate and popped the trunk and put that away. The stolen tag had only been needed in case one of the day-workers was up to making notes.

He got back into the rental car and they drove on. Penny chatted with Rual all the way to Mangrove Bayou. It excited her even more.

Thirty minutes later they pulled into the driveway on 12th street in Mangrove Bayou and Paul got out to unlock and open the garage door. There was a Mercedes-Benz CLS-class sedan already parked in the garage and Paul pulled in beside it. He got out and closed and locked the garage door.

"I could use a beer," he said. "Come on into the house."

"You bet," Rual said. "Nice house." A side door in the garage led into the kitchen. Paul got out three beers and passed two to the others. They stood and sipped a moment. "Show you something else I'm working on," Paul said. "Might need some help and advice for my 'acoustic' room." He led Rual through the house and into a room with carpet covering floor, walls and ceiling. Penny stayed behind in the kitchen.

There was a large piece of plastic sheeting covering the carpet on the floor and a single stainless steel plain chair sitting in the center of the room. A computer and monitor were set up on a table against the far wall, facing the chair. There were large speakers to either side.

"My acoustic room," Tedesco said. "I work with hearing aids and this is where I test them. Great for music too." He laughed a booming laugh. "Sit down and listen a moment."

"Ain't we got a fence to build?" Rual asked.

"Sure. In a moment. I may need to subdivide this room, build a wall in here. Control the sound level better. I could use another opinion. Sit and listen and tell me what you think."

"Oh. Okay" Rual sat in the chair. Paul went to the computer and started it playing some loud music.

"What's the music," Rual asked. "Sounds good to me."

"It's Wagner," Paul said. "Ride of the Valkeries, from *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, second opera in the Ring Cycle. Now listen carefully as I adjust the level."

Paul Tedesco bent to fiddle with the knobs on the stereo. Behind Rual and his chair, Penny Tedesco stepped into the room and raised a long-barreled .22-caliber pistol. "Daddy" she cried out as she shot Rual point-blank in the back of the head. The sound of the shot was muffled in the room and covered by the music. No one outside would have heard it at all. Rual's head snapped forward and then back and he slumped in the chair. Penny whimpered and rubbed the back of Rual's neck with the long barrel of the gun.

Paul turned off the music and walked back to the chair. In the sudden silence Penny felt for a pulse at Rual's neck. Sometimes a second shot was needed to finish the job but not this time. A trickle of blood ran from one small hole and down the back of Rual's neck and onto the metal chair rungs. There would be a lot more blood later when they butchered the corpse. Penny touched a fingertip to the blood and then sucked on her fingertip, tasting it. "I'm ready now, sweetums" She said in her girlish voice. "That made me all, like, excited down there." She rubbed the long gun barrel between her legs.

"Someday," Paul said, "you're going to shoot yourself doing that."

"Please. Let's go upstairs. Right now."

"We have work to do first," Paul said. "Cut him up. Clean up the room."

"He's not goin' anywhere." Penny laid the gun on the floor next to the chair and corpse. She took her brother's hand and dragged him towards the door. "Let's get upstairs before I cools off."

Chapter 2

Sunday, September 13

Troy Adam was helping Lester Groud rebuild an outboard engine on Groud's flats boat when Troy's office cell phone rang at eight a.m. on Sunday morning. He and Lester had been working on the boat since seven. Troy took a moment to wipe grease from his hand and then thumbed the receive button. "Yeah. Talk to me," he said.

"Chief, need you in the office," he heard Milo Binder say. "Got a reported rape. Girl's here. With her parents."

"Who's the other duty officer?" Troy asked.

"Domino."

"Get her into the office too. Be there in ten." Troy disconnected and looked at Lester. "Got to go do some actual police chief work. You all right here?"

"Yeah. Sure." Lester Groud, when not guiding clients on his charter fishing boat, was also the town mayor and one of the three councilmen. "Got to have this ready by noon. Probably finish up quicker without your watching anyway. And a lot faster than with you helping."

Troy grinned. "What I like about you, Lester. Always so grateful for the least little bit of help."

Troy found the station front door unlocked, which was unusual for a Sunday but there were two drunks in the lockup sleeping off a Saturday night binge and a friendly fistfight. Troy's policy was that someone had to be in the station if anyone was locked up. Sometimes that one person was himself and he had installed a long leather sofa in his office to sleep on some nights. For other times there was a sign outside advising people to push a doorbell and also to call the station non-emergency phone if they needed to. One of the two patrol officers always carried a department cellphone that received both that number and the 911 line. Troy had the other department cell phone.

He found Milo in Troy's chair in the corner office with the red-painted fire exit door in the back wall. "Trying it out for size?" he asked. Milo hastily stood and moved to stand by the office door.

"This is Ferris and Dorothy Ramstod," Milo said, pointing at the family seated on the sofa. "Mr. Ramstod is the dockmaster at the Guide Club. And this is Greer Ramstod." He pointed at a thin blonde girl sitting between the elder Ramstods.

Troy nodded at them. "Troy Adam. I'm the chief here. Ferris knows me, of course. Been by the dock there a time or two."

"You got that funny sailboat looks like a big open whaleboat with the two masts," Ferris Ramstod said.

"That's right." Troy sat at his desk and opened the top right drawer to get out a box of tissues. He hadn't quite gotten all the grease off his fingers.

Dorothy Ramstod stared at Troy. "I've seen you around," she said. "At the yacht club. Some other places. I didn't realize you were the police chief."

Troy smiled. "I stand out at the Osprey Yacht Club," he said, "being as I'm the only person of color they ever admitted. And even that's only because the Director of Public Safety is always an honorary member."

"Always pegged you for Seminole or Miccosukee," Ferris Ramstod said. "Sort of enjoyed seeing you there."

Troy shook his head. "Not Indian. White, black, Asian. But lots of people think I'm Native American." He shifted from Ferris to Greer. "How old are you, Greer?"

The girl just stared at him. "She's seventeen," Dorothy Ramstod said. "She's a senior in high school and she acts like she's six most of the time."

Troy nodded. "Tell me what happened," he said as he wiped some fingers. Spots, the stationhouse cat, wandered in. He tended to go where he heard voices because voices meant humans and humans could open the break room refrigerator. There was a large bed, designed for a dog, in the corner and Spots flopped down on that and regarded everyone through yellow eyes set in a very large head.

"Shouldn't you have a uniform?" Mrs. Ramstod asked. She wore a dark gray pantsuit and white high-collar shirt under. Her blonde hair was turning gray and was swept up into a tight bun. The lines at the corners of her mouth told of a lifetime of being disappointed with the people around her. Troy, who was ex-military himself, had rarely seen a civilian with such upright posture. Dorothy Ramstod looked like a drill sergeant.

Troy was wearing some ragged cargo shorts and a denim shirt with a logo from a Bahamian bar. The shirttail was out to cover his gun. Troy was rarely without a firearm and he had his Colt Commander .45-caliber in a horsehide holster on his belt at his right hip. The gun was the only clean piece of clothing he had on.

"It's Sunday, Mrs. Ramstod. I was off duty. Now I'm back on. Tell me what happened."

"Well, I think it's disrespectful of you to show up so slovenly dressed."

"For God's sake, Dot," Ferris Ramstod said. He was a big man, six-two and two-twenty, deeply tanned and with large weathered hands. He wore dark blue slacks and a light blue Columbia fishing shirt. Troy had a closet full of the same shirts and would have supposed there were several thousand in Mangrove Bayou. "Our daughter's been raped. And you're blathering about dress codes."

"We're about to ask this man to perform legal work for us and he shows up looking like a mechanic," Dorothy Ramstod said. "Not only that," she pointed at the cat. "He keeps a slovenly animal in his office. Disgusting."

"Spots is actually very much into personal grooming," Troy said. "Necessary, I suppose, when your entire wardrobe is a single one-piece fur jumpsuit."

"He's disgusting. You're unkempt. Why would I expect you to be any better at investigating crimes?"

Troy looked at Milo, who was still standing by the door. "Milo, tell us how many police chiefs there are in Mangrove Bayou. Or even within twenty miles of here."

Milo grinned. "Well, let me see. There's you. And there's ... you. She could ask the sheriff's office to investigate. They'll just tell her to talk to you. Your turf."

Troy looked at Dorothy Ramstod. "Looks like I'm all you've got. I'm good at my job, even if, at this moment, I'm not dressed like some department store mannequin."

"Give it a rest, Dot," Ferris Ramstod said.

"Plus, it's hard to investigate a crime if you won't tell me about it," Troy said. He tossed the greasy tissue into his trash can. "The crime we're discussing is called, here in Florida, 'sexual battery'. There are rules about what's a rape. Those go by age. Twelve-

and-unders have one set of rules, older have another set. We'll get into this in more detail when necessary."

Dominique Reiss walked into the office and Troy motioned for her to sit in one of the visitor chairs. Reiss was tall and black and the only officer besides Troy with a college degree. Hers was in anthropology and his was in ancient and medieval history. It occurred to Troy that studying something remotely useful, like social work, might have been a better choice for both of them.

"Tell me what happened," he said to the three Ramstods.

Dorothy Ramstod half-turned to her daughter. "Stop sulking, girl. Tell the man how you got raped by a bunch of high school kids."

Greer Ramstod looked around the room and then down at her shoes. She was wearing a white blouse and dark blue calf-length pleated skirt and her blonde hair was done in a single French braid that hung to the center of her back. She mumbled something.

"Speak up, girl," her mother said sharply.

"I don't want to talk in front of all these people," Greer said softly. She started to cry.

"Oh for heaven's sake," Dorothy Ramstod said. "Sit up and stop dripping and talk to the Chief there."

Troy handed the box of tissues to Dominique and she passed it on to Greer. "Officer Binder, thanks for handling this. I'll take it from here," Troy said. "Perhaps you can get back out on patrol"

"Will do Chief." Milo turned and left.

"I asked Officer Reiss, here, to sit in on this," Troy said. "Greer, would you feel more comfortable if you just told her what happened? Alone. In another room."

"She'll tell you here and now," Dorothy Ramstod said.

"Yes. Please." Greer mumbled.

"Domino, take Greer to the back room and talk to her. You know what to do." Dominique would use the interrogation room and turn on the camera and microphone to record the conversation. "Mr. and Mrs. Ramstod, stay here and talk to me."

"She will do as I tell her."

"Mrs. Ramstod, please. This is my police station. I actually know how to do my job, uniform or no uniform."

"Be quiet, Dot," Ferris Ramstod said. He looked at Greer. "Go with this woman. And remember that we love you no matter what."

Dominique Reiss and Greer Ramstod left. Troy slowly and patiently got the story out of the parents. Greer had gone out after dinner Saturday evening with some friends who were heading to the Barron Mall, the small local indoor mall. The next time the parents saw her was after midnight when Greer showed up crying, naked and bruised, and said she had been abducted and raped.

"This was at midnight last night?" Troy said. "Why didn't you call us then?"

"Why, she was hysterical," Dorothy Ramstod said. Her expression became, if possible, even more severe. "She was disgustingly filthy. I took her straight in for a good hot shower and scrubbing, gave her two of my sleeping pills and put her to bed. She was out in minutes and I went to bed too."

Troy grimaced but decided this was not the time to enforce obscure regulations covering prescription drugs or to shout at the mother about destroying evidence. He looked out the window at Sunset Bay and the boat ramp there but didn't see anything to make his mood any better. He looked at Ferris Ramstod. "What did you do, Ferris?"

"I sat up all night in the living room. I wanted to go out and kill the first boy I found on the street. I didn't. I got drunk instead."

Troy nodded. At least that sounded like a normal response. "Might have been nice to immediately bring Greer here to the clinic," Troy said. The two-story brick town hall building housed the police station, the town offices, a small office for the volunteer fire department, and a medical clinic.

"What for?" Dorothy Ramstod said.

"Get a rape kit done. Standard procedure. Without that it's maybe ten times harder to get a conviction on anyone."

"What's a rape kit?"

Troy explained. Dorothy Ramstod started shaking her head before he was done.

"Not having a bunch of strangers staring up my daughters' hoo-ha or sticking things in there."

"Her hoo-ha?" Troy said.

"She means Greer's vagina," Ferris Ramstod said. "Dot hates to admit she's the mother of a young woman and not a small animated toy. Damn, it, Dot, she has a gynecologist who sticks things up Greer's 'hoo-ha' just the same as she does yours. Jesus! We're adults here. Hoo-ha?"

Dorothy Ramstod glared at her husband and then turned the glare on Troy. "Well, do it now."

"I can ask Doctor Vollmer," Troy said. "But I don't think it works if the victim has already showered and ... er ... cleaned up. Stay here a moment while I check on Officer Reiss."

Troy walked down the hall that separated the four lockups from the break room, the public toilet and shower, and the small interrogation room that was barely big enough for a table and four chairs. He opened the interrogation room door and asked Dominique to step out.

"Tell me a story," he said.

"She went from the mall to a party," Reiss said. "Place on 17th Street and California. Two block walk. Lots of the high school kids were there and some older ones too."

"Parents? Anyone supervising?"

Dominique shook her head. "Apparently they were AWOL. Older kids, young men actually, brought some booze and pills and the kids had a good time being stupid. Greer," ... Dominique glanced at the closed door to the interrogation room ... "drank a can of beer someone handed her and soon felt dizzy."

"Can was open when she got it?"

"Yep. And you know what that means."

"Slipped her a 'roofie'."

"Probably. That or GHB. You talk the parents into a rape kit?" Dominique asked.

"Yeah. But even though she's underage I'd like to hear Greer agree to the kit. Did you explain to her how important that can sometimes be?"

"Did that. She understands. She agrees. But she says her mom made her shower and scrub up good. Idiot."

"I know. Mom told me," Troy said. "We'll try anyway. I want you to stay with her, be at her side. All day if it takes that long. She is your special project for today."

"Because?"

"You haven't done this before, I take it?"

Dominique shook her head.

"A rape kit is a two to four-hour procedure," Troy said. "It's physically invasive and emotionally upsetting. It's worth it but that makes it no less unpleasant to endure. Greer will need a friend by her side, a female friend. I don't think mom is up to that."

"What makes you think *I'm* up to that."

"We'll find out, I suppose. Part of our job is to be a shoulder to lean on for victims. So go do your job. We'll have Doc Volmer do the kit. It's probably still soon enough for blood and urine samples at least. DNA's probably gone, thanks to mom."

"What about pregnancy?"

Troy grimaced. "Good point. Discuss that with Greer, where she is in her cycle. Get Doc Volmer in on that. She may need a morning-after pill."

"Will do. Kid says when she got dizzy two of the seniors offered to take her home," Dominique said. "She knows who they are. After that things got hazy for her."

"Roofies or GHB can induce a sort of amnesia. In fact that's half the point."

"Well, she remembers some things. In and out of awareness," Dominique said. "She may not have drunk the entire can. Told me she doesn't like beer that much."

"So she didn't get the full dose," Troy said. "If she had, odds are she would remember nothing at all."

"She says they dragged her into the cemetery, just another block east. She doesn't recall them stripping off her clothes but she remembers the first boy penetrating her. She was a virgin and it hurt and that sort of woke her up."

"Jesus," Troy said.

"They took turns holding her down and raping her. Apparently, by that time, she wasn't very hard to hold down."

"She say anything? Like no?"

"Does that matter, Chief, or are you still living in 1950?" Dominique tended to bristle. Troy was used to it.

"Goes back farther than 1950," Troy said. "*Leviticus 22* in the Bible says, '*If a damsel that is a virgin be betrothed to a husband and a man find her in the city and lie with her. Then ye shall bring them out to the gate of that city and ye shall stone them until they die, the damsel because she cried not and the man because he humbled his neighbor's wife.*'" Troy frowned. "Or words to that effect; been a long time since I read that."

"Greer isn't someone's wife," Dominique said. "Or betrothed."

"Well, the author of *Leviticus* had a limited viewpoint. In Biblical times women were either children subject to their fathers' whims, or wives subject to their husbands' whims. There was no other state for women to exist in."

Dominique crossed her arms. "So rape is fine just so the woman doesn't complain loudly about it at the time? Just because it says so in the Bible?"

"No. But today's *Leviticus* is the laws of the state of Florida. And those laws say that consent does matter. Greer is over sixteen. Florida law is complicated when it comes to ages of consent for sex. In her case, if the man is under twenty-four, she has to actively say no or words to that effect for it to be counted as rape. She doesn't have to physically struggle, but some indication that she didn't want this is needed. Did she say anything?"

"She says that she thinks she told them to leave her alone and to stop."

"She thinks?"

"She can't remember very well. But one thing she does remember. Sort of a split-second flashback thing. She thinks there was a third boy. The third boy stood by but didn't rape her. But she's not even sure about that. When the boys left they took her clothes and they smashed her cell phone against a grave marker. She didn't actually remember them leaving; that's how she found things when she came out of it in an hour or so and then got up and ran home. Naked."

"Where is 'home' anyway," Troy said.

"One of those condos on Idaho Avenue. The ones with the canals and private boat docks behind."

"All right. Get back with her and see if she can remember the third boy's name."

After the Greer family had left, Troy let the two men out of their cells. He had arranged for the Sandy Shoes restaurant to bring over breakfast for his two prisoners and now he let them eat in the break room and then gave them a stern lecture and kicked them loose. Jack DeGrasse, the state attorney, often accused Troy of breaking the law in not sending all prisoners up to the Collier County jail. Troy didn't think that two friends who got drunk and punched each other in the eyes deserved criminal records.

Chapter 3

The dream was always the same. They came into her bedroom after midnight, after an afternoon and evening of drinking. It was part of the normal cycle. Days of beatings and whippings interspersed with Old Testament Bible readings. Then the drinking day. Then the special night of pain and ecstasy. Then a few days of love and tenderness. Then the cycle repeating. She knew what was to come. It excited her and terrified her at the same time.

The dream was always the same, Mommy and the Reverend. They both wore robes that they dropped once inside the room. They were naked now, the Reverend's manhood erect already. Penny had waited, eagerly now, fearful now, for what was to come. She was older now, two years older than that first time back when she had been only thirteen.

Mommy always approached the bed first. She gently pulled back the blanket and sheet and gazed down at Penny, proud of the young woman she had brought into this world, proud of the grown woman Penny would someday become, proud of what was about to happen. Penny had gotten up an hour before and taken off her flannel pajamas. She had lain in bed getting more and more excited and more and more frightened. The terror excited her and the excitement frightened her. She quivered a bit in anticipation. The overhead light was still on and in the harsh light her half-formed body was still girlish and thin, not pudgy as it would become later.

Mommy slid in beside her. The big man slid in on the other side. He picked up her Pooh Bear stuffed toy and tossed it aside. Normally the good Reverend beat or whipped Penny for the slightest transgression. She was expected to be the perfect girl, an example to the rest of the small congregations that came to the tents. Failing to properly clean the kitchen, or looking at any boy in the congregation other than her brother, or any of a hundred minor things she could do wrong, was a beating. Those days when the collection plate didn't earn them much money was a whipping. The beatings left bruises on her arms, legs and back and the whippings, which were worse, left scars across her back. But she deserved it, she knew. The Bible said so. She had been bad and the Reverend was only trying to make her good once more. But on these nights, these special, soft nights, he was as gentle as Penny had always hoped he would be.

While Mommy fondled Penny's small breasts and below as well, the big man slid on top of her and entered her with a gasp. She screamed. He never waited long enough for her to become ready and she was dry and it hurt. But that would pass, she knew. She lay back sobbing with the pain and then sobbing with the good pain that came soon, the good pain that never quite climaxed, while he heaved above her for only a few minutes before a final spasm and while her Mommy coo'd in her ear and pleased herself beside Penny. The big man grew silent, lying on top of her, his hairy, sweaty weight pushing her down into the old mattress.

The dream was always the same. Penny hugged the Reverend, holding him atop her even though it was hard to breathe. The terror was gone now. All that remained was the urge that he never quite satisfied. Mommy was gasping quietly beside her and eventually quivered with some small shudders and then she was quiet too.

After a few moments the big man rolled off of Penny and lay on his back staring up at the ceiling, his manhood in its condom flaccid now. He was weeping. "Why must I do this?" he said aloud. "God forgive me."

"It brings us closer, and closer to God," Mommy said on Penny's other side. They both always said the same thing. Penny smiled at that. They would be nice to Penny for a few days, their way of apologizing. Then the beatings and readings from the Old Testament would start and, after a week or so, the Reverend would give in to the urges once more and Mommy would help them all get closer to God once again.

Penny rolled over on her side to face the Reverend. Her right hand reached down to fondle his diminished manhood. She was still smiling.

"I loves you, Daddy," she said.

"I'm not Daddy," Paul Tedesco said beside her. Penny woke with a start. "Same dream? Paul asked. He turned on a bedside lamp.

"Same dream, sweetums."

"I sometimes have the dream too," Paul said. "Not exactly the same, of course. Not your dream, my own version. I remember sneaking into your room after they had left, after those nights. So many nights. You were so eager. You really taught me about love. And sex."

"Daddy never gots me off. He and Mommy would get me all worked up and then just ... leave. Go back downstairs and drink themselves into the dawn."

"Good thing you had a big brother to come to the maiden's rescue," Paul said. He laughed. "Want to go again right now?"

Penny stared at the ceiling. "No. Not now, sweetums. What I want is the special thing. You know what I mean."

"You want to kill your Daddy, yet again, and then have wild sex with me."

Penny looked at him. "Yes, please" she said in a small voice.

"Well, we've already checked out our next place. It's three a.m. We'll do it later this morning. Already rented the car. Hang on until then, little sister."

"Oh, I don' mind the hangin' on. It builds, you know. Builds inside me. The longer I can holds off the bigger the explosion when it happens."

"Know about the explosions," Paul Tedesco said. He laughed. "Like to threw me off the bed last time."

Penny giggled girlishly. "Sorry abouts that."

"It's all right. But, little sister, we have to slow down. We can't be killing people so fast. This will have to be our last for a few months, at least."

"I knows you're right," Penny said. Her voice rose in scale and became even more girlish. "But the urges. They just builds."

"Well, I'll just have to satisfy your urges the usual way," Paul said. "Like I did when we were kids."

"It's not the same," Penny said.

"Sure it is. It's just sex."

"But you're not Daddy."

Chapter 4

Monday, September 14

Monday morning, Troy started his day as usual, running from his rental condo at the Sea Grape Inn through town and out Barron Road to Government Key and then back to the police station in the town hall building. Sometimes he stayed overnight at Lee Bell's house on Airfield Key but the routine was the same. At the police station he worked out in the "gym" as they called the storage room where they kept some weights and other equipment, showered and put on a uniform from his locker. When he first came to Mangrove Bayou the uniforms had been long and black and hot. He had changed to tan shirts and matching shorts in summer and slacks in winter, and with safari hats. Lee Bell said he and his officers looked like they were on an African wildebeest hunt. But at least they were now comfortable.

He was sitting at the desk in the front lobby doing some paperwork because the dispatcher, June Dundee, took off Sundays and Mondays. The little bell over the front door dinged as Martha Sizemore walked in. Sizemore was five feet two and thin and deeply tanned from decades of outdoors exposure. She dribbled a little dust from her topsoil-sprinkled blue denim overalls that she wore along with a large straw hat and boots with deep cleats in the soles. Sizemore had probably the best-tended yard in Mangrove Bayou. Troy glanced up and sighed.

"Yes, Martha? What is it? Mrs. Manton's Bahia grass still spreading into your lawn?" Spots, who had been lying on one of the several visitor chairs, jumped down and wandered over to sniff at Sizemore's boots.

"I took care of that. Since you refused to help me I had some of my lawn uprooted and put down new St. Augustine turf to replace what she had ruined."

"All's well that ends well."

"It's not all well. Not all well at all."

"What now?"

"Sweet gum leaves."

Troy raised one eyebrow. "Sweet gum leaves?"

Sizemore looked down at the cat. "Get that nasty thing away. I hate cats. They dig in my plantings."

Troy stood up to see. He clapped his hands and yelled "Spots. Get!" The cat ran off to the break room. Spots was a Savannah breed, a hybrid of domestic cat and wild Serval and, still being a growing kitten, weighed only about fifteen pounds. Spots galloped loudly; Troy was always reminded of the Carl Sandburg poem *Fog* about the fog creeping in on little cat feet. He suspected that Sandburg had never owned a large cat.

"Tell me about your sweet gum leaves," Troy said as he sat down again.

"They're not *my* leaves. I don't want them. Georgette Manton has a big sweet gum tree. It's fall, or close to it. The leaves are falling off and all over my yard."

"Leaves do that," Troy said. "Doesn't this sort of thing happen about this time every year? What did you do about it last year?"

"Last fall I didn't have pygmy date palms around the house. Planted those this spring. Good protection against burglars trying to get in the windows. But now they're full of dead leaves from Georgette Manton's tree."

Troy nodded. "When I was a kid, people raked leaves into piles and the kids jumped onto the piles. Then they set fire to the piles. Not when the kids were on them, of course. I guess nobody does that any more. Air pollution and all."

"You tend to babble, Chief. The leaves on the lawn are no problem. I can pick up those with my mulching lawnmower. But some of them go into my pygmy date palms and I have to fish out the leaves from among those spikes."

"Palm trees have spikes?"

"They're not trees. They're bushes about four feet tall. Each frond has spikes down near the base. Don't you know anything at all?"

"No. So what do you propose that law enforcement do about this?"

"Order Georgette Manton to stop her sweet gum tree from dumping leaves on my yard."

Troy smiled. "Well, I suppose that's easier than ordering the tree itself to behave. Not sure how one arrests a tree. We don't have handcuffs that size. And would it need a lawyer or an arborist?"

"This is not amusing, Chief Adam."

Of course it is, Troy thought. "All right, Martha. I'll send someone out to look at the situation and give me some suggestions as to what we, as the police, can do about this."

"Good. And past time too." Martha Sizemore turned and removed her overalls and boots from Troy's station lobby. She had left clumps of soil on the floor from the cleats in her boots and Troy got a broom and dustpan from the storeroom and cleaned that up.

Cilla Dowling walked in while he was doing this. "Second job?" she asked. "Need some extra cash?" Dowling was the editor, reporter, photographer, and website manager for the *Bayou Breeze* news site. Today she was wearing her usual uniform of tight tee-shirt with journalism slogans on it and some jeans that showed off her rear end to good advantage. Cilla said it tended to loosen men's tongues. Troy was never sure what she meant by that but he knew that Dowling was a good reporter.

"What can I do for the twins today?" Troy asked. He took the broom and dustpan back to the storeroom and Dowling walked with him.

"Tell me all you know about Jessica Knowles."

Troy closed the storeroom door and turned to stare at Dowling. "I suppose that's an easy one to answer. Who is Jessica Knowles?"

"Christ, don't you read my web site? Keep up on the news?"

Troy sat back down behind June Dundees's desk in the lobby and pulled out the Bad Words Jar. "You owe a dollar," he said. "And I've been busy this morning with important chief things. A horticultural discussion with Martha Sizemore."

"She on your case about her lawn again?" Dowling pulled a wallet out of her purse and extracted a dollar and stuffed it through the slot in the jar lid. "What do you do with this money, anyway?"

"Besides curbing the bad language around here, especially June's, the troops have a beer-and-pizza party at the end of each month."

"You don't drink, Chief."

"I don't attend the party. I take the patrol that night so they can bad-mouth me as they please.

"Well, had you bothered to look at my website this morning ..."

"I do the crossword puzzle and read the comics," Troy said defensively.

"There is no crossword. No comics either."

"Well, perhaps there ought to be."

"I shoot for a higher level of readership. Not everyone is as lowbrow as you are."

"Comics aren't lowbrow. There's some great philosophy in them. Sometimes.

There's one called *Jump Start* that's about a cop and his extended family and I like to read that. So who is Jessica Knowles?"

"You're about to find out. Jessica Knowles is the wife of Lawson Knowles, and Lawson Knowles is a former ambassador to Belgium ... what?"

Troy was frowning. "Lawson Knowles. People with two last names are often high-maintenance. But go on."

"You have two first names. Well, sort of."

"I'm named for the town in New York where I grew up and the only man with no belly button. Go on."

"Um ... right. The Knowles. They moved here from Washington a few months ago and she just called the FBI to complain that some undersecretary or some such at the State Department had made a move on her at some party up there and has been harassing her ever since."

"A fascinating peek at the Washington social scene. What's that got to do with us? And why the FBI? They got a marital relations office now?"

"The FBI because this State Department guy, as it turned out once someone started looking, is all over half the trophy wives in Washington — which is ambitious of him considering how many there must be — and spouting off secrets into their shell-like ears in exchange for sexual favors."

"What secrets would he know?" Troy asked. "And, for that matter, why would the trophy wives care about the secrets anyway?"

"He's in the Middle East section. And the wives would want to know juicy insider stuff because those are conversation-starters at Washington cocktail parties. Nothing raises your social standing quite like spouting off secrets."

"Seems a little casual with the nation's business."

"Oh, honey, you have no idea. I wasn't always a website editor and reporter in some tiny swamp town. Worked for the wire service for many years, remember. I've been told so many military and governmental secrets that I could write a book. Sometimes reporters do. It's always 'on background' or 'just so you can do your job properly and not ask about this' and it's mostly ego-gratification for some military officers or political insiders.

"And we reporters eat it up. Nothing makes reporters feel more self-important than being told something they can't report. A good reporter working a military beat probably ought to have a security clearance. But it never seems to occur to anyone."

"It's not enough to have the clearance," Troy said. "Having a 'Secret' clearance doesn't mean you get to read every secret around. You must also have the 'need to know'."

"You learned this in the Army? You know secrets?"

Troy shook his head. "I was an M.P. What kind of military secrets does an M.P. get to know? Saturday nights I spent supervising a bunch of noncoms and bus drivers. The sergeants would spread out to the several towns near the base and pull drunks out of bars and tell them to stand by the street. Then the bus drivers made the rounds, stopping to pick up drunks and take them back to the barracks."

"Noticed how easy you are on drunks," Dowling said. "But I know you don't drink. You've never been a drunk."

"Yes I have. Been drunk. Not *a* drunk. But I once woke up in a ditch and had no idea how I came to be there. Doubly embarrassing as I was an officer and I had disgraced the uniform. Literally."

"How?"

"Rather not say."

"This is a whole new side to Chief Adam."

Troy grinned. "My opinion: everyone should wake up drunk in a ditch at least once in a lifetime. Just don't make a habit of it."

"So you swore off. AA? Doctor's advice? What?"

"Nothing so exciting. Just drank less and less and finally not at all. So tell me about this state department guy. He knows stuff and so he blabs. Hardly unusual, it seems."

"It's not. But God knows what he could screw up if he started talking to everyone."

"Jokes and puns come to mind. But those aside. What's this got to do with us?"

"Just this. The press is on this like stink on ..." Dowling glanced at the Bad Words Jar ... "on something. The Knowles moved here not long ago. You're about to have traffic jams of TV trucks."

"Ah. I see. Where do the Knowles live?"

"Indiana Avenue at 11th street. Big estate on the Collier River, right by the bridge over to Airfield Key."

"All right. I'll go over there and discuss security with them. Thanks for the tip."

Dowling's tee-shirt left, followed by Dowling. Troy walked back to his office. He would hear the bell if anyone came in and he almost never shut his office door anyway. He called in Milo Binder from patrol.

"Need you to go out to Martha Sizemore's house," he said. "Know where that is?"

"Sure. Looks like some cover photo for *Garden & Gun* magazine."

"There's a magazine called *Garden & Gun*?"

"Don't you know anything, chief?"

"No. And the more I live here in the South, the less I seem to understand. Here's what I want. Get the office camera out of the evidence room. Drive up to Martha's house with siren and lights. Park in front. Get out and spend ten minutes photographing a lot of stuff but especially some sort of little palm bushes that have fallen sweet gum leaves in them."

"What's a sweet gum?"

"I don't know. Some sort of deciduous tree."

"What's a deciduous?"

Troy grinned. "Reminds me of Thomas Chaloner, a 16th century writer, who complained that *'some writers searche out disused woords of antiquitee, to the end that*

who so understandeth them maie repute him selfe for more cunning and literate.' So let's just say that it's a tree that drops its leaves in the fall and grows new ones in the spring."

"Got it. What do we care when it drops leaves?"

"Milo, pay attention here. This is important police work. Put some leaves into an evidence bag and make sure Martha sees you doing that. Pull out your radio and talk into it."

"You want me to do this clown act and then call you up about it?"

"I didn't say that. I want you to do this clown act and then act like you're talking into a radio. Then get back into your truck and go on about your patrolling."

"This is bull ... this is idiotic, chief."

"I think you still owe a half-dollar on that one," Troy said. "But we'll let it pass since you were showing some improvement. Tell you what. Go ahead and use your Taser on the tree if that makes you happy."

"Ought to use it on *you*. That would make me happy. This is undignified. This isn't law enforcement, Chief. This is ... undignified."

"You're continuing to improve. And this is Mangrove Bayou, where law enforcement is somewhat whimsical. We serve and protect and the serving part is sometimes weird. Go. Do as I told you."

"I should have gone on the sheriff's."

"You think sheriff's deputies don't have to do stupid things now and then? Besides, Wanda wants you to stay local." Wanda Frister had been living with Milo Binder for some time now, ever since Troy had shot and killed her stalker ex-boyfriend.

Milo got the camera and went off to impress Martha Sizemore. Troy shook his head and got down, finally, to some serious police work. He got out the file he had started the day before and reviewed what he knew of the Greer Ramstod rape. *Or alleged rape*, he thought, *being as things are a little confused. Probably committed by alleged perpetrators who are alleged human beings. Poor girl. Even if I can put the boys away, her life is blighted forever. All because she trusted a classmate at a party on one night out of the ...* Troy did some math in his head, ... *about six thousand nights she's been alive.*

He had two names of high school boys. Even those were just the names of the boys who had offered to take Greer home — before the "roofie" drug had kicked in fully. She still couldn't say they were the ones who had raped her. He would stop by the school today and talk to someone about them and about Greer Ramstod. Doc Vollmer had done a rape kit on the girl Sunday afternoon, simply because Troy insisted, but said it was pointless except maybe for the blood test and urinalysis, which he had sent off to be tested. Even if those showed any drugs in her system it would prove nothing. Greer Ramstod could have taken them herself, and willingly.

Greer was staying at home today, Ferris Ramstod had said when Troy had called this morning to check on Greer's well-being. She was too embarrassed to go back to school. Troy didn't think the victim was the one who ought to feel embarrassed. But he wasn't the victim and he wasn't sure what he could do about that. He planned to discuss that with someone at the school too.

Troy leaned back in his chair and put one foot up on the lower desk drawer he usually left pulled out. He held the Greer Ramstod file and stared out the west window at Sunset Bay and the town's public boat ramp. Sometimes, he felt like he could talk to the files — or they to him — if he held them long enough. Angel Watson, his officer who

doubled as their electronics and computer guru, said that printed files and the filing cabinets against Troy's office wall by the door were all obsolete. Troy suspected that she was right but he was old-fashioned. Across Sunset Bay he saw a flash of yellow. Mrs. Mackenzie, the Sea Grape Inn manager, was on the job, watering the plants out front. She always dressed the same and had a closet full of identical yellow sundresses. Or so Troy hoped.

The phone rang, the business line. Caller ID said it was the Naples Police Dept. Troy doubted that the entire department was on the phone, but he picked it up. "Yeah. Talk to me," he said.

"That's how you answer the phone?" Matthew English said. English was the lieutenant in charge of detectives.

"In Japan they just say, "Moshi moshi," Troy said.

"I've heard that you're really smart, though I have yet to see any evidence of that," English said.

"Congrats on the promotion," Troy said. English had been a sergeant when Troy had first met him.

"Thanks. Saw you at the promotion party last weekend."

"Free ice tea. What's not to like?"

"A cop who doesn't drink. What's the world coming to? How do you compensate?"

I have bad dreams, Troy thought. "Called me up just to insult me? Slow day at the NPD?"

"Called to invite you to a meeting. Eight p.m. tonight. Here in the conference room. Calling to ask that you send someone."

"What's up?"

"I suspect that someone is killing off day-workers. Those guys that hang out at home improvement stores hoping for day jobs."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't," English said. "But they disappear and their families — those that have families — can't account for them."

"Aren't those people sort of ... I don't know ... transitory anyway?"

"They move around, yes. But most have relatives and they do stay in touch. Suddenly we got some missing."

"Plural?" Troy said. "Like in more than one missing person if you're right? We talking serial here?"

"I hate to even hear that word," English said. "But probably yes. Can you make it or send someone?"

"We don't even have a big-box store like that here. Got a good-sized hardware store but nobody hangs out there looking for work."

"You have people. And people sometimes murder other people."

"Matt, your job has made you cynical," Troy said.

"See you tonight," English said. Troy started to say something more but he was talking to a dead line.

Chapter 5

Monday, September 14

The Mangrove Bayou high school sat at the southeastern corner of Barron Key on a peninsula jutting out into the shallow marsh. There were actually two buildings, one for elementary students, the other for middle and high school.

When Troy had first come to town he had made the volunteer fire department practice fire drills weekly until the teachers could get the kids out quickly and the firefighters could assemble just as fast. The kids had loved it. The firefighters loved it. Mayor Groud loved it. The school administrators, with tight class schedules and state requirements to meet, not so much.

It was just after lunch when he pulled his new patrol truck into a visitor space. For the first year he had been chief in Mangrove Bayou, Troy had driven around in his old Subaru because the previous occupant of his office had wrecked the chief's patrol car. But with a new budget the town council had sprung for a third Suburban truck. His was painted and equipped like the two others but on the front door on each side was printed, in small letters, *Troy Adam, Director of Public Safety*. It was the only new car he had ever had and Troy was rather proud of it.

Christine Daniels was a thin, tall woman wearing a conservative cream-colored pantsuit today with a blue-gray paisley scarf rolled into a necktie. Troy suspected that the scarf cost more than his one suit, which wasn't saying much. Daniels was the school guidance counselor. Her husband, Toby, as Troy recalled, taught biology here.

"What can you tell me about Thomas Witherspoon and Prentiss Olsen," he asked when he was seated in her office.

"Because?"

"Because another of your students, Greer Ramstod, thinks they raped her last Saturday night."

Daniels stared at Troy a long moment. "Thinks?"

"She was drugged at the time."

Daniels picked up a pen on her desk and played with it a moment. "Christ almighty," she said.

"Exactly," Troy said. "What can you tell me about Thomas Witherspoon and Prentiss Olsen?"

"Is this a done deal. Do you know this for a fact?"

"No." Troy related what he had gotten from the parents and what Greer had told Dominique Reiss in the interrogation room. He had watched the interview recording Sunday night. "I could use some help, some more background," he said. "For example, is Greer what one might call a 'wild child' herself? She didn't seem that way to me."

"What difference does that make? She's seventeen years old. It's not legally possible to have sex with her and not call it rape."

"Not entirely true," Troy said. "And at the moment I have only her vague recollection — through a drug-induced haze — of trying to say no. So I'm left with asking, one more time, is Greer what one might call a 'wild child'?"

"She's what I would call a Seven Sisters candidate." Daniels was tapping the pen on her desk, clicking the push-top on and off with audible clicks. As she talked the clicking got faster. She seemed unaware of it. "She gets excellent grades, works hard at it and if she doesn't get into Wellesley or Smith it won't be for lack of her trying and my helping."

"That's great. Something to be proud of, not just for her but for her parents, teachers and you," Troy said. "And I ask, one more time, Is Greer what one might call a 'wild child'?"

Daniels glared at him. "Not in the least," she said. "Serious, studious, actually rather boring in other regards. Because those schools require some proof of social work as well as academics I had to push a little to get Greer to do some outside activities. I think she now helps out at a church as some sort of assistant."

"Yet this serious, studious, Seven Sisters school candidate went to a drinking and pill-popping party without her parent's knowledge and drank something some kid gave her," Troy said.

Daniels sighed. She put the pen down and stared at it. She flexed her fingers. She looked up at Troy. "They're kids. You were seventeen once, you can remember what that was like."

"No," Troy said. "I can't. I wasn't."

She stared at him. "You were never seventeen?"

"I lived in an orphanage. You went from six years old to thirty. Or you didn't survive. You ended up in jail or a mental home or sleeping under a bridge instead."

"Oh. I see. Well these kids, their bodies grow up faster than their minds. Intelligence develops before responsibility. That's normal. They don't yet understand consequences. It's not their fault; it's nobody's fault. It's just normal development. Even the well-behaved ones go off the rails now and then. Not all parents take raising a teenager seriously but, among those who do, what you described as happening to Greer Ramstod is just about their worst nightmare."

"All right. Tell me about the boys."

Daniels sat up straighter. "Thomas Witherspoon is your average seventeen-year-old nerd. His hormones are raging. He has pimples pretty bad. Girls ignore him. He's a follower, never in the lead in grades or sports or anything. Just trails along behind Prentiss Olsen."

"I had pimples," Troy said. "Never raped anyone though."

"You didn't have Prentiss Olsen around for an influence. Oh, I know," Daniels held out a hand, palm out, "you wouldn't have been influenced by him anyway. But Thomas is kind of an outcast and eager to follow anyone who will make him part of the 'in' crowd."

"And this Prentiss Olsen is 'in'?"

"Very much so. First off, he stayed back a grade when younger. He's over eighteen now, maybe nearly nineteen. He's tall, thin, looks good to the girls, and plays school sports, baseball, football." Daniels shrugged. "Might get a football scholarship to one of our state universities. Not that he needs that; his father is rich. You know how that is."

"Actually, no," Troy said. "I paid my own way through school, flipping burgers. Cornell."

"Why that's very admirable. You didn't do student loans?"

"Never occurred to me. Nobody offers student loans to nigger orphans. Everyone knows we're too lazy and shiftless to pay them off. So I worked the night shifts for four years and did school when I should have been sleeping. It was tough but now I think it was just as well. Got no loans to pay off every month from graduation to retirement age."

"Your parents, I take it, were deceased. The orphanage and all."

"My mother was probably a black prostitute who dumped me at the front door of the Orphan's Home and vanished. Nobody's really sure but they think I was one day old. My father was, apparently, an Asian of some sort. Maybe he was rich. We'll never know. I grew up in that orphanage in Troy, New York."

"I had wondered about the eyes, and the light brown color and the straight black hair. I just assumed you were a Seminole."

"Nope. Pure mutt." Troy smiled.

"We don't really have orphanages any more. We place children with foster families."

"We did back then. Up there."

"Did the orphanage have its own school or did you attend public school?"

"Local schools. But I was working by the time I was in high school. Planning ahead for Age-Out."

"And age-out is?"

"Major event in the life of an orphan. Sort of a coming-of-age ceremony. On your eighteenth birthday, your birthday present was to be dumped on the doorstep of a homeless shelter. You had 'aged-out' of the system."

"That's horrible! What about school?"

"I was still in school, a senior. They did at least let me finish and graduate. Spent the last six months sleeping at a Salvation Army shelter, working at a burger place, and attending high school. By the time I went to Cornell I was pretty self-sufficient."

"You had one advantage," Daniels said. "Your extremely high IQ. Word is that you're in Mensa."

"You been spying on me?"

Daniels smiled. "No. But people talk about you, Troy. You're unusual. Mixed-race. Police chief ..."

"Director of Public Safety," Troy said.

...eligible bachelor. Dating a beautiful woman who flies airplanes for a living."

"Being smart doesn't help all that much," Troy said, "Unless you have some internal drive to go with it. But I did, thanks to the people at the orphanage. They knew what I would face at age-out."

"It's still a horrible way to treat a young person."

"It's a destructive way to treat a young person. Nine of ten ended up criminals or drug addicts or prostitutes. What would you expect, tossing kids out into the streets like that?"

"Is it still that way now?"

"Don't know about New York. It still is in some states, I do know."

"They changed that law here in Florida some years ago," Daniels said. "Children in foster care can remain in a foster home to age twenty-one now."

"I know they did," Troy said. "And, as usual, the state legislature missed the point. Common decency had nothing to do with it. They realized that keeping kids in a stable environment for a few more years, letting them graduate from high school and get into college or work before aging out, instead of ending up in prison, was cheaper. They never cared about the kids; they cared about their wallets."

"Well, at least they did it, for whatever reason. And you're named for the town you were born in?"

Troy nodded. "And the first man in the Bible."

"If you will pardon me stating the obvious, that doesn't seem very original."

"I'm happy with it. Is originality a requirement for names now?"

"No. And, despite major hurdles, you turned out all right. Prentiss Olsen was born into wealth and a lifetime of ease and will probably never turn out all right, even if he gets into college, which he will since, if all else fails, his dad can get him a legacy slot.

Daniels sighed. "Prentiss is vicious. He bullies other kids because he's bigger than most of them. Seems to enjoy doing that. He feels privileged and he is privileged. His family's wealth ensures that he will never need to work to put himself through school or for any other reason. Him, I could easily see raping someone. Prentiss would just take it for granted that he could do whatever he felt like and his family's money would make it all right. Hard to believe that of Thomas Witherspoon but maybe he got dragged along and didn't know how to say no."

"Got another question," Troy said. "Greer Ramstod thought there was a third boy present. This boy did not rape her but she thought she saw someone in the background. She didn't have a name. Can you tell me who that might be? Who else hangs out with Prentiss Olsen?"

Christine Daniels frowned. "I name names. Names of boys who might not have done a thing. And you then harass them until you get one to confess?"

"I would call it investigating and questioning," Troy said. "And if you can think of another way for me to do my job and get justice for Greer, let me know."

"And so you catch the two bad kids. What happens to the others you have publically humiliated?"

"I won't publically humiliate them. And perhaps it will, as a side benefit, teach them — privately — not to hang out with jerks like Prentiss Olsen."

"You're rather judgmental, Chief."

"I am. And, at this moment and towards me, so are you. Tell me who else is in Prentiss Olsen's little clique."

Daniels stared at Troy a long moment. She nodded, serious. "You're right. I may or may not have misjudged you but I had no business making that judgment this early."

"I think that was a sort of half-assed apology. But it was so complicated my poor little brain is befuddled."

Daniels smiled. "That was an apology. From an academic. I think your poor little brain follows along just fine."

"So, tell me who else is in Prentiss Olsen's little clique."

"I can think of three. Joshua Forey, Francis Carling. David Stultz. There may be others, Olsen is on all the sports teams. There are girls, probably more of them than boys. But you asked about boys."

"I'll need contact information, if you please. "

"Of course. But what about Thomas Witherspoon and Prentiss Olsen? Maybe they can tell you the third boy's name."

"Maybe so. I plan on interviewing them both this afternoon after school."

"You will need to have Thomas Witherspoon's parents present. I suppose Prentiss Olsen is on his own, being older."

"I'll have all the parents there if I can manage it. Attorneys too if they so choose. I have no objection. Maybe someone will know something useful and will say it in front of me. Maybe one of them will be sorry for what he did."

"Do you really think that? That the boys will confess?"

"No. The sort of animal that does this doesn't care about the victim. And speaking about victims, I wanted to ask for help. I don't know what to do about Greer Ramstod."

"Do your job, of course. Build a case and arrest the boys — if they're guilty."

"That part I know how to do. But what more can I do to help Greer? What can any of us do?" He looked down at his shoes. "I mean, she has to come back here. Those boys will be here too. Even if I arrest them they'll bond out and be right back here."

Daniels picked up the pen and clicked the top with her thumb. "Two things are sort of standard. First, she transfers to another school."

"Why should *she* transfer? How about transferring the boys?"

"Some districts might actually do that. But those boys haven't — yet — been found guilty of anything, so how can we justify that if they refuse to switch? But even if we get rid of the two boys, the rest of the kids will all know about it within days. They'll tease her. Talk about her. Ostracize her. No, it's best to get her clean away from here.

"Second, she will need some counseling. Probably for a long time." Daniels sighed. She looked at the pen and laid it down. She looked at the far wall. "Rape victims, no matter what age, suffer forever. It may be worse for young girls who have not yet had any worldly experience with sex."

"Rape isn't about sex," Troy said. "It's about power and a sick desire to humiliate."

"Well, so they say. Easy to say, harder to internalize when you're the victim. If that's your first sexual experience, how do you then feel about sex when you have a boyfriend, when you marry?"

"I don't know."

Daniels sighed. "Rape victims are like dead people who somehow went on living. Most come back to life, more or less. But inside each and every one there is a small dead space that will never heal."

"So, I arrest the perps. If I can. And there's nothing I, personally, can do for Greer?"

"Let her know you care. Make sure she gets therapy. Stay in touch if you wish. It's mostly in her hands and in the hands of a therapist now."

"I hate it," Troy said. "I mean I hate feeling useless."

Daniels smiled. "It's not about you, Troy. It's about Greer."

Chapter 6

Monday, September 14

The Knowles lived in a massive home that couldn't decide if it wanted to be the Parthenon or a Georgian palace. Doric columns all across the front stood three stories high and clashed with a cornice extending around a gambrel roof — making the house appear to have been designed by a committee. Fake quoins had been cut into the plaster at the corners in a cheap try at ostentation. It was big, pretentious, and unintentionally ugly. Troy knew that Florida regulations required an architect on most commercial projects but not on private homes. Even those builders of expensive houses usually just reached into their filing cabinets for crappy plans drawn up by budding draftsmen. Nouveau-riche clients with more money than taste didn't know the difference.

Troy had parked a block away because the television vans were using up all the curb space in front of the Knowles home. Walking up a crushed-marble-chips pathway to the front, Troy decided that, on his salary, he might be able to rent a few feet of sidewalk on which to pitch a small tent.

The extra-wide front door had three large beveled lead-glass 'lights' that matched taller vertical windows to either side of the door. There was a bronze gargoyle head for a door knocker. The head was shiny on top from people using it. Troy used it. Then he did so again when nobody answered. He was looking around for a doorbell to push when the door opened.

Lawson Knowles was short and thin and balding and, when he opened the door and peered up at Troy with pale blue eyes, Troy was actually staring well above the man's head until Troy adjusted. He had half-expected some servant in tails and white gloves, extending a silver salver upon which Troy could present a calling card. But apparently Lawson Knowles did his own door-answering.

Inside, and with the door closed to some shouts from the news people, Knowles led Troy to a large living room with floor to ceiling glass that faced the Collier River flowing sluggishly past. Troy would have been more impressed with the view were it not for the fact that he had seen it before, from Lee Bell's house, visible on the other side of the river on Airfield Key.

Lawson Knowles was dressed in a dark gray suit and light gray tie, the suit complete with vest. Probably had an extra pair of pants for it too, Troy guessed. Probably 'bespoke' tailoring which, as Troy dimly understood, was different from buying two-for-ones at Men's Wearhouse. At that moment, Lawson Knowles and Mortimer Potem, the town's manager who always dressed as if going to a funeral, and some of the reporters outside, may have been the only people in Mangrove Bayou wearing suits.

Jessica Knowles came into the living room as Lawson and Troy were getting seated and sat as well, next to her husband on a sofa. Prim, back straight, knees together, ankles crossed and turned slightly sideways, hands clasped together in her lap, as taught in all the finest finishing schools. Lawson, Troy estimated, was in his sixties but Jessica was early forties. She was tall and thin and good-looking in a severe way and knew that, with a square-set jaw and high cheekbones above that. She wore a conservative high-necked white blouse and some black slacks that matched her jet-black long hair. She

looked at Troy with gray eyes and asked, "Is there something you can do about those horrible people outside?"

"They appear to be all on the street and legally parked," Troy said.

"So why did you stop by?" Lawson asked.

"Touch base. Didn't know about your ... problem ... until our local reporter told me this morning. She anticipated a media frenzy. We've had those before here and I'd like to get on top of this one before it gets out of hand."

Troy was looking around the living room, or the great room, or the smaller parlor for dealing with tradespeople, or whatever this room was. Décor was by some interior designer with minimal taste and maximum pricing. The green marble around the fireplace had never been besmirched by fire or soot. There was a fake log inside the fireplace with an electric cord running out and to a wall socket. The fireplace mantle was home port to a collection of good-sized sailing ship models and Troy saw that one was *Bluenose*, the famous 1920s Nova Scotia racing schooner. Alcoves evenly spaced around the walls held small statuary that Troy suspected was not marble but cheaper soapstone. He realized that there was nothing in the room to indicate that human beings lived here; no magazines scattered about, no marks on the furniture from wet glasses, no cushion was besmirched by any stain or sign of ever having been sat upon. The room looked like a museum display.

"It appears that you took many hours to drive across town, Chief," Jessica Knowles said. "I would think you could have made us a higher priority."

"Been a busy day. And shoing reporters off private property is not something we cancel all leaves to do. And I would point out that neither of you have actually called me."

"Perhaps you should learn to pay better attention to who your residents are," Lawson Knowles said. "I should not have to ask, specifically, for police protection, I should be receiving it as a matter of course. I am a former ambassador and continuing major political campaign contributor to presidents and presidential candidates."

"I appreciate ..."

"They often call upon me for advice in foreign matters," Knowles went on. "We are probably the most important people in your town. Newly-arrived, I realize, having moved in a few weeks ago, and so I make allowances for your ignorance."

"I appreciate that, sir. But, for starters, would you care to tell me exactly why all those people are out there?"

"My wife is ..."

"I am extremely prominent in the social swirl in Washington," Jessica Knowles said.

"Washington the city, not Washington the state," Troy said.

She stared at him and snorted. "Obviously. There's nobody important from Washington state. I'm talking about the capital."

"Lee Bell," Troy said.

"Who is Lee Bell?"

"Actually, I know that name," Lawson Knowles said. "She's that red-headed pilot who sometimes flies us to Naples or Miami or Tampa to catch flights to Washington."

"That would be my Lee," Troy said. "She's also my main squeeze. And she's from Seattle. She's the most important person I know."

"Jesus. Stay on track here, Chief Troy," Jessica said.

"Adam. Adam is the last name. Troy is my first name."

"Whatever." Jessica Knowles dismissed Troy's meaningless nomenclature with a wave of her hand. "In Washington I host fundraisers, organize parties, events. I've been to the White House many times."

"Considered going there once, when I was in Washington," Troy said. "Didn't want to stand in line that long, though."

"I don't stand in lines to take the public tour, you idiot. I get invitations to dinners."

"That would be better. Nobody offered to feed me."

"You don't seem impressed by us," Lawson Knowles said.

"I'm trying to be," Troy said.

Knowles shook his head like a horse shaking off a fly. "I don't find you amusing. How many ambassadors have you ever met?"

"Counting you, sir? Well, you. But let's get back to our problem." Troy looked at Jessica Knowles. "Would you care to tell me exactly why all those people are out there?"

"I'm being, or I was being, harassed by a State Department under-secretary for Middle East affairs. I think that was his title. He tried to feel me up at a party. I slapped him silly. He's been emailing me, a few times each day, for months since. I finally complained to the FBI."

"That part puzzles me. Why the FBI?" Troy said.

"I happened to know the Special Agent in charge for Boston. Socially. From ... long ago," She glanced at Lawson. "And when he dug into it, he learned that this same jerk had been all over Georgetown — that's the upscale neighborhood in Washington, D.C. ..."

"Really," Troy said. "Who knew?"

"... All over Georgetown trying his luck with various women. And worse, telling secrets by way of stressing how important he was."

"Secrets about the Middle East and American actions there."

"I suppose. My friend, the Special Agent in Charge in Boston, didn't tell me. But what was a minor issue between a prominent social organizer and ambassador's wife — me — and some little squeak in the State Department, suddenly got into the news."

Troy thought for a moment. Neither of the Knowles' had offered him any refreshment. They probably thought they were being democratic in allowing him to use the front door. "If that's all you know about the situation," he said, "why not trot out front and gather all the reporters around, and tell them that. They will file one day's worth of stories about you and move on to covering county fairs or something."

"Oh my heavens, I can't possibly do that," Jessica Knowles said. "They'll all ask questions. And one question leads to another and then to another. Pretty soon they're wanting to know what color underwear I use."

"You're not actually required to answer each and every question," Troy said. "No matter what they say about that." *Wonder what color underwear she wears*, Troy thought.

"Well, that's not going to happen in any case. You just keep those jackals off our property."

Troy saluted. "Serve and protect." He stood up. "Here's a card. Call the office on the business line if there are any problems."

Troy stopped by the *Bayou Breeze* office in The Village Shoppes, a square with a central building and one-story shops around a perimeter street as well. Cilla Dowling handed him a cup of coffee when he walked in the door.

"Saw you parking," she said. "Finally got a real chief's ride."

"It's four in the afternoon. Do you drink coffee all day?"

"I do. So do you, as I recall. I think we are both immune."

"Must be. Just came from the Knowles palace. What can you tell me about them? Anything new since this morning."

"What makes you think I know more now than I did this morning?"

"I'm the Director of Public Safety for Mangrove Bayou. Says so right on my truck door. I know everything."

Cilla Dowling smiled. "Yes, you sometimes seem to. Been making some calls today. Want to know what I learned?"

"In the worst way."

"OK. Here it is. First, hubby Lawson Knowles is a middling contributor to the Republican Party."

"Really? I had him pegged as a liberal Democrat. I mean, the man answers his own front door."

Dowling laughed. "The only reason his people didn't come here on the *Mayflower* was because his people would have *owned* the *Mayflower* and earned a good profit from the voyage. He is old Boston money. He mostly spends it now but he does sometimes earn substantial sums by advising ours and other governments about political matters."

"And Jessica? Who, I noticed, is a looker, wears colored underwear, and is twenty years younger than her little twerp husband."

"How do you know from her underwear?"

"I'm the police chief of Mangrove Bayou. I know ..."

"Yeah, yeah. Right. What I know about Jessica Knowles is that she's from some wealthy family in Pennsylvania. Philadelphia Main Line. The Shipley School and then on to Bryn Mawr college next door. I think her father owned a nationwide chain of florist shops. She learned early to exploit her looks. Jessica is all about the right schools, the right places to be seen vacationing — and that with the correct beautiful people — the right causes to stand in front of and pretend to support. She relentlessly pursues the right business people, movie stars and, most of all, political people. She's a nonstop social climber who actually thinks she is important because she manages to hang around the edges of important events and get into photos with important people."

"A legend in her own mind."

"Exactly. Of course in today's media-frenzy world, where international issues aren't important until some movie star has an opinion, and where every magazine cover has to feature a celebrity, maybe she's on the wrong coast and should move to Los Angeles."

"Ah. But there, she would be competing with people who were professionally pretty."

Dowling laughed. "Good way to put it. Professionally pretty. Got to remember that one. But there's no shortage of those in Washington either. Half our government has nookie on the side or nookie they married. Often both."

"Henry Kissinger once said that power was the best aphrodisiac," Troy said.

"Did he? He was right. And I got just the tip of the tail of one bit of juicy gossip. Want to hear it?"

"Sure," Troy said. "If you haven't got anything good to say about anybody, come sit next to me."

"Alice Roosevelt Longworth," Dowling said. "Now there was a woman who knew how to social climb among the Washington, D.C. 'cave dwellers.' She made our little Jessica Knowles look like a squib at a fireworks display."

"Well, to be fair to Jessica, she's not the daughter of a president. She has to work at it."

"Aha. And she does. Work at it. That sub-whatever at the State Department? Turns out she was doing him on the side."

"Doing him?" Troy said. "You mean having — pardon the expression — sexual congress with him?"

Dowling laughed. "In Washington, the words 'sexual' and 'congress' are synonymous. But, yes, she's been doing him, him and a half-dozen others over the past few years."

"I realize I'm naïve," Troy said. "But what about hubby?"

"She stays with him. Loyal. Thick and thin and all that. He's got money. But she always has someone on the side. Sometimes two. That's why they're here in Mangrove Bayou at the moment. Hubby puts up with it for his own political reasons but he hauled her ass down here to cool off."

"I had wondered about that. Why they were here at all. Do those reporters in front of her house know all this?"

"Probably not."

"You know this."

"I have special connections in Washington. Ten years with Reuters, remember. I'm not just a professionally pretty face."

"No. You're also the tee shirt."

Dowling smiled. "But I'm prettier than those guys standing around in the sun sweating and staring at Jessica Knowles' house. Smarter, too. We call those dial-a-reporters 'dish monkeys' because their job is to stand around next to a station truck and pretend to be investigating the news."

"Well, they're not pretending," Troy said. "I mean, they're there."

Dowling shook her head. "Standing in front of a courthouse to read off a story about a trial isn't being there. It's just adding a background graphic to a guy reading his notes. And the dish monkeys on any breaking story get a call from the station every fifteen minutes. They are chained to the truck, more or less, and not out and investigating. Ever seen them standing around, on-camera, and saying things like 'Something will happen soon, so we're told'."

"Yes. Of course."

"Think about it. That's not news. That's not-news-yet. We call that 'vamping'. Standing around filling dead air with blather."

"I guess it's tough filling the void on a 24-hour news channel."

Dowling laughed. "There never was twenty-four hours of news. There is thirty minutes of news, repeated forty-eight times a day."

"Well, Jessica Knowles is getting her two minutes, forty-eight times today. No wonder she doesn't want to talk to reporters," Troy said.

Dowling nodded. "And for no good reason. I've never been clear on what the difference is between a fifty-dollar street hooker and a young woman with no observable career or talent who marries some old frog for his money."

"I suppose one difference is that I would arrest the streetwalker, while I would protect the other whore from a raging mob of reporters."

"Cynical. Do you arrest street hookers here in Mangrove Bayou?"

"Suppose I would. It's illegal. I'm in the enforcing the law business, not in the philosophy business. I would hate it because I think that what use people make of their sex organs should be of no interest to anyone else. But I would do it. Fortunately, Mangrove Bayou is a little too slow to have a red light district. I suspect one place that has a lot of unattached young women living there and a lot of male visitors. But so far no one has made me investigate."

"Sounds like a news item."

"Maybe someday. I hope not. As for Jessica Knowles, I heard her story," Troy said. "And there's really no news there at all. The news is in Washington at the FBI and in Georgetown where other Washington trophy wives are gossiping."

"The chattering class, some people call them," Dowling said. "And, by the way, Georgetown is a working-class slum by D.C. standards. The powers behind the Oval Office live north of there in Kalorama."

"Never heard of it."

"See?"

"I told Jessica Knowles to march out front and just tell the reporters all she knows about it," Troy said. "They would go away and stop bothering her."

"You're not getting it Chief."

"What am I not getting?"

"Despite her asking you to get rid of them, Jessica Knowles *wants* the reporters standing outside her front door. Gets her name into the papers. Gets her talked about in higher circles. And she's playing the innocent victim here. She even filed a complaint with the FBI, you note, and not with — say — some meaningless police chief in a tiny town in a Florida swamp. For her this is perfect."

Chapter 7

Monday, September 14

About all that Thomas Witherspoon and Prentiss Olsen had in common was that they both had fathers, which, Troy mused, was more than he could claim. The two fathers took the visitor chairs in front of Troy's desk and the boys sat together on the leather sofa against the wall. Dominique Reiss stood by the open door to Troy's office, her arms folded across her chest. She spent most of her time glaring at the two boys.

Young Prentiss Olsen was already six feet tall but just one hundred thirty pounds. He sported a dragon tattoo on his right forearm but his arm was so skinny that Troy thought the dragon looked more like a colorful earthworm. His father, Harden Olsen, was more substantial, six-two and two hundred. Thomas Witherspoon was shorter, about five-eight and pudgy at one-eighty. His father, Ronald, was almost identical, just twenty years older.

"Where's your wife?" Troy asked the senior Witherspoon.

"At our store. Someone has to be there."

Troy nodded. "And your wife, Mr. Olsen?"

"At home. Doesn't take two of us to keep you in your place. This is nonsense."

Troy considered that a moment. He sighed. "I asked you all here to discuss Greer Ramstod's being raped last Saturday night," Troy said. He looked at the two fathers. "You sure you don't want any attorneys here?"

"I want to hear what you have to say first," Ronald Witherspoon said.

"Bunch of shit," Harden Olsen said. "Don't need an attorney to talk to some small-time parking-ticket-writer. Only showed up at all in order to squelch this before you screw up your life forever by crossing the Olsen family."

Troy stared at the senior Olsen a moment and then nodded slowly. "Good to know where we all stand." He looked past the parents to Prentiss Olsen. "Prentiss, you're eighteen now, almost nineteen. You're an adult in the eyes of the law. You have a right to ask, on your own, for an attorney."

Prentiss Olsen looked at the back of his father's head. His father didn't bother to look back at him. "I stick with my dad," Prentiss said. "We Olsens all stick together."

"Aha." Troy pulled a legal pad closer and uncapped his old fountain pen in case he needed to make a note. "Curious only, what do you do here in town, Mr. Witherspoon?"

The senior Witherspoon smiled, probably automatically, not because he found anything here amusing. "I own a gift shop. Why?"

"No reason. "What do you see your son doing after he finishes high school? College? Work? Career?"

"I see him doing whatever he sees for his own future." Ronald Witherspoon turned around to smile at his son. "I don't think he's intent on college but if so, I'll scrape up the money to send him." He turned back to face Troy. "What he does with his life is his business. He knows I'll support him in any decision he makes."

"I see. How about you, Mr. Olsen?"

"I'm not some little shopkeeper. I manage my family money. That's mostly in the stock market and several real estate situations."

"This being money you inherited?" Troy said.

"Of course. The Olsen fortune runs back generations. So what?"

"Just idle curiosity on my part," Troy said. "And what do you see as your son's future?"

"Prentiss is being groomed to succeed me, of course. He will go to college — we already have acceptances from several, from University of Florida if he wants to pursue the football thing, to a legacy slot at Yale, where I attended, if he so wishes. But he will come to work for me and when I retire he'll be handling the family financial interests."

"What if he doesn't want to do that? Suppose he wants to be a professional surfer?"

"Don't be ridiculous. He'll do as I tell him. We Olsens stick together."

"I see." Troy took in a deep breath and looked out the window at the Sunset Bay boat ramp for so long that the two fathers looked to see what he was staring at. But Troy was only thinking about family relationships and consequences.

"Here's what I have so far," Troy said, looking back at the four in front of him. "A young woman was first drugged and then raped Saturday night." *Don't actually know yet about the drugs*, Troy thought, *but I suppose the alcohol itself is a drug, especially at her age.*

"She has clearly identified Thomas Witherspoon and Prentiss Olsen." Troy was getting a little ahead of himself but he was curious as to what the reaction might be.

"Apparently she didn't ingest all of the roofie you slipped into her beer and she still has memories of the incident. Nice try, though. Personally, I've always found that acting like a real man, and treating a woman as she deserved, worked better than just drugging her into insensibility."

He gave the two boys a long dose of CopStare. "But I suppose that was the only way a couple of pathetic losers like you two could think of to destroy a young woman's life."

"Hey!" Harden Olsen said. "You need ... "

"I now intend to destroy your life, Prentiss, and yours, Thomas." Troy sighed and took another deep breath. He didn't want to be less angry but he did want to control it, and he knew he wasn't doing a very good job.

"If I had my way neither of you would ever see the outside of a prison again. You would die old men behind those walls. Unfortunately, you'll probably only do about seventeen years unless a judge decides to run several sentences consecutively. They don't usually like to do that. But I plan to try for it."

"What the hell are you talking about, Harden Olsen said. "Olsens don't go to prison. Prentiss is innocent."

"Of something, probably. Not of this," Troy said. "I had Greer examined by our doctor and she had abrasions and bruising consistent with her story. We'll get the blood and urine test results back soon but she was probably drugged with Roipnol, a drug known as 'roofie' and normally given as a last resort to insomniacs, or with GHB, gamma-hydroxybutyrate, which, far as I know, has no medical use. My money's on the roofie because Greer says she didn't taste anything odd in her drink. GHB is quite salty and most people would notice it."

"You have no right ..." Harden Olsen started to say.

"I'm not finished," Troy said. "In party circles a 'roofie' is used by young men to render young women unconscious and pliable. Sometimes it's also called the 'date rape drug' and in this case that's what happened to Greer Ramstod. She was a virgin up to last Saturday night. Now she is a shattered young woman with horrible memories of your two worthless and despicable spawn. Before I arrest Thomas and Prentiss, I wanted to hear if any of you had anything to say to this."

"Arrest?" Harden Olsen exclaimed. "That's bullshit. You aren't arresting anyone. The bitch is lying."

Troy looked past the father at the son. "Prentiss, what say you?"

"The bitch is lying."

"Really? Where were you Saturday night? I mean other than at that booze and pill party. Did you bring the roofies with you or buy them off someone there?"

"None of your damn business."

"That's right, son," Olsen, senior, said.

"All right," Troy said. "This isn't an interrogation, just the prelims. But let's hear from young Thomas, there. Did you participate in the rape of Greer Ramstod on Saturday night?"

"Don't answer that, son," Ronald Witherspoon said. He looked back at Troy. "Let me talk to him first. If he has made some terrible mistake, I'll expect him to make amends, or whatever. But let me talk to my son first. Please."

Troy nodded. "Of course. That can be arranged. I can't imagine what amends he could make. But as of now I'm placing Thomas Witherspoon and Prentiss Olsen under arrest on charges of sexual battery, and kidnapping if I can make that stick too. Domino, cuff them and do the Miranda thing. You know I can never remember the words."

"Stand up, Thomas," Dominique said. Thomas stood and she turned him around and cuffed him with his hands behind his back. It was more for show than anything since they would take the cuffs back off once the boys were in the holding cells just a few yards away. Troy pulled his own handcuffs off his duty belt and handed those to Dominique. "Stand up, Prentiss," she said.

Harden Olsen stood instead and roughly shoved Dominique back. "Stay away from my son," he shouted. He backed up and pulled up his fists to either side of his head, elbows forward.

"Used to box, did you?" Troy said mildly.

"College." Harden said. "Nigger bitch comes near me and she'll get her clock cleaned." He looked at Prentiss, still sitting on the sofa. "Son, get up and go get in the car."

While Harden Olsen was talking to his son Dominique Reiss kicked him in the balls. She was a big, tall, strong woman who used to swim competitively and had the thighs to prove it. The kick lifted Harden Olsen into the air an inch or so. He folded over and lay on the floor clutching his testicles and crying at the pain. The son started to get up from the sofa but Troy barked at him. "Prentiss! Sit down! You get up and she'll only put you down too." The son sat back down.

Ten minutes later they had one boy, one young man, and the one father locked up in separate cells. Troy let Ronald Witherspoon talk to Thomas in the son's cell.

"Was it the 'nigger' remark that set you off," Troy asked Dominique Reiss when they were back in his office.

"Nah. That's water off the duck's back. Just saw a chance when he turned his head. Probably don't teach ball-kicking in college boxing."

"Apparently not. Go see if Ronald Witherspoon wants out of his kid's cell yet. Bring him back here if he wants to talk to me." He looked at his watch. "I have to leave for Naples in an hour."

"You could take our threesome along, drop them at the county jail."

"I don't want to look at them any more. I might shoot one. We'll send one of the night shift up with them later."

Chapter 8

Monday, September 14

"That was incredible," Paul Tedesco said. He rolled over onto his back and tried to bring his breathing under control.

"Incredible twice for me, sweetums," Penny said. "Wonder if it has anythin' to do with the age of our 'guest'."

"I doubt it," Paul said. "Speaking of our guest, it's cleanup time."

"He can wait," Penny said. "I enjoys that part too. And not bein' in a hurry is good."

Several hours later they got up and, still naked, went downstairs. "Time to take out the trash," Paul said and laughed. He went to the kitchen where he had left their special box and came back with some surgical knives, the bone saw, and the black plastic heavy-duty yard-trash bags.

By now they were well-organized and Paul had done some practical training in medical school. It didn't take long to cut up the body and put the pieces into several bags. As always, Penny cut off the man's scrotum and penis and put that into a clear plastic baggie.

"Still don't know why you do that," Paul said. "It's a bad idea."

"I likes to look at them sometimes. Imagine what sort of lives they had. Before ... you know ... they met us."

"It's a danger to us. Keeping anything."

"Don' be silly. You're too smart to get caught. And you saves the stolen license plate."

"That's just so I don't have to bother stealing another one."

"And it's a big turn-on for me," Penny said. "And, big brother, you do seems to like it when I'm turned on."

"I suppose."

"Hah. You supposes." She went to the kitchen and put the baggie into the freezer compartment. Later, she would dry and preserve the souvenir and put that with the others she kept.

Paul took the trash bags out to their garage and put half the bags into one trash container and the rest into the second. He slid the license plate into a slit in the end of one of several large bags of cypress mulch. The trash bins were the large type with wheels and an attached cover on top and lifting bar in the center of one side. Each Tuesday and Friday an automated garbage truck would hoist those up and dump them without the driver even having to stop talking to his wife on his cell phone. But it was best not to have too much weight in any one can. After they had hosted a 'guest' they put actual trash out on Fridays because the Tuesday cans were full.

While Paul tended to the trash cans out in the garage, Penny carefully wiped down the steel chair. She rolled up the bloody plastic sheeting that covered the carpet in the 'sound room' and put that into a trash bag too. The knives and saw she took back to the kitchen and put into one side of their stainless steel sink, added a few inches of water, and dumped in some bleach. In one hour there was no longer any trace of the man they

had picked up outside of a Fort Myers home improvement store. Later, Paul would put the knives and gun into the steel box and put that back inside the hollowed-out stonework of the barbeque grille outside.

"Wanna to go out to a restaurant tonight?" Penny said to Paul.

"Sounds good, little sister. I've worked up quite an appetite."

Chapter 9

Monday, September 14

Lee Bell had held dinner for Troy and he dragged himself into her home on Airfield Key at eleven that evening.

"Long day," she said as she brought in two fillets from her outdoor grille.

They sat at Lee's dining room table. Lee turned down the overhead lights and lit some long tapers on the table. She always did that. Troy never understood it. He could eat a meal with a flood light over the table, or in the dark. She always used fresh ones, not the half-used candles from the night before. Once, Troy had asked what became of the half-candles and Lee said she turned them back in to a shop in town where a woman melted them back down and made new candles for sale. To Troy this sounded like Lee was buying the same candles twice. But the years had taught wisdom and he didn't bring it up again.

"Isn't this nice," Lee said finally, sitting down across from Troy. "The silverware. The plates. All shining in the candlelight."

"Better than an MRE out of a mess kit," Troy said. Troy had his usual mix of seltzer water and some orange juice. Lee had some hot tea.

"That's hardly a valid comparison," Lee said. "You usually work twelve hours. Seven to seven. Later tonight," she said.

"Many are the duties of the Director of Public Safety," Troy said.

"Saw one of the duties out my back window," Lee said. "Couldn't see the television trucks but I could see those tall antenna things they put up, over the top of the house across the river. They seem to be gone now."

"Yes. That would be the media trying its best to make news out of nothing. I'm sure they'll be back in the morning." He explained about Jessica and Lawson Knowles.

"Well, that's not nothing," Lee said. "Some guy at the State Department buying sex with secrets, basically."

"Suppose not. That part. But she's not central to it. She has loved widely and none too wisely."

"I think it was you who once said that screwing around like that wasn't love; it was hydraulics."

"Well, true. Lawson Knowles doesn't know quite what to do about her. So he bought a house here in an attempt to get loose from the spider web that is Washington society."

"He must love her to put up with her behavior so far," Lee said.

"Probably does. In her own way she may love him. But April-December marriages have special challenges. And that's even if you don't get national security into the mix."

"Well, that's not her fault."

Troy nodded and chewed. He swallowed. "True. She's also a victim here, not some major criminal."

"Sort of a, 'you ought to be able to have a fling outside of marriage without ending up with a TV truck parked in front of your house' case," Lee said.

"Exactly. Complicated by the fact that she actually likes the attention. At least that's what Cilla Dowling says."

"Well, let Jessica Knowles enjoy it while she can. What else in your day today?"

"Arrested the two boys and one father in that rape case from last weekend."

"Why the father?"

"He put up a fight with Domino Reiss. Told me he had boxed in college."

"How did that work out for him?"

"He'll be sore for a few days. She kicked him in the balls."

"Ouch," Lee said. "College may have been a long time back for him."

"He can get some bed rest tonight. I shipped all three of them to Naples, to the county jail. They'll probably all bond out tomorrow and the boys will be back in school with poor Greer Ramstod."

"That sucks. Her parents holding her out of school for a few days?"

"I believe so. Had a talk with the school guidance counselor about that."

Apparently the usual thing is to put the girl into some other school. Get her entirely away from all the kids at the old school. That didn't seem right to me. Those are her friends, all but the two little bastards."

"Teenage girls can be very cruel to one another," Lee said. "Boys too, I hear. Maybe a different school is for the best."

"I suppose. Also went up to Naples this evening. Conference with all the Collier and Lee counties police departments and sheriffs offices. Matt English thinks he has a serial killer on the loose."

"Matt English? Who's he? And is he sure about this?"

"Detective with the Naples police department. He's good people. Got his head screwed on the right way. And he's been at this a long time. If he thinks there's a serial killer out there, there is most likely a serial killer out there."

"Who is this person killing?"

"He's a clever one. Picks up day-laborers outside home improvement stores. Most of those people don't know one another. And the people change from day to day anyway. If one never shows the next day they don't think anything about it."

"How did English get onto it at all?"

"He's got records of three people gone missing. There may be more. One was homeless. But all had families. They have relatives who keep in touch. Reports of missing persons started Matt English to wondering where they could have gone."

"Aren't there always missing persons in any community?"

"Usually, yes. But they do fall into some predictable categories. Young people who run away from home. People of any age with mental problems. People, men usually, who run away from family responsibilities or were big losers in divorces. Rarely, older people with dementia who wander away. But when he started seeing multiple complaints of missing healthy young or middle-aged men who were last seen heading out to stand on a corner and try to land some day-work, English pricked up his ears."

"But there's no evidence of any crime. Maybe they just happened to wander off, each in his own way."

Troy shook his head. "And didn't notify their families? Possible. Matt is being a little proactive. It's an odd pattern. He's been around long enough to notice things like that and he's a good enough cop to want to know more about what's going on. No, the men

don't have to be dead. If Matt finds them working in Georgia or whatever, so be it. He's just covering the exits in case there's more to this than seems obvious at first sight."

"But no one is missing here in Mangrove Bayou?"

"Not so far. But we don't have a big-box home improvement store and I'm guessing our average family income here is a bit above the day-laborer range. But I'm going to keep my eyes and ears working just in case."

"Well, do your thing. I won't be home tomorrow night. Flying some people up to Atlanta tomorrow afternoon and back here the next day. I'll just camp out in the plane. Maybe go shopping."

"Wondered why you weren't drinking your usual glass of wine."

"Ah. Rules. Federal Aviation Regulation 91.17 says not to drink any alcohol eight hours or less before flying." Lee looked down at her plate and sighed. "If you had shown up a little earlier, I might have enjoyed a good merlot with this."

Chapter 10

Tuesday, September 15

Usually, when Troy had the dream, he knew, somewhere in his dim behind-the-scenes consciousness, that it was always the same. But lately it had been different somehow.

Billy Poteet held the gun against Wanda Frister's right ear and shouted "I'm never going back to prison." For some reason Troy was sitting in water up to his armpits, holding a gun with glowing tritium sights that was aimed at Wanda's head. Troy wondered about the sights and when he looked back over them he saw a head come up out of the Dumpster in the back of the town hall parking lot. He pulled the trigger and the head vanished and Troy woke up sweating.

Lee was already holding him. "Again?" she asked.

"Different." Troy scrambled out of bed and ran to the toilet. He always threw up, sometimes once, often twice. This one was a two-fer. He cleaned up and got his briefs from a chair beside the bed, put those on, and went out to Lee's living room. He turned on a lamp beside a sofa, and sat and picked up his book. Troy kept books, real books, in his own bedroom back at the Sea Grape Inn, here, and at his office. He worked on three or four at a time. He always laughed when people asked him when he had read a book last.

Lee came out to the living room. She wore a knee-length tee shirt as a nightdress. "Did you write it down?" she asked. "Doctor Groves said to record all your dreams."

"I will. Go back to bed."

"Do it now. You'll forget in a few minutes."

Troy shook his head. "No. Unfortunately, I won't. These aren't like random dreams. I remember them all, for a long time. I wish I *could* forget them. Go to bed."

"Come back to bed with me."

"You know I can't. Never can sleep after these." He held up his book. "Do a little reading for now."

"Well, you know where to find me if you need me." Lee turned and walked back towards the bedroom.

"My love," Troy muttered to himself. "My anchor. My everything."

"I heard that," Lee called from the hallway.

"That's all right," Troy said, louder. "I meant it."

He picked up the small notebook beside the book and wrote out a description of the dream. He picked up the book, a history, and lost himself in the wonders of Pericles' Athens.

Doctor Groves had said that Troy appeared to be processing his past through dreams and, as the dreams advanced, some past memories merged. As the dreams were about times Troy had killed people, the mergers were sometimes jarring, like sitting in armpit-deep water shooting at a man in a Dumpster on perfectly dry ground. Troy shook his head and went back to his book. Let the good doctor figure it out.

— end sample —

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