

CLASSICS

NO. 2

\$5.95

INSIDE:

37 CLASSIC NUDE PHOTOS
ALL IN COLOR!

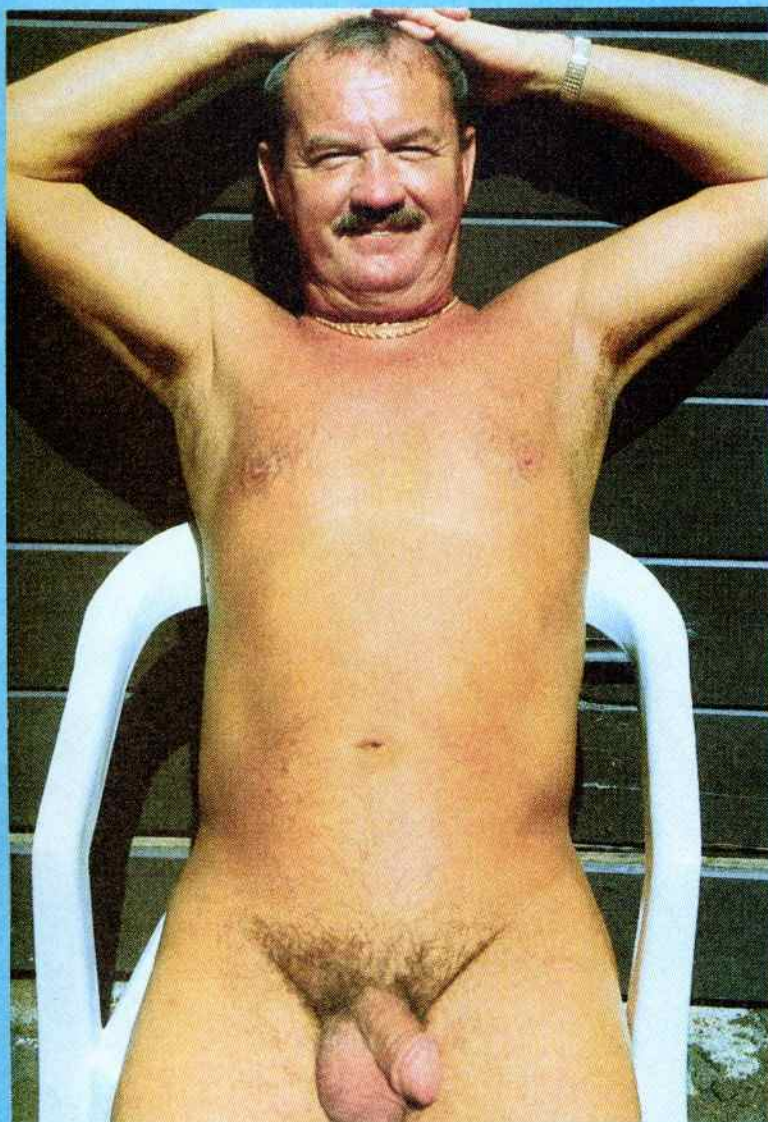
FEATURING
THE PHOTOGRAPHY
OF JOEL AND KIM

THE FIRST FULL COLOR
ARTWORK OF RAM
AND WALTER MITTY

INTRODUCING
HOT NEW MODELS
SMOKEY MOUNTAIN BEAR
AND GEORGIA EDDIE

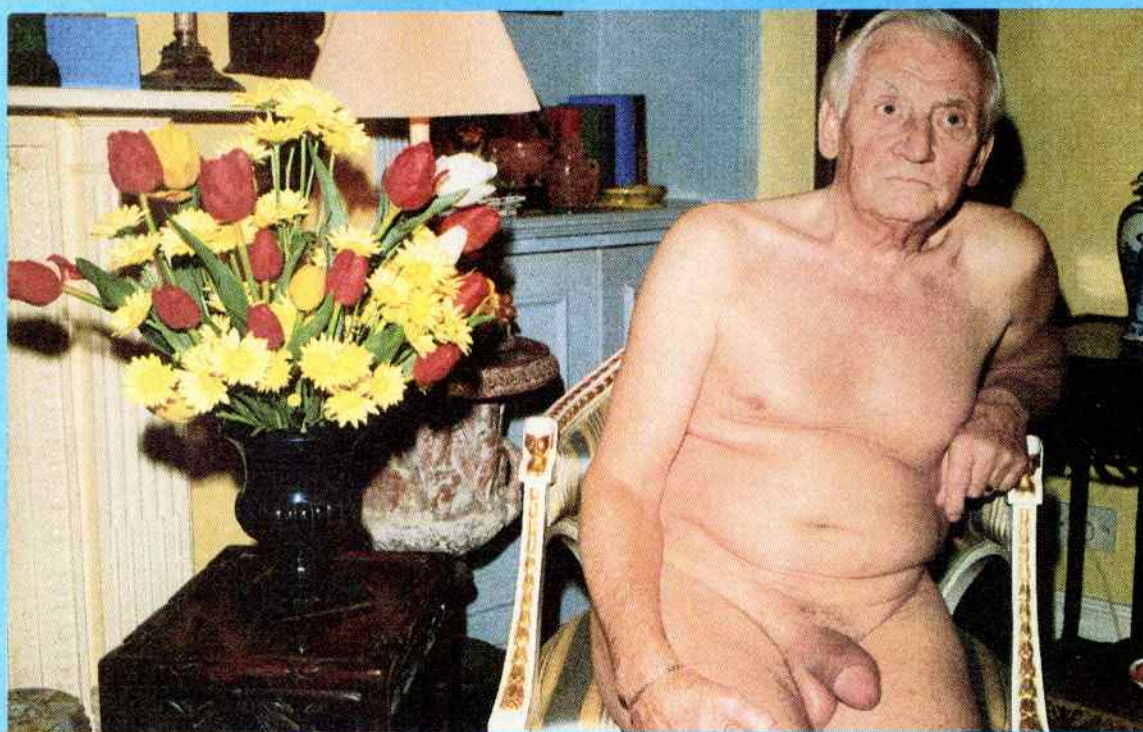
ALSO
P.H. COLLEY'S
NEW EROTIC NOVEL,
SWIMMING TO
VENEZUELA

ADULTS ONLY

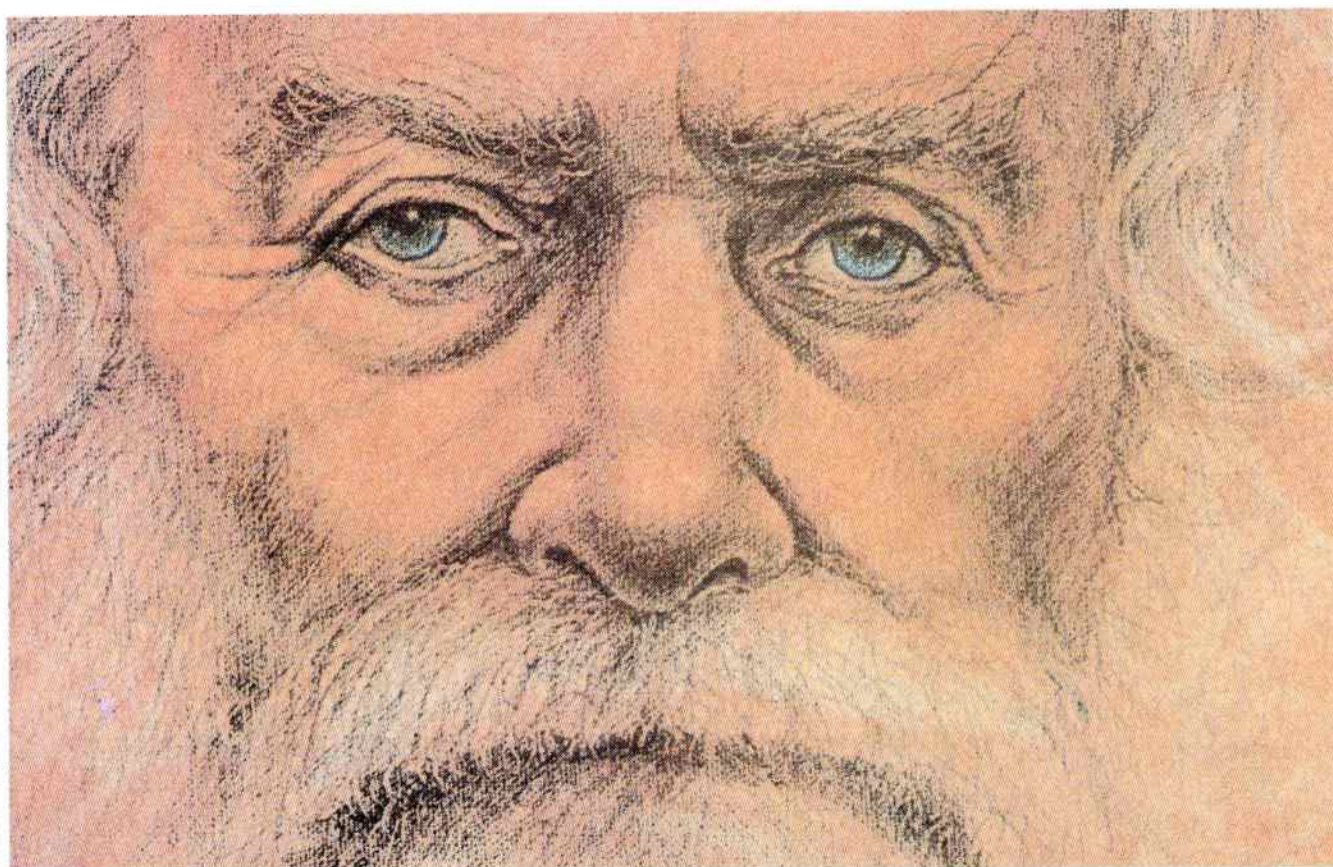


ZIPPER - photo by P.H. COLLEY

HORNED TOAD
photo by RICHIE II



JON
photo by
LEE



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CLASSICS MAGAZINE™

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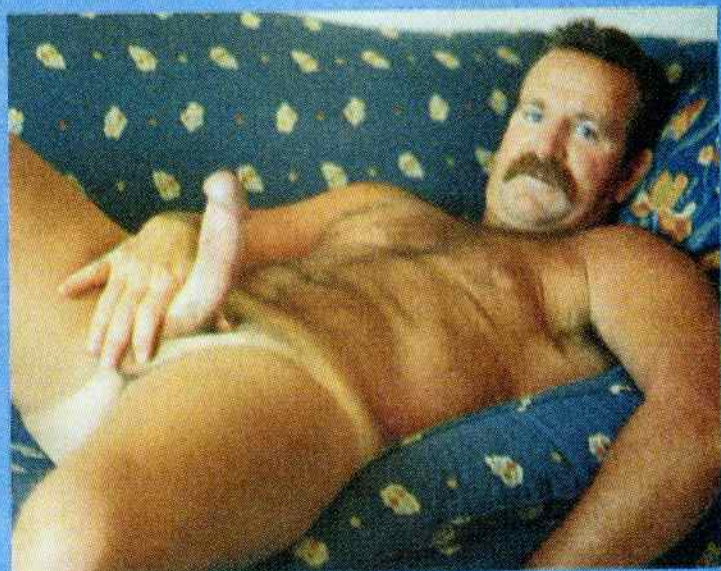
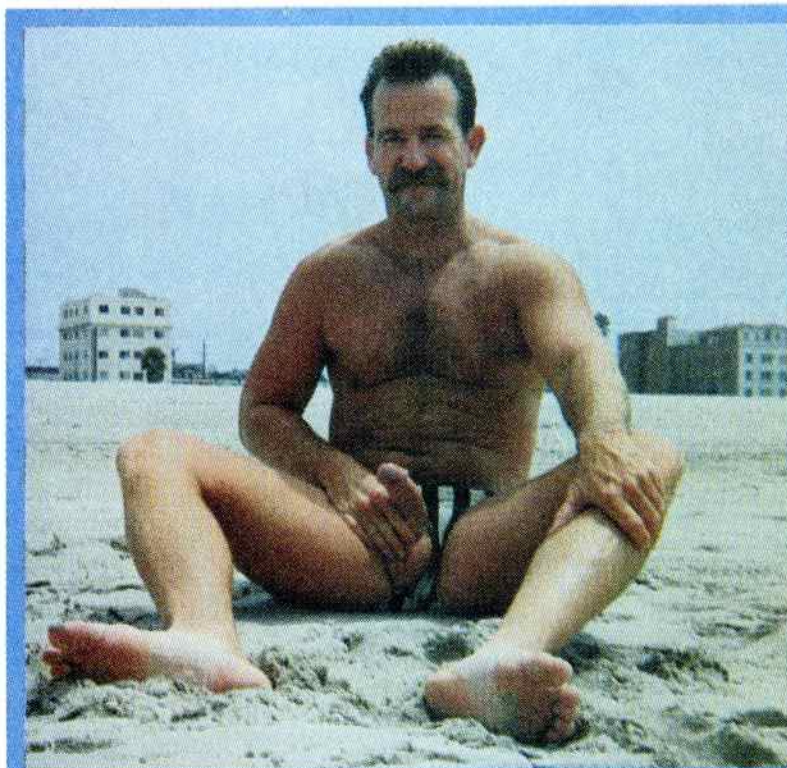
Clockwise from upper left: EL HOMBRE - photo by G. Mann; FRENCH TOP - photo by Andre; SWAN - photo by Roby; HANSRUDOLF - photo by Werner

KELLY

KELLY

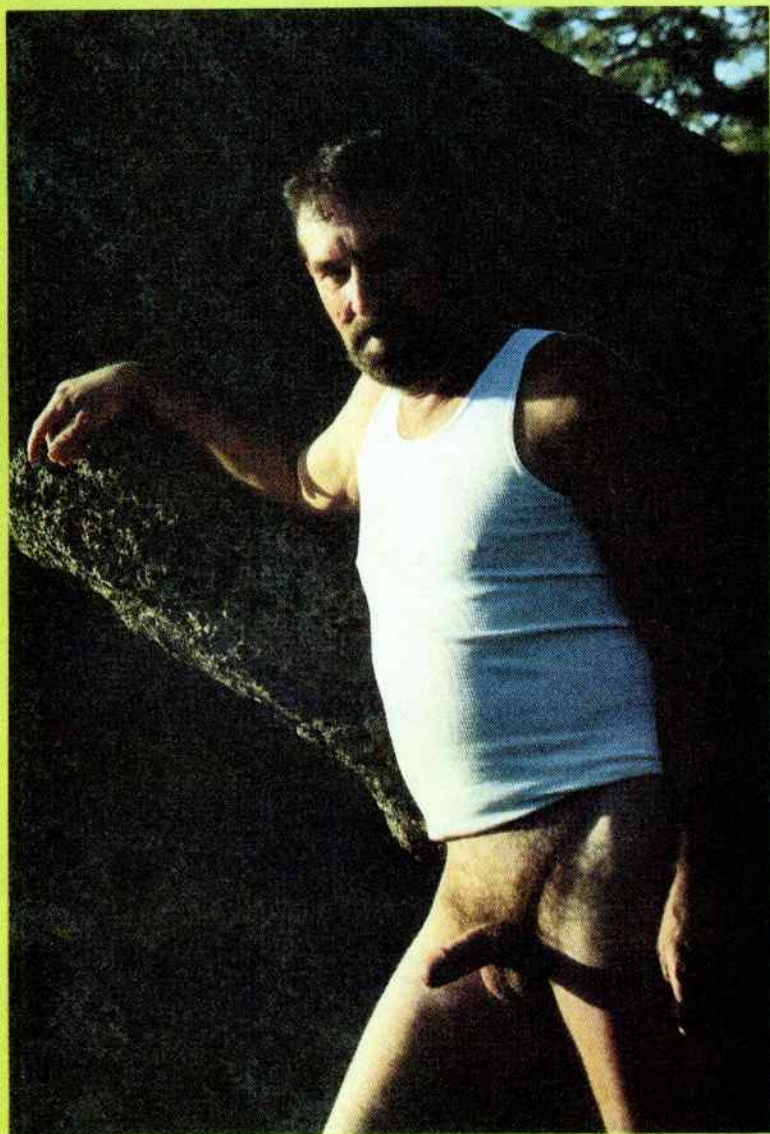
KELLY

KELLY



THE
PHOTOGRAPHY
OF

JOEL



LEW

MERRILL

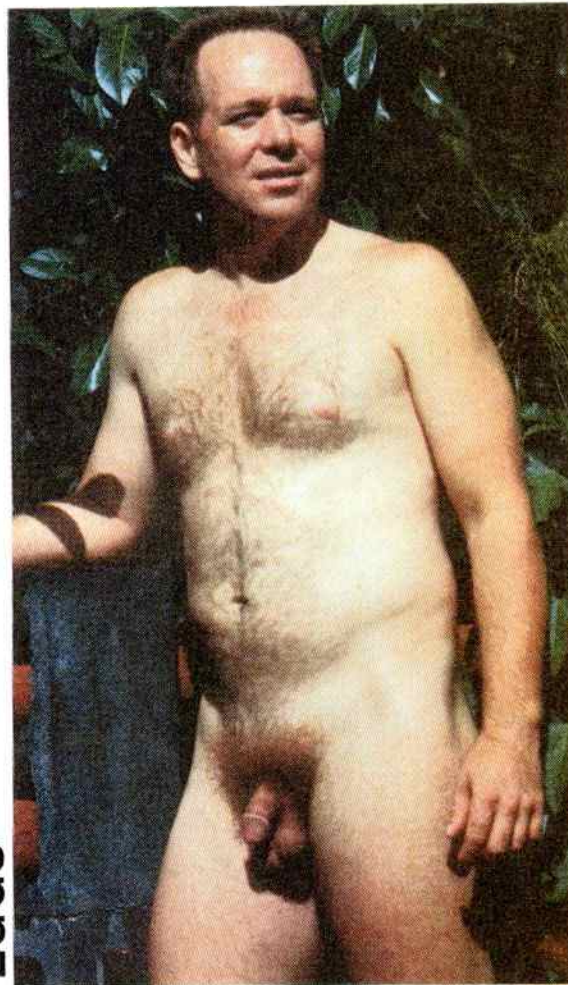
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CHICAGO JIM



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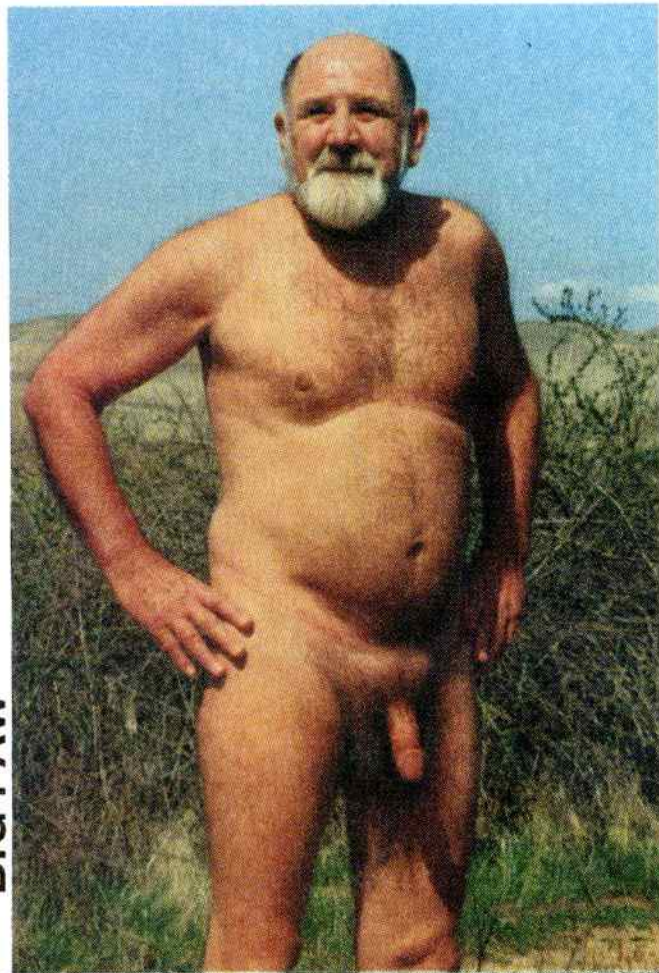
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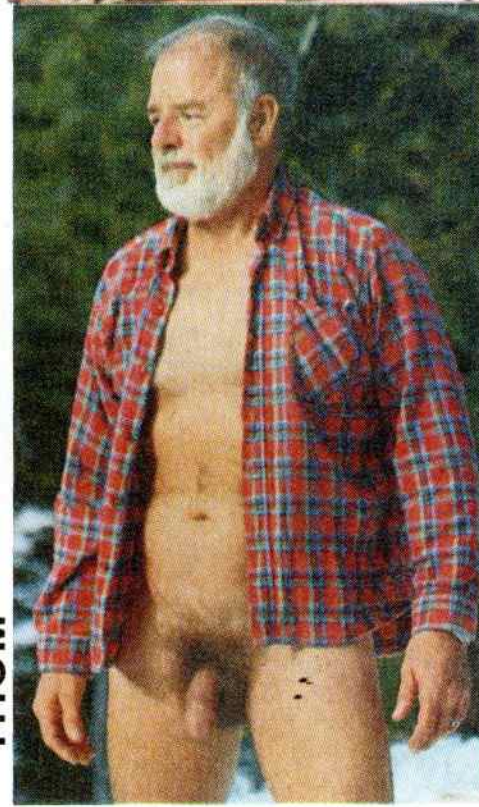
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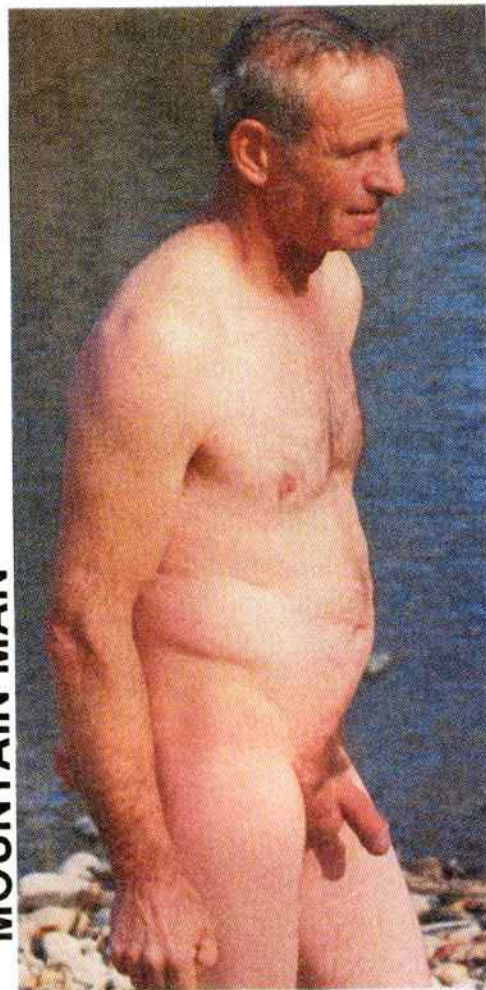
BIG PAW



THOM



MOUNTAIN MAN



SWIMMING TO VENEZUELA

a novel by
Patrick H. Colley

ONE

Los Angeles, April 24, 1992

Having parked in my reserved space, I lingered inside the car, enjoying a tape of songs from *Oklahoma*. The sun was shining, the air quality was excellent, and Gordon McRae, possibly the most handsome man who ever lived, was singing: "... oh what a wonderful feeling ... everything's going my way." For the first time in months, I felt positive about my life and considered that perhaps the depression was finally over. *Things are going to start going my way*, I predicted.

My new private doctor had taken me off the tricyclic antidepressant a V.A. doctor had erroneously prescribed. He told me that I was suffering from a transient depression, not the serious endogenous type, and put me on a milder drug called trazodone, which I never took. Except for my usual two cocktails before dinner, I was now drug-free and figured I was quite capable of riding out the tail end of my temporary malady.

I began working out in the gym again and was in the process of getting back my muscle tone. Only that morning, I awakened with a raging erection and entertained the idea of going to the baths in North Hollywood during lunch.

Then I remembered an early morning staff meeting and quickly rushed to my office building.

Upstairs, I found my petite, blonde secretary staring at the wall. "Morning," I mumbled, entering my cramped office overlooking Wilshire Boulevard.

She didn't respond with her usual, cheerful greeting.

I placed my briefcase on top of a file cabinet.

"California is dying," she said languidly. "Don't you agree, Mister Sweet?"

I walked out of my office and to a coffee maker on a table behind her. Pouring a cup, I glanced at her warily. She'd been with the company for only three weeks, so I didn't really know her well. "Is it?" I stirred in some creamer and reached for some Equal.

"My parents live in Desert Hot Springs."

There'd been a 6.1 earthquake there two days earlier. "How did they fare with the quake?"

She looked at me with profound sadness. "They have a crack the entire length of the house. They want to sell the house and move back to Michigan, but they'll have to take an unbelievable loss."

I took a sip of coffee and walked back into my office. "That's too bad. Lots of people in that same boat."

"Your boss was here just a few minutes ago," she said. "Joyce in accounting says they're going to lay someone off today."

I turned on my Macintosh SE-30 and watched as the little icon smiled at me. "There's nothing to the rumor, Cindy. Creative

directors usually get invited to the hit list discussions, and there've been no personnel reduction meetings in the past year. Besides, we have more business than we can handle." I brought to the screen the advertising campaign strategy of my prime client, a cosmetics firm.

"I hear we lost a big account yesterday."

Just as I was about to get up and find out more, my boss strode into my office. Larry was an unfriendly (and probably unfunny) version of the captain in "Gilligan's Island." He'd been brought in to replace my last boss, who had died atop his desk one night while receiving fellatio from a secretary-cum-copywriter he'd taken under his wing. Massive coronary, they said. The copywriter panicked and tried to slip out of the office, but she was spotted by a cleaning lady. As is usually the case in similar situations, the president of my advertising agency, embarrassed over the incident, made sure that the replacement vice-president was of the other extreme: a religious fanatic. And there is nothing more unbearable than having a Pat Buchanan-type zealot as a boss if you're 58, single and living in a Hollywood Hills house left to you by your deceased "companion" of 32 years.

Larry closed the door and sat down in a guest chair. His imperious gaze locked onto my eyes; his lips seemed to almost quiver.

"Let me guess," I said. "President Bush has just nominated you to the Supreme Court."

His expression soured. "We lost the Printemps Cosmetics account to some agency in Chicago. Leo Burnett, I think."

"What? How could that be?" I was stunned. "I've had my hands on that account for two years. I've nurtured it like a baby, for crissakes!"

He shrugged. "We have to cut back. The shoe falls." He got up and looked out at the street below. "Your people can be moved to other accounts. There's enough work." He turned and looked at me. "But we're top-heavy, Byron."

And then I knew. "Me."

He nodded.

"Rich ... Jeff ... all of the other directors are up to their asses with work. I have four more accounts besides Printemps. No way are we top-heavy."

He shrugged again. "Controller says we're fat, so they gave me the knife." He slowly turned and almost smiled. "Accounting has your check. The boss put you in for six months severance. I tried to talk him out of so much."

I wanted to punch him. I wanted to get up and cause a bloody scene they'd never forget, but I knew I had to remain cool. It would have cost me jail time and a lawsuit. "And all this time I thought I was your favorite," I said instead, deciding not to give him the pleasure of seeing me lose control. "Go figure."

He walked to the door and opened it.

"Oh, Larry." I wanted the last shot.

He stared at me with a mixture of contempt and disappointment.

"You and I both know the real reason why I'm being fired." My voice sounded an octave lower.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." And then he did smile.

"You hire another creative director and I'll sue the fuck out of you. I've got two letters of commendation in my file, asshole."

Looking at his watch, he said, "You have another forty-five minutes to clean out your desk and vacate," whereupon he turned and left.

That night, I sat in my living room and looked out over

Los Angeles while sipping a glass of Scotch. I felt as if I had regressed back to the day I'd gone to the doctor who prescribed the too-strong antidepressant. I had no appetite and felt no need to do anything in particular. My situation bordered on the ridiculous; 1992 was obviously going to be my worst year ever.

The previous Christmas had been one of the happiest periods of my life. Taylor and I celebrated our thirty-second anniversary on December 20th by taking a cruise to the Greek islands. Because Taylor was a tall, distinguished-looking clone of Peter Lawford, and I look like a late-fiftiish Bob Hoskins/Joe Pesci hybrid, we were the subject of much attention and were treated like celebrities. "I've seen you in the movies. You're . . . you're . . ." was a typical comment.

From the moment we met in Chicago back in 1959, we adored one another. There was never any doubt about the soundness of our relationship. I'd just been discharged from the army and landed a job as a copywriter at a small ad agency. Taylor was a "professional college student" working on his second PhD. Because his father had died when Taylor was a toddler and his mother was worth millions, there really wasn't much need for him to work for a living. I, on the other hand, having come from a dysfunctional, violence-prone family in southern Mississippi, had been forced to work hard for everything.

Our relationship wasn't all story book romance, however. When we decided to move into an apartment together near the University of Chicago, his mother, Miriam, became suspicious. She hired a detective to see what we were up to, and it didn't take long for her to get the facts about her only child and that "horrible young man who'd led him astray." She threatened him with disinheritance, but he stayed with me. And when she did indeed exclude him from her will, Taylor got his first job teaching English literature at Northwestern University.

It wasn't until Miriam was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer that she began to have second thoughts about our relationship. She reinstated Taylor in her will and tried very hard to accept me. In turn, we spent virtually all our spare time with her during the most difficult days. I'll never forget the brief conversation we had one night when both the nurse and Taylor were out. She asked if my family lived in Chicago. I told her that I'd left home after graduating from high school and moved to New Orleans, where I put myself through college and R.O.T.C. while working two jobs. I told her about getting word during my senior year that my father had killed my mother during a drunken rage, and how I vowed to get as far away as possible from my family by going into the army. She wept and hugged me. And when she finally succumbed in 1963, I truly felt like I'd lost another mother.

After probate, lawyers' fees and taxes, the inheritance was just under a million dollars. Taylor was disappointed that it wasn't more, but I felt numb trying to comprehend the magnitude of such a sum. Agreeing that Chicago wasn't where we wanted to settle, Taylor and I decided to move to Los Angeles, where he bought a house high above Sunset Boulevard for just under \$200,000. And in 1964, that sum bought quite a house.

The sixties . . . a lifetime ago. Suddenly, I got up to make myself another drink and looked around the living room. It was a palace to me—a castle. It had five bedrooms and four baths. It had a dining room with a table that could easily seat thirty. The terrace, garden and pool in back were spectacular and completely private. There was a fortune in paintings and artifacts. *Lose your job? So what?* Only last year, the house was appraised at almost two million.

But that was last year, when there was still an insane buying frenzy going on in southern California. Little did I know then that the housing market would slump. Neither did I have any

way of knowing that I would awaken the morning after we returned from Greece to find Taylor next to me, paralyzed after having suffered a massive stroke.

Or that he would die only two days later.

I made another drink and wondered how, at 58, I could get another job. How would I be able to pay the incredibly stiff property taxes and the maintenance costs? I looked at all the paintings and antiques and shuddered at the thought of having to sell them.

Having placed a t.v. dinner inside the microwave, I sat on a bar stool and looked out over the pool in the back yard. I could almost hear echoes of frolicking and laughter from the times when we had well-heeled and famous friends over for opulent pool parties. I thought I saw movement from the periphery of my vision. *Was it just a combination of shadow and imagination? Or is it Taylor, watching over me? That smell of his favorite cologne, Jacomo. Is it really wafting through the hallway from his bathroom?*

"Byron, you little shit! Why do you always leave the commode seat down?"

The memory of the essence and the sound of his voice was so real that it startled me.

"Oh, Taylor, how I miss you," I whispered.

Sleep finally came after hours of staring at the ceiling and trying not to worry about what I would do. It got to the point that I felt compelled to chant: "An answer will come from Taylor, who's here with me." I chanted it until I fell asleep.

TWO

There seemed to be no immediate help from Taylor, for the following morning brought only more bitter tears and added confusion. Instead of cleaning up and taking a morning swim as I'd done for years, I put on a robe and turned on the television. But finding nothing on but Saturday morning cartoons, infomercials and bad movies, I turned it off. Nothing I could think of to do sounded exciting. I could visualize nowhere to go to lessen my anxiety. A bottle of Scotch lured my eyes, and I considered drinking the day away as Taylor and I had done during some of our more wild times in the sixties. And then an idea entered my head so subtly that I wondered if Taylor had sent it to me.

Suicide.

Did Taylor want me with him?

"Or some form of it," I whispered while getting up and approaching the bar. The smell of the open Scotch bottle reminded me of the breath of a man I'd met in a gay bar on Los Feliz. Just kissing him had been intoxicating. That was two weeks ago. An eternity.

I stared at the bottle of Scotch, capped it, then turned away and went to the bathroom to clean up.

Inside the garage, I inspected Taylor's 1992 Corvette ZR1 convertible and realized I could get a fortune for it. Imagining a groan from Taylor, I shrugged, getting into my white 1988 Mercedes sedan. "So what do I do with it, then? Didn't you will it to me to do with as I please?"

Opening the garage door by remote control, I gazed at the loaded, silver Corvette and saw two young men in a red 1973 model, heading for Las Vegas in the middle of the night on a whim. Taylor insisted that there should never be a care about tomorrow, that life should be lived to the fullest.

I backed out of the garage and drove into West Hollywood to see a realtor who had been a close friend of Taylor's. I figured that even during such a sales slump, most realtors would still be working on Saturday.

I signed the documents to put the house on the market, but the realtor wasn't too optimistic about my getting two million. Told about the loss of my job, he suggested that I see a man in Beverly Hills about the Corvette and an art dealer in Long Beach for the sale of the paintings. He even called both men and made appointments for me to see them that same day.

The man in Beverly Hills turned out to be a multimillionaire car collector whose mouth seemed to water over picking up a soon to be discontinued ZR1 for a mere fifty-five grand. We made a date for him to test drive and fully check the car out on Sunday.

Then I drove to Long Beach to see the art dealer, whose eyes registered excitement when I walked into his gallery and introduced myself. He was young and built like Taylor, but there was something unattractive about him—something I couldn't readily identify. It was obvious that the feeling wasn't mutual, however, and I began to feel uncomfortable with his staring at my crotch. But after he heard that I wanted to sell an original Pollock, his expression turned quite serious. My cock was suddenly the last thing on his mind. When I mentioned that I also had a Manet and a Miro for sale, he appeared to be acutely breathless.

Since he would be flying to New York on Sunday and returning Tuesday night, I agreed to bring the paintings to the gallery on Wednesday.

That done, I shopped for groceries and returned to the house.

I surveyed the paintings and felt terribly guilty. Granted, I'd paid my share of living expenses, but I certainly didn't come up with the money to buy such valuable pieces of art. And his Corvette! I felt like I was somehow violating Taylor or desecrating his memory by selling off his beloved possessions.

"But they're yours now."

Was it a voice or my imagination? "Taylor?"

I listened for another voice, then I felt silly.

"Okay, okay," I said quickly, imitating Joe Pesci in the movie *Lethal Weapon*. It was an impression that usually brought Taylor to his knees in laughter. He thought that Joe Pesci was one of the sexiest men alive. "Taylor," I said in my own voice. "You want me to be able to go on living, don't you? What good are the paintings and the Vette if I can't afford to manage the house?" Then my voice cracked as I said, "What good is the fucking house without you?"

The guilt began to subside, but thoughts of selling the house nauseated me for other reasons. Even if I managed to sell it for a half-way decent price, where would I go? As is normally the case, virtually all of our couple-friends had quickly become less social after Taylor died, and we never really had any single friends anyway.

Having chopped up vegetables and chicken for a Hunan stir-fry dinner later, I made myself a Scotch and watched as the sun began to set. I turned on the television to catch some CNN news and heard that there had been a 6.9 earthquake off the coast near Eureka. I thought of what Cindy had said the day before: "California is dying, Mister Sweet."

My own voice reverberated in my mind: "Where would I go?" I thought of Palm Springs, then San Francisco. Arizona, perhaps? The thought of a 6.9 earthquake in the Los Angeles basin made me shudder.

"California is dying, Mister Sweet."

And then it occurred to me that my job had saved me from going under after Taylor died. "So what's going to save me now that my job has died, too?" I asked myself. A renewed feeling

of grief struck me. It was almost as powerful as when Taylor had passed on.

"Byron Sweet is dying . . . just like California . . . just like you," I said to the house.

THREE

Leaving a silver Rolls Royce in my driveway on Sunday morning, the Beverly Hills car collector picked up the Corvette to have it checked out by his mechanic. I became so depressed that I began to drink heavily—so much so that I only vaguely remember the man's returning and advising me that he would deliver a cashier's check to me the next day. The rest of the day and night was blacked out in my mind, depressing me more.

Monday's mood was more of the same, prompting me to call my doctor. He again explained that my depression was part of a natural grieving process, not a mental disorder. Adding that the disposal of Taylor's possessions was exacerbating my feelings of emptiness, he urged me to take the medication he'd previously prescribed. He assured me that the feelings would pass.

By noon on Tuesday, I began to feel better without the aid of the medication . . . or the liquor. I was even able to leave the house to have lunch and deposit the cashier's check.

On Wednesday morning, I carefully packed the three paintings and headed for Long Beach. According to the news on the car radio, Eureka had been hit with aftershocks of 6.5 and 6.0. There were swarms of aftershocks in the Desert Hot Springs area as well. But perhaps the greatest aftershock, the commentator said, could be the reaction to the Rodney King beating case verdict, which was expected that day. I thought then how ridiculous the man sounded. *How could those cops be acquitted in light of such damning evidence?* I wondered. Still, I got the distinct impression that something very dangerous was imminent; I felt anxious to quickly sell the paintings.

The art dealer jovially greeted me and couldn't wait to get his hands on the paintings, which I had packed in urethane-lined cartons. He introduced me to an older, scholarly-looking man who turned out to be an art appraiser and expert on Impressionistic art. Ten minutes after I arrived, another man walked in. He was introduced as being an art professor at UCLA and an expert on Miro and Pollock.

I had no idea how much the Miro and Pollock were worth and was resigned to the fact that I would be taken. On the other hand, Taylor had often told me that the Manet would easily get between \$50,000 to \$75,000 at any prestigious auction in Beverly Hills or New York. My gut estimate for the other paintings was something in the range of \$20,000 each.

As each expert opened separate cartons, the dealer turned and asked, "How much do you want?"

"Hundred twenty-five for all three," I answered confidently. "All or none."

The dealer blinked once but showed no reaction. He quickly turned his attention to the first painting exposed: the Miro. The UCLA professor gazed at the signature with a magnifying glass, then pored over the rest of the canvas. At the same time, the older man was inspecting the Manet with his own magnifying glass.

I turned away and began browsing through the gallery at the paintings he had for sale. There were no other exhibited paintings of the caliber of a Manet, Pollock or Miro, so I was confident that I had something the gallery owner wanted badly.

Another wave of anxiety came over me, and I wondered if it was being caused by the guilt over selling the paintings or a recurrence of my sense of foreboding that wouldn't go away.

I heard the sound of hushed voices and turned to see the men in conference. Each man in turn glanced back at me with a countenance not shown upon our introduction. I tried to decipher the expressions, which seemed to betray an element of stress. *Were they worried that I had stolen the paintings? Were they afraid that I would come to my senses and ask for double the amount?*

"Well!" said the dealer with a smile. "Shall we do some business?"

And then I knew that I'd asked for too little. It occurred to me to haggle, but the sense of foreboding was still there and getting worse. I felt compelled to make the sale and get out as quickly as possible. "Let's," I said.

While I waited patiently, the dealer placed a "closed" sign in the window and left for his bank. The experts took turns making excited, hushed telephone calls; I got the impression that they were trying to determine if the paintings had been stolen. It also occurred to me that my price had been so low that it left an inordinate amount of room for resale and that all three men would benefit handsomely.

The dealer had been gone for almost two hours when I realized that something must have gone wrong at his bank. As the UCLA art professor paced, the older art appraiser answered the telephone. From the tenor of the conversation, it became apparent that the dealer was having trouble coming up with the full amount. Suddenly the art professor whispered something in the appraiser's ear and excused himself to me. He rushed outside and drove off quickly in a BMW.

I looked at my watch and found that it was already early afternoon. "Has something gone wrong?" I asked.

The professor smiled and shook his head a little too nervously. "Not really. A hundred and twenty-five thousand is a little difficult to come up with on a moment's notice. It won't be long." He studied me. "Do you have any more works like these?"

"A few," I answered teasingly. I inspected him more closely and realized that, under different circumstances, he might be rather exciting. He was in his late forties and built well.

"Why do you want to sell these?"

"I lost my lover back in January and my job last Friday," I said bluntly.

His expression turned compassionate. "I'm sorry. How long were you together?"

"Thirty-two years."

His eyes became misty. "My Joey died of AIDS last year."

"Then you know," I said, feeling good about being around a man who knew how I felt.

"We were together ten years." He shook his head as if to push back painful memories. "Surely you must be hungry. I'll call for a pizza. There's a Domino's down the street."

My stomach growled, answering for me. "Sure, why not?"

He looked in a telephone directory and called for a large deluxe pizza.

Soft music from a New Age radio station suddenly stopped, drawing my attention to a speaker in the corner. The incredulous voice of a woman came on the air with the announcement: "All four defendants in the Rodney King beating case have been acquitted." She said more, but I was too dumbfounded to hear.

"Did you hear that?"

"What?" The professor had not heard.

"The police who beat Rodney King. They were found innocent. All four!"

The man shrugged, then went back to the paintings and looked at them lovingly.

The pizza delivery man, the dealer and the art appraiser arrived almost at the same time. Breathlessly, the dealer handed me a bill of sale and a cashier's check for the full amount. Suddenly not hungry, I walked to the paintings and touched each one for the last time. Signing the bill of sale, I silently asked for Taylor's forgiveness and left without another word.

I got inside my car and drove until I found a First Interstate Bank branch, where I deposited the check. The diminishing guilt was eventually swept away by a wonderful sense of security. With an additional \$180,000 in the bank, I felt I could make a new beginning, maybe start my own business, and perhaps stay in the house.

I drove to the Long Beach Freeway and headed north. Turning on the radio, I found that almost all stations were reporting on the Rodney King verdict. I left the radio on an all-news station, which told of unconfirmed looting. I figured there would be a backlash, but I felt confident that the police could handle it.

As I passed the Imperial Highway exit, the freeway traffic began to back up. A short time later, I saw that the freeway was completely blocked by California Highway Patrol cars, and officers were directing all traffic to exit at Firestone Boulevard. It appeared that a detour had been set up, sending traffic up a parallel road to bypass an accident just past the Firestone interchange. As I reached Firestone and approached a CHP officer directing traffic to the right, I turned on my left turn signal, intent upon heading west on Firestone to the Harbor Freeway about five miles to the west. The officer, seeing that cross traffic had been stopped to allow a convoy of cars to detour, allowed me to turn left. It turned out to be a very fateful change of direction for me.

While driving west through the unincorporated L.A. County area between South Gate and Los Angeles, I heard the radio announcer tell of expanded looting and burning in south-central L.A. And then it finally dawned on me that I was just above the Watts section of the city and heading straight for south-central. About the same time, I saw smoke rising in the distance. When I reached the city limits, I saw small groups of young blacks milling about. Up ahead, a grocery store was being looted. Across the street, a young man threw a fire bomb through the plate glass window of a liquor store. Seeing no policemen anywhere, I became very concerned for my safety.

Other light-skinned drivers in my vicinity abruptly stopped, made u-turns, and sped off in the opposite direction. I felt compelled to follow them, but I could see the Harbor Freeway up ahead. And then I looked in my rear-view mirror and saw that one of those who had turned around was being pelted with bricks. A gunshot rang out, and the car ran over the curb and crashed into a building. I heard sporadic gunfire up ahead and saw several more pillars of smoke rising all around. I was driving straight into the eye of a nightmare riot.

As I approached Broadway, the last intersection before the freeway on-ramp, the light changed to yellow, then red, and two cars stopped abreast in front of me. A van pulled up next to me, preventing me from passing the two cars in front. I was trapped in the right lane, and there was no way I could go over the curb. I rolled down my window and screamed at the other drivers, imploring them to run the light. I honked my horn again and again, but they wouldn't budge. Suddenly a shower of bottles and rocks began to fall on us, and I turned to see a gang of youths approaching with bats and handguns.

The white woman in the car in front of me suddenly lurched into the intersection and was broadsided by a pickup

truck. Seeing that the cross traffic had stopped because of the accident, I sped into the intersection and drove around the mangled cars. With the on-ramp only feet away, I glanced into my rear-view mirror to see that the gang of youths had pulled an Oriental man out of the van that had been next to me. They were beating him with baseball bats and bricks. Sickened, I stopped the car and ran back toward the intersection. "NO!" I yelled.

I could see two older black men trying to drag the man away from the crowd to safety, but they were attacked, too. Others tried to come to the aid of the crash victims, but the young toughs beat them away and took the possessions of the seriously injured drivers.

Then I saw a huge man with a shotgun pointing me out to the others, and I stopped.

A young man with a brick turned and stared at me, then began running in my direction. Cursing myself for getting out of the car, I rushed back to it and jumped inside just as the brick landed atop my car. I looked into the rear-view mirror and saw that the big man was now at my trunk, his shotgun trained on me.

As I drove away, there was a deafening blast, and my back window blew out. And then I was on the ramp, merging into the heavy traffic of the Harbor Freeway. It wasn't until several minutes later that I began to feel a stinging sensation on the back of my neck. I touched the wetness and stared at bright-red blood on my hand.

I placed several tissues on my wound to try to stop the bleeding. I knew I had to get to a hospital, but the surrealistic sights all around convinced me to keep going in order to get out of the immediate area. At many of the underpasses, unruly crowds were showering debris upon the cars on the freeway. Palm trees were set ablaze, looking like huge torches leading the way to hell. Fires were roaring out of control in every direction, and a blanket of smoke hovered over the freeway. The radio station had abandoned music programming, and a man was reporting that the city seemed to be in the process of systematic destruction—that massive, all-consuming fires were being set at a rate of one every ten minutes. The announcer said that people of all races were looting and burning and that the police were doing nothing to stop it.

As I reached downtown, I could see that the Hollywood Freeway turn-off was backed up for miles. Knowing that east Hollywood had a huge, gang-infested Hispanic population, I knew I'd find trouble there, too, so I left the freeway at 3rd Street and drove west into the direction of Beverly Hills. Seeing no police anywhere, I ran red lights and exceeded the speed limit until I reached Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

I sat on my terrace and watched the multitude of fires. As one became an inferno, another would start blocks away. It began to look like the caldera of a leviathan volcano with eruptions rising in every direction. Having forgotten I'd been given codeine at the hospital, I was through my second Scotch before I realized that I was on a most incredible high. I couldn't even feel the patio chair against my body, let alone the bandages reaching from the shaved back of my head to my shoulders. I regarded the fires as some sort of entertainment and couldn't comprehend the tragedy of what they would later call "The Civil Unrest of 1992."

FOUR

The telephone on my nightstand rang the next morning, awakening me to the reality of searing pain from my wound. The back of my head felt as if it were about to explode. All the muscles in my back were contracted and stiff. The ringing of the telephone only worsened the pain, so I grabbed it more to stop the ringing

than to answer it.

"Okay . . . yes!" I answered, looking around for the pain medication.

"Byron?"

"Yes." I spotted the pills atop a chest of drawers, got out of bed, and carried the phone to the end of the bed.

"This is Jeremy Porterby at Porterby Realty."

I poured out two pills and dry-swallowed them. "Yes, Jeremy."

"Is this a bad time?"

"No . . . no . . . I, uh, just woke up."

"I'll call back . . ."

"No, no . . . that's okay. What do you have?"

"An offer. I showed your house while you were out yesterday. Did you see my note and card?"

"Uh, no, I didn't. I got in rather late. The riots and all." A pill lodged momentarily in my throat and left a bitter aftertaste. "What kind of offer?"

"Million and a half. He's a theatrical agent. She's a producer with Fox."

"Jesus, Jeremy, that's a half mill low. I . . ."

"Byron, you're *not* going to get two million in this market. It's just too soft."

"No way, Jeremy," I said, anxious to get rid of him.

He sighed. "I even wrote up the damn thing. I'll talk to you later. I think I can show it tomorrow to another couple."

"Later, then." I hung up and rushed into the kitchen for a glass of orange juice.

Guzzling it down, I went into the bathroom and used a hand mirror to look at the bandages on the back of my head, neck and shoulders. They were blood-soaked, and I remembered the doctor saying that he wanted me to come back the next day. I figured that I was probably better off returning to Cedars-Sinai than trying to see my own doctor in West Hollywood.

I went to the sliding glass door to the terrace and numbly looked out over the L.A. basin with countless columns of smoke still billowing. Incredibly there were still new fires being set. A haze of acrid smoke covered the entire area from Hollywood Hills to the ocean. And then I could hear Cindy's words again: "*California is dying . . .*"

Turning on the television, I listened trance-like as the nightmare was relived through endless segments of videotape from the previous afternoon and night. Worse, it continued, unabated. So many killed. So many beaten unmercifully. The aerial video of Reginald Denny's beating was shown over and over.

When the pain finally became manageable, I quickly dressed and drove my car to an auto body shop outside the "war zone" in Beverly Hills. That done, I had someone from the shop drop me off at an Avis car rental place nearby, where I rented a blue Honda Accord. Feeling out of character without my luxury car, I drove to the hospital and slinked through the emergency entrance, reeling at the sight of chaos and suffering because of the riots.

Several hours later, a different doctor took off my bandages and probed for more pieces of glass and pellets. It was agonizing, but he did find three previously overlooked pieces of glass which had been the cause of the continuing pain. With all the foreign objects gone and a new dressing, the pain started to diminish.

Upon leaving the hospital, I longed to have a talk with Taylor. After the funeral, I'd never had the courage to visit his grave, but the events of the past few days dispelled the fear of breaking down. I felt that the time was now right, so I drove to

Forest Lawn Memorial Park on the other side of the Hollywood Hills from the house.

Strangely, I remembered exactly where he was buried, even though my memory of the event had been repressed for almost four months. I was pleased to see that the tombstone I'd picked out had already been placed.

I read the inscription: *In Loving Memory - Taylor Sylvester Croft - June 26, 1929 - January 6, 1992.* I sat cross-legged in front of his tombstone and touched it gently, gliding my fingers over the inscription. "I finally got enough nerve to come. I guess that after yesterday I can face almost anything, right?" I fought back the sensation of choking up. I was determined not to break down. "I think it's a good bet that you were there with me. You helped me get away from them." My voice almost cracked, and I grimaced. "Are you pissed that I sold your Vette and the paintings? I hope not. After all, I have to go on, don't I? Surely there must be a reason why you went over and I stayed behind. There must be a reason." Tears came to my eyes, but they were bitter, not the kind one sheds when breaking down. "Reasons. Reasons why all those people were brutally beaten in the name of . . . civil disobedience. Reasons why you rarely took your hypertension medication." I wiped my eyes with my shirt sleeve. "I want to sell the house, Taylor. I want to go some place where I can start my own business. What do you think? I'll have to low-ball the house to get it sold. Maybe you can give me a sign, huh? Maybe you can . . . you can come to me in my dreams and just hold me . . . " More tears came, and I became angry at myself. Regaining control, I continued: "I'm over the hill, Taylor. At fifty-eight, nobody will hire me for the same money I was making at the agency. I'd be lucky to get minimum wage at K-Mart. It's just a matter of time before the taxes, maintenance and utilities would eat me up alive . . . and I'll lose the house. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

I slowly got to my feet and gazed over the verdant panorama. *How could sadness prevail in such an atmosphere?* I wondered. I looked down at his grave once more, convinced that he wasn't down there. Maybe he was sitting patiently in the rental car, waiting until I got the first visit out of my system. Maybe he was home watching television. More likely, he was standing beside me with his arm around me, trying to tell me that everything would be all right—that he would see to it. With that comforting thought, I walked away. Several yards away, I stopped and turned to look at the grave site once more. I knew then that I'd come back again only to make sure that his grave was maintained. There was no need to come here to talk to him, because he was always with me.

By the time I arrived back at the house, the pain was gone; I felt good about visiting Taylor's grave. I poured myself a Scotch and checked the answering machine, which had recorded two messages. Instead of checking them out, I made myself the first well-balanced meal I'd had since Taylor died.

Night fell and the rioting continued. It got to the point that I couldn't watch television news any more, so I looked for a movie to watch on one of the cable channels. But seeing that they were all movies with violent themes, I opted for soothing New Age music on the radio.

I made myself a Tia Maria on the rocks and pushed the playback button on my answering machine. The first message was from the realtor. He wanted to show the house twice the next day, so I decided to take a drive somewhere. The second message was from someone whose name I didn't recognize. He said that he was calling from Palm Desert and gave his number. Curious, I dialed the number.

"Hello." It was a rather pleasant timbre.

"This is Byron Sweet. I'm returning a call from a Jim McArthur."

"Oh, Byron! Thanks for calling me back. I'm sure you don't remember me, but I met you and Taylor at a party in Palm Springs last April. I'm the one who got a little bit too tipsy and sort of pawed at you." His voice was soothing. "But then, maybe that happened a lot, a guy like you . . . "

The memory was vague, but it began to sharpen. "The doctor?"

"Yeah."

And then I remembered him quite well: taller than my five-foot-seven, stocky, very masculine. He drank too much and came on to me with a vengeance, but he was interesting. Of course, I'd been with Taylor, and we were semi-monogamous: he played around—safely, he insisted—but I didn't play around at all. "Let's see if I can say it: *otorhinolaryngologist*."

He laughed. "Perfect, but ear, nose and throat will do nicely." His laughter died away. "Uh . . . I just heard about your partner this morning, and . . . I'm really sorry. I just wanted to call and offer my condolences."

"Thanks. It's been a tough few months."

"You have a lot more to go through, unfortunately."

"The voice of experience?"

"I lost Bill a little over two years ago. A drunk driver broad-sided him in Desert Hot Springs."

"I'm sorry." I wondered how a man who'd lost his lover to a drunk driver could drink too much at a party and drive home.

"Sometimes it helps if you talk things out with someone who's been through the grieving process."

"Probably would. In my case, I think I could use the services of a good psychiatrist too. I was fired last week, plus I was almost killed trying to drive through the riot flash point yesterday."

"Good God, man. Were you hurt badly?"

"Not really. Just some glass and buckshot in the back of the neck. The firing at work hurt much worse."

"That's awful!" He sounded so distraught and sincere.

"Do you have a friend staying with you?"

"Friend?" I chuckled bitterly. "We made the mistake of cultivating friendships exclusively with couples. And because you've lost a lover, too, you know that they usually drift away after a few weeks."

"You mean you're alone now? You shouldn't be alone after all the trauma you've been through."

"Then why don't I come out tomorrow and spend a long weekend with you?" I couldn't believe I'd said it. The statement was so unlike me. Noting the silence, I continued. "Are you still there?"

"Yeah. Please don't misunderstand my loss for words, but I'm trying to decide if I have the . . . the willpower to keep my hands off you."

"Maybe I'd like your hands on me."

He laughed.

"What's so funny?" The laugh was so full of relief that I almost laughed with him.

"I never thought I'd get the chance. I just called to offer my condolences and throw my hat into the ring. You see, you made quite an impression on me last April."

It was my turn to laugh. "Well, we'll see if the impression holds up when you see me with a punk hairdo and some pretty ugly cuts. And if heavy-set guys turn you on, let me warn you that I've lost twenty pounds. That, plus there are no other hats in the ring."

"It was something inside that impressed me."

The warmth of that statement moved me. Enchanted, I

wrote down the directions to his place in Palm Desert.

FIVE

The friendly guard found my name on the guest list, gave me a bright yellow plastic pass for my dash board, and allowed me inside the exclusive, gated community. All the single-story houses were understated and partially hidden by lush, well-manicured shrubs. The streets were lined with stately date palms and free of parked cars. Of course, the development surrounded a pristine, private golf course, complete with small lakes and water fowl. There were even two red-beaked trumpeter swans moving serenely on the calm water.

As I pulled the Accord into Jim's driveway, I could see that the house was typical of such communities: obviously well-constructed yet unpretentious on the outside. I felt sure that it would be spectacular on the inside, however. Parking in the driveway of a two-car garage, I got out and followed a cobblestone sidewalk underneath an archway of brilliant Bougainvillea to the heavy, ornate front door. I was already impressed.

I rang the doorbell and waited almost a minute before Jim opened the door. He looked at me wildly, as if he'd just awakened. I looked at my watch to make sure I wasn't early.

"Byron," he said, smiling quickly. "Uh . . . I, uh . . . guess I must have overslept. Come on in."

"You did say ten o'clock, didn't you?" I felt embarrassed for him.

"Uh . . . yeah. My alarm clock must have . . ." He looked at me sheepishly and ushered me inside the foyer.

I wanted to greet him in some way—a hand shake, something—but he seemed too disoriented. I closed the door instead and followed him past the kitchen and dining room into a living room that could have been featured on the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*. It had a cathedral ceiling with a teak beam across the top. Tens of alcoves in the walls were filled with potted plants, and there was a gigantic pencil cactus in a corner near a fireplace. It had to be fifteen feet tall. Expensive-looking paintings and tapestries adorned the walls, and a large cream, blue and green Persian rug supported an exquisite cream-colored couch and matching overstuffed chairs. The floor was made of beige Spanish tile. The entire back wall was made of glass, and a sliding glass door led to a large patio overlooking the golf course.

"The cook's tour," he said. "There's a guest bedroom over there." He pointed at an entryway toward the back of the living room and opposite the dining room. "Oh God, do I need coffee." He fairly staggered back into the kitchen, which featured all-black appliances with all-white cabinets and white tile counters. There was even another patio accessible from either the kitchen or the dining room. It was surrounded by a beige stucco wall and contained a beautiful collection of hanging plants, flowers and small trees. "Would you like a cup?"

I sat down at a small breakfast table for two. "Yes, thanks."

As he pulled a coffee packet out of a cabinet and placed it inside a coffee maker, I was finally able to scrutinize him. He looked a lot different from the last time. For one thing, he was heavier, which was no big thing with me. But his arms seemed thinner, and his belly appeared distended—a sign that perhaps he wasn't as healthy as last year. His hair was a little thinner, and his face was bloated and pasty. He looked more like a man in his sixties than one in his early fifties. His brilliant blue eyes had a puffiness around them, and it was obvious that he'd really tied one on the night before. "You look like you're in pain," I said, chuckling. "Why don't you freshen up while I make the coffee?"

He grinned and nodded. "I must look like shit warmed

over."

I got up and approached the coffee maker. "Oh, I wouldn't say you look *that* bad."

"I'll take a couple of Tylenol and give myself a B-twelve shot . . . and then I'll take a shower." He headed for a bedroom on the other side of the foyer.

"You do that."

"Make yourself at home!" he shouted as he disappeared.

I looked inside the black refrigerator and saw that it wasn't stocked with items conducive to good health. As a matter of fact, there was hardly anything at all to eat: no eggs, milk, cheese, cold-cuts or bread. Just mixers, dry vermouth, pickles, olives and orange juice. I poured two glasses of orange juice and placed them on the table.

Looking inside the freezer, I found two bottles of syrupy thick Beefeater gin and a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka. There was a plastic bag filled with some sort of sausages, but they appeared discolored with freezer burn and frost.

I decided to take my host out to breakfast.

As we sipped coffee at a restaurant on Palm Canyon Drive, his hangover had obviously diminished. His color was better and his eyes weren't as bloodshot. He began to look attractive to me.

"You should have been here last night," he said. "I went to a party in Palm Springs. They would have eaten you up."

"Yeah, right." I rolled my eyes.

I must have smirked, too, because he briskly shook his head and seriously said, "You don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?" His sudden earnest expression threw me.

"I remember something you said to me last year . . . you know, when I came on to you at the party and all." He spoke softly, looking around to see if anyone in the next booth could hear. "You said I had to be nuts to be attracted to a 'short, fat old man'." He studied me. "At the time, I thought: Wow! This guy really doesn't know how attractive he is. Maybe Taylor's everything to him. Maybe he's really that oblivious."

"Oblivious? Like naïve?" I was becoming a little irritated.

"Yeah, that too, but that just makes you more attractive to me. You're fresh, truly an original, untarnished . . . unaffected. Have you ever considered why actors like Danny De Vito, Joe Pesci and Bob Hoskins are so popular?"

"Because they're short and cuddly like me?"

"So what's wrong with short and cuddly?" He smiled then shook his head. "No. They're popular because there is something awesomely sexy about a short, really masculine man." He took another sip of coffee and gave me a smoldering look. "Since Taylor's death, you haven't been out, have you? I mean for sex. You haven't been to bed with anyone, have you?"

I shrugged. "No." I was still trying to fathom how short movie stars could be sex objects.

"And when someone comes on to you, you probably don't even notice."

I scanned my memory of recent visits to the various shops in West Hollywood. "No one's come on to me. I could walk down Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood, and no one would give me a second look."

"I got news for you, Byron." There was a glint in his eyes, as if he was about to reveal something profound to me. "You're one hot piece of work, my friend. Even with a weird haircut and a cut-up neck, you've got it in spades. Your eyes are like the greenest jade, and there's nothing forced or phoney about your masculinity—it's natural and laced with a big dose of testosterone. But . . . more than that, you have freshness, wholesome-

ness." His eyes narrowed. "And I want you. I want you badly." He grabbed the check and abruptly slid out of the booth.

I was so surprised that I didn't protest his paying the check. As he went back to leave a tip on the table, I walked out to the car. I felt at once embarrassed and flattered; my cock reminded me that I was also excited.

Getting inside the car and reaching over to unlock the passenger side, I tried to appear casual and avoided eye contact with him. When I started the car, I glanced down at my trembling hands, then further down at the bulge in my trousers. And then his hand came into my view.

Before I was able to get the car out of the parking lot, he had my fly undone and my bloated, neglected cock inside his mouth.

Jim lay nude on his king-size bed, watching me undress. "Yeah," he growled, as I took off my shirt, exposing my fairly hairy bare chest.

Except for a sudden case of performance jitters, my ambivalence was gone. I wanted to please and excite him. Although I couldn't fathom why he was so attracted to me, it was obvious that he was and that he could barely contain himself. His eyes widened as I unbuckled my belt and unzipped my trousers, allowing them to slide down my legs.

"Did you ever watch the 'Mary Tyler Moore Show'?"

His question caused me to pause in my struggle to get my trousers off. Finding a chest-of-drawers within arm's reach, I balanced myself. "Yeah, why?"

"Remember the character Lou Grant?"

"Ed Asner's role, yeah . . . why?" I quickly pulled off my trousers and threw them over a chair.

"You remind me of that character."

"I'm not that big, and Asner's not that short."

"You don't really *look* the way he looked. It's more like the way he presented himself: rugged, lots of bark, but a pussycat. You look more like . . ."

"Bob Hoskins, Joe Pesci and Danny De Vito," I interrupted.

"More like Joe Pesci . . . only brawnier."

"Short, brawny and sociopathic. That's me," I said, chuckling. "Like his character in 'Goodfellows.'"

"Are you dangerous?"

"Could be, probably. I've never had the opportunity to find out. Never had a fight except in school when guys made fun of my name."

"Sweet . . . I guess you would get that." He looked at me thoughtfully. "You look like my conductor friend in Luxembourg," he said softly. "I was taking a train from Luxembourg to Brussels back in eighty-four," he mused. "There was this conductor from the train on the next track. It was going to Paris. I stood just ten feet away from him on the platform, waiting for his train to leave and mine to arrive. He was talking with some other conductors in French. He was stocky and about five-six or seven, with dark hair . . . and these incredible hazel eyes. I couldn't help staring at him, over and over every inch of his exposed skin: his hands, his neck, face, lips, eyebrows, eyes. *His eyes*. Once, he turned and our eyes met, and I just . . ." He fell silent.

"You sound obsessed," I said, pulling down my briefs and exposing my painfully turgid penis.

He trembled and swallowed, then licked his lips, his focus on my cock. "Yes . . . obsessed," he hissed, gesturing for me to join him.

As I reached his side of the bed, he slithered up to my cock and lovingly took it inside his mouth. Moaning, he turned

onto his back, inviting me to reciprocate. I looked down at his drooling, semi-erect penis and hesitated. It had been so very long ago. Knowing that the weekend would be ruined if I balked, I went down on him. And then his tongue struck an exceptionally sensitive spot at the base of my cock, unleashing some potent craving I must have suppressed. I became acutely aroused and went after him with abandon.

As our passion mounted, I could feel myself tearing loose from the tether that had kept me from going on with my life. I could even imagine Taylor standing at the foot of the bed, offering encouragement. An urgent moan from Jim signalled his impending climax, and the mere thought of it pushed me over the edge and into ecstasy. We came within seconds of each other.

As we lay side-by-side, Jim fell asleep, and I stared at the ceiling, trying to sort out my feelings. I had swallowed the semen of a man I didn't know anything about. And although I'd heard both pro and con about the risk of doing so, I chose not to dwell on it. After all, surely a doctor would be tested, I assured myself. Of more importance was the fact that I had just been intimate with someone other than Taylor—something I hadn't done in years and years. I felt a closeness to Jim and wondered if the feeling was mutual.

Several minutes later, we were awakened by Jim's beeper. He called his office and found that one of his surgical patients had developed a serious post-operative infection.

While he quickly got ready, he explained the patient's situation. "I closed an oral-antral fistula on a elderly woman. Some lame-brain dentist pulled an abscessed tooth that had eaten into the sinus cavity, so naturally it left a hole. She went through a year of repeated infections before she finally came to me. The quack dentist told her that it would close on its own." He combed his hair in the dresser mirror. "Close on its own, my ass. Hell, I'm one of the best, and even the closing procedure I do takes over an hour . . . and it's only *fifty percent effective*."

That brief glimpse of his professional side left me wanting to know more about him. A lot more.

He pitched me a set of keys. "Here're the house keys in case you want to take a walk or something. I should be back in a couple of hours." He looked at me and smiled. "If only you could see yourself the way I see you."

I was lying on my back with my legs crossed and my arms crossed behind my head. My spent, sticky cock was beginning to adhere to my right thigh.

"I just had that conductor and Lou Grant and all those others that used to haunt me so. You can't imagine how good you taste." He winked and left the room.

After taking a shower, I drove to a Von's supermarket to buy something for dinner. I pushed the cart down every aisle and picked out everything I thought we'd need for the weekend. Saving the produce section for last, I pushed the almost full cart to a bin of honeydew melons.

As I prodded several melons, it became evident that they weren't ripe, so I reached for a cantaloupe.

"They're not very good, either." It was the voice of a man with a very slight Hispanic accent.

I looked around and found no one. Then I looked between two price signs in front of me and noticed a dimple-cheeked, handsome face with friendly light-brown eyes. He was in the other aisle inspecting oranges.

"Try the Juan Canari melons," the man said. "They're much too expensive, but at least they're ripe."

"Uh . . . thanks," I said, watching him carry a bag of oranges to a cart further down the aisle. He was about thirty or

thirty-five with short dark hair and the body and carriage of an athlete. A tall, rather stern-looking man standing next to the cart regarded him severely, then me. As the tall man pushed the cart around the corner out of the produce section, the young man looked back at me and smiled before catching up with his older companion.

Assuming they were lovers, I continued shopping for salad ingredients and wholesome vegetables. While I was reaching for some zucchini, the young man's image flashed in my mind. I wondered if his expression had held more than just a smile. *Take it easy, Byron, I thought. Just because you just got mentally ravaged by a younger man doesn't mean that every young man is hot for your body.* I shook my head to dispel the image and picked out a head of romaine lettuce.

With a full cart, I headed for a check-out line and saw that the young Latin had already gone through and was leaving the store. As he and the tall man reached the exit, a brawny, equally serious-looking man appeared and escorted them out to the parking lot.

Mafia? I wondered. Again, his face flashed in my mind, haunting me. Again, I dispelled it.

Jim returned after having been gone for over four hours. His patient had stabilized and he was ready to party. And party we did for the rest of the weekend.

After we'd consumed eight gourmet meals, all three bottles of frozen liquor, and each other to the count of six more orgasms each, it was two days later and time for me to drive back to Los Angeles.

As I drove away from his house, he stood in the middle of the street with a look of anxiety clearly spelled in his eyes. I considered my own similar frame of mind and wondered if we were falling in love.

SIX

When I got home, I saw my realtor's card on my dining room table and found that he'd left a message on my recorder. He said that two couples had liked the house but neither thought it was worth anywhere near what I was asking. He said that houses like mine in Hollywood Hills were selling for substantially less—if at all—and that many realtors were going out of business due to the rapidly diminishing market. I got the impression that he felt I was a waste of his time; either that, or he wanted to make a quick commission before he lost his own job.

I poured myself a drink and went out on the terrace to watch the sunset. I thought of Jim's fading expression in my rear-view mirror and felt a rush of infatuation. *Maybe I should dump the house and sit through a sixty-day escrow,* I thought. *By then, I'll know if Jim and I connect. And even if we don't, then I'll be free to do what I really want to do.*

"So what do you think, Taylor? You like him?" I looked back at the sliding glass doorway and imagined Taylor standing there with that sensuous pout he'd perfected. So many times he would say, *"Wanna have a little fun, sailor?"* It had been enough to get me going, regardless of my mood. "Would you forgive me if I sold the house?"

My mood swung, as it had so many times before. I suddenly felt depressed over the return of that nightmare image: Taylor with mouth agape, his voice frozen, his right arm and hand contorted hideously; the events at the hospital and the battle I had with the staff over the fact that I wasn't a blood relative; the outrageously unnecessary drive back to the house to get a copy of the health care power of attorney.

"No!" I yelled at myself. "Enough!" I watched as the

sunset changed from blood-red to deep purple. "Eat . . . drink . . . get some sleep." I got up and walked around the pool to the railing overlooking a neighbor's house below. "And then you can get up and call the realtor . . ." I turned and headed back into the house. " . . . and bring some delicious chaos into this dull life."

Just as I pulled out some leftovers from the freezer, the telephone rang.

I answered on the wall phone in the kitchen.

"Byron Sweet?" A familiar voice.

"Yes."

"The one who really lives up to his last name?"

My mood swung again like a pendulum. "Is this that sexy otorhinolaryngologist that I couldn't get enough of this past weekend?"

"None other."

"Are you taking new patients?"

There was the sound of clinking ice cubes and a gulping sound, prompting me to freshen up my drink.

"Why?" he asked. "Do you know someone who needs an . . . otorhinolaryngologist?"

"Yes . . . me. I have a very sore throat."

"You do, huh?"

"A very, very sore throat. Traumatized, I would say, by this fat, slick, very persistent . . . *appendage* that kept sneaking inside my mouth."

"Well, the doctor recommends that you gargle with one hundred-proof Southern Comfort for now and see him this coming weekend."

I laughed. "How about Scotch?"

"Not as effective, but it'll do." Another gulp. "So how about it? Are we on for next weekend?"

"Sure," I said, sitting on a bar stool, very much liking the idea of someone wanting me around. "I'll even come Wednesday, if you like."

"Ooooo, aren't you *impetuous*," he hissed. "But I'm afraid that my practice has me by the balls presently. Friday morning again?"

"Sure, then maybe the next time you can come up here and see how I live."

"I can't stand Los Angeles. Please don't insist that I go there. Honest, I can't. That place is a fucking time bomb."

"Okay, okay," I soothed.

"I had a great time. It's been a long time since I've felt so good being around another man."

The words tugged at me. "Me too."

"The grief . . ." His voice abruptly changed timbre. "The grief does funny things to you . . . as you no doubt know."

"I know." *Oh God, how I knew!*

"You want to experience joy again, but you just can't stand the thought of going through losing someone again."

I wondered what he was trying to say, considered what I should say in response. Nothing came forward, except: "Well, don't work too hard . . . and don't tie one on Thursday night. I want you fresh and hot on Friday morning."

"So hot that you'll have to use pot holders."

I growled, eliciting a chuckle from him. "I have a hard-on."

"Me too."

"Hold that thought."

"You too."

"I will."

"See you Friday morning," he said in a low, intimate, mellifluous voice.

"Friday."

He hung up.

A surge of joy swept over me, but it was tinged with an undercurrent of anxiety. I tried to isolate the negative feeling, but it quickly dissolved and was immediately forgotten. Besides, there was too much negativity in my life, and it was time to embrace the positive aspects.

SEVEN

I arrived at Jim's front door just after nine but hesitated to ring the door bell. I wondered: would he be turned off at my obvious eagerness? Would he still be in bed and become irritated at my untimely arrival? But before I could ring the bell, he opened the door.

Backlit by brilliant sunlight, he was a semi-silhouette with what seemed to be an unsmiling, lustful expression. As I moved toward him, I could see that he wore a vivid green silk robe which was undone, exposing his bloated, oozing cock. His face indeed projected serious passion. There was no time for jovial smiles.

After closing the door, he took me in his arms and kissed me deeply, offering the residue of cinnamon-flavored mouthwash. I could detect freshly showered skin with a hint of Glockengassen 4711 cologne.

Surrendering to this wanton ambiance, I probed his mouth with my tongue and frantically tore off my shirt, trembling as our bare chests met. Seemingly impervious to gravity, I felt as if we would soon be floating near the ceiling over the pencil cactus tree.

He pulled away and finally smiled, kissing my nose playfully. Grabbing my hand, he turned and silently led me into the bedroom. Hurriedly, I stripped completely and sat down on the edge of the bed, gazing up at him with amazement.

Standing at the foot of the bed, he nodded toward the center. Understanding his intent, I lay down on my back and assumed a spread-eagle position in the middle of the bed. And then I shivered as he crawled up to me.

"If only all men had such beautifully proportioned cocks as you," he whispered. He stared down at a penis that had performed few erections of late, let alone an erection that threatened to split its head like a ripe watermelon. "Would that all men of your caliber wanted a man's hot mouth in which to frolic."

Before I had a chance to comment about his eloquent speech, he silenced me with deep, lazy oral thrusts. As his tongue fluttered on the downstroke and kneaded on the upstroke, I became mesmerized and abandoned all conscious control of my response. My climax would be completely natural and spontaneous. I felt as though I could almost leave my body to study his concentrated efforts from every angle, even from inside his mouth. No longer aware of passing time, I lay back and wondered if Jim could bring me the true rapture I'd only dreamed of. It was an experience I'd been able to provide Taylor, but one that he was unable to provide me.

But the soaring sensation never came. Although sexual ecstasy was imminent and welcomed, the transcendental rapture I longed for would remain illusive. And so my mind began to prowl in search of a fantasy, allowing a phantom to join us. He was a younger man with luxurious, light-brown skin and heavily muscled legs and arms. His cock was fat, like mine, and approaching my mouth. But when I took the trembling organ inside my mouth and heard a gasp of delight, I found myself looking up into the eyes of the Latin I'd met in the grocery store.

Instantly, I bellowed a warning and filled Jim's mouth and throat with the most abundant ejaculation since I was in my twenties. My cock throbbed again and again, expelling so much

semen that Jim seemed almost to gag.

When my penis became inert, Jim rose slowly, grinning at me with a glistening, reddened mouth. He crawled up my body and straddled my neck, careful not to rub against the healing wound. Lifting up his heavy testicles, he allowed them to fall and slap my lips. Taking the hint, I began to lick his balls as he masturbated.

Already trembling and primed, he began to celebrate his imminent eruption with groans of delight. Determined to heighten his climax, I quickly stuffed one testicle, then the other inside my mouth, causing him to shout, "Oh my God!" And then his cock released its bounty into my hair and atop my forehead; the last drop finally came to rest on the tip of my nose.

Watching him collapse next to me and pat my leg, I reclaimed the image of the Latin's face and tried to fathom why I was so haunted by a man I'd seen only once.

As the sun disappeared behind Mt. San Jacinto, I took Jim to the grocery store where I'd shopped during the previous weekend. I could tell that shopping for food was alien to him. I assumed he probably bought the orange juice, pickles, nuts and the other goodies which go so well with booze at the liquor store, along with the weekly allotment of gin and vodka. Obviously he dined out all the time.

I had, of course, a rather feeble ulterior motive for shopping at the same store, but there was no sign of the young Hispanic. After all, why would a day-shopper be shopping at night? And what were the odds against running into him again? Still, I felt compelled to shop for honeydew melons, just so I could look for his face between the signs.

"How can you tell if it's ripe?" asked Jim, standing next to me.

I turned to him and felt guilty about my apparent obsession with the brown-eyed young man. After all, Jim was terribly exciting, readily available and probably quite lovable. Even at such an early stage of our relationship, I felt it was entirely possible that I would move in with Jim after my house was sold. "If it feels 'tacky' to the touch and slightly soft at the blossom end, it's ripe. If not, then forget it, because it'll never soft-ripen. It's rare you'll find a good ripe one this early in the year . . ." I faltered as the image of the young man re-emerged. "Except for the Juan Canari. They're much too expensive, but at least they're ripe." The sound of the young man's voice saying those words reverberated in my mind.

"God, you're so domestic for someone who's as rugged as Lou Grant."

I smiled. "Do I come across as gruff?"

"Yeah, in a pleasant sort of way." He looked at me as though he was about to kiss me, prompting me to push the cart faster.

After we'd put the groceries away, I concocted a Greek beef stew for slow cooking while he called the doctor who was on call for that weekend. I placed the stew in the oven, and then we took off for a restaurant/bar in Palm Springs called Rusty's. Jim wanted to prove to me that there was a demand for mature guys and that today's "older crowd" bars were filled with vibrant, fun-loving men of all ages, not with the sad derelicts and faded drag queens found in the "wrinkle rooms" of the fifties.

When we walked inside, I was immediately impressed. There was a fairly large bar on the left and a good-sized, bustling restaurant on the right. Jim led me to the crowded bar, where we stood behind two men in their seventies. Jim got the bartender's attention and ordered a martini. I ordered a Scotch. Looking

around the bar, I saw that I was being seriously cruised by several customers, both older and younger, most of them very attractive.

"So?" asked Jim. "What do you think?"

"I think I've lived in a cocoon for the past twenty years."

The stares from a couple of younger guys became so intense that I had to look away. "Of course, I've heard of places like this, but I just never believed they were any different from the dives I saw when I was younger. Except for the Sherman House and Palmer House bars in Chicago, they were all pretty seedy. This place . . . " I looked around. "I'll bet it's packed on weekends."

Jim searched the faces of the men looking at me. "You seem to have upset the place. Being a regular, I get ignored." He pretended to pout.

"I'm not used to this attention," I said, taking my drink from the bartender and holding out a twenty-dollar bill.

Jim pushed my money away, paid the bartender, and took his martini. "If you want to take someone home for a three-way, feel free."

I searched his eyes to see if he was serious, but I couldn't tell. "Oh, I think not," I said, my teeth almost chattering as that previous three-way fantasy resurfaced in my mind.

Jim shrugged and smiled.

One of the younger men got off his barstool at the other end and approached us. He was slightly shorter than me but stockier. *Short and cuddly*, I thought.

"Good evening, David," greeted Jim. "Meet Byron and pull your tongue back in your mouth."

David frowned playfully at Jim and extended his hand, which I shook.

"Hello, David," I said. Jim's comment had intimated that David was attracted to me, but I didn't get that impression.

"Hello, Byron." His voice was refined, his diction exact. I figured that he was either an actor or trying to give the impression that he was.

"Byron's last name is 'Sweet,' and he *is*," added Jim.

"In what way?" asked David.

"In all the best ways," Jim said, smiling fondly at me.

I smiled back at him. "My agent. Trying to fix me up?"

Jim placed his arm around me. "No way. You're going home with me tonight." He winked at David. "I just want to make David jealous."

The young man looked hungrily at me. "I am."

With that, another of Jim's young friends joined us, followed by a very attractive couple in their fifties and sixties. It became evident that Jim was a popular regular.

As the evening wore on, we inherited a couple of barstools. He consumed four martinis to my two Scotches and made regular visits to the restaurant side to greet and converse with several diners. He became loud and boisterous, and the other men would shake their heads as he left them for another table. I began to suspect that he had a drinking problem.

A couple of times I reminded him that we had a stew in the oven and should get back. Both times, he said that we'd leave momentarily, but someone else would walk in, distracting him.

When he raised his hand to order his fifth martini, I reached for his arm to get his attention.

"The stew?" I said it firmly and without a smile. "I'm getting a headache for not eating."

"Okay, Babe, we'll go."

He kissed me on the lips, causing me to recoil in embarrassment and look around to see if anyone had noticed.

"Just one for the road," he continued, looking down at my empty glass. "Hey, Tony, two more, then we have to go."

Before I could complain, he spotted David leaving and

rushed outside.

Fuming, I watched the bartender make the drinks and paid for them when he placed them in front of me.

"Five's his limit," the bartender said for my ears only. "I made the mistake of serving him six one night." He walked away without looking at me.

I spotted a bowl of peanuts and reached for a handful. Chewing them absently, I willed myself to calm down. But as the minutes went by, I began to feel highly irritated and considered driving to a motel for the night. After another five minutes went by, I left a tip for Tony and walked outside, looking up and down the sidewalk.

Seeing no one, I began to walk to my rental car parked half a block away.

"Hey, where're you going?"

I turned around and watched Jim stumble from the passenger side of a car parked across the street. I recognized David in the driver's seat.

Jim walked across the street, weaving occasionally. "Were you going to leave me?" he asked, catching up with me.

"I was looking for you," I lied. "I was afraid that something had happened to you." I watched as David slowly drove away.

Jim grabbed on to my shoulder and almost stumbled. "Let's go home, Babe," he slurred, breathing the powerful aroma of partially digested semen into my face.

Back at Jim's house, I was relieved that the stew had not burned and dried out. As Jim made himself another martini, I filled two bowls and set them on the kitchen table. While I looked for forks and napkins, he excused himself and carried his drink into a bathroom off the foyer.

Eager to give my body sustenance, I ate a bowlful and felt my headache begin to dissolve. The clock in the kitchen showed that it was after midnight—too late to drive back to Los Angeles. I tried to examine my feelings, but could sense only a creeping indifference. Or was it a growing cynicism? "You had something a lot of people never experience," I whispered to myself. "And now you're stupid enough to think that you'll find it again?"

I heard the sound of a flushing commode, followed by departing, irregular footfalls. Concerned, I walked to the master bedroom and found him passed out on his bed.

Retrieving the second bowl of stew, I went through the living room to the guest bedroom, which I'd never seen. It was beautifully decorated, complete with a king-size bed, a large-screen television and a ten-foot Ficus tree. "Hell, this is much better than a motel room."

After I found a good movie on HBO, I finished eating the *stifado* and slipped into bed.

EIGHT

Having awakened to the sound of a fire-fight between two space ships, I slipped out of bed and found that my headache was still with me. Locating a terry cloth robe, I put it on and quietly went into the master bedroom to get my overnight bag. Jim had barely moved and was snoring loudly.

Back in the guest bedroom, I quickly shaved, brushed my teeth and showered with the intent of getting out before Jim awakened. Having dressed and packed my bag, I turned to leave but found Jim standing in the doorway. He looked as terrible as the first time I'd visited.

"I did it again, didn't I?" he said meekly.

"Again? I wouldn't know," I said indifferently, slipping by

him with the bag in hand.

"Please don't leave." His voice sounded so small and vulnerable.

I hesitated a moment but continued walking toward the foyer.

"I can't get over losing him, Byron. What did you do to get over it?"

That stopped me cold. I turned and saw tears streaming down his cheeks. I wanted to rush to him and comfort him, but I held back. I knew there was only so much I could do for him—that he would ultimately have to help himself out of his alcoholic maze. "I never did. I suppose I never will get over it." I sighed and fidgeted with the bag. "I'm haunted . . . like you . . . But I'm not addicted to something that will ultimately destroy me. You are, and you'll have to do something about it."

"Stay . . . help me through it."

The sight of his tears tore through me. "You're a doctor, Jim. You have connections, and this area has some great hospitals."

"I'll lose my practice."

"Bullshit," I spat. "Doctors take vacations. No one will have to know."

"Just don't leave right now." He wiped his eyes. "If you leave like this, you'll never come back . . . and I don't want to lose you."

The sincerity in his eyes caused me to drop the bag, but I slowly reached down to pick it up. "Jim, I'd rather be alone with Taylor's memories than fall in love with a man intent upon destroying himself."

"Fall in love?" His eyes misted over again.

"I didn't mean it like that," I said defensively.

"You were about to fall in love with me, weren't you?" He tried to look deep into my eyes for the answer.

"Maybe . . . but that man was a figment of my imagination."

He half-smiled and shook his head as if he'd made a monumental decision. Walking past me, he pulled out a personal telephone book from a drawer in the kitchen and picked up the receiver of a wall phone. He dialed a number.

"Hello? Jennifer? Jim. Sorry to bother you at home. Look, I want you to cancel all my appointments for the next three weeks, okay? Refer them to Ramachandra or Villareal. Emergencies to Trager. I'll call Trager and have him cover for me. What?" He looked at me and smiled. "Well, remember that thing you urged me to do awhile back? Well, someone very special convinced me to do it." He shuddered and seemed to fight back more tears. "Yeah . . . thanks. I will. Hold down the fort and tell the snoops that I had a death in the family, okay? Okay. Same to you." He hung up the phone.

I again dropped the bag on the floor and watched him as he dialed another number. *Oh, my God, I thought. He's doing it for me. He's committing, and if I don't walk out the door, I'll be committing, too.* But I couldn't leave him.

As I drove to the alcoholic treatment center in Rancho Mirage, Jim kneaded my leg nervously.

I glanced at him. "You worried?"

"Not about the treatment." He looked ahead thoughtfully. "I worry about what kind of damage I've done to my heart and liver. It was as if I had a death wish. Alcohol destroys the liver and the ventricles of the heart . . . and it's not reversible."

"When I first met you last year, your arms were more muscular and your stomach wasn't as distended. Is that the alcohol?"

He nodded sadly. "Muscle loss in my arms and legs both because of bad nutrition and no exercise. A distended belly because my liver is obviously enlarged."

"Well, at least this is a step in the right direction," I said lamely, somehow knowing that he'd already done too much damage.

"You'll watch over the house and be here when I get out?" He looked at me pleadingly.

"Yes . . . I will."

"Remember, the cleaning lady and the service that takes care of the plants will be there tomorrow. They have keys, so don't be alarmed."

"I understand," I said, wondering how all of it would work out.

When we arrived at the hospital, I accompanied him to the admitting station and looked on as he answered all the endless questions and received his white plastic bracelet. Later, I sadly watched as he was ushered by a nurse through a double door marked, "Authorized Personnel Only Beyond This Point." As I left the hospital, I knew I couldn't stay at Jim's house as I'd promised. I had to get away for a couple of days.

I passed through the gate and waved at the elderly guard who had become very friendly. I decided to secure Jim's house and head back home to try to unload mine. Since Jim wouldn't be allowed to make or receive calls for the first week and all the calls made to his home would be automatically forwarded to his receptionist, I knew he'd never know the difference.

I made sure that all the windows and the two exits were secure, then I looked into the garage for the first time. Inside was a brand-new blue Lexus sedan and a work table covered with motorcycle parts. I could understand the Lexus, but the bike wheel, exhaust pipe and other parts caught me off guard. Jim just didn't seem the biker type.

With the set of keys Jim had given me, I armed the sophisticated alarm system and drove away.

Having eaten only the stew for the past 24 hours, I stopped off at the coffee shop that Jim and I had discovered the weekend before. I ordered a chicken sandwich with coffee and stared out the window at all the cars moving along Highway 111. I groaned softly as the depression came to me like frigid rain. "This can't be right, can it Taylor?" I mumbled.

"What's that?" asked my waitress as she placed a cup of coffee in front of me.

"Uh . . . nothing." I smiled. "Talking to myself again."

"Darlin', I do that all the time," she said, chuckling and walking away.

Although it was only a quarter till two, the sky was overcast and the bleakness of the day only made my depression worse.

"I didn't say it, but I committed myself, didn't I, Taylor? I just . . . tacitly . . . committed. And now I have to live with whatever happens next . . . Unless I just don't come back." *But you promised, Byron. A promise is a promise. A broken promise can destroy a broken man.* And then it occurred to me that I really was just a hair from falling in love with him. *Maybe I already have. Maybe that's why I made the promise.*

After eating the sandwich and paying my bill, I walked out to the car, dreading the long, monotonous drive. I looked across the street and saw the supermarket where I'd seen the young Latin. Then it dawned on me who he reminded me of: the Indian with the strange hairdo in the movie *Dances With Wolves*. The man who played that part had very much attracted me with

his good looks and haunting eyes.

I drove into the parking lot of the store and watched customers coming and going. I wondered how often the young man shopped and if he had certain days devoted to grocery shopping. I wondered if he was really a Mafia figure or just a celebrity. "Wait a minute!" I said out loud, startling myself. "You don't really think he could actually be that actor . . ."

Realizing that my behavior was becoming obsessive and that I was already in enough trouble because of Jim, I pulled out of the lot and drove toward Rancho Mirage.

Only seconds away from the store, I saw a burly jogger turning away from the highway several blocks ahead. He disappeared behind a huge growth of oleander with a dark sedan trailing him closely.

"Could it be?" I wanted to get to the corner and follow, but there was too much traffic.

By the time I reached the street—called Quito Terrace—the jogger was nowhere in sight. Then I saw that the street was actually the entrance to yet another gated community, only this one wasn't nearly as elegant as Jim's. As I got closer, I could see that it was a mobile home park. I saw a sign which read "Open House."

A friendly older woman greeted me from the gate house. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was wondering if I could see one of your available units."

She reached for something inside a drawer. "Why, you certainly can, Mister. We have three homes available and we'd just love to show them to you. You wouldn't believe how many retirees are moving to Arizona because of all the earthquakes."

"Oh, I can imagine," I said, infected by her charm.

She handed me an orange plastic visitor's card. "Put this on your dash and just follow the sign to the open units. There'll be someone there to show them to you. Turn right after you reach the first stop sign." She smiled and pushed a button to lift the security gate.

I thanked her and drove through, making sure that I followed the sign until I was out of her sight.

Well inside the complex, I methodically drove down every narrow street until I found the first dark sedan. Seeing a woman sitting on the front porch, I drove on. Working all the way back to the very last row of mobile homes, I found a dark sedan parked in a driveway. There were lights on inside the home, but all the blinds were closed. *Was that usual for a retired couple?* I wondered. I looked for a place to park, but all the visitor parking spaces were taken, and there were signs everywhere warning against parking on the narrow streets. Opting to keep on driving, I slowly drove around the small block four times, but I could never see any activity inside the house. Then I saw that an elderly man across the street was staring at me, so I felt it prudent to drive on.

Telling the lady at the gate that I would be coming back to look at the other units in a couple of days, I headed in the direction of the freeway to Los Angeles. *Grief-stricken, entrapped and obsessed*, I thought. *Ain't life a barrel of laughs?*

NINE

As I awakened, the memory of my dream evaporated fast, leaving me with a vague recollection of bits and pieces of gibberish. Both Taylor and Jim had been in the dream, and both had joined forces to somehow give me a bad time. Then there was José or Juan or whatever, and he kept luring me away from Taylor and Jim. Knowing from my own experience that trying to decipher dreams was a waste of time, I got out of bed and picked up the Sunday paper from out front, then I settled into my favorite

chair in the den with a fresh cup of coffee.

After skimming over the entertainment and sports sections, I got up to make breakfast. I felt irregular and was determined to get myself back into a healthy regimen, so I cooked some whole grain hot cereal and threw in some nuts, raisins, dates and a banana. With a glass of orange juice, I took a multivitamin, along with garlic, selenium, extra vitamins E and C and beta carotene. *Might as well get into some good habits again*, I reasoned.

I thought of Jim and allowed myself to be more optimistic about his recovery and our relationship. I wondered how I would react if he was discharged in improved health and was determined to stay sober. I felt a surge of excitement as I vividly conceived our reunion in bed and the fresh taste of a body that had pulled out of its atrophic spiral and begun to generate new cells to replace the dead ones.

Then a wave of anxiety rippled over me as I realized I'd have to stop drinking myself. It would be unfair . . . *unthinkable* . . . to drink around him. And following that difficult realization was the fear that perhaps it was too late for him to fully recover. What if he had cirrhosis of the liver, pancreatic cancer, or heart failure?

And as if that wasn't enough, the Latin's face flashed in my mind again.

After cleaning up, I called my realtor at his home and told him I would accept any offer over a million five. Obviously excited, he rushed me off the line so that he could make some calls.

Sensing the arrival of another wave of depression, I went to Taylor's old desk and pulled a framed photograph from a drawer. It was a photo I took of him in Venice back in 1988. He looked so rugged and vibrant. It had been one of our most memorable vacations.

For the first time since his death, I placed the picture on his desk. It was time to heal. "Hey, good-looking. You pissed at me for dumping the house and moving in with Jim? I can almost hear you now: 'You do what makes you happy, Byron.' But what if I don't know what'll make me happy?"

I turned and looked out the glass door at the pool, which needed cleaning. Beyond the terrace was a stagnant mass of choking smog, a reminder that living in such opulence had severe health drawbacks in addition to the financial ones. Of course, it was inevitable that I allowed all the other drawbacks to surface in my mind: the brush fires during the dry summers; the mud slides during the wet winters, not to mention the earthquakes.

After cleaning the pool, I went through some old newspapers and found an article about the filming of *Dances With Wolves*. I saw a photo of Graham Greene, the dazzlingly handsome Canadian Oneida Indian who co-starred with Kevin Costner in the movie. My Latin friend looked a lot like him, complete with the wise, old-soul eyes, but he wasn't Greene. *That means he's probably Mafia*, I reasoned.

The telephone rang. It was Jeremy, and he wanted to show the house in thirty minutes. I therefore decided that I would spend the rest of the week at Jim's and keep in touch with Jeremy by telephone. I'd come back only if there was a formal offer to accept or if my car repairs were finished.

By the time I arrived in Palm Desert, it was after two o'clock—probably too late to catch the Latin jogging, I presumed. But just in case, I waited in the supermarket lot until a quarter of three.

I drove down to Quito Terrace and entered the gated mobile home community. The sweet old lady was happy to see

me again and gave me a visitor's card when she recognized me.

Driving slowly down each street as before, I eventually came to the home in the rear. The dark sedan was parked in the driveway, and again there was no one in sight. And then it occurred to me that a mobile home was an odd place for a Mafia kingpin. Obviously, the young man was someone who required protection, but why? From what? Then I reminded myself that I wasn't necessarily sure that the young man lived in this complex. Maybe the man I saw was someone else. Maybe the sedan wasn't actually following the jogger.

Not wanting to be seen driving past again and again, I decided to try waiting in the parking lot the next few afternoons. Just in case I would need to enter again, I drove back to the gate and told the lady that I was very much interested and would be back.

And then I saw it: a road I'd not seen before. Each time I'd driven into the mobile home complex, I was apparently so excited that I never noticed a narrow driveway veering off to the right. My pulse racing, I turned sharply to the left and entered the narrow road. A sign at the entrance warned that it was a private driveway. High, well-manicured hedges of oleander were on each side of the paved road, and stately date palms came into view as the road widened. I was surprised to see a huge wrought iron gate with a television monitor aimed at a call box nearby. Stopping suddenly, I placed the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway. "Mafia," I whispered to myself. *Obsession over.*

Reaching Quito Terrace, I turned the car around and headed for Highway 111. That's when I heard an insidious little voice (*mine? ... whose?*) that said: "*Over? Ha! Just beginning!*"

Shuddering, I drove to Jim's place and found the plants watered and the house spotless.

TEN

The next afternoon, just before one, I parked in the Von's supermarket lot near the sidewalk. Every dark sedan entering the lot caused my pulse to quicken. A distant jogger running on the sidewalk toward me made me feel queasy with anticipation. I laughed when the person turned out to be a young woman.

At 1:35, a jogger rounded the corner from Quito Terrace, followed by a dark sedan, which stopped in preparation to enter the eastbound lanes. There was no light at that intersection, so the sedan had to wait for several seconds before it could get into the intersection. By that time, the object of my obsession was less than a hundred yards away from me. My heart was pounding. The stress of seeing him again both thrilled and nauseated me.

Without any plan, I slipped out of the car and stood facing him as he approached. Noticing that the sedan was trapped in the middle of the intersection, I involuntarily shouted, "Hello!"

He gazed serenely at me without a hint of recognition, then looked ahead, never varying his pace. A few paces more and he glanced back at me with a confused look on his face, but he continued with only slight hesitation. I turned my attention toward the sedan, which by now was just opposite me and nearly even with the jogger. There were two men wearing sunglasses in the front seat.

I looked back toward Quito Terrace and noticed two telephone stands on the sidewalk near the lot exit. "He's got to come back this way," I said to myself, grinning. "Let's see what he does."

I got back inside the car, locking my gaze on the sidewalk to the east.

I waited.

At 2:20 I spotted him about three blocks away, heading back. Goose bumps rippled down my arms, and I took deep breaths to calm myself. "It's now or never," I sang with an Elvis twang. Slipping out of the car, I walked to one of the telephone stands and pretended to make a call. Casually leaning against the enclosure, I watched as he appeared larger and larger in my vision. Trailing behind him in the turning lane was the dark sedan.

Just feet away, his eyes locked onto mine, and he began walking.

My left hand began to hurt, and I realized that I was fiercely squeezing the receiver. I smiled nervously, watching the approaching car warily. I could see then that it was a dark blue Oldsmobile, probably new.

"Did you ever find some good melons?" he asked with a voice that resonated sweetly in my head.

"No, not yet," I said, my voice cracking with anxiety.

"You have to know where to buy them."

He was almost even with me, and I could see that he was covered with sweat. His moderately plentiful body hair was dark brown and soft-looking; his arms and legs were well-proportioned and void of body fat. The refraction of the sunlight in his eyes made them appear to be almost golden tan. He was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

"Maybe you can show me where they are," I said as he passed by. I turned to see if he would respond, but he started to jog again. Glancing at the Oldsmobile, I saw that both men were facing me. I could feel their intense stares through the dark glasses.

Shaking uncontrollably and shattered from the stress of the experience, I hung up the receiver and leaned back against the stand. I had to cross my arms to keep from looking like a man with severe Parkinson's disease. As I searched for enough stability to walk to my car, I glanced back again and saw that the young man had stopped to say something to the men in the car. One of them got out and started walking toward me. He was dressed in jeans and a dark, loose-fitting shirt which wasn't tucked in. There was a bulge on his left side.

"Oh shit," I groaned. Unable to think of what to do next, I lamely picked up the receiver and placed a quarter in the slot. With trembling fingers, I attempted to dial Jim's number but my finger wouldn't hit the buttons I wanted. I felt utterly stupid and out of control.

"Sir?" the man said, reaching me.

I slowly turned, trying my best to appear casual.

"The jogger that just passed by. He'd like to talk to you if you don't mind."

I tried to swallow, but the lump in my throat failed to budge.

He turned and pointed toward Quito Terrace. "He just lives about a block away. I'll ride with you." He smiled, but the tone of his voice created a scary incongruity.

I considered the invitation. *Well, you got this far, so you might as well go all the way,* I thought. *Maybe you can get rid of the obsession.* "I'm parked over there." I nodded toward the rental car. Suddenly, my trembling stopped and was replaced by numbness.

The heavy gates were open, but they closed as soon as I drove through. The driveway led through what appeared to have once been a commercial date grove with towering date palms in neat rows. Beyond the palms was a two-story house with attached garage which reminded me of Jim's in its simple yet solid construction. Surrounding the grove and the house was a well-manicured, 8-foot-high ring of oleander on the outside of a

security fence of the same height. Rings of razor wire were looped around the top of the fence.

As my pleasant but menacing-looking passenger gestured for me to park in front of the garage, I realized that my numbness had given way to a moderate apprehensiveness. I'd convinced myself that I wasn't in any danger, because the jogger was obviously very interested in me. I had serious reservations about our having a fling in front of the two bodyguards, however.

The man led the way through the front door and pointed into the living room. "Have a seat. He'll be here soon." He disappeared into another room.

I sat on a very elegant leather couch and looked around the room. The interior was that of a model house: impressive but hardly homelike. The place clearly was 100% decorator-furnished.

Almost fifteen minutes had passed before the young man entered the room, obviously freshly showered and dressed in canvas shoes, chinos and a black T-shirt. His hair was combed back and still slightly wet.

He stood before me and held out his hand. "My name is Nestor. And you are?" Again I could detect a slight Latin inflection, but it was not the same as the Mexican-American accents I was used to hearing.

"Byron," I said, shaking his warm, electrifying hand.

"Byron." He nodded. "As in 'Lord Byron'. I think Byron is a noble name." He pulled a pack of gum from his pocket and unwrapped a stick, sensuously placing it inside his mouth. He chewed it slowly.

"So is Nestor." I watched his mouth move, unable to remember the last time I saw a man chew gum in such an erotic, masculine fashion.

He grinned and sat down next to me then placed his arm on the back of the couch, facing me. "I think few men would have come here under these conditions. Are you wary of me?"

"That's an understatement. I'm terrified."

He smiled warmly, assuringly, exposing a set of dimples that would rival those of the coach of the Dallas Cowboys, Jimmy Johnson. "There's nothing to be afraid of." It was then that I decided he was of European ancestry. His demeanor, accent, and manner of speaking led me to believe that he was Spanish.

"I sensed that, but then I thought maybe I shouldn't ask questions." My gaze was lured to the fingers on his right hand, which were rolling the gum wrapper into a tiny green ball.

"Maybe you shouldn't. Sometimes it's best to know as little as possible."

I rolled my eyes up. "Oh, great. Now I feel even *more* nervous."

He chuckled. "I'm really not supposed to see anyone, but my . . . companions are very understanding about my . . . my needs." He searched my eyes with a look of amusement. "There are only two types of people I'm sexually attracted to. One is a mature, voluptuous woman like Elizabeth Taylor. The other is a short, muscular man who radiates with masculinity. No pretty young women; no pretty young boys. Does that confuse you more?"

"I'm obsessed with you," I blurted. "Does that confuse you?"

He blinked as he reflected on what he'd heard. "On the contrary, it excites me." His grin faded to a look of acute lust. "It excites me no end." He placed the perfectly spherical ball made of gum wrapper on the end table.

"Then let's do something about it before the world crashes in around us. Let's jump through our window of opportunity." I was so excited that my voice cracked on the word

"opportunity."

He leaned over and kissed me with lips that tasted of mint. Tracing my lips with his finger, he slowly stood up. "Shall we?"

He pulled me up and led me to a stairway.

Upstairs, he preceded me into a large bedroom, likewise adorned in a sanitized decorator motif. It wasn't a place in which one would find soiled socks underneath the bed or toys in a box in the corner.

I sat on the edge of a large, compartmentalized water bed. My fear was gone, but my curiosity was becoming a distraction.

He stood in the middle of the room, inspecting me, shaking his head in amazement. "My gut reactions are rarely wrong. When I first saw you in the grocery store, I had to say something to you, and I knew that you'd respond. Somehow I knew." He slowly approached me. "You're one of the most exciting men I've ever seen. You're perfection."

"And you're taking the words right out of my mouth," I said, my voice quavering with both passion and an element of lingering fear.

"Please," he said breathlessly. "Enough of this civility. It's time to be wanton . . . and very uncivil. He seductively took off his T-shirt, exposing the body of a lean heavy-weight boxer. But that's where the similarity ended. His face was unscathed and handsome with eyes that seemed to penetrate into my very essence. His hair was short-styled and clean-looking; his lips, richly textured with the promise of delight.

I stood up and took off my shirt, astounded that the sight of my chest could make such a beautiful man gasp for air. With his hands frozen on his belt buckle, he watched enraptured as I took off all my clothes. Nude, I walked to him and knelt.

As I pulled his hand away from the buckle, he inhaled in a shudder, then exhaled a semi-vocal sound that eventually became a moan. I unbuckled his belt as he stepped out of his shoes, then I pulled down his trousers, exposing an engorged, moderately small penis. Slowly I stood up and took him in my arms.

"I hope my size doesn't . . ."

I silenced him with a deep, probing kiss, which prompted him to respond in kind. Still kissing, we stumbled to the bed, where he fell upon me, feasting upon my mouth, neck and ears, rising periodically to study me. I pulled him back down to kiss him again but felt frustrated that I couldn't get my tongue far enough into his throat.

He pulled back and looked lustfully at my nipples, then he slid down my torso and began lavaging my breasts with his tongue. Then it was my navel and finally my testicles. I braced myself for that special feeling one gets when a hungry mouth lovingly envelopes one's cock with a promise of deliverance. In my case it was more a promise of the transcendental rapture I'd always fantasized about.

And rapturous it was. I looked down and saw that his eyes were focused upon mine. Tears streamed down his face. Feeling the sensation of soaring, I gently cupped the face of this man who seemed to want me so badly.

I manipulated him into a sixty-nine position and gently went down on him, cocooning his small penis. Finding that I could simultaneously breathe and do all kinds of wonderful things with my tongue, I poured on the technique.

His body began to quake and he pulled away from me. "No . . . too close . . . I want it to last."

"It will," I said, self-assured, determined to have him again and again. "I want it to be natural, Nestor, and I want to

make an impression you'll never forget."

I took his cock again and swirled my tongue around and around its head. He countered by burying mine down his throat, flexing his legs until they seemed as if they would fracture. Looking down his legs, I watched them shake while his toes were curling.

He ejaculated forcefully into my mouth, and to my joyful surprise, I came spontaneously without warning. It was a gentle yet profound climax, a level of rapture I'd never before experienced. It was the type of orgasm that completely drains a prostate yet urges it to produce more. Because this prelude would never be forgotten, it would become a source of great joy, a most delightful keepsake fantasy. *Endless ecstasy*, I thought, wanting him again.

As Nestor swallowed and awaited the final drop, I did likewise. Both of us remained still and relaxed while cradling each other's recovering organs.

Minutes went by, and I was almost asleep when his cock began to stiffen again.

After his third and my second climax, we fell asleep in each other's arms, only to be awakened by a gentle knock on the door.

Slipping into a robe, he hurried to the door and cracked it open. There was an exchange of whispers, and he closed the door again. He turned and looked at me plaintively.

I sat up in bed, taking my cue. "And so it wasn't endless after all, was it?"

He looked at me quizzically.

"Time for my exit, I assume."

Nestor closed his eyes and lowered his head, which nodded slightly. Then he yawned, but I got the impression that it was feigned, that he really felt pain over my having to leave. Taking off his robe, he got into bed and watched me as I dressed.

"I'll bet it gets old sometimes, not having any privacy." I nodded toward the door as he looked at me questioningly. "They're like Secret Service agents."

He smiled wanly. "You don't have a clue, Byron. It would blow your mind."

I slipped on my shoes and looked at myself in an ornate dresser mirror. I noticed a telephone with a pad and pen nearby. "My mind's already blown." I wrote down my full name, address and telephone number in Los Angeles. Under that, I wrote Jim's name and telephone number. "I'm sitting a friend's house while he dries out in a hospital." I turned to face him. "I think he wants some sort of relationship, but I don't see how it could work. Give me a . . ."

Nestor held up his hand. "I'll never call, Byron. I can never see you again."

I felt my face slacken then distinctly saw a look of regret in Nestor's eyes.

"I'm sorry, Byron." He got out of bed and put the robe on again. "I don't mean to be blunt, but I have to be honest with you."

I studied his odd expression and saw a vast paradox which compelled me to look around the room. *Was the room bugged?* I wondered. "Well, I appreciate your honesty . . . I guess. I never thought this would be a one-afternoon shot. Guess you won't need this." I ripped the page off and stuck it inside my shirt pocket, then quietly took it out and placed it on the bed. I smiled at him and thought I saw a glimmer of a returned smile. "You can't imagine how magical this was for me. You've lifted my self-esteem to unbelievable heights."

He sighed and looked at me fondly, then regarded the paper.

Opening the door, I looked back at him. What I saw was unmistakable: I had moved him.

I felt watched as I drove down to the security gate, which had been opened to allow my exit. After I passed through, the gate shut solidly.

ELEVEN

I spent the next two afternoons parked in the supermarket lot, watching for Nestor. But he never ran. On the third afternoon, I waited until four, then I panicked. I drove to the security gate and found it open.

Reluctantly driving through, I became so nervous that I had to pull over to gather my wits about me. "What in the fuck are you doing?" I felt dizzy, and wondered if I was hyperventilating. "Finding out," I finally answered myself. "Doing what I have to do."

I drove on and found two luxury cars parked in front of the house. The front door was open.

After parking near the same spot I had used the time before, I walked to the entrance. I heard a female voice and moved in that direction.

Standing in the middle of the living room were two fashionably dressed women. They stared at me in alarm and stopped talking.

"Can I help you?" one of the women eventually said.

"I'm looking for Nestor," I said, feeling as if I had entered a dream world. Nothing made any sense.

The woman looked nervously at a nearby telephone.

"Who?"

"Nestor. I visited him here a few days ago."

She glanced at the other woman out of the corner of her eye. "I'm sorry, sir, but this house has been vacant for the past two months. The owners live in Madrid." She inched toward the telephone, panic spelled in her eyes.

I nodded toward the telephone. "You have nothing to fear from me. Was the house rented to someone recently?"

"Why, no," she said, less coiled. She glanced at the other woman. "I'm showing it for a seasonal rental now."

"And there's no way it could have been rented without your knowledge?"

She shook her head, her eyes locked on me warily.

"Lady, I was in this house four days ago." I turned to depart, leaving them in a buzz of relieved whispers.

TWELVE

I sat in the lobby of the hospital, waiting for Jim's discharge. His receptionist had called me the night before and asked if I would pick him up. Still strung out over Nestor, yet mature enough to realize that our coupling was probably just a one-time display of fireworks, I convinced myself that the most responsible thing to do would be to greet Jim and be the friend he so desperately needed. And when the time was right, I would explain to him that friendship would be the extent of our relationship—that I just didn't have it in me to commit to another "long haul" relationship.

Then I saw Jim in a wheelchair. He was being pushed in my direction by a burly orderly with an indifferent, faraway expression. Jim's expression was another matter: he was obviously sober, but he looked very ill.

I walked out of the hospital ahead of the wheelchair and grinned at him as he was pushed through the doors.

He greeted me with a wan smile.

"You look good," I lied.

"Bullshit," he grumbled, getting out of the wheelchair.

"Good luck, sir," said the orderly, surprising both of us with his incongruous gentleness.

As the orderly went back inside with the wheelchair, Jim smiled more sincerely.

"It's really good to see you again," he said.

I led him to the Accord. "How was it?"

"Hell . . . pure hell."

I glanced at him then opened the passenger side for him.

"So what did they find?"

He got inside as I walked around to the driver's side. As I sat down, I could see that he was grimacing as if in pain.

"You should have used my car," he said, looking suddenly pale. "This one's too small."

"So what did they find?" I probed.

He began to sob.

I drove to his house with my hand on his leg for comfort. By the time we'd reached the security gate, he'd stopped crying and was staring straight ahead.

Inside, he dropped his small bag in the foyer and went into the kitchen. He flung open the freezer and stared at the frozen gin and vodka.

"That bad, huh?" I said sadly, wondering if he could fight off the craving.

"Bad," he mumbled, slamming the door. "But not that bad."

Relieved, I followed him into the living room and watched as he stared out the sliding glass door at the verdant golf course.

"My liver failed the day I checked in. I have cirrhosis."

Unsure of how serious the disease is, I sat down on the couch and awaited more information from him.

He turned and sat down in a chair. "With the right diet and total abstinence of alcohol, cirrhosis patients can live a normal life." He looked at me warmly. "I really appreciate your picking me up."

I held up my hands and frowned. "Wait . . . wait a minute. Didn't I just hear some good news? Am I missing something here?"

He looked down. "I have to go in for more tests. A biopsy of . . ."

"Biopsy?"

"Of my liver."

"They think you have liver cancer?"

"I'm not responding that well to cirrhosis treatment."

"Can they treat the cancer . . . catch it in time?"

He sighed and appeared suddenly uncomfortable. "Primary liver cancer is rare. Most forms are what we call 'metastases.' In other words, the malignancy starts elsewhere and spreads to the liver."

I was speechless.

Tears welled in his eyes again. "If I do have cancer in the gastrointestinal system and it's spread to the liver, then it's probably too late."

I felt myself wanting to hold on to him. "You don't know that yet."

"But I *feel* it, Byron. I feel it eating away at me right now."

"When do you have the biopsy?" I asked at length.

"Next week. Monday." He surveyed his home, and I wondered if he was considering what would be done with all his valuable artwork, the rare cactus, the car, the practice, if he were to die. "Byron . . ."

"Yes?" I anticipated that he wanted me to hold him, so I moved forward.

"I'd like to be alone for a few days."

I felt as if I'd been slapped.

He looked at me lovingly. "Please understand why, because I'll need you desperately after the biopsy . . . regardless of the outcome."

I was surprised, but I understood. "Okay."

"Thanks." He reached for my hand and patted it.

Actually, I felt relieved by the opportunity to escape from sharing his agony of waiting and wondering.

I got up and kissed him lightly on the mouth, making him cry again. Unable to stand seeing him cry, I abruptly turned and walked into the guest bedroom to retrieve my bag. As I came back out, I saw that he'd walked out on his back patio and was staring up at the sky.

By the time I reached the house in Hollywood Hills, my depression had returned with a vengeance. All I wanted was a couple of stiff martinis, a sandwich and my cozy bed.

Then I noticed there were messages on my answering machine, and the news was good enough to implement a substantial change in mood. My Mercedes was ready to pick up, and my realtor had a formal offer on the house. But the best news was that a small but growing advertising agency was interested in talking to me about a job.

Later that night I went to bed a little tipsy. In the forefront of my mind was the excitement over selling the house and finding a job, but buried deep in some dark recess of my brain were my concern about Jim and the incessant longing for Nestor.

THIRTEEN

After turning in the Accord, I picked up my precious Mercedes and drove to my realtor's offices to sign the necessary papers for the sale of the house. That done, I was confronted with the problem of how to get out of the house within the thirty-day escrow period. The buyers were anxious to get in, and I definitely had to get out. But the realtor had a great suggestion: "Just have a mover come in to pack everything up and keep it all in storage until you decide on what you want to do."

At 2:50 p.m., I arrived at an office building in the Wilshire district to keep my job interview appointment at the small advertising agency. The yuppie "director of human resources" made me wait for forty-five minutes, then he insulted me by offering me an entry level copywriter position with a practically worthless hospitalization plan. I pretended to accept the offer and was introduced to the partners: all thirtysomething with MBA diplomas on their walls. But the "bullpen" personnel consisted only of seniors, no doubt highly experienced advertising pros who were axed by their previous company because of their age.

My eyes locked on the sad gaze of a rather attractive graphics artist. He appeared to be in his early sixties. I looked around at all the other faces and saw no enthusiasm, only a look of resignation—a look that clearly stated that at least they had a job.

"You guys are stupid, you know that?" I mumbled involuntarily.

"Beg pardon?" said the tall lanky young man, turning to face me.

"If the partnership offered a decent hospitalization plan and paid these people what they're worth, no other agency could touch you."

He recoiled in complete surprise.

"And I'll tell you something else, Junior," I said so that all in the office could hear me. "Had you treated me with the respect I've earned by being in this goddamn business since before you reached puberty, I could have landed you at least three new accounts!" I glanced at the good-looking artist, who was smiling

at me.

I saw that all the partners were standing in their doorways, fearfully watching me.

"It was all a big joke, son," I laughingly said to the personnel man. "I'm not a fucking copywriter! I'm a creative director! I accepted the job just so I could see the big shot MBA idiots with the plush offices overlooking Wilshire Boulevard!"

The terror in his eyes was delicious. "Sir, you're disrupting our office. I'm afraid that I'll have to ask you to . . ."

"Leave?" I began to guffaw. "Hell, son, I can't wait to get out of here. I'm a goddamn millionaire! Fuck, I don't need a job!"

I walked through the entrance doors into a quiet hallway. Finding my way to the elevators, I began to wonder if I was losing my sanity. I'd never created a scene like that before.

A door opened and I got on the empty elevator. By the time it had descended to the ground floor, I had reconciled myself to the outburst. I was angry over the way seniors were being treated. I was livid over the treatment of fat people, people of color, gay people and homeless people. I was angry at Jim for waiting too late to stop drinking. But most of all, I was incensed at Nestor for making me unfit for anyone else.

Outside, I got into the soothing confines of my Mercedes and drove to the only place that offered peace: my home. En route, I pondered how I would get by without it.

With a double Scotch only a couple of strokes away, I swam in the pool until the sun went down. Having called three movers and made arrangements for them to come by the following day for some estimates, I found myself with nothing to do but learn to live with myself. I was completely convinced that continued searching for love would always lead me to more men like Jim, perhaps another Nestor . . . or worse.

I pulled myself out of the pool and sat on the edge sipping the Scotch. A scenario came to me, and it didn't look pretty. It was ten years hence, and I was a raving, boisterous alcoholic who'd been banned from every gay bar in town. Feeling chilled, I grabbed my robe and went inside.

Staring at the telephone, I wondered when and if Jim would ever call again. I even allowed myself to imagine how I would feel if Nestor called. Strangely, the thought comforted me in spite of the obvious fact that he was some unsavory character who needed a great deal of protection.

And then it occurred to me that I had ceased talking to Taylor. I expected a pang of guilt, but none came. I took another sip from my drink and considered my feelings. "Taylor?" I looked deep within myself, listening intently.

He was gone. Perhaps to another incarnation? Was he ever here at all?

I was alone. I was so alone that I didn't care.

FOURTEEN

Jim finally called me six days later. Good news, he'd said. There was no malignancy, and he wanted to see me again the following weekend.

I drove down to Palm Desert on the following Friday morning and was pleasantly surprised to see a much healthier-looking Jim answering the door on the first ring. Actually, he was almost like a different person. He seemed sedate and more refined. There was a rosy glow in his cheeks, and he wore nothing but an apron with the inscription: *This is so I won't burn my dick!*

Kissing me lightly on the lips, he took my bag and placed it on the foyer floor, then he led me into the kitchen, where he was preparing breakfast.

"Breakfast?" I gasped. "You?"

He chuckled. "I baked some bran muffins. Hope they don't kill us. Sit down and I'll pour you some coffee."

"They smell great," I said, sitting down and sniffing the air. "Is that cinnamon?"

"This great cinnamon honey I found, plus pecans, blueberries . . . and even a banana." He poured two cups of coffee. "Decaf. Hope you don't mind."

"I already had two cups of caffeinated coffee earlier. That's okay." I looked at him in amazement. "Boy, you've really turned it all around, haven't you?"

"Had to," he said briskly, taking the coffee pot back to the stove. "They say that I can lead a normal life with the right diet—no fats or salt—but that I'll probably die if I start drinking again." He looked into the oven. "Another five minutes." Then he sat down opposite me. "I'm not completely out of the woods, you know."

"Oh?" I took a sip of coffee and almost fell for him all over again.

"The alcohol damaged my heart muscles and my G.I. tract is susceptible to bleeding still. It'll take some time." His eyes became almost misty. "I missed you."

"I was beginning to wonder. It took a while for you to call."

"I had to get over the hump, Byron. I had to get my mind settled." He reached for my hand and squeezed it. "That process took a while, plus I wasn't good company while I was waiting for the biopsy results."

"It's okay, Jim," I soothed. "I understand. I'm here, aren't I?"

He sat back and smiled. "Yes . . . you're here." Then his eyes glossed over, and he got up to check the muffins again. "You're going to like these," he said, his voice cracking.

After breakfast, I led him into his bedroom and lay with him as he held me tightly. Several minutes of silent clinging passed before his trembling lips invited mine. We kissed slowly and tenderly, the passion rising easily, calmly. Oddly, the pace of our lovemaking reminded me of Elsa's procession into the cathedral in act two of Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*. The music is richly romantic; the crescendo grows slowly until it becomes blissful. And so it was with us as we shared a romantic crescendo, a sweet prelude.

His tongue reached into my mouth, searching the crevasse between my lips and upper gums. Writhing across my teeth, it probed the roof of my mouth and seemed to reach for my tonsils and uvula. His breath became hot; his face broke out in a sweat.

I closed my eyes and felt as if I were free-falling, clinging to him, silently tumbling through clouds. When I opened my eyes, his cock was over me, a pearl of precum forming at the slit. His balls brushed my eyebrows.

And then I felt my cock being enfolded inside the hot humidity of his mouth. His lips were buried in my pubic hair; his tongue curled underneath my testicles, as if trying to pull them inside with my cock.

I tasted the drop of his nectar then sucked both his balls into my mouth, giving myself an unobstructed view of the clean crack of his ass.

Closing my eyes again, I felt like a blank sheet of paper, riding upon thermal currents. I sensed complete oblivion, allowed nothing distracting to surface in my mind. I wanted him this way, needed to know just how much magic there was in the room with us.

I took his cock inside my mouth and cradled it there, somehow maintaining a pathway for breathing. He was doing the same, and I realized that we were in a delicious zone of sub-

ecstasy.

Unable to sense passing time, I had no idea how long we stayed on that plateau. And though I didn't want the "procession" to stop, I still welcomed his escalating tongue motion as it began to send shivers up my spine. I did likewise and felt his body quake in response. Matching his suddenly urgency, I felt his body twitch as if a bolt of electricity had shot through it. We rolled back and forth over the bed until we came to rest with me on top.

As my load gushed down his throat, he pulled his cock out of my mouth, denying me his. When his semen sprayed over his abdomen, I lunged for it, but he held me back. Afterward, I reflected on the denial of his fluid and wondered if his medication was affecting the composition of this semen.

That night we sat nude on the lush Persian rug. We were eating an elegant, candle-lit dinner consisting of stir-fried tiger shrimp and vegetables on a bed of lentil pilaf. I'd bought a bottle of dealcoholized rosé wine at the local up-scale market and fretted over serving it to him. *Would it make him long for alcohol?* I wondered.

But it was I who had the problem with the absence of alcohol. I knew that a relationship with him would require my abstinence, too. The thought dispirited me, but I knew that my drinking around him could drive him back to alcohol. I found revolting the prospect of sneaking an occasional drink of vodka while he was away.

"Look, the swan," he said, pointing out the back toward the lake. "Something must have disturbed them. I've never seen them fly at night."

I looked around and saw the pair taking flight against the illumination of a half moon. It struck home the reality of what I needed so very much: a mate to take the place of Taylor. It would have to be someone I could live and sleep with. It would have to be an open yet deeply loving relationship with no secrets. There would have to be whatever sacrifices were necessary.

"Did you know that swan mate for life?" he asked, finishing up his meal with great relish and chasing it with a gulp of the "castrated" wine.

"That's the way it should be," I said, realizing that he was watching me while licking the rim of his glass.

"You look pensive. Something you want to tell me?" He lay the glass down and leaned back against one of the elegant chairs. His cock was hard.

"I sold my house."

His expression changed, but I couldn't decipher in what way it had.

"I agreed to a thirty-day escrow, so I'm having a mover come in and pack me into storage."

He seemed confused. "Why?"

"Because I couldn't afford to keep it up. That, plus the taxes would have eaten me up alive."

"But surely a man with your experience . . ."

"I interviewed for a job the other day. They wanted me for a copywriter's slot. Entry-level wages. I'm too old to get back into the big time in this economy."

He seemed uncomfortable. "Where will you go?"

Where will you go? It was as if he'd kicked me in the groin. "I have no idea," I said coolly, angrily.

And then it finally occurred to him. "Here? You were thinking of moving in here?"

"Don't be silly," I said, even angrier.

"Isn't that a little too fast?" he persisted.

"I'm missing something here, obviously." I stood up and walked to the back door, looking out at the moon.

"We've both been terribly hurt. I just thought that we shouldn't jump into anything until we were perfectly certain."

I turned around. "I believe you said something like, 'Don't leave me . . . Help me through it.' Something like that."

"And you did."

"I *did*?" I chuckled. "You think you're *through* it?"

"Byron, Byron . . . come sit next to me." He smiled at me lovingly. "Please."

I walked to him and sat in the chair.

"You're the most important person in my life right now. You have no idea what you've done for me. Hell, I think I love you right now!"

The words tugged at me, soothed me.

"And I'll bet that you love me, too." He looked up at me.

"Do you?"

"I really don't know how I feel, Jim." I sighed. "Perhaps I'm very naive, but I thought that your asking me to stick around and my agreeing to do so meant that we were somehow committing to each other."

"Yes, committing. Committing to a beautiful, caring, giving friendship that will easily turn into a relationship . . . in time."

"In time," I repeated, feeling ambivalent. "So where do I go in thirty days?"

"Rent an apartment in Laguna Beach or some other place on the coast, and we'll be together on the weekends and holidays. We can take fantastic trips together. It'll give us a diversion . . . some space. And I can concentrate on getting my practice back into full swing again."

I considered what he was saying and, after some hesitation, reluctantly nodded my head. I realized that it might be a good idea.

FIFTEEN

Jim and I had gotten into a pleasant routine of meeting on weekends. The sex continued to be fulfilling in spite of the fact that we'd reached a stagnant plateau. Eventually I had to visualize making love with Nestor in order to have a climax, but it didn't bother me. After all, even with Taylor, sex had eventually evolved into something that really wasn't sex at all. Perhaps it was that certain element that separated "having sex" from "making love." Taylor had once said it so well: "When I'm with you, there is a lofty exchange of essence: *making love*. At the baths, I get my rocks off: *having sex*. Do you see the difference, dear boy?"

As I stood on the terrace in the nude, watching my last sunset from the house I'd lived in so long, I thought of the special way Taylor had said that. It made me smile, but I felt a sense of mourning over giving up the house and became guilt-ridden. *You're a little late for second thoughts*, I reminded myself. *The movers are coming tomorrow*.

A small shiny object at the corner of the terrace caught my eye, and I walked toward it, thinking that it might be a piece of glass. Squatting, I picked up a balled gum wrapper and instinctively looked down onto the heavily wooded hillside below. Nestor quietly stepped from the shadows into the waning light and placed his index finger in front of his lips. The sight of him stunned me, but I remained silent as he'd gestured. I slowly stood up and looked around. Knowing that the terrace couldn't be seen from any other house in the area, I wondered why he was so cautious.

He pointed first at himself then at me. Smiling broadly, he made a swimming gesture. Trying to appear casual, I walked away from the railing and entered the tepid pool. It had not warmed sufficiently, and my teeth began to chatter.

Without a sound, he had disrobed and climbed up on the terrace. He stood against a backdrop of a magenta sky, looking

down at me with a smoldering expression. Easing himself into the pool, he swam to me and kissed me deeply.

In spite of my uncontrollable shaking, I matched the intensity of his kiss. Without thinking, I opened my mouth to say something, but he placed a hand over my lips.

He faintly whispered in my ear: "They've bugged your house. Perhaps out here, too. I'll explain later."

I nodded and kissed him again then watched as he slipped under the surface and went down on me. As my cock became turgid, my body temperature seemed to rise. He surfaced and pushed my head under water, urging me to go down on him. I did and found his cock bone-hard and warm.

He eased back into a floating position, better offering his cock and clinging balls, all three of which I hungrily took inside my mouth. I held his crotch above water as he lazily trod with his hands. Straining to watch me with almost unbelieving eyes, his legs began to tremble, warning me that he was getting close to coming.

I pulled off and released him, reaching behind me for the ladder and offering myself to him. He looked at my cock as if it were some kind of rare delicacy, then took it gently and lovingly inside his mouth. It was as if he had so completely taken control of me that he could command my glands to secrete at will. A climax felt perpetually imminent in my groin.

I studied his round, almost cherubic face and wondered how such an innocent-looking, clean-cut man could be in such serious trouble. Since he had surely eluded his "bodyguards" and was probably taking a great risk in seeing me, it was obvious that our obsession was mutual. I considered that we were perhaps "star-crossed" in some way and headed for doom... but I just didn't care.

His eyes burned into me, pushing all the right "buttons," triggering turbulence inside my groin. He reached for my mouth in order to muffle it, I'm sure, but his fat middle finger slipped inside my mouth instead. Matching him stroke for stroke, wishing his finger could somehow trade places with his penis, I arched my back and served him my nectar.

Before I'd finished spasming, he pushed me upward, causing me to sit on the top rung of the ladder. His biceps bulging, he pulled himself up and straddled my mouth, fucking it with movements of seal-like liquidity. He crushed his groin into my face and locked his strong fingers behind my head, then he throbbed again and again, stirring me with the clean taste of the semen of a man in perfect nutritional balance.

He squatted and kissed me, sending his tongue after remnants of his own jissom. Pulling back, he kissed my ear and whispered, "I have to go, but I won't leave you. God willing, I have to have you."

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I whispered back.

"I know... I know everything." He kissed me again on the lips. "I'll always be there. You won't see me, but I will. Just trust me."

And he was gone.

Hearing faint rustling from below, I walked to the railing and looked down. He was nowhere in sight.

Knowing that my every move was being monitored, it was virtually impossible to sleep. My mind searched for answers, finding only a quagmire of confusion. *Who is he?* I wondered. *Who are the bodyguards? Why would they allow him to have sex with me if he was under arrest? How did they know about me? How much did they know about me?*

Having slept less than two hours, I was awakened by the sound of an approaching moving van.

While three workers efficiently packed my belongings, I showered, shaved and dressed. Then I packed one large bag with everything I needed for indefinitely living out of a suitcase. My valuables had already been placed inside a briefcase awaiting transfer to a safety deposit box.

For the next four hours, I watched as the evidence of Taylor's and my existence was either dismantled or packed in a multitude of boxes and stacked in the center of the living room. I fretted over the safety of the valuable paintings I'd not sold. The walls were bare, the kitchen sterile and incapable of producing even a sandwich. Garbage bags held the contents of my refrigerator and the household items which movers are forbidden to pack. The bedrooms were just rooms now, void of the signs of habitation. There were no echoes of laughter or throes of passion.

They placed all the boxes and furniture into huge storage containers and loaded them onto the van. After I signed the release, they drove away, leaving me standing in the center of a house without a soul.

SIXTEEN

Having checked into a motel in Palm Springs instead of Laguna Beach, I'd called Jim to tell him of my change in plans. I informed him that I didn't see any reason to isolate myself in Laguna Beach and preferred staying in Palm Springs. He seemed very agitated and told me he would have to see patients on Friday, that I would have to come over on Saturday instead. I was apprehensive, therefore, when I drove to his house that Saturday morning.

Upon my arrival, he abruptly insisted we go into the bedroom to have sex. Although I really wasn't in the mood, I figured that he was horny and needed to have a release. Even more unusual was the fact that he couldn't reach erection. He seemed angry.

An icy feeling swept over me as I considered the possibility that he'd started drinking again. I tried to kiss him to find out, but he turned away, explaining that he'd not brushed his teeth yet. Giving the excuse that he felt a cold coming on, he stayed in bed for a nap but wouldn't allow me to take his temperature.

Instead of arguing, I closed his bedroom door and busied myself with doing his laundry in the utility room off the garage. I glanced inside the garage and found a different mix of motorcycle parts. That's when I noticed the dented fender and a broken headlight on the Lexus.

I went into the kitchen and looked inside the freezer. The last time I was there, it had contained only frozen meats and prepared foods. This time there was also a half-empty bottle of vodka. And then I was sure that Jim's health problems went far beyond a common cold.

Leaving the house to take an extended walk around the entire golf course, I longed to see Nestor again and wondered where he was. It didn't take long to find out where his two "bodyguards" were, however. They were parked in the same dark sedan about two blocks from Jim's house. Of course, their presence confirmed my gut feeling that Nestor was safe and still on the loose. Moreover, they certainly had no idea that I was aware of them, especially if they didn't know that Nestor had visited my house. It was obvious that they were watching me because they assumed Nestor would try to reach me, and there was no doubt in my mind that Jim's house had been bugged.

Having walked over a mile, I glanced at a window and saw the reflection of the dark sedan discreetly following me. I began to feel an odd sort of amusement over the ludicrous turn my life had taken. I had several hundred thousand dollars in the bank and a doubtful future with a dying alcoholic and a Latin lover on

the run. *Go figure!*

I came upon a park bench under a pepper tree and sat looking at ducks swimming in a pond. I watched as four older women pulled up to a tee in two golf carts. They all wore brightly colored, stylish clothing and used what appeared to be top-of-the-line golf equipment. All four drives sailed down the middle of the fairway, and I applauded, causing the last driver to bow. All four women laughed and waved.

Spotting the dark sedan out of the corner of my eye, I abruptly stood up and headed back toward Jim's house, presenting a quandary for the two men. They quickly did a U-turn and turned down a side street.

As I pulled out the key to Jim's front door, I saw the three tiny balls neatly lined up perpendicular to the door. Hearing a car slowly passing behind me, I pretended to drop the key and picked up the tightly rolled chewing gum wrappers.

Inside, I walked to the guest bathroom and opened up one of the wrappers. There was tiny writing on it and it had the number "2" written at the top. The next wrapper had the same size writing and the number "1" at the top. A three-part epistle, I thought, impressed with Nestor's cleverness and his ability to elude his trackers.

The message read:

"If they catch you with these, they'll kill you, so read and flush quickly. If you want a little dangerous excitement in your life, go topless on the back patio. If not, wear a shirt. I was arrested for money laundering and agreed to a plea bargain: charges dropped and witness protection program in return for my testimony against a cartel-connected bad guy. Bad decision. Mr. Cartel is super-connected to dirty DEA agents in Panama and Nicaragua. Worse, there isn't a witness protection program for guys like me, just a bullet after I testify. Lose—lose, get it? My aces in the hole: 1. I'm one smart and mean motherfucker, and 2. I got you (?)"

Shaking violently, I dropped the papers into the commode and quickly flushed it. I staggered to the door and slid down it until I was sitting on the floor. "Oh my God," I whispered, terrified.

Finding my composure, I walked around to Jim's room and looked in on him. He was still asleep. I went into the kitchen to cook dinner and stopped suddenly when I saw the empty vodka bottle in the garbage.

I walked back into the living room and stared through the back sliding door at the patio. Approaching the glass, I gazed across the lake and looked for Nestor.

Seeing no one, I went through the dining room and out onto the side patio. I peered over the wall and saw the occupied dark sedan.

So what happens if they think I know something? I wondered. Even a little bit of knowledge could get me killed. How long will they follow me? I heard Jim break out into some nonsensical song.

I returned to the living room and stood just inside, scanning the windows of the other houses surrounding the lake and greens. "I got you," the note had said. *I got you. I want you. I need you.* And before I realized what I was doing, I was standing bare-chested in the center of the patio.

SEVENTEEN

Just before five in the morning, I was awakened in the guest bedroom with a swaying motion, followed by a deep, low rumble. Then the house began to shake violently. Jumping out of bed, I staggered to the doorway and braced myself under it. I could hear the breaking of glass, the creaking of the house, the distant trumpeting of swan taking flight.

"DAVID!!" came a scream from Jim's bedroom.

I tried the light switch, but the electricity was off, so I knew that it was a serious quake. It was by far the strongest and longest lasting earthquake I'd ever experienced, and I considered that it might have been the "big one."

Then it was over, and there was an eerie symphony of wailing sirens and urgent beeps from tripped alarms all over the area. I quickly put on shorts and shoes and carefully made my way through the darkness to Jim's bedroom. I found him heaving over the commode. He looked up at me, gasping.

"Candles . . . flashlight . . . first drawer going into the kitchen," he stammered.

I groped my way into the kitchen and pulled out two candles, matches and the flashlight. Taking the candles to Jim, I turned the flashlight on his face and saw that his skin had turned yellow. "Oh my God," I groaned.

Grabbing his bedside telephone, I was relieved to hear a dial tone and dialed 9-1-1.

"What are you doing?" he asked, still holding on to the commode.

"You're yellow. You have to go to a hospital." I looked at the empty vodka bottle peeking out from under his bed. I wondered how many bottles he had stashed.

"No!"

"Yes, goddamnit!" I roared, silencing him.

He began to sob.

"What is your emergency?" asked a man.

I calmly told the dispatcher that it appeared to be a heart attack due to the earthquake. I doubted that they would have even responded to a non-earthquake related emergency, especially an alcoholic's liver failure.

I left a lit candle in Jim's bathroom then placed another in the kitchen. Walking out the front door, I inspected my car with the flashlight and saw that nothing had fallen on it. The sun was beginning to rise in the east, and I began to make out the forms of the other residents milling about outside their homes. I looked down the street and saw a smaller dark sedan parked in the same spot as the one before. A peculiar half-light revealed that two men were sitting inside. I reasoned that the two men from yesterday had probably been relieved by two others.

Shuddering, I rushed back inside and inspected the interior of Jim's house. There was a huge crack down one wall in the living room and broken glass strewn over the kitchen floor. Paintings and potted plants had fallen to the floor and a small section of the pencil cactus had broken. I looked closely at the sliding door glass to see if there were cracks. There were none, but the door was difficult to open. Outside on the patio, an ashtray had fallen from a metal and glass table and broken.

I looked out over the golf course and saw a lone figure standing on the other side of the lake. Somehow I knew it was Nestor, and I wondered how my mind could process such a combination of awesome and bizarre events. Miles behind him, a swath of sunlight swept the foothills at the base of towering Mount Gorgonio, illuminating gathering clouds of dust as rock slide after rock slide tumbled into canyons and down steep slopes onto the primeval alluvial fans. I waved at him and felt my spirit soar as he waved back.

A different-sounding siren broke through the cacophony outside and got louder. Realizing that it was the ambulance, I quickly ran to the front and opened the door. Two life-support paramedics rushed inside and followed me into the bedroom.

Awakened by the touch of one of the paramedics, Jim flailed at him. "Who in the hell are you?"

Both paramedics backed off and stared at him.

"I thought this was a heart attack," said one of the men, looking sternly at me.

"I didn't make the call," I lied. "Some neighbor across the street did. I just got here. Lot of people hurt?"

Jim frowned at me as if unable to comprehend what I was saying.

"Not that many," answered the stern one. "Odd for an earthquake that size."

"It's liver failure," I continued, nodding at Jim. "He could die."

Jim's frown changed to a look of fear as he realized I was probably correct.

The two men looked at each other as one of them attached a sphygmomanometer cuff to Jim's arm. The other looked into the bathroom and pointed. Following his direction, I saw a pool of partially coagulated blood on the bathroom floor.

The man taking Jim's blood pressure mumbled, "Ninety-two and dropping. Internal bleeding."

The other paramedic quickly set up an I.V. on Jim's left arm so that he could receive saline solution.

In what seemed like seconds, they had him on a gurney. One man pressed saline into Jim's vein as the other pushed him out to the ambulance.

Standing in the doorway, I watched as Jim winked at me just before he disappeared inside the ambulance. His face was ashen. Strangely, I felt almost indifferent. Sure, I cared about him, but I just wanted to get out of his life. I didn't want to know the outcome.

As more sunlight filled the house, I quickly swept up the glass on the kitchen floor and piled it into a corner. Next I found a mop and went into Jim's bathroom to clean up the blood. Wringing the mop out by hand in the bathtub, I noticed that there were splatters of blood on the side of the toilet bowl. I got on my hands and knees and cleaned it off with facial tissues. When I looked around the tile floor to see if I missed a spot, I saw shoes at the bathroom entrance.

The expectant smile on my face must have contorted into a grotesque scowl as I looked up into the stoic expression of a man in a dark blue windbreaker. "Who are you?" I asked lamely, slowly getting to my feet. Then I noticed that he was holding what appeared to be a very large, semiautomatic pistol.

He abruptly turned and walked away from me. I followed, still holding the mop. He cautiously went from room to room, the pistol aimed forward with two hands.

"Are you a cop?" I asked, my voice cracking in fear.

He continued to ignore me and strode into the guest bedroom near the patio doors. I looked at where I'd seen Nestor, but he was no longer there.

When the man came out of the bedroom, he saw the mop handle and slightly lifted his pistol, causing me to drop the mop and raise my hands. "Jesus! Easy!" I yelled.

Expressionless, he placed the pistol inside a shoulder holster and left the house, closing the door behind him.

With rattled nerves, I sat on the living room couch and tried to compose myself. My gaze swept the walls and any light fixtures which could hide microphones.

Hearing a scraping noise from the side patio, I walked into the dining room just as Nestor was halfway over the kitchen patio wall. Suddenly there came the roar of an approaching motorcycle, and I held up my hand to warn Nestor.

The front door burst open, and I caught a glimpse of a familiar face as a man ran into Jim's bedroom. "Jimbo!" he yelled.

Nestor looked at me in surprise and rolled his eyes up. He waved, placed a finger to his lips and disappeared behind the

fence.

"Where is he?"

I turned to see David, the man to whom Jim had introduced me that night in the bar.

"I saw an ambulance leaving the complex. Was he hurt?" He looked around wildly.

"No, he turned yellow. I had an ambulance take him to the hospital. He's drinking again," I said, wishing he would leave so I could see Nestor. "They probably took him to the hospital in Rancho Mirage."

"Eisenhower." He turned pale and sat on a chair. "Yellow? Oh my God."

"Look, uh . . . I have to lock up the place and leave. Why don't you go there, so I can . . ."

"I live here, pal," he said with a look of hostility. Then he smiled at my obviously blank expression. "He didn't tell you?"

I shrugged. "Tell me what?"

"Hell, all of the Coachella Valley knows except you. I'm 'Weekday' and you're 'Weekend'. One lover wasn't enough for him."

I felt as if my brain had overloaded. "You live here? During the week?"

"Except when he was drying out this last time . . ."

"Last time?"

"He kicked me out for the umpteenth time last week, but he always takes me back." He seemed to try to gauge my reaction. "He didn't want to tell you at first, because he thought it would scare you off, but I thought you knew by now." He smiled wickedly, seeming to relish my look of shock. "Jim can't sleep alone. He just . . . can't. And since I have this part-time job taking care of an elderly billionaire on weekends, he recruited you as a . . . what would you call it . . . surrogate lover?"

I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

"I'm number one and you're number two."

I felt enraged and relieved at the same time. "A moot point now."

"How so?"

"Jim's dying." I said it without any emotion, hoping it would hurt him like he'd tried to hurt me. "He threw up about two pints of blood, and his blood pressure was dropping when they took him away. He's bleeding internally."

His eyes widened, and he ran outside to his motorcycle.

As David started the Harley and sped off, I locked the front door and walked out on the side patio. Momentarily, Nestor's face appeared again, and he climbed over the wall. We tenderly embraced each other, and both of us broke out in tears. We held one another tightly, as if we'd not seen each other in years.

"You have no idea how happy your bare chest made me feel," he said.

Amazed at his lapse of caution, I placed my hand over his mouth.

He chuckled. "It's okay now . . . at least for a few minutes. I was waiting inside an unoccupied house I broke into across the lake, just hoping for a little diversion." He held out his arms. "I certainly didn't expect chaos of this magnitude!"

"But a man was just here. He carried a gun." I turned around and looked into the house. "The bugs."

"He was looking for me. They think I might still be around, waiting to make contact with you. Hell, they're looking everywhere for me. They have everyone on this, it seems."

He led me inside the house. "The bugs transmit only a few hundred yards, and the Feds are gone. I don't think they'll come back. I saw them place a homing device on your car to keep

track of you—just in case. They probably have someone watching that motel you're staying in in Palm Springs."

I could only shake my head. "You know *everything*."

He smiled. "Do you have anything to eat? I'm starved."

I kissed him and led him into the kitchen, where I gestured for him to sit down at the small table.

Opening the dark refrigerator, I pulled out a half-gallon of milk and reached for a box of cereal. "Since we don't have electricity, this'll have to do."

"I don't eat eggs anyway. Cereal's fine."

I served us both cereal, to which we added sliced bananas from a fruit bowl on the table.

"Do you have any idea what you're getting yourself into?" he asked softly.

"No," I said, chewing a mouthful of cereal thoughtfully, then swallowing. "But then, my life hasn't been too exciting lately."

"So who is this guy they carted out in an ambulance, the ear, nose and throat specialist?"

"Jesus, is there anything you don't know?" I was amazed.

"Probably not."

I absently stirred the cereal. "He's not a lover," I said emphatically.

"I overheard what you and the guy on the hog had to say to each other." He looked down into his bowl of cereal. "Were you in love with the doctor?"

"I've only loved two men in my life: my lover, Taylor, who died last December . . . and, God help me . . . you."

He studied me. "I fell in love with you the first time I saw you in that grocery store."

"Fatal attraction," I offered, feeling a chill as I said it.

"Perhaps," he almost whispered as a look of concern crossed his face. "When I got away from them, I could have left them behind in a cloud of dust. I've been in this covert racket for a few years, and I'm pretty good at it." He hesitated, staring at me in awe. "But I couldn't leave you. Even if it placed your life in jeopardy . . . I just couldn't."

"How much can you tell me?"

"Everything." He reached for my hand. "Even after I tell you, I'll understand if you decide to stay on the sane side of the line."

"I won't."

"Wait until you hear."

"Nestor . . ." Our eyes locked together in rapt attention.

"I'm not on the sane side of the line, nor do I want to be. I have lots of money with nothing to look forward to. I'll do anything to stay with you, regardless how rough or dangerous it gets."

Nestor pushed the bowl aside and walked out the front door. He looked up and down the street then came back and sat down. "Would you go with me to Venezuela?"

"Venezuela?" I'd always wanted to go there to see Angel Falls. "Sure."

"It won't be easy."

"I have money."

"Money won't always get you where you want to go." He leaned back in his chair, looking at me as if I were some prize he'd just won. "Sometimes we'll have to climb mountains or hack our way through jungles or disguise ourselves and travel on a bus for days and days. We might have to swim across rivers and . . ."

"I would swim the entire way to Venezuela for you," I said, probably grinning like a love-sick teen.

"You and me," he said, looking at me with obvious intentions of taking me to bed, "swimming to Venezuela. What a pair. What a crazy pair."

In the large stall of the guest bathroom, we showered together leisurely, sensuously. We kissed easily, lovingly. Thoughts of earthquakes, DEA agents and Jim's probable demise were suppressed. Closing my eyes and feeling his tongue lick the roof of my mouth, I imagined us making love underneath a waterfall in the jungles of southern Venezuela.

And then it was like a real waterfall as the water turned cold.

"Electric hot water heater," I said, turning off the water and shivering. "Th-th-th-that's all, folks!"

Nestor grabbed a huge, fluffy towel and dried me briskly between kisses. I looked at my hands and saw waterlog wrinkles. I'd lost track of the time and began to feel uneasy about being inside the house. I wanted to leave with Nestor and just go some place to plan our move, to hear all of his story.

"Get in bed," he growled, drying himself slowly, whistling as the towel brushed against his hard cock.

I lay in bed, watching him approach me slowly. His expression was blissful, more moving than any expression either Taylor or Jim could muster. This man was mesmerized by my chemistry, and I by his. It was as if he could become enraptured just by standing over me and drinking in the sight of me. I thought of all the sappy melodramatic movies I'd seen as a child and how I'd felt ill-at-ease at the sight of two people star-struck by the mere presence of one another. Even then I was cynical. And when it never happened to me, even with Taylor, I just assumed that such an attraction was only a product of Hollywood.

But looking into his misting eyes, I knew that I was having a profound effect on him and that he was moving me as no one had done before. At that point, I truly changed, and I knew that my life would be meaningless and unlivable without him.

He crawled up my body, sucking my toes and licking my legs. He slurped both my testicles inside his mouth and held them there, his eyes locked on mine. His powerful hands dipped underneath my shoulders and kneaded my back down to my buttocks.

Hungry for him, I tugged at his shoulders and nodded for him to crawl higher. My balls slipped out of his mouth, and he swooped down on my cock, chuckling as he made his way further up my torso. As his legs straddled my neck, I opened my mouth as wide as possible and took in his cock and one testicle. Gently, I pushed the other one into the warm, wet envelope of my mouth and held the position.

He looked down and appeared amazed at the sight of his "missing" genitals. And as my tongue swirled under his balls and around the top of his cock-head, his mouth opened in a silent gasp. He shook his head and frowned, as if something was happening that normally didn't. "Don't stop," he whispered tersely, obviously not wanting to break the spell.

Even as the bed started to lilt and the house began to shake again, he maintained his rapturous expression. And as the house was violently jolted, sending the bed toward the center of the room, he held onto the headboard and lifted his head like a dominant wolf, howling in ecstasy as the second earthquake raged.

As the earth settled into a lilting motion again, I relished the taste of Nestor's semen, swallowing small quantities of it, wanting to savor it for as long as I could. I wasn't afraid any more. With him by my side, I was afraid of nothing.

Taking advantage of the ensuing panic and chaos, Nestor found the homing device in my car and carefully attached it to Jim's Lexus inside the garage. While he did that, I packed my bag and placed it and my briefcase in the trunk of my car. After

exchanging the plates of the two luxury cars, Nestor insisted that we both put on dark sunglasses and drive my car slowly out of the complex. Several of the residents were still outside talking, but there was little evidence of damage except for the continued electrical outage.

"Who were your 'bodyguards'?" I asked. "Were they DEA agents?"

"Federal marshals, but there's somebody in the DEA that wants me pretty badly too." He drove cautiously, obviously alert for any contingency. "Problem is, I don't know where *they* are."

Reaching Highway 111, he headed toward Indio in heavy traffic. Because all the traffic lights were out, our movement was slow and laborious.

"Where are we going?" I asked, feeling the tension lessening.

"Mexico."

"In this car?"

"No. I have a friend in Mexicali who owes me a favor."

"Oh," I said, dumbfounded.

He glanced at me and chuckled with an expression I'd never seen from him before. It was an intimate, vulnerable look reserved for lovers and best friends. "Okay, time to 'fess up. Jeez, where do I start? From the beginning, probably." He sighed. "My name is Nestor Guzman, and I was born the youngest of three boys in Puerto LaCruz, Venezuela. My father was Panamanian, and my mother was Venezuelan. When I was about eleven or twelve, we moved to Panama City, and we boys became citizens of both countries." He paused with reluctance. "My father was not a very nice man. Uhh . . . He was part of Noriega's organization that distributed Colombian marijuana and cocaine into the U.S. Of course, he insisted that all of us follow in his footsteps, and who was I to beg off? I didn't know any different. Hell, I didn't touch the stuff, and I didn't really care where it went from Panama. But he had big plans for his sons in the organization and made sure that I earned a degree in chemistry from the University of Miami . . . you know, so the family could do our own thing. Then my mother unexpectedly died of ovarian cancer." He sighed. "She was everything to him, I guess, because it broke his heart. Two years later, he died of a massive heart attack. My very relieved brothers moved back to Venezuela to raise their families, but I stayed. I was determined to make it on my own, and eventually I was allowed to sort of take my father's place. But I soon realized just how insidious all this business is. I was bright and aggressive and found myself in the company of the super big shots. I even met Noriega, and because of that meeting, I was eventually trained at Langley, Virginia by the CIA and recruited into a sub-agency that worked clandestinely with them. I was even involved with the drug distribution operation that helped fund the Contras in Nicaragua."

The thought revolted me. "You mean to tell me that the . . . ?"

"They're all in bed together. The Reagan Administration would do anything to fight Communism, even if it meant keeping a few million American Hispanics and blacks hooked on crack. And the next administration took up where he left off."

"And Taylor voted for them," I mumbled absently.

"Huh?"

"Taylor, my lover who died. He voted for Reagan and Bush. We didn't share the same political views."

Nestor shook his head. "If you knew what I know, you wouldn't bother to vote. It's all meaningless."

It was obvious that he was telling the truth. "Are you an illegal alien?"

He laughed. "With the right connections, you don't have to be illegal anywhere. But, no, I have an authentic U.S. green card. But I also have an almost flawless, counterfeit Mexican passport, as well as legitimate ones from Panama and Venezuela."

"The passports are with you?"

He placed his hand on my neck and kneaded it. "No. They're in Mexico. I have a series of 'safe houses' from Mexico to Venezuela. The problem is, I never know if one of them has been detected. Lots of people are looking for me now, and more will be looking later."

"But surely there's someone with the Attorney General's office that could protect you. I thought the witness protection program was a good thing."

"Not for me it isn't." Nestor looked into the rear view mirror several times. He slowed down and warily watched as a car passed with two men in business suits inside. He relaxed his grip on the steering wheel as the car turned left at the next intersection. "The money laundering charge was all trumped up. They framed me so they could get me to testify against a drug kingpin in the Cúcuta Cartel. It's a smaller cartel than the Cali or Medellín. They have him in jail in Houston. The only problem is that the Cúcuta gang is trying to find me and make sure I don't testify. There's also a very greedy and dirty DEA agent who doesn't want me to testify either, because he knows that the drug lord would plea-bargain to finger *him*. I think that's what the Attorney General's office wants anyway: to get hold of the DEA turncoat and find out who else is dirty. And people wonder why the Americans can't win the drug war. Too many important people have hands in the pie."

I found it inconceivable that so much corruption could have infiltrated the U.S. government. "Then, this whole concept of drug interdiction, this 'war on drugs' is actually one big lie?"

"Do you have a passport?" he asked, ignoring my question.

I panicked at first, then remembered it was inside my briefcase. "Yeah. Taylor and I were in Europe last year, and I had to get a new one." I began to sense that some immense obstacle was on the horizon and wondered if Nestor would be able to get us over it. Was he all bravado, or was he in fact a dangerous, wily adversary? "I need to know, Nestor. Is my country really as corrupt as you say?"

"It's not your *country*, Byron. This is a wonderful country, filled with wonderful, decent people. Unfortunately, it's law enforcement agencies have been compromised when it comes to drug interdiction programs. Unbelievable profits are at stake, and greed is a very potent human trait." He appeared intent upon making sure that I understood fully. "Did you ever hear of Barry Seal?"

I shook my head. The name wasn't even familiar.

"They made a movie about what happened to him. He was a drug runner who plea-bargained and cooperated with the DEA to gather information on Escobar and the other leaders of the Medellín Cartel in Colombia. The guy was fearless. He uncovered the trail of cocaine from Medellín through Nicaragua and even got photos of the bad guys loading cocaine onto U.S. government-supplied planes. But after all he did for your country, he was double-crossed by the CIA, the IRS, the state of Louisiana, and ultimately by the U.S. Attorney General's office and the DEA. Some Baton Rouge judge broke an agreement and sentenced him to high-profile community service, compromising his so-called witness protection status and making him a sitting duck for the cartel. No one lifted a finger to help him, Byron." He looked at me with an angry and determined expression. "That won't happen to me."

We sat in silence for a few minutes as I mulled over what he'd told me.

"Having second thoughts?" he asked.

"No," I answered softly. "I'm apprehensive and scared to death, but I have no intention of letting you out of my sight."

He patted my leg. "You're going to have to—at least for a few days."

"Oh no," I protested.

"It's the only way this will work. If I show up with a *gringo* in Mexicali, no one will trust me. This guy in Mexicali is a Mexican heroin smuggler and out of the cocaine loop. He doesn't know any cartel types, and he wouldn't play ball with anyone with the DEA, even the dirty ones."

I was crestfallen. "Then what in the hell do I do while you're in Mexicali, wait in a Denny's across the border in Calexico?"

"First of all, we stop at the next First Interstate Bank branch that has power, and you can get me the maximum on your ATM card. What is it? One, two hundred? If it wasn't Sunday, I'd ask you to go inside for more." He stopped for a backup in traffic and studied my reaction, which was substantial.

"How did you know I had a First Interstate ATM card?"

"There's nothing they don't know. They were even watching us have sex that first time." He chuckled. "Smile, you're on 'Candid Camera.'"

My mind began to race in all directions.

"Being able to get laid was part of the deal, although I never thought I'd see anyone that could turn me on as much as you did. But after you left, they rushed in, took the note you left me, and checked you out from the day you were born. And because they never let me out of their sight, I got to hear everything."

"Everything?" I felt violated.

"You and Taylor, your job loss, your injury . . . They even checked out Jim McArthur." He chuckled. "Boggles the mind, huh? I know you were in R.O.T.C. in school and were in the army from fifty-six to fifty-nine—that you were a chopper pilot and were kicked out after some sergeant turned you in."

I felt naked and couldn't find my voice. He'd triggered memories that I had suppressed for many years. But the idea of money nagged to be addressed. "And the money?" I asked. The small amount notwithstanding, his abrupt request for money scared me, but my gut told me that I could trust him. After all, he'd risked his life to come back for me. *Sure, because you have money, stupid*, another part of me said.

As if reading my sudden second thoughts, he said, "I know what you got for the house. I know your investments, your net worth . . . And after I escaped from them, I followed them as they followed you."

"How in the hell . . . ?"

"By using one stolen car after another. I'm pretty good at that too." He studied my expression. "If you have any doubts whatsoever, then please back out now. There are some ugly ways to get a quick five hundred, which is what it'll take to get to my first safe house in Puerto Vallarta. He's an old lover who brought me out in Panama City back when I was seventeen. I'm almost certain no one knows about him."

The traffic began to move again, and he drove on, glancing at me nervously.

"The max on my ATM card is two hundred . . . but I've got another three hundred on me. Then what do I do?" I asked, the ambivalence tearing me apart.

"You don't trust me."

"Sure I trust you. I told you . . ."

"No you don't." He took off his watch and handed it to

me.

I looked at it and realized that I'd never noticed it before. It appeared to be a gold Rolex.

"Take it!"

I handed it back. "I told you I trusted you," I said emphatically, as the doubts began to leave me. "Now . . . what do I do?"

He put the watch back on and gave me a relieved smile. It was obvious that he'd been dreading my response. "You drive on to Phoenix and store the car in the long-term lot at the airport. Just don't get a ticket along the way, okay?"

I nodded but tried to hide my reluctance to let him out of my sight.

"Fly to Puerto Vallarta and stay in one of the older hotels near downtown. It shouldn't take me but a couple of days to get down there, but you have to be patient."

"How will you know where I am?"

"Have your breakfasts in a place called 'Las Palomas' downtown on the main drag, across from a promenade called the *Malecón* and the beach. I'll catch up with you and make sure you're not being followed."

"And that's the reason why we don't meet at your friend's house, right?" The thought made my spirits fall. "And what if I *am* being followed?"

"I'll contact you somehow."

We fell into silence. I struggled to figure out how he could contact me if I was being followed; he obviously had his hands full with the mapping of strategy. Glancing at him, I found him almost entranced in deep thought. I very much wanted to stop off at a motel and make love to him, but I knew he wanted to get to Mexico as soon as he could. I wondered if I would ever be able to make love to him again.

By the time we reached the outskirts of Indio, the electricity had been restored in some areas, and the traffic lights were working again. Finding a First Interstate Bank branch, we saw eleven people lined up at the ATM machine, so he parked the car. All those in line were talking about the two massive tremors, especially after it was announced that the first, a 7.4 jolt, had been centered under the little town called Landers, near Yucca Valley, which is in the high desert north of Palm Springs. Incredibly, the second 6.5 jolt wasn't an aftershock of the first. Cal Tech had just broken the news that it was a second earthquake and was centered underneath Big Bear, a few miles west of Landers. Even more incredible was the news that, although several local people had been injured, there had been only one fatality.

After I received the money from the machine, we headed for Calexico, stopping once for a quick lunch.

He parked the car about a block away from the border crossing and watched the activity for several minutes.

"It looks safe," he said at length, reaching for a ball cap he'd bought at a lunch stop and adjusting his sunglasses. He turned to me. "Remember everything I told you?"

I nodded, looking warily at the border crossing. "Nestor?"

"Yeah." He apparently detected my somberness and gave me his full attention.

"What would you've done if the earthquakes hadn't happened?"

"The Feds were about to pull out anyway . . . but to answer your question, I would have just waited until I had the opportunity to get you out."

I turned to him. "Would you've . . ."

"Killed them?"

I nodded.

He shook his head. "I really don't know Maybe. Someone was prepared to do *me* in."

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

He sighed. "Yes But, I was cornered, Byron . . . and they were scum." He studied me with great concern. "Would you kill to save your life?"

I shuddered. "I suppose I would. I was in the army between Korea and Vietnam, otherwise, I guess I'd know. I wonder what it's like?"

He leaned over and kissed me on the lips, stroking the back of my neck with trembling hands. "I love you, Byron. Please, be there for me."

"I love you too, Nestor. Come hell or high water, I'll be there."

He climbed out of the car and walked briskly toward the crossing, never looking back. I watched as he successfully crossed without incident.

It seemed as if the sunlight went with him. I felt cold, empty. My life seemed meaningless without him.

EIGHTEEN

After spending the night in Phoenix, I drove to a First Interstate Bank branch and rented a safe-deposit box for my valuables. Instead of leaving my car in the long-term parking lot at the airport, I decided to lock it inside a large self-storage compartment and pay for six months in advance.

That evening, I flew to Puerto Vallarta and checked into a hotel on the beach near downtown. In spite of a pleasant breeze and the calming rhythm of the waves hitting the sand only a few yards away, I couldn't sleep.

When the sun rose, I got out of bed, intent upon cleaning up and getting to the restaurant quickly. But as I was shaving, I realized that I had to be patient—that Nestor might not make it to Puerto Vallarta for several days. I had to believe that things would work out easily. So much had gone wrong already, and now it was time for the trend to reverse. Instead of worrying, I allowed myself the pleasure of fantasizing about what his home town of Puerto LaCruz in Venezuela looked like. Would it look a little like Puerto Vallarta? Probably not, I reasoned.

By the time I had cleaned up and dressed in sneakers, shorts, ball cap and T-shirt, I felt calm, proving it to myself by walking the fifteen or so blocks to the downtown section.

The city had changed a great deal since Taylor and I had flown there for a vacation back in '78. The airport was going through a lot of expansion, and there was a huge development of time-share condominiums and hotels being built around a golf course just south of the airport. There was even a brick-surfaced freeway that serviced all the hotels from the airport to downtown. Old Puerto Vallarta, however, had not changed. There were still the very rough cobblestone streets which were interminably under repair. The city still paid homage to the event that placed it on the map in the first place: the filming of *The Night of the Iguana*. The statue of John Huston was still there, as were the daily tours of the villa Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton had rented during the shooting of the film.

I found the Las Palomas restaurant at the north end of downtown and walked by it several times before finding the nerve to go inside. The café, a multilevel, airy place with a pleasant blend of colorful Spanish decor and antiques, was half-filled with what appeared to be a mix of tourists and locals. I asked for and got a table for two which overlooked the Malecón and the beach beyond. Assuming that Nestor had not reached the city yet, I studied the other patrons, especially those who came in after I did.

As I ordered coffee and a Mexican breakfast, I watched

an older man and woman come in, followed by two younger couples who were together. I looked out over the elevated promenade across the street to see if there was someone watching me, but I found no one who appeared to be interested in me.

Later, as my meal was served, I watched as a dark-complexioned man in his early thirties walked in and was seated at a small table near mine. He was wearing sunglasses, so it was impossible to determine if he was watching me. I decided to leave without a second cup of coffee, just to see if he would follow.

Having paid my bill, I headed for the center of town, stopping often to look into shop windows to see if the man was behind me. Convinced that he wasn't, I browsed through the myriad shops, trying to kill time, hoping I could maintain my patience.

Eventually I reached the Cuale River bridge. I looked upstream and wondered what it was like at the river's origin high up in the lush foothill jungle. It was such a gentle river, and from my vantage point, I could see many small waterfalls cascading down to Banderas Bay.

With the ferocity of a barracuda taking its prey, a feeling of panic seized me, squeezing my chest and terrifying me. My first rational thought was that someone had slipped PCP or some other hallucinogenic in my coffee. I felt completely alone in a hostile environment. I imagined that everyone around me could read my mind, and that all were about to run to the police to tell them I was a fugitive. The heat and humidity became oppressive as I stood in the sun waiting for a cab to come by.

Although it was only seconds, it seemed like minutes before an available taxi pulled up at the curb. My anxiety was so severe that I had great difficulty telling the driver where I wanted to go.

Back at the hotel, I took a cool shower and felt my anxiety ebbing. I realized then that the problem was with my state of mind, not due to some drug. I tried to will myself back to normal by repeating assurances to myself. *Tomorrow. He'll be here tomorrow, and all will work out well. He'll have picked up a car and we'll drive to Mexico City and fly to Caracas. And then it'll all be behind us.*

That night, I sat on my terrace with a bottle of Scotch, wishing that I could become intoxicated. Instead, the feeling of dread continued. Nothing seemed real. The gentle waves offered no rhythmic hypnosis. Instead they warned of larger rollers to come.

NINETEEN

Because of my gracious tipping, the waiters at Las Palomas had become quite friendly and began calling me by my first name. The restaurant had evolved into a haven of sorts. In the midst of an alien, hostile environment which had triggered the devastating panic attack, it was a place where everyone knew my name. The ambiance eroded the seemingly endless attack and helped me get back to normal. After all, it was also the place where Nestor would safely come back into my life. Or so I hoped.

I sat staring at my half-eaten hot cakes, the remnants of my sixth breakfast there. My favorite waiter, a short and stocky older man with a bald head, came to me and pointed at my plate.

"It is no good, Señor Byron?" he asked, reaching to take the plate back to the kitchen.

"No, Pablo," I said, waving his hand away. "It's just that I have no appetite."

He looked at me with concern. "Are you sick, Señor? I know a doctor."

"No, that's okay." His caring touched me. "I'll be fine." He reluctantly walked away, glancing back from time to time.

I left him an especially good tip and left.

My anxiety was soon joined by another bout of depression as I realized that Nestor wasn't coming. All I wanted to do was walk to the hotel, pack, and fly back to Phoenix. I wasn't capable of speculating about what might have gone wrong. Perhaps he'd been killed. Perhaps he'd betrayed me. Either scenario was equally tragic and would have the same permanent consequences.

I'd walked less than a block when a small, white object fell onto the sidewalk in front of me. The tightly rolled ball of gum wrapper bounced twice and rolled against a store front.

My first reaction was one of wild joy. I wanted to look up, wave and cry out his name, but a chill went down my back as I realized that Nestor's greeting had to be clandestine. It was obvious that I was being watched, which meant that we were in deep trouble.

Standing with the ball between my feet, I pretended to look at a display of silver jewelry. I focused my eyes upon what was in the reflection of the glass: a man dressed in a Hard Rock Café T-shirt and a straw cowboy hat was standing across the street, leaning against a coconut palm. He was wearing sunglasses and looking my way. I pulled three coins from my pants pocket and dropped one between my feet. Quickly picking up the coin and the ball, I placed both inside my pocket and walked inside. Keeping the man across the street in my peripheral vision, I browsed through the store until I was behind a display of T-shirts.

As the man crossed the street to come inside the store, I opened the wrapper and read the tiny writing.

Read it and eat it, you gorgeous hunk. You won't believe what I had to do to get here. Until I figure out who's watching you and why, I'll stay in the shadows. Take a tour tomorrow to Chinos Paraiso. The jungle waterfall tour. Know I'm with you, body and soul.

As Mr. Hard Rock entered the store, I swallowed the ball of paper and walked past him indifferently. I didn't even look at him.

Outside, I walked across the street and out onto the beach. Taking my sneakers off, I waded in the surf, looking out to sea. Sure that no one could see my face, I let it all out and sobbed tears of immense joy and relief.

Feeling Nestor's eyes on me, I turned and scanned the rooftops above where the paper ball had dropped. There were four stories of what appeared to be apartments above the shops, but Nestor was nowhere in sight. Of course, he wouldn't be anywhere near those apartments by now. *Maybe he'd dropped the paper ball while walking by me in disguise*, I surmised. He was a phantom black jaguar in the mountain jungles, clever and dangerous. And soon I would join him.

TWENTY

The tour bus picked me up at nine the next morning. There were only ten of us, counting the driver and the tour guide, a grinning "smoothie" by the name of Carlos. The bus driver went south on the Manzanillo Highway, past the better beaches and finest hotels in the area. The vistas were spectacular because the highway was carved out of the side of a mountain, which seemed to rise straight out of the Bay. The bus finally reached a photo opportunity turnout featuring some rather unspectacular waterfalls, and I walked down a path to take pictures with a cheap camera I'd purchased. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that a Jeep had parked at a turnout further up, and two men in T-

shirts and jeans were looking in my direction. Both wore dark sunglasses, and one wore a straw cowboy hat. The man with the hat looked like the one who had watched me the day before.

A short time later, the bus trudged on to a place called Chico's Paradise, an open-air restaurant and bar underneath a thatched roof with dirt floors. I was relieved it wasn't a lunch stop and followed the others in the tour to a vista overlooking more spectacular waterfalls. Considering that Nestor might have confused Chinos Paraiso with Chico's Paradise, I carefully looked about for evidence of Nestor's presence.

The waterfall portion of the tour satisfied, the bus turned around and headed back toward Puerto Vallarta, then turned up a jungle road at a place called Mismaloya. The dirt road was severely eroded by torrential rains, and there were precious few spots to pull over for oncoming traffic. Several times our driver had to back up precariously close to the cliff's edge to allow a car or truck to pass going downhill. A thrill-packed hour later, we arrived at a clearing filled with cars and other busses. There was a sign which indicated that we had arrived at the jungle oasis called Chinos Paraiso. Carlos announced that this would be our lunch stop. He also proudly pointed out a burned-out helicopter at the edge of the parking area, stating that the movie *Predator* had been filmed there and that he had actually met Arnold Schwarzenegger.

As Carlos helped me down from the bus, I looked in the direction of where the others were walking and saw a couple of brightly colored stalls with native Indians selling trinkets. Hearing the sound of gently cascading water, I assumed that the restaurant was situated on the Mismaloya River. I looked up and saw a line of coconut palms, banyan trees, bamboo, vines, ferns, banana trees and giant bird of paradise. Above and beyond the line was a huge thatched roof that rose through the jungle canopy of towering trees that looked like cedars.

Strangely, I felt peaceful as I walked down a rock stairway with the others, my eyes scanning the ground for Nestor's little messages. I felt no turmoil, even as I caught a glimpse of the two men getting out of the Jeep and following us.

When we reached the bank of the relatively narrow, cascading river, I looked up and saw a wooden bridge that led to a surprisingly large, multilevel restaurant, complete with blue and white table cloths and a uniformed staff of waiters, busboys and bartenders. The entire facility was void of walls, and the temperature was pleasant. Moreover, there were no mosquitoes and very few flies. It was indeed a paradise in the middle of the jungle.

Carlos led us to a billboard menu which was surrounded by samples of how the food would be presented. It was elegant . . . and expensive. The maitre d' practically insisted we try their margaritas, which were huge, then took our orders. I declined the margarita. Carlos then led us to a group of tables and told us that the bus would leave in an hour, allowing us time to also take photos and discover the surroundings. I sat alone at a table for two.

I carefully scanned every level of the restaurant and found my trackers two levels up. Of course, they pretended not to see me. Ignoring them, I looked down into a clear shallow pool away from the river current and imagined Nestor and myself making love in such a place in Venezuela.

I waited, not knowing what to expect from Nestor. There were no balls of paper, no signs of his presence. By the time my food arrived, the inner peace was replaced by renewed sense of anxiety. Eating only half of my meal, I got up to find the men's room. Spotting a *Caballeros* sign at the top level, I realized I would have to walk right by the two men who were following me.

As I passed their table, they began laughing and talking

animatedly in Spanish, ostensibly believing that I wasn't on to them. I could see that the one with the cowboy hat had a pock-marked face and insect-black eyes. He appeared to be in his forties. The other man was younger and had dark auburn hair and brown eyes. As I reached the door of the men's room, they suddenly ceased talking; I could hear their chairs scraping the cement floor as they turned to watch me.

Inside, I found myself alone and looked for a message from Nestor. There were no little balls of paper lying on the floor. As I urinated, I looked out a window into the dense forest in back of the facility. I wondered why there were no squawking parrots or macaws, no iguanas, no sign of animal life.

And then I saw a man dressed in camouflaged clothing and dark glasses. He stepped out of the shadows of the jungle and smiled at me, then fell back quickly. It was Nestor!

Struggling to compose a look of indifference, I walked out of the men's room and almost chuckled as the two men scooted their chairs back to face the river. Feeling omnipotent and rather impish, I pulled out my camera and aimed it at the vista of the river and waterfalls. Both men quickly put their sunglasses back on and turned away. I clicked a zoom shot of them and walked around the upper level, looking for some way to disappear, hoping for some diversion.

Finding no possible way to bolt for the jungle, I went back down to the river level and climbed up a stairway adjacent to the first set of falls. Taking photos as I walked among other tourists, I turned toward the restaurant and looked through the view finder. The men were no longer there. Instead, they were on opposite sides of the river, watching every move I made.

As our tour members huffed back up the stairway to the bus, Carlos met us with much joviality. It was obvious that he'd had a couple of margaritas himself, as had many in our group. I struggled to figure out a way to stay behind and at the same time elude the two men. Finally I decided to try to rent a Jeep and come back later, hoping that I could somehow lose my "shadows" in traffic.

While Carlos and four Mexican-American tour members sang familiar Mexican songs, the driver began the downhill trip. As I expected, the men in the Jeep were close behind. Ten minutes into our descent, the driver had to swerve abruptly to avoid a group of tourists in a pickup truck, which barely squeezed past without slipping down the embankment. The right front wheel of the bus caught the steep slope of the mountain, almost turning us over. Over-correcting to the left, the driver had to slam on his brakes to prevent our going over the cliff. The bus came to a halt at an angle which blocked the road.

I stood up and saw that, given the small amount of clearance on each side, it would take the driver some time to right the bus. Then I looked behind and found that the pickup had forced the Jeep to back up to let it pass. Quickly, I ran to the door. "I left my wallet at the restaurant. I'll get a cab back."

Both the driver and Carlos looked at me dumbly.

"Open the fucking door!" I boomed.

The driver opened the door and I jumped out, scrambling up a badly eroded and very steep slope, which was out of sight of the men in the Jeep. It must have been my sheer desire for Nestor which gave me the strength to climb to the top and safely into the dense jungle. Gasping for air, I watched as the bus corrected its direction and continued down the mountain. Shortly thereafter, the Jeep came into view, following the bus. The two men were obviously unaware of my departure.

When I reached the perimeter of Chinos Paraiso, I found

I'd suffered several cuts from thorns and other vegetation. My legs were in agonizing pain from the stress of walking at extreme angles. Making sure that no one was on the road below, I scrambled down the slope and crossed the road to another embankment which led down to the river. Moving upstream and out of sight of the restaurant, I easily crossed the shallow river, avoiding a series of waterfalls up and down river.

In another twenty minutes or so, I arrived at the same general area where I'd seen Nestor hiding. I looked around for a sign, some indication that he'd been there and that the sighting hadn't been just my imagination. There was nothing. No freshly broken branches, no gum wrapper balls. Nothing but the sounds of birds high up in the canopy.

I walked upstream until I reached a hilltop overlooking the restaurant, the road, and even the Bay in the distance. I gazed out over the panorama of green hills and rain clouds hovering over the higher mountains further inland. It was a spectacular sight, but I sensed an undercurrent of agonizing emptiness.

It was obvious to me that Nestor saw me leaving with the others and began to make his way back into Puerto Vallarta to try again. It was also logical to assume that he would return to Chinos Paraiso again over the next couple of days when he found that I'd not returned to my hotel.

Or would he? Maybe he saw me leaving the bus. Maybe he's waiting to see if the two men will come back with more men.

"Maybe you'd better settle down and figure out a way to find shelter and feed yourself," I whispered to myself.

By sunset, I'd found and consumed some too-ripe bananas and several quavas from trees near the restaurant. Remembering what I'd seen in a chimpanzee documentary on PBS, I gathered large leaves and twigs and made myself a very uncomfortable bed high up in a banyan tree.

TWENTY-ONE

At first light, I was awakened by a screaming flock of parrots flying in colorful formation from hilltop to hilltop. A flock of parakeets, apparently unaware of my presence, landed in the top of the banyan tree, and bird droppings began hitting me on the leg and shoulder.

"Jesus Christ," I mumbled, frightening them away.

Hearing a scratching sound along a branch on the other side of the large tree, I quickly turned and spotted a bright green iguana staring at me. It was evident that the local birds and reptiles were only active during the morning hours.

I tried to climb down the tree, but my left leg was numb because of the way I'd slept. Rubbing it to get the circulation going, I looked down toward the restaurant and saw a small truck unloading a group of employees. I cautiously looked in all directions then carefully climbed down the tree and walked some 200 or so yards to the river for a drink of water.

Acting a lot like a wary impala, I drank in sips, looking up from time to time to see if someone was approaching. My thirst quenched, I returned to the tree and decided to make my way down the hill to see if I could find a sign from Nestor.

As my legs began to tremble from overexertion, I sat down on a rock to rest and to eat an avocado I'd picked. Apparently the owners had planted just about every tropical fruit tree that wasn't indigenous to the region.

From where I sat, I could see the Manzanillo Highway, but I didn't dare go any further. I would just have to wait for Nestor, I reasoned, regardless of how long it took for him to realize what I'd done.

I began to hear vehicles turning from the highway to the road leading to the restaurant. Feeling hungry, I wondered if I could somehow pretend to be a tourist and dine at the restaurant. Of course, it was out of the question.

There was the sound of a car pulling on to the side of the highway directly below me.

"Nestor?" I whispered, wishing with all my heart that it was he.

I heard a vehicle door slam and listened to footfalls on the gravel shoulder.

Then silence.

Then abrupt footsteps scaling the hill I was on, cracking branches, crumbling dead leaves.

I stood, expectant, ready to rejoice.

But as a familiar cowboy hat came into view, I realized that I had made a terrible mistake. I turned to run back uphill, but came face-to-face with an exotic-looking pistol with what appeared to be a laser sight.

"Down the hill." The man was tall and thin, with light brown hair and dark sunglasses.

I numbly turned and began walking down the hill with my arms raised.

"Lower your arms and pretend like we just came in to take a piss," he instructed in a midwestern American accent. He said something in Spanish to the man with the cowboy hat, prompting him to hurry down the hill ahead of us.

Making our way down the embankment to the highway shoulder, the tall man nodded for me to get into the back seat of a waiting Town Car. The man with the cowboy hat opened the door for me and smiled, then got in the car on the front passenger side. The thin man got in the back seat with me and trained the pistol on my chest. I glanced at the auburn-haired driver, who was also smiling. I was impressed with all their resources: a Jeep, a Town Car, and God only knew the extent of their firepower.

"Am I under arrest?" I asked.

"Where is he?" asked the thin man.

"Who?" I looked innocently at all three men in turn.

The man with the cowboy hat quickly slapped me in the face with the back of his hand, splitting my lip.

Infuriated, I reached for him just as he pulled out a .357 Magnum and roughly pushed the barrel against my nose.

"You don't want to fuck with us, Byron," said the thin man evenly, menacingly.

I licked my lip to try to stop the bleeding, then sighed. "I guess not."

"Where is he?"

"I thought he'd be here, but he wasn't." I looked at the barrel of the .357 Magnum.

"Why did you think he'd be here?"

I knew better than to tell of our way of communicating, so I balked.

"It was prearranged?"

I nodded and looked down.

"Where are the safe houses?"

"There's one here and one in Panama. He never told me exactly where they are. I guess he was afraid that something like this would happen."

I got the feeling that the thin man believed me.

The man holding the Magnum said something in rapid Spanish to the thin man, calling him "Bruno." I assumed he was asking what would happen next.

Bruno answered him in broken but apparently effective Spanish, then looked at me thoughtfully.

I was convinced that their only option was to somehow

lure Nestor, using me as bait. Of course, there was always the interrogation and torture option, but I got the feeling that Bruno could plainly see that Nestor had kept all his options to himself and that I knew nothing. I was also convinced that Bruno was the DEA turncoat and that the other two were from the Cúcuta Cartel in Colombia. In a way, it was a letdown, watching these men act quite differently from what I'd expected. They didn't at all fit the stereotype of thugs, the smack to my mouth notwithstanding.

Bruno said something in Spanish to the driver, who pulled onto the highway and drove toward Puerto Vallarta.

At an intersection in the middle of the old city, Bruno ordered me out of the car without explanation. But then, no explanation was necessary. It was a draw. Bruno obviously knew that Nestor had some means of contacting me, but that I had no way to contact him. He was betting that Nestor would try to contact me again, and I had no choice but to be the bait.

As the Town Car drove away, I walked to the beach and slowly made my way to the hotel. I sensed Nestor's presence. I had to. I had to believe that there was some way out, even though another part of me chanted with every other step: *dead, dead, dead.*

TWENTY-TWO

I was awakened just at the crack of dawn the next morning by the ring of my telephone. I stared at the phone, afraid to answer. It was at once a basket filled with a king cobra and a pot of gold.

I picked up the receiver and listened.

"Byron?" It was either Nestor or a damn good imitation.

"Yes," I said, my voice strained with tension.

"Chill out, man. We're not up against the Mexican Feds ... at least not yet. Bruno didn't bug your room. I checked it out."

"What? How ... ?"

"I saw Bruno at Chinos Paraiso. He was following behind the two Colombians who were following you. He was pointed out to me once in Panama, but I was never introduced to him. Since he's a DEA agent, it stands to reason that he's the one who'll get fingered in a plea bargain with me and the Cúcuta boss. I'm sorry I abandoned you, but I had no choice. I had to get here to see if your room was bugged. I knew that they wouldn't hurt you because you're too valuable as a lure."

I was pissed. "They *did* hurt me. They split my fucking lip."

"I'm sorry," he said soothingly.

"They could have held me hostage."

"He knows better."

I felt myself softening. His voice had a calming effect, and God, how I wanted him. "So why does he want you now that you're not going to testify?"

"Because he knows the U.S. Feds are looking for me. I'm still a threat. Of course, now that I know who he is, I could finger him via long distance just for spite. But then, that would only intensify the Fed's resolve to find me and force me to testify. It would be like throwing a bleeding pig to a school of sharks." He paused as if he'd thought of something new. "It sounds crazy, but if I could just somehow get Bruno into the Fed's hands ..."

My head felt like it was spinning. "When do I see you again," I asked as my cock immediately stiffened.

"Soon. If they make the mistake I think they're going to make, I can move you to the safe house in a matter of a few minutes." He chuckled. "You'd shit if you knew where I was right now."

"Where?" I shook my head. "No, I don't want to know."

In the paranoid state I was in, I couldn't believe that the line wasn't bugged.

"Have your bags packed. When you get the signal, go downstairs and check out."

"Signal?"

"You'll know."

"Okay."

"Okay?" He lingered on the line.

"I miss you, Nestor."

"Soon," he said with a timbre that sent shivers down my neck.

I cleaned up and packed my bags, then sat on the couch watching CNN on television. The waiting became agonizing.

After two hours had passed, I looked out my bathroom window at the parking lot below and the downtown section in the distance. Then a reflection of sunlight off something shiny momentarily blinded me, luring my gaze to the top of a building across the street. I caught a glimpse of something resembling a cowboy hat.

Quickly falling back from the window, I rushed to the terrace and looked over the railing. Several hotel guests were lying in chaise longues around the pool. I studied each one then looked again at a single auburn-haired man with powerful limbs and dark sunglasses. Under his chaise was a bag large enough to hold an automatic weapon.

I noticed a power boat speeding directly for the hotel about 400 yards out. Its engines suddenly cut back, and it coasted another 200 or so yards closer to shore. Then the engines were shut off, and an anchor slipped into the water with a clattering sound.

I imagined the two Latins, armed to the teeth, watching me, following me for days while waiting for Nestor to make his fatal error. But the speed boat—that was something new. It was never there before. And suddenly it began to make sense to me. Bruno, with his Fed connections, must have found out about Nestor's escape with me in tow. It would have been possible to obtain our photos and fax them to the cartel brass, who probably set up teams to watch all the major airports in Mexico and Central America. I envisioned "Tex" and "Red" spotting me at the airport and contacting the drug lords, who relayed the news to Bruno. It stood to reason that Bruno probably didn't want to arouse suspicion by abruptly flying down to Puerto Vallarta, hence his recent arrival.

I felt that something terrible was about to happen. Things were coming to a head, and everyone was geared up for it. Immense tension made my stomach feel like it was twisting in knots. I knew where our adversaries were hiding, but did Nestor? I wanted to warn him, but I didn't know how.

I ran to the bathroom window and looked into the parking lot. I scanned the tourists walking on the sidewalk toward downtown. I looked again at the rooftop across the street just as a cowboy hat drifted lazily down to the sidewalk. The sight of its descent mesmerized me as I pondered its significance.

"Nestor?" I whispered, cautiously approaching the railing to look down upon the Colombian with auburn hair. He looked up at me and smiled just as a gaping hole appeared in the side of his neck. As the reverberation of a rifle's crack caught up with the weapon's devastation, blood began to squirt out at odd angles and ooze from his mouth. His eyes glazed over.

Pieces of glass and metal tore away from the power boat, peppering the water for several feet around as more cracking sounds streaked through the air. The power boat's engines revved up as its anchor chain retracted, then it sped off

to sea.

Knowing that the cue had been sounded, I rushed downstairs with my suitcase. I checked out at the cashier just as the first policemen arrived, then I stood outside in front of the hotel. The image of Red's glazed eyes played over and over in my mind.

As an ambulance pulled into the hotel's driveway, I saw the Colombians' Jeep rushing in behind it. At its wheel sat Nestor, nodding for me to get in. He was still dressed in camouflaged fatigues and looked like a marine.

Abandoning the Jeep in the airport parking lot, we walked in and out of the airport terminal, then got inside a cab.

"Pulpito y Aguacate," Nestor directed, glancing at me. "What?"

"Nothing," I said, my heart pounding. "I just hope there's plenty of Scotch where we're going."

He smiled, but I could tell that he was filled with ambivalence. Maybe it was something more akin to regret. "Plenty of Scotch."

"Good." I wanted to ask him if we would have some privacy, but I felt it would be an inappropriate question. "Nestor?"

He slowly turned to me, placing his hand gently upon my knee.

"There was no other way out. You had to . . ."

"I know," he said, looking out the window. "But sometimes even that's no consolation."

"It doesn't change the way I feel, even though I'm scared to death."

He smiled plaintively. "I wondered if it would."

He turned to look out the window again.

"Bruno will come back, won't he?"

Nestor nodded.

With more firepower than ever before, I almost said.

"The word will get out," he said softly, so that the driver couldn't hear. "They'll all come out of the woodwork. It gets complicated now."

We sat in silence until the cab driver pulled up at the corner of Pulpito and Aguacate. Nestor got out and helped me out with my bag. After paying the driver 20,000 Pesos, Nestor led me across the street and into an alley. We followed the alley until we came to a narrow walkway leading to the next street. But just before reaching the street, Nestor preceded me into another narrow walkway to a basement stairway. It was the back entrance to a house facing the street east of Aguacate.

"Circuitous route," I commented.

"Can't be too careful," he said, pressing the doorbell three times, then once more after a pause.

"How do you know it's safe?" I asked, still jittery.

He pointed at a green piece of paper in the window. "Green is for Wednesday. He changes it every day when he knows I'm on my way in."

The door opened, exposing a tall, gaunt man of about seventy. He had well-groomed white hair and a moustache. When he recognized Nestor, tears came to his eyes. "My boy!" he exclaimed, embracing Nestor.

"Max," said Nestor, returning the hug, then turning to me. "This is Byron, my friend. He's going with me to Venezuela."

Max scrutinized me quickly from head to toe, smiling courteously yet insincerely. He didn't trust me, I could tell. That, or he was jealous.

"Byron," said Max with a slight accent I assumed was European, "a friend of my boy's is a friend of mine. Please, come inside."

Nestor and I walked into a basement filled with antiques

as Max closed and double-locked the door behind us. He also turned on a switch which appeared to arm a security system. We waited for him to walk ahead of us.

He took us upstairs into a living room likewise filled with fine antiques. The drapes were pulled, so the light was rather dim, but I did see some very old paintings on the wall. There was a musty odor to the place, but the smell was far from being offensive. Since all the windows were shut, it was obvious that the house was air-conditioned to avoid mildew from the humidity outside. I placed my suitcase near the foot of a stairway leading to the floor above.

"Are you hungry?" asked Max, showing us to the dining room.

"Yes," we both said in unison, chuckling as we did.

"I was just about to make myself a sandwich, so have a seat and I'll make three instead."

We sat at the dining room table and smiled at each other. I had no idea what to expect from Max, and I got the feeling that Nestor was apprehensive about something.

"It was a pleasant surprise to hear your voice, my boy," said Max from the adjacent kitchen. "And from Mexicali of all places."

"It seemed like the best choice at the time."

"Very good choice. Of course, had you waited another few hours, you'd never have made it."

I wondered how much Max knew.

"What are they saying in Panama?" asked Nestor.

"My friend in Colon says that everyone is in the act. The Americans are determined to get you back so they can nail Mister Big from Cúcuta and Mister X in the DEA. The entire cartel is determined to kill you on sight. The DEA wants to find out about the traitor in their midst before anyone else. And everyone wants to know how Byron Sweet fits in." He entered the dining room with a tray of sandwiches and chips. "I myself am quite curious."

And then I realized why Nestor was on edge. If Max was a jealous man, he was certainly in a position to do us a lot of harm.

Max set the tray on the table and went back into the kitchen.

"Byron is my lover, Max," Nestor said bluntly. "He's risked his life to be with me."

Max stood in the doorway holding a large bottle of cola and three glasses. He glanced at me, then at Nestor. "I see." He slowly sat down, facing both of us. With what looked like a forced smile, he served the drinks and sandwiches.

I looked at Nestor, who seemed to be anticipating some reaction from Max.

"You know, Byron," Max began, his eyes on his food. "I found Nestor on the streets of Panama City when he was a young tough of seventeen. He was constantly fighting with his parents and was a rebel in so many ways." He looked up at me. "I brought him home and seduced him, showed him the power of wealth in a two-class society. I ignited him and showed him his potentials, sexually and career-wise. I became his surrogate father and lover." He moved his gaze to Nestor. "I've always loved him and always will. For years, I prayed that he would come and live with me, but I was realistic enough to know that his life had to be filled with excitement. He's always lived on the edge, Byron." He looked at me again, taking a bite of his sandwich, prompting us to start eating. "What makes you think that he'll retire with you in Venezuela?"

I had no idea what to say and looked at Nestor for an answer.

"By the time we get there—if we get there—I think I'll have experienced enough excitement to last a lifetime," said Nestor.

"Besides, we won't be free to roam around from country to country, looking for kicks. They'll all be looking for us for years. And since . . ." He hesitated for some reason. "Since you . . . are the only one besides Byron that knows anything about my ties in Venezuela, then how will they know we're there?"

"You're so right, my boy," said Max, eating his sandwich, studying us both.

After lunch, we sat in the living room as Nestor and Max reminisced about old times. The tension seemed to have died away, as if Max had suddenly accepted the idea that Nestor would be slipping away from him. Actually, I couldn't believe how he could even hold hope for such a continued relationship with Nestor after so many years. Still, he was in a position to do us great harm, and I just hoped that his love for Nestor was strong enough to allow his letting go.

I wondered when or even if Nestor and I would be able to have some time to ourselves. I longed to hold him but knew that it wouldn't go over well with Max at that moment.

"Well . . ." Nestor slapped his knees. "I haven't had a shower in several days. Haven't had too much sleep either, what with all the bug bites." He looked at me and winked. "I'll bet you haven't had much sleep either."

I shook my head and looked at Max for his reaction.

"Of course, you'd like to freshen up. How rude of me not to suggest it. You've both come a long, harrowing way." He glanced at a nearby stairway. "Nestor, you know where the blue guest room is."

Nestor got up and stretched, then reached for me. I stood up and allowed him to pull me next to him. The older man's nostrils flared, and his eyes seemed to flash.

"What time should we be down for dinner?" asked Nestor, kneading my neck.

"Seven?" Max proposed, watching Nestor's hand.

Nestor nodded as I broke away to fetch my suitcase. Following him up the stairway, I glanced back at Max who was smiling sardonically.

The bedroom had white walls and blue drapes, which were closed like those downstairs. The bed was a four-poster made of very dark wood and appeared to be well over a hundred years old. A heavy chest of drawers and a dresser were made of the same type of wood. The dresser mirror was showing its age with detached silver backing. The attached bathroom was small with very old but well-maintained fixtures. There was even an old porcelain tub above which a modern shower head and curtain had been installed.

While placing my suitcase on the bed, I heard the door close and turned to face Nestor, who was staring at me hungrily. "Finally . . . alone."

"Alone," he repeated, walking to me and caressing me tenderly.

Both of us shuddered at the feel of each other's body.

"I just want to hold on to you . . . to know you're here with me, safe and in one piece," I whispered in his ear.

"The thought of you here, waiting for me . . . that kept me going. Nothing can stop me if I have you."

I began to undress him. "Get in the shower so I can eat you alive. And after I have my appetite sated, I want to know everything that happened from Mexicali to Puerto Vallarta."

He smiled, showing his dimples again, then quickly took off his ripe clothing.

As he showered, I took out a clean pair of jeans and a "Save the Whales" T-shirt for later and draped them over a chair. After I placed my bag in a corner of the room, I pulled back the

bedspread and smelled musty sheets that probably hadn't been next to human skin for some time.

Taking a toothbrush and toothpaste out of my suitcase, I went into the bathroom to brush my teeth. "Are those the only clothes you have?"

"I picked up some things in Mexicali, but they're all stashed in a cave up in the foothills," he answered, vigorously soaping himself down.

"No toothbrush, huh?"

He laughed. "I'll use yours. If we can swap spit and cum, then we can share a toothbrush."

I shook my head, delirious that he was with me. The earlier bloody images of my rescue had been stowed away somewhere in my memory banks. There was no way that I was about to acknowledge that Nestor was anything but the second gentle love of my life—certainly not a cold-blooded killer.

When he finished showering, I stepped into the tub and handed him my toothbrush.

"Don't get too used to such luxuries," warned Nestor. "Tomorrow we move on."

"Where to?"

"We outfit you in fatigues, then we fill up a pair of backpacks, and off we go into the night of the iguana."

"That's all I hear around here. Is that movie Puerto Vallarta's only claim to fame?"

Nestor mumbled something, but his mouth was full of foam from the toothpaste.

"So we're going to rough it, are we?" I shrugged. "As long as you're with me, I really don't care how rough it gets."

I could hear more mumbling.

"What's that?"

He spat out the toothpaste. "It'll get so bad that you'll probably hate my guts before it's all over with."

"Hell will freeze over first."

He chuckled then looked at me as I pulled back the shower curtain, exposing a throbbing erection. Slowly kneeling, he effortlessly took it down his throat, keeping it lodged there for what seemed to be a whole minute. After backing off to take another breath, he went down on me again. Contracting my sphincter muscles, I made my cock throb rhythmically, which excited him more.

I dried off as he sucked lazily, lovingly. I tried to push him away so that I could more easily get out of the tub, but his powerful arms clung to me. Laughing, I stumbled out of the tub and almost drug him toward the bed, but by the time I had sat down on the edge, I was no longer laughing. I was moaning with pleasure and close to ejaculation.

Sensing that he wanted me to come, and knowing that I couldn't hold back, I stood up and roughly fucked his mouth. A wildness came to his eyes, as if we had just found a new sexual dimension to pursue.

"Yes," I half-groaned, half-hissed.

He moaned urgently.

"Oh, yeah," I growled.

He grunted and slurped, completely uninhibited.

I bellowed and sent my cock deep into his gullet, discharging again and again, knowing that Nestor had driven every sperm to frenzy and released every drop of nurturing fluid that my body was capable of producing.

As he released me, his eyes almost rolled back in his head as he swallowed and gasped. "Byron!" He showed me his reddened penis, which he held with both hands. His eyes were inflamed.

Falling to my knees before him, I pulled away his hands

and was immediately splattered about my mouth with thin, hot semen. Quickly capturing his eruption, I held on until the powerful throbs ebbed, finally swallowing his pleasantly salty elixir.

I lay on my back on the bed and pulled him next to me, willing him to merge with me. We held on to each other desperately and fell asleep in the middle of a kiss.

Just before seven, Max knocked on the door. "Cocktails now. Dinner in about thirty minutes."

We reluctantly got out of bed and hurriedly took turns washing the semen residue off our bodies.

I was just about to ask him what he was going to wear when he opened up a walk-in closet and turned on a light. Inside was an assortment of clothing, supplies and weapons, including backpacks, canteens, dried and canned foods, assault rifles, pistols—just about everything we would need.

"Jesus Christ," I said softly.

"It's a long story," Nestor said, fetching a pair of jeans, a pair of white canvas shoes and a colorful shirt.

After dressing, he kissed me deeply and led me down the stairs.

I could smell the fragrance of roast duck and couldn't wait to get my hands on a double Scotch on the rocks.

I was surprised to see that Max had two very young Mexican guests, both quite effeminate. Nestor, however, didn't seem surprised.

"Byron, may I present Antonio and Jesus," said Max, who was already half drunk. "I would introduce them to you, but they speak absolutely no English."

Antonio glanced at me, then raised his eyebrows at Nestor. Jesus merely pursed his lips and looked bored.

Nestor looked at me and shook his head. "Door bell jail bait. He's incorrigible." Then he said to Max with more seriousness: "You realize that if the police ever raided this place, I wouldn't have a safe house any more?"

"Dear boy," Max said haughtily, "I'm quite capable of paying off the local police if I had to . . . and so far I haven't." He narrowed his eyes at me. "Besides, you won't be needing a safe house any more now, will you?" His tone was acerbic.

"I need *all* my resources until they're no longer needed," Nestor responded evenly and with a modicum of anger.

The resentment rising between them worried me. Of course, I had no idea what their arrangement was, but I'd assumed that Nestor was at the mercy of Max's good nature and in need of the older man's wealth. But then, what about the closet upstairs, the security system . . . the jealousy in spite of Max's propensity for boys? And didn't Nestor imply that he would pay me back the money when we got to the safe house?

"Your resources?" Max sniffed.

Nestor stiffened, his eyes as cold as tundra.

"Dear boy, I have lived in this house for ten years, and I've seen you perhaps four times in that length of time," Max said indignantly, fairly slurring his words. He took on an air of vitriol.

The two teenagers decided to get up and make themselves another drink in the kitchen.

"This whole charade about colored paper . . ." Max waved his hands grandly. "and intrigue and your . . . *arsenal* upstairs—well, it all bores me, quite frankly. I mean, what's in it for me?"

"Max, you're drunk," said Nestor softly.

"You bring this . . . *American* in here and tell me you're riding off into the fucking sunset together, and you expect me to joyfully throw rice at you? *Puleeze!*" He took another gulp from his drink, which appeared to be a martini.

"Let's have dinner, and we'll discuss it tomorrow morning when you're sober," suggested Nestor, obviously trying to hide his anger.

"Fuck dinner!" slurred Max, spilling his drink. "Antonio! *Otro mas martini, por favor!*"

Antonio rushed from the kitchen and took Max's glass.

"Byron," said Nestor, "would you please see if you can salvage dinner?"

I nodded and got up.

"Stay out of my kitchen," snapped Max, staring at me with contempt.

Nestor gestured for me to go on, and I did.

"What in the hell is wrong with you, Max?" Nestor asked.

I heard Max respond but couldn't make out the words as I walked through the dining room into the kitchen.

Antonio finished preparing Max's drink and turned to serve it. Jesus stood in the corner, making a rum and cola. The kitchen was large and had all the modern appliances. There was a glass door oven, and I saw a duck roasting inside with a meat thermometer stuck in it. Opening the oven door, I could see that the thermometer was registering past the temperature for poultry, so I turned off the oven. Looking inside the refrigerator, I found produce for a salad, but I didn't know if it had been treated for Nestor's and my consumption. Looking inside a pantry, I found a can of long asparagus and one of Mandarin oranges, the combination of which would do nicely for a salad.

I glanced at Jesus and saw that he was staring at me while rubbing his crotch. I grimaced, which sent him back to the living room with a sour look. Spotting a bottle of Scotch where Jesus had stood, I made myself another drink and proceeded to prepare and serve dinner.

While Antonio and Jesus ate like pigs, Max attempted to dine in a refined manner, only to drop every other forkful. Several times he nodded off, only to catch himself before his face fell into his plate. Nestor ate slowly and seemed lost in very serious thoughts. Convinced myself that Max would awaken the next morning and profusely apologize, I enjoyed the duck and looked forward to my first full night with Nestor.

TWENTY-THREE

I was awakened by a loud exchange of voices downstairs. Finding myself alone in the bed, I groggily got up and put on a pair of running shorts. My head ached from too much Scotch the night before. I peeked behind one of the heavy drapes and saw bright sunlight.

Quietly opening the bedroom door, I made my way down the stairs. Max and Nestor were sitting at the dining room table drinking coffee, but neither had noticed me. I sat down on the staircase and eavesdropped as they spoke in English.

"I just don't understand your attitude, Max, and frankly you're scaring the hell out of me."

"Attitude?" Max's voice almost cracked with emotion. "Everything I've done over the past twenty odd years has been geared to having you settle down with me."

"But you like boys, Max. What on earth do you want with me?"

"Companionship, goddamnit!" Max boomed. "It's not a sex thing any more. We've both grown too old to satisfy the other's desires. It has to do with taking care of each other."

"We never made a pledge to each other, Max. Okay, you're like a father to me, but you never once said anything about a life relationship."

"I thought it was implied," Max said softly.

"Implied? What was I supposed to think when you moved Montalvo here? Hell, he stayed for two years!"

"It was purely sexual. It wasn't meant to last."

"Bullshit," Nestor spat, looking away in disgust.

"You can't just waltz in here with the . . . *love of your life*," Max said acidly, "and expect me to welcome him into my house with open arms."

"Your house?" Nestor's voice became low, hostile.

"Do you think it's *yours*?" Max laughed. "Oh, *please!* Whose money bought the house in the first place?"

"Max, you're *really* getting me pissed," Nestor warned.

"You may have furnished it with your antique collection, but I paid for the house. Or did you forget that little fact? I've also spent a fortune on remodeling, not to mention the security system and the maintenance. I don't know what ten years of heavy drinking and chasing boys have done to your brain, but you've conveniently forgotten who's the benefactor here." He paused, perhaps trying to soften the tone of his voice. "I've always thought of you as a trusted friend and surrogate father, someone I could always count on to maintain the house and keep it safe. You know what my line of work is."

Max picked up the morning paper and threw it across the table. "Yes, I can see quite clearly." He translated the Spanish headline. "Sniper kills tourist, self. Both just happen to be from Colombia." He leaned back and smiled. "I'll bet this town will be crawling with those who are looking for you. I wonder if there's a reward?"

Nestor's face turned bright red as he looked grimly at Max.

The older man seemed to shudder as he realized what he'd said. "Of course, Nestor, I didn't mean anything by that." He chuckled nervously. "I'm just jealous of Byron, and I'm being a child about it."

Both men fell silent, so I walked down the stairway.

"Oh, there he is," chirped Max. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you." I glanced at Nestor, whose expression remained grim.

"Uh . . ." Max regarded Nestor's fiery eyes and headed for the kitchen. "I'll get you some coffee, Byron. Then I'll make us some breakfast."

As Max disappeared into the kitchen, I looked at Nestor, luring his attention. Immediately, his expression softened. "Good morning," I said.

He half-smiled. "Morning, Babe. Did you hear?"

I nodded.

"There's a safe upstairs in the big closet," he said softly. "I'll pay you back for the loan . . . with interest." He winked. "Then we'll take what we need and head out tonight under the cover of darkness."

I nodded again.

"You can still back out, but I'm afraid you'll have a lot of explaining to do. That, plus they've probably frozen your assets and seized your car. They have great latitude now since you're aiding and abetting a fugitive in a drug case."

The idea of losing all that money smarted, but I knew that if I had to choose between the money and Nestor, there would be no contest. "I'm with you for the long haul," I said, placing my hand over his. "We're swimming to Venezuela together, remember?"

His gaze burned into my eyes. It was a look of passion I'd never seen directed at me before. The man obviously adored me, but he was terribly complicated and unfathomable. Moreover, he was a formidable fighter who, now cornered, was extremely dangerous. I wondered what turned me on more: the passion or the danger.

Max returned with a cup for me and a pot of coffee. With trembling hands, he poured my coffee and glanced warily at Nestor. "What would you like for breakfast? I have eggs and sausage. I also have frozen hash browns, orange juice . . . the works." He smiled sweetly at me. "Since you finished cooking dinner last night, serving you breakfast is the least I could do."

"Then give me the works," I said, returning a cordial smile.

Max looked at Nestor, who nodded in agreement.

As Max turned to go back into the kitchen, Nestor cleared his throat. "Max, we'll be leaving tonight."

Max nodded but didn't turn around.

"For good, Max," Nestor added.

Max half turned, exposing an open mouth and sad eyes. He stiffened somewhat and walked into the kitchen.

As darkness fell, Max sat in the living room watching television while Nestor and I dined on left-over duck, black beans and rice. Max had not said a word for over four hours. Afterwards, we went upstairs to prepare for our escape from Puerto Vallarta.

Nestor laid out two sets of camouflaged fatigue outfits, consisting of trousers, jackets, caps, belts, olive T-shirts and heavy boots. "The one on the right is a little too small for me. It should fit you. The boots should fit. You wear nine, ten?"

"Nine and a half," I said, changing into the alien clothing.

He walked into the closet and brought out two loaded backpacks. "These have all the provisions we'll need."

"When did you put all this together?" I wondered if they'd been sitting there for years.

"This morning while you slept. I closed the closet door while I worked."

"Oh," I said, watching him unzip different sections to show me what had been included.

The packs were loaded with everything from dried and canned food to knives, and nine-millimeter pistols, each with three loaded clips.

He went back into the closet and brought out two select-fire Uzi assault rifles and two canteens. "Wear the canteen on your belt and carry the Uzi with the strap over your shoulder. Extra clips are in the backpack. Have you ever shot something like this?"

"No," I said, handling the surprisingly short weapon gingerly.

"How about a pistol?"

"No." I looked up in time to see his eyes roll up. "But I'm a really fast learner."

"God, I hope so." He chuckled, but I knew that he was very concerned.

"Do you think you could kill someone?"

The question stunned me, leaving me speechless. The thought had never occurred to me, but as it suddenly did, the vision of the auburn-haired Colombian's disintegrating neck almost made me vomit.

"Could you?" Nestor prodded.

"How did you kill the Colombian with the cowboy hat?" I asked, somehow needing to know.

"I knew where all of them were. I used gloves, surprised him, slashed his throat, used the scoped rifle on the other one, pressed fingerprints onto the knife, pressed fresh ones on the trigger." He studied my face. "As you know, Bruno got away."

"They were going to kill you," I said, more to myself than to Nestor. "They were waiting for you." I looked at all the equipment, thought of all the miles of jungle that lay ahead, lifted my gaze to the face of the man I loved. It was the face of a man

who was vibrant, alive and full of love for me. "Yes . . . for you, I can kill."

He smiled and nodded his head in approval. "Now, the contents of the safe." He returned to the closet as I followed.

The safe was about two foot square and bolted to the floor in the corner of the closet. Kneeling, he dialed the combination, and the safe door opened, revealing two cigar boxes. He took the boxes and led me back to the bed.

Inside the first box was the deed to the house, a stack of several U.S. one hundred-dollar bills, and a key to a safe-deposit box.

"I'll sign the house over to Max." He broke out five bills and handed them to me, stuffing the rest inside the thigh pockets of his fatigue trousers. "This is the principal. The interest will come when we get to Caracas and open up this safe-deposit box."

I looked at the other cigar box, which brought a broad, dimpled smile to Nestor's face.

He opened it, exposing two gemstone bags. "These are my pride and joy—a story behind every one." He poured out a handful of gemstones of various colors and sizes onto the white sheet of the bed. Picking up the largest stone, he handed it to me to feel. "An emerald, almost flawless, over eleven carats. Easily worth a quarter to half mill."

My mouth flew open. "How . . . ?"

"My father gave it to me to hide. He took it from the corpse of a man who had stolen it from a Colombian courier."

I handed it back, and he replaced it with two smaller green stones. "The light one is a natural green diamond, about five carats. The other is a six-carat tsavorite."

"Never heard of it."

"It's a garnet from eastern Africa and worth more than most emeralds of the same size. Very rare."

I placed them on the sheet and pointed at the others. "They're all beautiful."

"None of them are under a carat. There are blue sapphires, gold sapphires, tanzanites, rubies, African emeralds . . . and even one rare golden-green star sapphire."

"So this is what you've invested in all these years?" I couldn't keep my eyes off the stones.

"The best investments are things you can carry when things get tough." He opened the other bag and poured out a handful of small gold coins. "If we make it to Venezuela, we can live well."

I couldn't keep from agonizing over my frozen assets in Los Angeles. More anxiety came over me when I thought of a subject that Max had brought up: whether or not Nestor could live anywhere but on the edge.

Nestor placed the coins back inside the bag and stuffed it inside my thigh pocket. "In case we get temporarily separated."

I suddenly felt panicky. "Separated?"

He leaned over and kissed me. "Temporarily, I promise. If we get boxed in, we separate. I'll find you somehow. Bruno and the Colombians won't kill you if they think you're the key to getting me. The same holds true for the American Feds. They won't take you back without taking me back, too. Just don't panic if it happens." He grinned. "I rescued my man once, and I can do it again."

I took a deep breath and sighed. "Then let's do it."

"Let's do it," Nestor said, about to get into the fatigues. Then he suddenly stopped and cocked his head.

"What?" I asked.

"I don't know." Nestor had a worried look on his face. "I'll be right back. Just stay where you are." He turned out the light and silently opened the door, leaving it ajar behind him.

I listened carefully and thought I could hear Max talking to someone in a hushed voice. A minute or so passed before Nestor slipped back inside the room and turned the lights back on.

"What happened?" I asked.

Nestor appeared grim. "Nothing," he said, hurriedly putting on the fatigues. He looked at me impatiently, prompting me to quickly dress and stuff my passport and another \$460 into my pockets.

As Max sat in the dim light staring at us, Nestor told me to wait in the basement. He had the deed to the house in his hand, and I assumed that he wanted to try and make amends prior to leaving. I didn't want to witness their parting anyway.

Downstairs with my backpack, suitcase and Uzi, I noticed a doorway I'd not seen before. It had a window in it and revealed a car inside a garage. Looking through the glass, I could see that it was a fairly new Volvo, surrounded by even more antiques. I waited.

A short time later, Nestor came down the stairway and turned off the alarm switch. He seemed to force a smile and opened the door to the garage.

"Aren't you going to re-arm the system?"

"Max'll do it," he mumbled, opening the back door and throwing his pack onto the seat. He took mine and threw it inside next to his, then he looked at the suitcase, finally deciding to place it in the trunk. Closing the back door, he opened the front passenger door for me.

As I got inside the car, I could see an element of sadness in his eyes.

He opened the manual garage door, peered out, and carefully scanned the area. Satisfied that there was no trap set for us, he got into the car and pulled out a set of keys.

"How'd he take it?" I asked.

"Okay, I guess. He didn't say much." Nestor started the car and backed out of the garage.

"I'll do it," I said, getting out to close the garage door.

Nestor drove to the Manzanillo Highway and headed south.

"So where do we leave the car and go into the jungle?" I wondered why Nestor hadn't looked at me since he got inside the car. "Do we bury the suitcase? Maybe I should have just left it behind, huh?"

"We were going to leave the car up in the hills near the Cuale River, but I think that might be a mistake. They'll probably fan out from Puerto Vallarta and catch up with us in no time. Max said he'd report the car stolen in three days. That'll give us a big jump. Maybe we can make it to near the Belize border."

I was confused. "I don't understand. What was the original plan?" I looked at the dash lights dancing on his eyes in the darkness and thought I saw a different man.

"To head out on foot to Guadalajara, maybe take long enough to make them think we'd gotten out of the country. I planned to steal a car at night and drive it all night, then abandon it and go on foot for another few days. I figured we could've kept doing that until we reached the other side of the Yucatan peninsula. I have an old friend like the one in Mexicali. He lives in Chetumal on the Caribbean side. He's the captain of a ship that hauls coffee and cotton from Guatemala to Jamaica, then takes on sugar and rum and heads for Trinidad, where he takes on cocoa bound for Panama." He sighed wearily. "Trinidad is less than ten miles from Venezuela. Northwestern Trinidad reaches out to Venezuela with a group of islands. The area's called 'Dragon's Mouths,' and you can almost swim across. I hope you know how to swim."

"Swimming ten miles? Dragon's mouths? I can see it all now: we survive all the way to Trinidad and get eaten by sharks just off the coast of Venezuela!"

That got a laugh out of him. "We'll do it the easy way with a boat."

But he settled into pensive silence again, and I got the feeling that he wanted to be left alone.

An hour or so later, he urged me to hop in back to get some sleep. He wanted to get as far as possible, stopping only for getting gas and urinating.

TWENTY-FOUR

Nestor awakened me and told me it was my turn to drive.

"Where are we?" I asked, yawning.

"Toluca. Mexico City is just up ahead."

"Me? Drive through Mexico City?" I was aghast. "A city of a hundred million people, with traffic worse than L.A. and very few freeways?"

Laughing, he pulled over to the shoulder. "I bought gas awhile back, so you won't have to fill up again until way past Veracruz." He slipped out of the car and traded places with me. "Look for Highway One-ninety, then look for the toll road to Veracruz." He pulled several ten-thousand peso bills out of his pocket and dropped them in the front seat. "For the tolls and the next time you get gas."

"What about food?" I asked, irritated. "I need coffee and breakfast."

"And what would you be doing right now if we'd stuck with the original plan through the jungle?"

"Making coffee over a fire and eating canned breakfast," I snapped. "Besides, I have to piss."

Grinning, he shook his head and pointed at a sign up ahead. "There's a restaurant. Looks like they're open for breakfast."

"Thank you," I said, bowing my head.

The restaurant turned out to be quite good. Nestor had milk while I drank very strong coffee, and both of us had *huevos rancheros*. We weren't even stared at, and I assumed that the other patrons thought we were some form of Mexican military.

Back on the road, Nestor began to snore as I got deeper and deeper into Mexico City traffic. Somehow I found the tollway and drove to Veracruz in very good time. In Alvarado on the Bay of Campeche, I stopped for gasoline and found a fruit stand nearby, where I bought bananas and oranges.

Near dusk, I reached the outskirts of Villahermosa and pulled over. I turned to look at Nestor, who was sleeping so peacefully that I hated to awaken him. Studying his face, I could see that his eyes were moving rapidly under their lids. He was dreaming. Then his face began to contort, and I realized that he was having a nightmare.

He yelled out and bolted upward, startling me.

"It's okay, Nestor," I said calmly.

He looked at me wildly.

"You were having a nightmare."

He shook his head and held his forehead. "Oh... oh... uh... where are we?"

"Villahermosa."

As the name of the city sunk in, he appeared pleased. "Hey, dude, you did good!"

"And now it's your turn to do good, *dude*," I shot back.

"But I need coffee," he whined, mimicking me.

We changed places and I lay down in the seat, exhausted.

"When you awaken next, we'll be in Ciudad Chetumal and about to board a ship."

"So how do you know his ship will be there? What if it's in Jamaica? What if he's retired or dead?" I was already falling asleep.

"Then we'll have to figure out something else," I vaguely heard him say.

TWENTY-FIVE

I felt the strange sensation of an object being placed between my cheek and gum. There followed the sound of a car door opening and closing gently. I awakened to dead silence then bolted up and looked around.

It was still dark, and the car was shrouded in fog. I could smell the odor of fish and sea air and, with the help of an almost full moon, I saw what looked like towering wharf cranes in the distance. But Nestor was nowhere in sight.

I felt around for his pack, but it wasn't there. Remembering the object in my mouth, I took it out and found it was a balled gum wrapper. Climbing into the driver's seat, I felt for the keys and found them in the ignition. I opened the door to turn the dome light on, then unraveled the ball. It said: *temp sep patience swallow*. As my face numbed, I quickly shut the door and locked both sides. I swallowed the ball and slid down in the seat, scanning the area. I translated Nestor's message: "Temporary separation. Patience. Swallow."

Oh God, not again, I thought.

I heard the sound of a car engine and saw the ghostly outline of a sedan approaching the car. It stopped 20 or so yards away, and two men with assault rifles got out. They began walking in opposite directions, ostensibly trying to surround me.

I thought of the Uzi in the back seat, but knew it was no use. Nestor was sure that they wouldn't kill me. That's what the separation was all about. But how did he know the Colombians were here?

A very faint sound of a siren wafted through the thick, wet air, causing me to roll down my window. I looked at the heavily armed men and saw that they had stopped to listen. And as the siren came directly for us, the two men ran to get inside the sedan, which moved away from the direction of the siren. Then there were two sirens and the eerie sight of flashing red and white lights.

A police car screeched to a halt several yards in front of the car as another one pulled up at an angle on my side. Bright headlights blinded me. Instructions in Spanish were barked at me through a megaphone.

Terrified, I opened the door and quickly held my hands up in the air. Hearing running footsteps, I closed my eyes and felt my body being thrown to the ground on my face as my hands were tied behind me with plastic restrainers.

As the heat and humidity took all the life out of me, I sat in the dank, sun-streaked interrogation room, dabbing at the cut on my nose with some facial tissues someone had given me. I'd already been "interrogated" in Spanish for over an hour, and the officer finally stormed away in frustration.

The door opened and a young-looking man in uniform walked in. He had two bars on each shoulder. "You speak English?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes," I said.

"American?"

"Yes."

He sat facing me from across a table. "You are in very big trouble, Señor."

I rolled up my eyes. "I figured as much."

"You can save us a lot of trouble if you would dictate a confession and sign it. The courts take kindly to such cooperation as well." He smiled, no doubt assuming that I would.

"What am I being accused of?" Blood began to trickle down my nose, so I dabbed it again. "What am I supposed to have done?"

"Murder, robbery, grand theft, burglary . . ."

It took awhile to sink in. "Murder?"

"The murder of Maximillion Dorfmann."

I shook my head in denial. "Oh my God."

"Why do you say, 'Oh my God'?"

I kept shaking my head in disbelief.

"Do you want to make a statement?"

"I . . . I, uh . . . want to . . . to see a lawyer," I stuttered.

Suddenly, nothing seemed real to me. Something snapped and I was incapable of saying anything.

The next few hours were like a dream. I was questioned more, but it did them no good. The lieutenant said something about extradition to Puerto Vallarta. The car was impounded, as were the weapons, backpack and my suitcase. The cash, gold and passport were confiscated and placed inside an evidence pouch, which was given to a detective sitting in a corner. Another detective was handcuffed to my left wrist. I assumed that they were with the Puerto Vallarta police.

Sometime in mid-afternoon, I was escorted to a small airport, where I waited with my two companions for the next milk run flight to Mexico City. No doubt, there would be a transfer in Mexico City for Puerto Vallarta. About the time that the thirty-passenger turboprop plane was available for boarding, the consequences finally hit me. I was about to be indicted and tried for the murder of Max, and I had absolutely no defense. Even if I chose to tell the police that Nestor had done it, I would still be guilty as an accessory. But what if Nestor got me out of this jam, too? No, I had to keep my mouth shut. I had to believe in Nestor. *Temp sep patience swallow*.

The detective attached to me pointed to a seat near the rear, so I sat down. He sat next to me and helped me fasten my seat belt. The other detective sat across the aisle from us, holding the envelope with the valuables in his lap.

A short time later, we were airborne and my attention turned to a heavy-set man in sunglasses. I found it odd that he was wearing a jacket. He got out of his seat and stretched, then walked to the back toward us. He smiled at both the detectives and reached for a magazine in a rack behind us. A short, wiry man, also with sunglasses, got up and walked toward the cockpit.

I heard what sounded like two sneezes and turned to see blood spurting from the head of the detective next to me. The warm liquid sprayed onto my left chest, and I watched in horror as the man's eyes became glazed. The detective across the aisle had fallen forward, his neck shattered and bent back grotesquely. I looked up at the big man, who was holding a pistol with a silencer. He nonchalantly reached inside the shirt pocket of the detective attached to me and pulled out a key to the handcuffs. After unlocking the cuffs, he took both detectives' pistols, stuffing them inside his belt. Finally, he held up his hand in a gesture that told me to stay put.

Meanwhile, the other gunman had entered the cockpit, and the airplane began to bank toward the Caribbean. A woman passenger with a puzzled expression turned around to see the heavy-set man holding his pistol. He merely held up his finger to his lips, intimidating her into silence. One by one, all the other passengers became aware of the hijacking and fell into terrified muteness.

As the gunman kept an eye on the other passengers, I cautiously reached across the aisle and retrieved the envelope. Without the gunman noticing, I tore it open and stuffed the contents into several pockets.

We landed on the runway of an abandoned airfield about an hour and a half later. I assumed we were in remote northern Nicaragua. The airfield had to belong to the cartel and was probably originally built by the CIA for the Contras. Incredibly, an unmarked private jet and a fuel truck were waiting for us. While the commuter plane refueled, the two gunmen bound my hands in front with tape, led me off the plane, and escorted me to the smaller aircraft. A closer look revealed that the plane's identification numbers had been masked by plastic and tape. Then I saw a battered pickup truck speeding toward the runway and recognized its passenger as Bruno.

As he boarded the small plane and sat down next to me in the back, the commuter plane began to taxi for takeoff. "Nice to see you again," he said, grinning triumphantly.

After the larger plane was in the air and heading back to Mexico, the big gunman got into the front seat of our plane on the passenger side. The short, wiry man tore off the plane's I.D. masking and assumed the role of pilot.

"Aren't you barking up the wrong tree?" I asked, wondering what fate awaited me.

The jet engines revved up, and the plane sped down the runway.

"Not at all," he yelled over the roar.

"You think my white knight will come to save me again?"

"Of course."

I shook my head and made an attempt at laughter. "He just framed me for murder, so why should he risk his life to save me from you? He's used me to get to Puerto Vallarta. He's used me to get to Yucatan. But he has no more use for me now . . . and you should know that."

"He saw that we had the port watched, so he tipped off the police to have them get to you before we did. I wonder why?"

"To create a diversion and use me one last time. It obviously worked."

"I think it was to save you from us."

I glanced at him. "Oh, I see. So you torture me, and I tell you where he is." I chuckled. "Do you really believe he was stupid enough to tell me where he was going?"

"Would you be stupid enough to follow him and risk your life if he didn't?"

I bitterly laughed with gusto. "So who do you think is more stupid, him or me? He's on his way to sweet retirement, and I'm on my way to hell." I turned to look at him squarely and saw that I had placed doubts in his mind. It was only fitting in light of the growing doubts in mine.

The plane flew at low altitudes and was never challenged by any military aircraft, which led me to believe that practically every Central American country was cooperating with the Colombian, Peruvian and Bolivian cartels. I wondered how many "Brunos" there were in the DEA and CIA, and I became convinced that the whole drug interdiction program was a big joke like Nestor had implied. Where there were huge profits, there were many greedy and corrupt hands grasping for a cut. And the corruption reached to the highest levels of all the countries in the Americas. *My country 'tis of thee, my ass.*

Eventually the plane landed at another remote airstrip: in Panama, I guessed. Bruno was silent throughout the refueling and looked around nervously. *Was he worried that Nestor would*

miraculously show up again? Or perhaps he was worried about what the Mexican government would do.

I desperately wanted to hurt Bruno, even if it meant a quick whack to the nose. And then I thought: *why not a little verbal assault?* after which I abruptly said, "Aren't your DEA bosses getting a little suspicious about your being gone so long?"

"We get vacations like everyone else," he said absently.

"Has it ever occurred to you that Nestor knows who you are?"

He looked at me with a blank expression.

Bingo, I thought, gleefully imagining his mind spinning madly as he tried to remember if he'd ever met Nestor.

"Does he?"

Was there an element of subdued panic in his voice?

"He not only knows you, but he called the U.S. Attorney's office in Houston and fingered you," I said as coolly as I could. Of course, I had no idea if he really had.

Bruno's panic could no longer be subdued. He glanced nervously at the two men in the front seats, probably wondering if they knew enough English to hear what I'd said. "You're lying."

I was on a roll. "How important are you to the cartel if your cover is blown?"

He studied me for several seconds, then a smile crept to his face. "Okay, who am I?"

"Bruno."

"Not my real name, my man. Not my real name." He chuckled. "The name 'Bruno' means shit to the DEA." He ignored me and looked down into the jungles below.

I was disappointed that I'd not found Bruno's Achilles heel, but I still felt that I'd planted the seed of fear in his brain.

By the looks of the terrain and the high mountains, I could tell that we were off the coast of Colombia. The pilot got on the radio and spoke in Spanish. I assumed that it would be no big deal getting clearance to land since the flight had obviously originated in Colombia with proper flight plans filed—and maybe even a few officials' palms enriched with currency. I had no doubt that my kidnapping operation was part of a very large contingency plan with similar planes and teams located at strategic locations throughout Central America.

About thirty minutes later, we landed on what appeared to be a private airstrip between two hills. In the distance was a city that I assumed was Cúcuta. I would soon be among some of the most ruthless and cunning international drug manufacturers and smugglers the world has ever known. "Oh well, it could be worse," I whispered to myself. "It could've been the boys in Medellín or Cali."

"What?" Bruno appeared jumpy. Had I psyched him out? "The Cúcuta bunch are pussycats compared to the ones in Medellín and Cali."

"But formidable nonetheless. You're dreamin' if you think he'll try to get me out of here." But then again, I had no idea what Bruno had in mind. Perhaps *Bruno* didn't even know what the Cúcuta boys had in mind. Maybe that was the reason he was so jumpy. After all, he was only a mole: valuable in the scheme of things, yet expendable. These guys wanted their own man back—the one who was languishing in a Houston jail, awaiting the outcome of the plea bargain with Nestor. They desperately wanted back their "big cheese" who'd been kidnapped by DEA agents in Panama and who would rot in prison and implicate a lot of people associated with all the cartels when he finally realized that he'd never get out.

As the plane came to a halt, a black limousine drove out onto the tarmac. The two thugs in front got out of the plane and

held the seats up so Bruno and I could exit.

"Hey, V.I.P. treatment," I said, trying to appear flippant in order to psyche Bruno out more. And just for good measure: "You know, Bruno . . . killing Nestor won't necessarily do the trick. They'd have to rely on a Federal judge to force the Justice Department to let the big cheese go because of lack of evidence. Maybe one will . . . then maybe not."

Bruno stared grimly at the limousine.

"You know what I think? They're thinking deal." *Chew on that one, motherfucker*, I thought, chuckling as he staggered out of the airplane.

Bruno and I sat riding backwards, facing two impeccably dressed, tanned, well-groomed men. One was in his forties, very attractive, and built like Nestor. The other appeared to be in his late fifties or early sixties. He was powerfully built and had a short, snow-white fringe of hair around a partially bald head. He looked like a white-headed version of the great Russian weight lifter, Alexiev, with the same good looks and hands twice the size of mine.

He extended the hand to me. "Welcome to Cúcuta." He took off his sunglasses, exposing piercing, near-black eyes. "I am called '*El Oso Blanco*.' It means 'the polar bear' in Spanish." His voice was deep, his accent, thick.

Damn! There's nothing cold about you, Big Daddy, I thought. "A pleasure," I said shaking his beefy hand and nodding respectfully. I glanced down at his crotch and saw what appeared to be a proportional bulge. "My name is Byron Sweet."

The big man half-smiled and glanced at Bruno, who sat stiffly. "I knew your Christian name was Byron, but I did not know your last name. In Spanish, your last name is '*dulce*'. Did you know that?" He spoke thickly accented English confidently and without hesitation.

"Yes, I did. It also means 'pleasant', doesn't it?"

Oso smiled at Bruno, then at me. "Ah, but you are not here under pleasant conditions." He inspected my cut nose. "You are . . . how we say . . . *romantically involved* with a man who has caused us much grief, and we think you know where he is." His eyes narrowed, sending a chill through me.

Think! Throw him off, or it's torture time, Byron. "He was betrayed by my country," I said, suppressing a nervous gulp. "He has no intention of testifying. All he wants is to retire to Panama with me and get out of all this. They would have killed him after he testified against your man. That done, they knew that your man would have plea-bargained for Bruno's identity in return for a shorter sentence—maybe even extradition to Colombia." I was amazed at how knowledgeable I sounded. But was I also digging my own grave?

The big man mulled over what I'd said.

"Bullshit," spat Bruno.

Oso, the obvious leader of the cartel, silenced him with a raised hand. "With Nestor dead, the Americans have no case against my brother. They will have to release him."

Brother? The drug kingpin in Houston is your brother? I almost said out loud. "With all due respect, *El . . . uh, Don?* I'm sorry, I . . ."

"*Don Oso*," advised Bruno.

"Thank you," I said, nodding politely. "But trusting the U.S. Attorney's office was the big mistake Nestor made."

"I don't believe that. I think Nestor's escape with you was a charade, a diversion. Nestor is an agent for the U.S., and his mission is to find out Bruno's identity and take him back to the U.S. What feathers in their caps that would be to have both Bruno and my brother!"

"Nestor knows about Bruno already."

Both Colombians slowly looked at the thin man.

"Nestor never made me," gasped Bruno. "He's making this up."

"You never introduced yourself to me, Bruno," I snapped.

"Nestor told me who you were. If he didn't know who you were, why did he try to shoot you when you were on the boat in Banderas Bay? That certainly doesn't sound like attempted kidnapping to me!"

Bruno's mouth flew open as he struggled to rebut me. His eyes flicked back and forth from the drug lords to me.

"Think about it," I said. "Why would Nestor try to kidnap Bruno? Do you really believe that he wants to be running from you the rest of his life?"

The big man raised his hand again, but his expression was now radically different. Did he respect me, or was I reading him wrong? Somehow I knew that the guy liked me. And if he liked me, then perhaps he would believe me.

We pulled into the driveway of one of the most opulent mansions I'd ever seen. It was a palace, complete with awesomely armed guards, well-manicured lawns and shrubs, towering royal palms, a fleet of luxury cars, an olympic-sized swimming pool, four tennis courts—all of it perched atop a hill overlooking a verdant jungle valley with towering mountains in the background. What appeared to be a child's birthday party was being celebrated on an expanse of lawn. Uniformed waiters walked among the guests, offering refreshments. How incongruous it was to see such familial goings-on at the home of such a notorious drug smuggler.

Two male servants rushed to open the doors for us, and we got out of the car. Oso led the way into the house.

At the base of a grand, ornate staircase, he turned and looked at his bounds. "Cut him loose. We don't bring prisoners into this house."

Bruno cut the tape with a pocket knife.

"Take Mister Sweet upstairs and show him to a guest bedroom," Oso instructed an approaching butler. He looked at his watch. "Gomez will find some decent clothing for you and help you clean up for dinner . . . in about thirty minutes." He walked away, glancing back at Bruno. "Come with us," he said gruffly.

I followed the rather nondescript, sixtyish butler up to an extraordinarily beautiful and tastefully decorated bedroom, where he turned and inspected me. He appeared to be guessing my clothing sizes. Nodding to himself, he led me into a state-of-the-art bathroom and placed a fluffy bath towel on the marble sink counter.

When he walked out of the bathroom, I quickly pulled out the cash and the gold and placed it inside an empty drawer. I placed my wallet and passport on the bathroom counter. Then I stripped and got into the shower, allowing the hot stream of water to take some of the tension out of my body. For some reason, I wasn't necessarily afraid, but I was terribly confused. I couldn't believe that so many incredible things were happening to me.

When I got out of the shower, I found that Gomez had placed some swabs and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide on the counter next to the towel. Opening a medicine chest, I found a packaged toothbrush, some toothpaste, a bottle of mouthwash, and a shaving kit. He'd also taken away my smelly fatigues, so I was relieved that I'd stashed the money away.

After drying off and disinfecting my cut nose, I brushed my teeth and shaved. Feeling much better, I walked into the bedroom and found a blue silk *guyaberra* shirt that fit me perfectly. Gomez had also laid out a pair of brief underwear, a pair of white trousers and leather sandals.

I was escorted by another servant to a small villa in back of the main house. Inside, Oso, Bruno and the other partner were sitting at a dining table for four, speaking in Spanish. They stopped talking when I entered, and the big boss motioned for me to join them.

I sat down and scanned their grim faces. I got the feeling that everything had been discussed, and something had been decided about what to do next. Considering that Bruno's face was flushed, I figured that he wasn't happy with the outcome.

The younger partner nodded at a servant, who began serving soup.

"We just received word from an associate in Panama City," said Oso. "Some man identifying himself as a friend of Nestor made several calls to some of our associates in Panama. He wanted to make a deal for a lot of money in return for Nestor's location in Puerto Vallarta. He wouldn't give the location until he had assurances, so our man arranged to have a Mexican associate meet Nestor's friend with the money at a park bench on the *Malecón*. Unfortunately, the man did not show up." He studied me then glanced at Bruno. "What can you tell me about this?"

I felt a deep sense of relief that Nestor hadn't killed Max because of a drunken threat. Looking back over that night, I realized that Nestor must have overheard one of the calls and killed Max just before we left. "I didn't know that Max was dead until the police arrested me in Chetumal. I didn't even know why Nestor killed him at the time. Now, of course, I do. Nestor must have overheard the conversation. The original plan was to ditch the car nearby and head for Guadalajara with the backpacks. I should have known that something had gone wrong when we kept the car and drove practically all the way to the Belize border. When we arrived in Chetumal, I was asleep in the back seat. Nestor must have known that your men were watching the port. Apparently, he slipped out and called the police. By that time, Max's body must have been found and his car reported stolen. It was his way of protecting me from you. And had your men not highjacked that plane, I'm sure that Nestor would have done it himself."

As Bruno ate his soup sullenly, the big man looked at me in amazement. He turned to his partner and translated what I'd said. The partner likewise looked at me in amazement.

"This is something new for me," said Oso, smiling cordially. "All my life, I have been taught that men like you were cowards, that you would never lay your life on the line for a comrade. This love you have for one another is . . . On the surface, it is no different from the love I have for my partner, José Luis." He glanced at his burly, quiet partner. "We would lay down our lives for each other, too, but we have no sexual attraction to one another."

"I find you both enormously attractive." It just fell out of my mouth. *You idiot!* I reprimanded myself silently. *All you've gained you've just lost by insulting them, and they're two of the most dangerous men in the fucking world!*

But instead of being insulted, the big man laughed and told the other what I'd said.

José Luis shook his head and guffawed.

Bruno, on the other hand could only manage to mumble, "Fuckin' faggot," which the two Colombians missed hearing.

As the laughter died down, I began to eat my soup.

"So where do you think he is?" asked Oso easily, pleasantly.

"I don't know," I said as sincerely as I could.

"He's lying," Bruno said through clenched teeth.

"Don Oso, Nestor never told me what would happen

next," I countered. "He didn't even know himself." I wondered how much of the truth I could tell without compromising Nestor. "We were going to try to get aboard a freighter in Belize."

"Bound for where?" Oso cocked his head. It was show time.

"Some port in Honduras."

"La Ceiba?"

"Was it a trick? It sounded right." "Yeah, I think so."

"To pick up what?"

"Coffee and bananas."

"For where?"

"Uh . . . Jamaica, I think."

"To pick up what?"

I strained to remember what Nestor had told me. "Sugar and rum."

"Then where? To Panama?"

"No. To Costa Rica."

"What port? San José?"

Trick question, I realized. San José was inland. "No, it was . . ."

"Limón?"

"Yes, I believe it was." I remembered the back packs.

There had obviously been a dual reason for the backpacks and camouflaged clothing. "He knows an official there who would have allowed us to get off the ship. We were going to hike through the jungles to Panama. He said he had a family place in the hill country of western Panama," I lied. "We were going to settle there."

I could tell that the big boss was impressed. In my heart, I knew that he believed me. I looked at Bruno, who appeared defeated.

Two servants took away the soup bowls and brought in the main course: assorted broiled meats with fried yucca and black beans. They even poured a California Cabernet Sauvignon.

That night, I lay in the king-size bed and listened to the alien sounds produced by insects, frogs and other small animals. Sleep was impossible. In spite of the fact that I was treated quite well, I could see no reason why they shouldn't blow my brains out after they were done with me. Bruno considered me a definite threat and would never allow me to live if it were up to him.

I heard footfalls from the hallway outside and heard my door slowly open. Sure that it was Bruno stealing in for the kill, I prepared to jump out of bed and dive out of the second floor window if I had to.

"Byron?" It was a familiar voice.

I sat up and saw the big man approaching my bed. He was wearing a robe.

"Don Oso?" I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"Nestor just called me from the U.S. Embassy in Caracas," he said in a hushed voice. "He was with a high-level DEA official."

"Nestor?" My voice rose in excitement.

"Shhhhh," he admonished. "Bruno is sleeping across the hall. Be very quiet." He sat on the edge of the bed. "The DEA apparently has my private number. He knew you would be here." He sighed. "The man being held by the U.S. in Houston is my brother, Ignacio. The DEA kidnapped him from Colón in Panama. They cannot defeat Medellín or Cali, so they pick on us." His voice quavered with bitterness and hatred, then he seemed to try to collect himself. "Sometimes we have to be smart instead of bold. We have to make deals that give us less than what we want, but more than what we would get if we failed. It is much like plea bargaining, no? I am a very flexible, eclectic man, perhaps a little

daring at times. That is why I made a deal with Nestor and the DEA."

"A deal?" *Was I dreaming?*

"First and foremost, I want Ignacio back."

I felt a strong sense of *deja vu*.

"Of course, I thought that with Nestor out of the picture, my brother would be released . . . but I now know that such is not the case. The Americans are becoming more determined, their tactics more and more illegal."

He paused. Was it reluctance? He was such a powerful man, yet he suddenly seemed so vulnerable.

"The Americans, on the other hand, want Ignacio *and Bruno*. But now they must choose, and it seems they want Bruno more." He sighed. "So . . . there will be a swap—you and Bruno for Ignacio—in neutral territory, an area we both avoid: Venezuela."

I found it so very hard to believe.

"It will happen the day after tomorrow, just over the border in a town called Casigua. Bruno will be told that we have a tip on where Nestor will cross over into Colombia and that we will intercept him just inside Venezuela. We will tell him that Nestor enlisted an old friend to help him get into Venezuela through Maracaibo . . . and that the old friend thought he could make some big money by warning us."

"Will Bruno buy that?"

"He is obsessed with Nestor. Yes, I think he will. It is logical to assume that Nestor would enter Venezuela at Maracaibo, then cross into Colombia near here, surprise us, rescue you, and get lost in the Venezuelan mountains."

"Why are you sharing all this with me?"

"I need your cooperation. One false move . . . and there could be a bloodbath." He stood up and faced me. "Bruno, José Luis and I will be away most of the day tomorrow. You are my house guest, so feel free to use the pool. Gomez will take good care of you."

And Gomez will undoubtedly shoot me if I try to escape, I thought. "Don Oso . . ."

"Yes?"

"I want to thank you."

"No, no. Please, do not thank me. I am not a saint, my friend. I do this because it is the only way. Had it been expedient to kill you, I would have done so with no remorse."

His comment failed to chill the surge of passion I suddenly felt for him. "I want to show my gratitude anyway," I said softly, holding out my hand to his sash. I looked up at his face, but I couldn't see his eyes. Unable to determine his reaction, I felt intimidated and pulled my hand back somewhat.

After a pause of several seconds, he took a step forward and allowed me to undo his robe. His cock was already half erect and extraordinarily thick. As I grabbed it, more blood gushed into it, hardening it more.

Slipping out of bed, I knelt in front of him and inhaled his essence, which was potently masculine. The reflection from a security light outside made his white body hair glow like a ghostly nimbus. My trembling hands were drawn to his massive chest, where they combed through his expanse of silky, thick fur.

I went down on him and almost came as the taste of his precum registered in my brain. The idea that I was sucking the cock of such a dangerous man made me shudder with a potent combination of fear and lust. Opening wide my mouth and throat to accommodate his girth, I deftly took him in sleek strokes, causing him to lean into me. His big hands played with the back of my head.

"You are . . . *better* . . . than Gomez," he whispered

between heavy breaths.

He began to wildly hump my face, and I realized that he wanted it to be over quickly. As he tightly held the back of my head and tried to push his cock even further into my throat, he discharged a load of strong, virile jissom worthy of his name. Muffled feral grunts came from his nose. His perspiration and saliva peppered my head and face.

As I tried to claim his last drop, he backed away quickly; tying his sash, he walked to the door. I could sense that this "flexible, eclectic" man still possessed remnants of some form of forced morality. Maybe it was from his Catholic youth, assuming he had one. As evil as he was, some things were still sacred to him: his family, his friendships . . . his macho image. Was his word sacred, too? Gomez appeared to have been here for some time; maybe even he was cherished in some way. I thought of Oso's imminent betrayal of Bruno and wondered if he'd ever given the thin DEA agent his word.

He held his hand on the knob and glanced back at me. "That was incredible."

"No, *Don Oso*," I whispered. "You are incredible. You are indeed a great white bear."

He chuckled and left.

TWENTY-SIX

I awakened just before dawn with a slight pain of sunburn. While Oso, José Luis and Bruno were out the day before, I'd spent most of my time in and near the pool under the watchful eye of Gomez. I wanted to see if he would loosen up a little, but my efforts to get him involved in a personal conversation were politely thwarted. I wondered what he would think had he known that I had been declared the better cocksucker by his boss. In a perverse way, I felt disappointed that Oso hadn't come into my room again for seconds.

Hearing voices, I got out of bed and looked out my window, which overlooked the back of the house. Bruno and José Luis were packing assault rifles and ammunition underneath the removable steel bed of a rugged-looking pickup truck with Venezuelan license plates. When everything was in place, they lowered the bed, creating a false bottom.

I began to clean up in the bathroom and looked up to see Gomez standing in the doorway. He'd laid out a fresh blue *guyabarra* and tan trousers.

"Yes, Gomez?"

"Don Oso would like for you to join him for breakfast in fifteen minutes." He turned and headed for the bedroom door.

So he could speak English! "Oh, Gomez."

He stopped and looked back.

"How long have you worked for *Don Oso*?"

He inquisitively cocked his head. "Twelve years, *Señor*."

"He seems like a very decent man . . . a man of his word."

The servant's shy smile betrayed his feelings about Oso. "His word is golden, *Señor*."

"You've known him a long time?"

"Since we were children together. He is very kind to me and my mother." His smile faded as he looked at his watch. He looked at me, nodded and left.

I wondered if he knew just how much he'd told me.

As I shaved, I remembered something someone had said to me during the Gulf War. It had to do with Saddam Hussein: "Kiss the tyrant's ass . . . and live." Perhaps sucking one's dick would have the same effect.

Dressed, I distributed my wallet, passport, coins and cash into the trouser pockets and looked into the mirror to see if the bulges could be detected. Confident that they weren't that

conspicuous, I left the room.

During breakfast, Bruno glanced at me from time to time with a wry I-know-something-you-don't-know smile. Oso ignored me and talked in rapid Spanish to José Luis. As we finished, a servant took away the plates and poured more coffee.

Then Oso smiled at me. "Byron, how would you like to take a little drive with me this morning? You can see our coffee plantation, and I can show you Cúcuta."

I pretended to be pleasantly surprised. "Uh . . . yes, I'd love to see your spread."

Bruno seemed to have trouble keeping a huge smile from forming.

Oso looked at his gold and diamond Rolex watch. "Good, we can go as soon as the car is ready." He shouted orders to a servant, who ran out of the villa to the main house.

Excusing myself, I went to the bathroom to urinate. I heard laughter from the three men. Of course, I had no idea what to expect. There was no valid reason to believe anything Oso had said, our intimacy notwithstanding. But at that stage, I seemed to have lost my capacity for worrying. The depression, the anxiety—all of it had been replaced by numb compliance. I was in a foreign country with very dangerous people all around me. I was a fugitive who had nothing except a passport, some gold coins, a thousand dollars in cash and the promise of deliverance from a man perhaps as brutal and enigmatic as Oso.

After I returned to the table, the big boss went to the bathroom. Feeling Bruno's eyes burning into me, I could only stare dumbly into my coffee cup.

Oso and I were picked up in front by a limousine. Giving orders to the chauffeur in Spanish, he pressed a switch that raised a privacy panel between the driver's compartment and the rest of the limousine. "I do not enjoy betraying someone," he said, shaking his head.

I had no comment. After all, I still wasn't certain whether or not he was about to betray me.

"But then, Bruno is exposed, useless." He looked at me seriously. "And I am so very vulnerable now. I have no assurances that I will not be betrayed. Think of how delirious your government would be if they could hold and prosecute the whole troika of our cartel as well as their traitor."

"Surely you have contingencies," I said. "I saw José Luis and Bruno loading an arsenal into a pickup. You'll have others there, just in case, won't you? You're no fool, *Don Oso*."

He seemed impressed. "Okay, I tell you the plan. We scouted the designated area yesterday. Nestor even suggested it to prove his sincerity. North of Casigua there are many marshes, but there is a four-foot-thick elevated gravel pad which was abandoned years ago when the oil wells went dry. It is the size of a soccer field and is near the railroad to the northeast. It is approachable only by a dirt rail service road and isolated . . . except when trains go by. José Luis will first disarm Bruno and place a pistol to his head. Your government wants him alive to plea-bargain for the identities of a cell of rogue DEA and CIA agents. A DEA agent will almost certainly have a pistol to the head of my brother. After the exchange is made in the center of the pad, I will release you to Nestor. Then all of us walk our separate ways, and only Bruno is the loser."

"And if something goes wrong?" I thought of one of the often quoted Murphy's Laws.

"Then the contingencies."

I felt an immense desire for him again, and I loathed myself for wanting him for all the wrong reasons. He was utterly

masculine and very deadly. He was an enigma. To his enemies and victims, both direct and indirect, he was void of any moral sense and completely without social or spiritual values. But to people like Gomez and, no doubt, his family, he was a loving, decent man of principle. I wondered if he was perhaps a basically good man trapped in an environment that required ruthlessness just to survive. In any event, he was much less revolting to me than certain of America's "heroes," both living and dead.

"At the border crossing yesterday, they scrutinized us well. Colombians are not trusted by Venezuelans. We told them that we are driving to the fishing village of Solita on Lake Maracaibo, where we would make plans to take a boat to Maracaibo today."

"So they're expecting us?"

"Yes. I assume you had the presence of mind to bring your passport. I doubt if they will ask for it, but one never knows."

"Yes. It's about the only thing I still have," I lied, feeling the bulges in both pockets.

"We will wait for Bruno and José Luis just north of Petrólea up ahead. It is not far from the border crossing. There, I want you to begin hiding on the floor so that Bruno will think I shot you as I told him I would. From there, it is about forty kilometers to Casigua. You must stay out of sight from Bruno. He could turn this delicate operation into a disaster if he sees you or suspects betrayal." Then he looked at me, catching me glancing down at the growing disturbance in his crotch.

I looked back at the panel separating us from the driver.

"He cannot see or hear." With a shuddering sigh, he unzipped his trousers and pulled out his cock, which was reddish brown and bloated. It looked painful.

Even though I was excited over the possibility of soon being with Nestor, I couldn't resist Oso. Maybe I didn't really believe that Nestor would be there and wanted to do something I normally would never have the opportunity to do. Maybe I wanted to do something crazy during the last minutes of my life. Then again, perhaps I was just a sexual opportunist. It seemed very odd to me that I'd lived so long and never before encountered such men as Nestor and Oso.

He closed his eyes as I began devouring him with a vengeance. I unbuckled his belt and pulled down his trousers and boxer shorts, then I unbuttoned his shirt, exposing his ample, hairy belly. As if reading my mind, he took off his shirt, allowing me to better see his huge, powerful arms. It was as if some dark, wild side of my nature had been un-caged. I straddled him, licking his arms, shoulders and underarms. His nipples, fingers, chin—no part of his body was safe from my voracious mouth. I stuffed his testicles inside my mouth and licked his perineum, inciting him to lift his legs, which shook wildly as my tongue neared his sphincter. So very close to a line I'd never crossed, I pulled back and engulfed his cock in one fluid stroke.

I deep-throated his cock in slow, rhythmical lunges. His eyes opened and exposed a look of urgent lust. They clearly signalled that he wanted to fuck my mouth like he fucked his women: robustly and with power. Pushing me to the floorboard, he mounted my face and appeared enraptured over the sight of his glistening cock driving in and out of my mouth. Biting and moaning into an armrest, he flooded my mouth and throat with surprisingly sweet, nutrient-rich semen.

Breathless, he pushed himself up and fell into the seat. His cock, still oozing viscous fluid, flopped onto his belly. I staggered up from the floorboard and licked the discharge, then I squeezed his cock for what was left.

"No," he protested, gently pushing my chin. "Please. Sensitive."

In a frenzy, I pulled out my cock and took his fat thumb into my mouth. My cock convulsed, ejaculating again and again on the plush carpeting.

As the limousine idled on the side of the road, I sat on the floorboard at Oso's feet. He lowered the privacy panel.

He said something to the driver, who responded.

Even though I was looking into his eyes, he seemed unaware of me. His face revealed a growing anxiety. He began to sweat profusely.

"Don Oso," said the driver. "*José Luis y Bruno.*"

The big man quickly turned and looked out the back window. "*Bueno. Vamos.*"

As the driver accelerated, Oso reached into a compartment and pulled out a .45 caliber pistol. He pressed a button on the handle and the clip fell into his hand. Examining it, he pushed it back into the handle. Pulling back the slide, he released it with a snap. Decocking the pistol, he placed it back inside the compartment and looked straight ahead with a grim expression.

A short time later, the limousine slowed down and turned off to the right.

Oso glanced down at me. "They are ahead of us now. When they are allowed through, I want you to slowly sit up in the seat in the corner, so that Bruno cannot look back and see you. After we are allowed through, I want you to sit on the floor again. Okay?"

I nodded.

A little over ten minutes later, we slowed down.

"Here we are. José Luis is talking to the border guards now. Yes, they remember him and Bruno from yesterday." He watched intently. "They are laughing." He rubbed his sweaty hands onto his trousers in excitement. "They have been motioned on. Good. Now, slowly get up into the seat."

I slipped into the seat opposite him, as far to the passenger side as possible.

Passing by the fawning Colombian border guards, the limousine slowed and stopped behind a gate at the Venezuelan check point.

Oso lowered the window, greeting the guards in Spanish. They obviously recognized him as well, then looked at me. I smiled.

One guard went back inside the station shack, but the other one looked at me suspiciously.

Oso said something to him, and I recognized the word "*Americano.*"

The guard stared at me. "*Pasaporte, por favor, Señor.*"

Oso complained, but the guard ignored him.

I pulled out my passport and handed it to him, trying to still my shaking hand. Oso seemed to be going through hell.

The guard thumbed through the pages and shook his head. "*No estampa de Colombia.*"

Of course, my passport hadn't been stamped by Colombian customs. I half-turned my head and saw that Bruno had gotten out of the truck and was walking toward us.

Oso pulled out his wallet and fumbled to look inside. There were only a few bills of Colombian currency. Rivulets of sweat trickled down into his eyes.

I quickly reached inside my pants pocket and pulled out three hundred-dollar bills. I handed them to the guard, who stared at them, then turned to see if the other guard was watching.

Pocketing the bills, he waved us on. I looked to see where Bruno was and found him rushing back to the pickup truck. Dropping back onto the floorboard, I looked up at an ashen-faced Oso, who shook his head in relief and mussed my hair affectionately.

tionately.

But the tension began to mount again. Twenty-odd minutes later, the limousine left the paved highway and turned onto a poorly maintained dirt road.

"Just a few more minutes. Stay down," he said nervously.

For what seemed like an hour, the car bounced along the road. Then we suddenly stopped. Oso lowered the window and scanned the area. There was no wind, and the heat and humidity was stifling.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"José Luis and Bruno are getting out of the truck and opening up the false bottom. They are taking the weapons."

I heard the crackle of what sounded like a CB radio.

He picked up a phone and said something.

A man's voice came over the radio, apparently acknowledging Don Oso. There was the loud sound of helicopter rotor blades in the background.

"Bueno," the big man said, putting the phone away.

"Your contingency?" I asked.

"My contingency," he confirmed, scanning the area again. "Now they are taking up positions. Bruno appears suspicious. The plan as he knows it is that I would drive away the pickup so that Nestor cannot see the limousine or the pickup. You can get up, but keep your head out of sight."

I slowly rose and saw that the two men had moved to the perimeter of a flat pad of dirt and gravel. I could see how the pad had better allowed the working of the wells above the marsh. A railroad track was between the cars and the field, and beyond the field there was a river and what seemed to be an endless expanse of marsh. There were still ruins of both railroad and river loading docks. The few trees in the immediate area were tall, lush and exotic.

"Here they come," Oso whispered, reaching for the pistol in the compartment.

I turned to look up the road and saw a grey sedan heading toward us.

Looking back at the others near the pad, I saw that José Luis had disarmed a shocked Bruno and was holding a pistol to his head—all as planned.

The other car stopped, and the driver, a blond-haired man about thirty, got out with a pistol in his hand. He walked to the other side and opened the back door.

As a slight man with a dark complexion got out, Oso began to whimper with tears in his eyes. "Ignacio. Oh, Ignacio. You look good, my brother. They have treated you well."

The blond man placed his pistol to the head of Ignacio and led him to the opposite edge of the pad, a little less than a hundred yards from the other pair.

Oso then tapped me on the shoulder with his pistol.

"My turn?" I tried to say with a cracking voice.

As we got out of the limousine, the big man placed his pistol to my head and gently pushed me toward the railroad track. Crossing it, we walked over a few yards of spongy, muddy ground, then climbed atop the pad surface.

"Where is Nestor?" Oso yelled.

"In the car!" the blond man yelled back with an American accent. "First things first!"

Oso nodded to José Luis, who moved forward with Bruno.

"You sorry, lying motherfucker!" yelled Bruno at Oso. "I helped make you rich, you cut-throat sonofabitch! Without my help you wouldn't have gotten to first fucking base!" He began to sob.

At the same time, Ignacio and the American walked closer to the center of the pad. As the four men met, the American released Ignacio and re-trained his pistol on Bruno.

Another man got out of the grey sedan and went to help subdue and handcuff Bruno, who was now screaming obscenities and trying to kick the DEA agents.

But as yet another man slipped out with an assault rifle, Oso's chauffeur rose through the sun roof of the limousine with his own. The air became charged with unbearable tension.

"Don Oso?" I whispered urgently. Then I heard the faint sound of a helicopter in the distance.

"Do not panic," he soothed. "It is still a stand-off. They can hear the helicopter, and they are not stupid."

I looked at the grey car but couldn't see anyone else inside.

José Luis and Ignacio reached Oso, and the two brothers hugged and cried. Leaving me standing there, they gathered the assault rifles, walked to the limousine and got inside. The chauffeur slowly lowered his weapon and cautiously got behind the wheel. I watched as Oso made a call to the helicopter.

Whirling around, I watched as the three Americans handcuffed Bruno and placed tape over his mouth and ankles. They quickly carried him to the grey sedan and sped off.

Hearing the limousine's engine start, I turned and watched the Colombians drive away, bouncing over the bumps at high speed. As the sounds from both cars died away, so did the sound of the helicopter.

And then I was alone.

I was so alone that I felt invisible, even to the birds overhead, to the insects. I felt insignificant, worthy of nothing or no one. I was alive, which was a surprise, but it wasn't much consolation.

I looked at the abandoned pickup truck with the Venezuelan plates and wondered how much gas it had in it. *Would it make it to the nearest gas station? Would it stand up to a drive all the way to Caracas,* I wondered?

Then it came with a vengeance: the hurt of having been used, of having been cast away like a bag of garbage in the middle of nowhere.

A distant train whistle startled me. I sat down on the ground and watched as the long freight train passed by; its clacking wheels calmed me like a narcotic and made me ignore another sound in the distance.

As the train's caboose passed, I heard what sounded like a man yelling.

I stood up and turned toward the expanse of marsh between the pad and a lone tree about a quarter-mile away.

"Help!" The voice sounded weak, and I wondered if I had imagined it.

"Help!" Louder, more impatient.

"Byron, goddamnit!" It was Nestor's voice.

I ran to the far edge of the pad and saw Nestor, stuck in mud up to his waist, a laser-scoped rifle raised above his head.

"Nestor!" I yelled, afraid that he was in quicksand.

I ran down the slope and immediately found myself in mud up to my ankles. "I'm coming, Baby. I'm coming!" There was no time for emotion or celebration or trying to figure out what had happened. I needed to react fast and use my instincts.

"Test the ground before you step. Get close enough to pull me out with the rifle!"

I looked into his eyes and realized that he wasn't afraid, but he was certainly pissed off.

"Are you sinking?"

He laughed. "No, but I'm stuck like a fly to flypaper.

What a crock of shit. I'm supposed to be a goddamned trained commando!"

I saw a dead tree limb a few yards away and rushed to it, almost getting stuck in calf-deep mud."

"Watch it! Don't you get stuck too!" he yelled.

Retrieving the branch, I made my way back to the spot where I had been before and began testing the depth of the mud with it. Probing around him, I finally found a route which got me to within reach of the rifle.

He extended the rifle butt to me. "Don't shoot me now, goddamnit!"

"What do you think I am? Stupid?"

"Just hold on to the butt while I pull myself out. Don't try to pull me out."

"Okay!"

His olive green T-shirt was soaked with perspiration. His large biceps flexed and quivered as he struggled to pull himself out of the black, stinking mud. As he pulled almost free, he collapsed from exhaustion.

Taking the rifle away from him and jamming the butt into the mud, I grabbed his underarms and pulled with all my might, extricating him the rest of the way and pulling him atop of me.

Face-to-face, we looked into each other's eyes and gently kissed in spite of the sour mud smeared over our faces.

"It worked," he said, amazed.

"Of course it worked," I said immodestly. "Some people can tap into super-human strength when it comes to rescuing someone they love."

"I meant the *trade*, dude." He laughed and kissed me all over my face, spitting out the horrible tasting mud.

"Your idea?" I asked, holding him close as the reality of my good fortune hit me.

"Yeah, but the DEA had the clout to talk the Houston Federal prosecutor into it. They even had to get the Attorney General's office to approve it. All I did was convince my DEA buddy in Maracaibo that Bruno's capture would lead to far more drug interdiction and prosecutions than *El Oso Blanco's* brother. The DEA didn't even know there was an operating cell of the magnitude of Bruno's."

"They said you were in the car. Where in the hell were you? Up in that tree?" I pointed at it.

"Yeah, just in case something went wrong."

"You're always there for me, aren't you?" I looked away to find my composure. "Come on, let's get out of this awful mud," I said, pulling him to his feet and helping him up the slope.

We lay on our backs, shielding our eyes from the sun.

Eventually Nestor's breathing got back to normal and he sat up, looking at the truck. "Why'd they leave the truck?"

I thought about it. "For us, probably. It has Venezuelan tags, you know."

He smiled down at me. "How *decent* of them."

"Very convenient, huh, *dude*?" I said grinning.

"Come on. We have a long drive ahead of us."

I struggled to get up, then noticed the rifle in the mud. He followed my gaze. "Leave it. We don't need it any more."

"Are we safe now?"

"We're home free. The Feds don't want us; the cartel doesn't want us."

"Then . . . it's over."

"Yes, it is." He pored over my face lovingly. "Repeat after me: *Soy Venezolano.*"

"What does that mean?"

"It means, 'I am a Venezuelan.'"

"So how do I get a green card, or don't you have those things here?"

"Just leave everything to me."

"Don't I always? Let's see, uh . . . *Soy Venez . . .*"

"*Ve-ne-zo-la-no.*"

"*Soy Venezolano.*"

"*Bueno.*"

Near nightfall, we were on the outskirts of Caracas, and Nestor was looking for a place for us to stay.

"You still have the jewels?" I asked.

"You bet. I guess you lost your cash and the gold, huh?"

"Nope. Got it back." I shuddered when the image of the murdered Mexican police detectives flashed in my mind, but I quickly suppressed the memory.

"Well, you really don't need it so badly now. They lifted the freeze on your assets. At least they promised they would."

"Well, I'll be damned if I'll trust them enough to go back."

"Maybe they'll transfer the funds." He grinned impishly. "I do have some additional information to sell."

"Hey, maybe we could live pretty well over here after all, huh?"

"We could even *without* your assets," he added.

There was a lapse of silence, and I decided to start our relationship off on the right foot. "Nestor?"

"Yeah, Babe."

"What kind of relationship are we going to have?"

"What do you mean?"

"Monogamous, open . . . what?"

He gave me a puzzled look. "What kind would you like? I'm not jealous of you. All I ask is that you be careful."

"You're not jealous? You know, it's really weird, because I'm not jealous of you, either . . . and I'm a jealous type of guy. Why is that?"

"Jealousy and insecurity go hand in hand. We're secure with each other."

I mulled over what he'd said, and there was another period of silence.

"I had sex with *El Oso Blanco* . . . twice."

"What!?" he boomed, incredulous. He almost veered into another lane.

Oh, shit! I thought. *I've fucked up already.*

And then he began to laugh, his eyes wide with amazement. "I'd give my left *nut* to have that. Man, I've had the hots for that murdering gorilla for years!" He looked around and saw a motel up ahead. "We have to stop, Babe. We gotta get into a motel. That makes me hot as hell. I want you to tell me everything, okay? Everything, blow-by-blow."

Inside the motel, we made love until we were exhausted and in pain.

Lying on my side facing him, I watched as his eyes became heavy and he nodded off to sleep, snoring softly. Unable to take my eyes off him, I watched as he slept and found myself wishing that I could enter his head. I wanted to ride his rapid eye movements, to submerge into the depths of his dark side, to know the extent of his capacity to love me. Instead, I entered my own mind and found a completely altered man. I no longer feared that Nestor might want to continue living on the edge. I knew he would, knew he had to.

I knew I had to as well.

TWENTY-SEVEN

San Cristóbal, western Venezuela

March 19, 1993

Even though the calling distance was only a few miles, it was still an international call and very difficult to make. Nestor finally smiled.

"Is it ringing now?" I asked.

"*Hola,*" greeted Nestor, glancing up at me with a grin. "*Don Oso?* This is Nestor Guzman calling from San Cristóbal. Yes, we're just across the border from you." He made a gesture like he was dropping a pin, essentially telling me that Oso was so speechless that one could hear a pin drop. "Yes, *that* Nestor. How are you, my friend?" He smiled, melting me with those dimples. "No, I'm now semi-retired. I haven't left Venezuela since you returned my sweet Byron." He laughed. "No, I was there, all right. I was in a tree with a high-powered rifle aimed at your noble head." He laughed again, and somehow I got the impression that the big man was laughing with him. "Yes, he's here. Okay." He handed the phone to me. "He wants to say hello."

I vigorously shook my head in protest, but I couldn't resist talking to him again. "Hello?" I said softly.

"Byron?"

The sound of his voice actually sent vibrations to my groin. "Yes. *Don Oso?*"

"This is a pleasant surprise," he said. "I have thought a lot about you."

"Me too. A lot." I felt tongue-tied. "Uh . . . Nestor has something important to tell you."

Nestor shook his head at my shy clumsiness and took the telephone. "*Don Oso,* I have something of grave importance to discuss with you. Like I said, I'm almost out of the business now. Byron and I fly tourists to Angel Falls and conduct some other tours into the wilds of southern Venezuela. But I still get information from some of my friends at the DEA, and what I've been told recently is something you must be aware of." He glanced at me with a more serious look. "No, not over the phone. This must be very private—just you and the two of us. You trusted me during the trade for your brother, so I ask you to do it again. You must know we're not your enemies now, and I'd like to think that perhaps there's a bond between us."

I assumed that Oso agreed, for Nestor took a deep breath and made his pitch: "My American sources tell me that you come to San Cristóbal regularly to meet a lovely *Venezolana* by the name of Lydia Eldorado. As a matter of fact, you're probably meeting her here tomorrow morning in this hotel, the Tres Estrellas. Is that correct?"

The big man must have been speechless, because Nestor shrugged and continued. "We'd like for you to discreetly cancel your engagement with her but let your own people believe you're keeping your date. And since you have adequate protection when you come here, then surely you know we haven't set a trap in league with the DEA." A pause, then he handed the receiver to me. "He wants to talk to you again."

I took the phone. "Yes?"

"What is going on, Byron?" His voice betrayed an element of mistrust.

"Come, *Don Oso,*" I said gently. "Your life depends on this."

"My life?" He seemed astounded.

"Yes . . . I'm afraid so," I said dolefully.

After a very long pause, he cleared his throat. "I will be there at ten tomorrow morning. What room?"

"Four-eleven," I said, knowing full well that he had the power to sweep over the border and take us back at gunpoint.

"Please do not betray me, Byron."

"Rest assured, *Don Oso* . . . I would never think of betraying such a man as you."

To which Nestor raised his eyebrows, making fun of my eloquent compliment.

"Tomorrow, then." He hung up.

My hand shook as I hung up the receiver. "He still scares the hell out of me, Nestor." I paced the room, feeling more and more ambivalent. "What if he doesn't believe us?" I sat next to him on the bed.

"He will. He's too smart not to. He's crafty and has the instincts of an animal. He's a beast of a man." His eyes lit up. "He's like a massive bull that's about to be relieved of some prized semen. Surely the bull enjoys being jacked off, but you have to subdue him or get the shit kicked out of you." He patted my leg. "I know how to subdue him, my love."

"How?"

"With the unvarnished truth and a lot of guts." He pulled me down and kissed me passionately. "We'll see just how close we can come to the edge."

TWENTY- EIGHT

At 10:10 a.m. there was a knock at the door. Nestor and I had been sitting in silence, waiting.

I opened the door and felt a tingling sensation as I saw Oso again.

He was dressed in a blue *guayaberra* with white trousers that accentuated his massive genitals. It was obvious that he wasn't wearing underwear. I wondered whether he always dressed that way when seeing his mistress or if he'd done it just for us. Nodding and half-smiling, he cautiously entered the room, scanning it suspiciously.

I glanced at Nestor, whose mouth hung open at the sight of the stretched trousers.

After closing the door, Oso reached for my chest and patted me down for a weapon and wires. "Do you mind?"

I smiled and blushed as my cock immediately became erect from his touch.

His attention turned to Nestor, who eagerly stood up and offered himself for a quick search. His trousers were already wet with precum in anticipation of our visitor.

Oso finished searching Nestor and patted him on the shoulder affectionately. He walked to the bathroom and looked inside, then took a quick look inside the closet. Satisfied, he sat down on the bed. "*Caballeros*," he said, taking his .45 from under his shirt and placing it in his lap. "*Buenos días*." He pulled a silencer from a back pocket and lazily screwed it onto the barrel of his pistol.

"Good to see you again, *Don Oso*," I said, shivering. In spite of the pistol, my trembling was more out of rank carnality than fear. He was my darkest, most potent fantasy come true.

He nodded and looked at Nestor, who had heard about the wanton events in such graphic detail that he probably adopted my memories as his own. "I assume that Nestor knows about us."

"Yes," I said, looking fondly at Nestor.

"And there is no jealousy, it appears." He studied us both then shook his head. "You people are amazing."

"I suppose we are," murmured Nestor, staring blatantly at Oso's crotch. "We share shoes, socks, money, underwear, fantasies . . . even toothbrushes. Jealousy doesn't exist in an environment of complete trust and security."

The big man placed the pistol on a nearby table and self-consciously dropped his hands between his legs. "So what is your urgent information? I disappointed a very lovely lady for this rendezvous, and I trust that I will not likewise be disappointed by

some . . . ploy. Are we playing games, *Caballeros*?"

"The Medellín Cartel is planning to assassinate you," Nestor said bluntly.

Oso looked as if he'd just had his breath taken away by a kick to the groin. He was speechless for a moment, then he cleared his throat. "And your source for this information?"

"A sub-agency infiltrator with Medellín," I said, thinking that perhaps he would trust me more. I glanced at Nestor. "The infiltrator's control is a DEA operative in Maracaibo. He told Nestor because he thinks Nestor would be indifferent to your fate. The DEA, the Colombian government—everyone wants this assassination to take place, because they think it will result in cartel warfare."

"But why?" asked Oso. "They are my friends!"

"I believe they were furious when you got Ignacio back so easily," interjected Nestor. "There's talk that you're cooperating with the DEA against them and Cali. It's a case of paranoia on a grand scale."

Oso shook his head in disbelief. "But we are so small compared to them. We pay off government officials, we do not murder them. We export more coffee than cocaine . . . and the DEA is as much our enemy as theirs." He abruptly got up and strode to a window overlooking the street below. "My God, I do not stand a chance." He turned around and looked first at me, then at Nestor. It was strange to see such a vulnerable expression on such a powerful man.

"We have a suggestion," said Nestor.

He studied Nestor for several seconds, then he slightly glowered at him. "Why are you doing this? We owe nothing to each other."

"Quite frankly, *Don Oso*, you have something we want," Nestor said bluntly. "And perhaps you might find it rather bizarre—maybe a little frivolous . . . but our proposal is dead serious. I'm not foolish enough to toy with dangerous, highly intelligent men." He looked at the pistol. "You're very much in control here."

The big man considered this and sighed. Walking back to the bed, he looked at Nestor soberly. "What is your proposal?"

"I've been in touch with the infiltrator. He works in a remote coca field in the mountains near the Venezuelan border. He's afraid he's about to be exposed, and the DEA hired me to get him out. You see, they can't do it through Colombia, so they need my help to get him out through Venezuela."

"So?" Oso appeared skeptical and impatient.

"I believe you're invited to a big meeting with the Colombian cartel leaders the day after tomorrow in Medellín."

The big man was astounded. "You know that? Then . . ." He rolled up his eyes as the picture unfolded. "Then, the DEA knows it, too . . . and the Colombian government."

"Your choices." Nestor held up one finger. "Bow and scrape your way back into the hearts of your 'brothers' by warning them. In which case, they may not be quite so thankful . . . or perhaps they might wonder how you came to possess this kind of information."

"And they would kill me anyway," he mumbled.

"Number two . . ." Nestor held up a second finger. "You could remain silent and hope that the Colombian government can pull off such a mass arrest. Of course, you wouldn't be among the group, and the underlords left behind would suspect you had something to do with it."

"And they would kill me . . ." Oso's face seemed to partially drain of blood, making him look older, beaten. "Two losing options."

"Number three . . ." Nestor spoke louder.

Oso looked at him hopefully.

"You're a very wealthy man, *Don Oso*," Nestor pointed out.

"Retire . . . now," I said, drawing his pensive gaze. "Burn your coca fields, announce to your family that they will henceforth be producing only coffee. Leave the operation in the hands of José Luis and your brother and get out of Colombia for a few months."

"Medellín won't move in on your family once they know you've disappeared and that the fields have been burned," said Nestor. "Besides, once the Colombian government knows your cartel has disbanded and become legitimate, they'll protect your family. They couldn't ask for better proof that they're winning the drug war—even though they aren't. The headlines: 'Cúcuta Cartel goes straight'."

"Byron, is all this true?" He turned and looked at me with an intensity that made me shudder.

"Yes, my friend. It's all true. Otherwise, how could we know about the meeting in Medellín?"

My words seemed to finally convince him, and his expression took on a nuance of resignation. "It is the only way, is it not?"

"I'm afraid so," Nestor said softly.

"No more." The big man ran his fingers through his fringe of hair and over his bald head. "No more *El Oso Blanco*. No more *Don Oso*." And suddenly he didn't look like the powerful, dangerous bull of a man who was capable of shooting both of us in the head if it was necessary to do so. "When . . . where do I go?"

"Do you have bank accounts outside of Colombia?" asked Nestor.

"Yes. One in Switzerland, one in Mexico, and one in the Bahamas."

"Then don't tell anyone about this," continued Nestor. "Tomorrow night, have your chauffeur drive you back here. Tell him that your mistress will be driving you back to Cúcuta."

"And how much money do you want for all this? How do you get me out of Venezuela?"

Both of us looked at him with apprehension. It had finally come down to one final statement.

I decided that it was up to me. "*Don Oso* . . ."

"Just plain 'Oso'."

"Oso, we want you to stay with us." I watched as his lips slightly curled into a half-smile. "We'll fly back home and give you a different identity." I glanced at Nestor to see how I was doing, but he was trying to decipher Oso's growing smile as well.

"And where is . . . home?" Oso asked, reaching for the pistol.

"Uhh . . ." I watched as he slowly picked it up.

"Ciudad Bolívar, on the Orinoco," said Nestor, his eyes fixed on the pistol.

TWENTY-NINE

May 1, 1993

Near Angel Falls in southern Venezuela.

It was a mesa that I'd most wanted to explore, and the weather was clear. I carefully landed the helicopter on the flattest surface I could find and shut down the engine. Even before the blades stopped whirling, I smiled at my passengers and jumped out. Spotting what I wanted to see, I headed for a clump of exotic plants with violet blossoms and pistils dripping with a brown, syrupy substance which attracted several bees. The plants'

leaves were variegated and their flowers were connected to bird of paradise-like stalks. It was as if I had landed on another planet. "They've probably grown up here unchanged and unspoiled for thousands of years," I said, looking around to see who was with me. Finding that the others had gone off in a different direction, I peered into pools of rain water and saw strange, aquatic life forms scurrying about in the water. Odd-looking insects crawled over even odder-looking blossoms. A large bush with brilliant orange-red blossoms clung precariously close to the edge of the cliff. I ventured as close as I could, but the thought of being that close to such a precipitous, 3,000-foot drop made me feel nauseated. I remembered having seen a documentary about a group's attempt at hang gliding and parasailing off this beautiful and primeval monolith and wondered if I had the nerve to try it. I laughed to myself. *No, Byron. That's over the edge, not on it. Pardon the pun.*

I looked around to see where the others had gone but couldn't spot them anywhere. Walking back towards the helicopter, I saw an outcropping of tiered flat rocks and decided to climb them in order to see the entire mesa top.

Reaching almost to the top, I panned the entire area but could see no one. Climbing higher, I began to hear laughter. When I peered over the top, I saw a sight so awesome that it made me gasp for breath. Against a backdrop of dark rain clouds and verdant jungle, the warm sun illuminated the golden, glistening bodies of Nestor and Oso. They were both nude, and Oso was lying spread-eagle on his back, a big smile on his face. Nestor was lying face down between the big man's legs, gobbling the fat cock like it was his first time.

Almost tearing off my shorts and T-shirt as I hurried to join them, I straddled Oso's waist and willed him to open his eyes. Since he'd come to be with us, there had been a frenzy of sexual activity. I could sense that the big man was beginning to lose his qualms. Perhaps it was the way he'd been looking at my cock the past couple of days.

His eyes opened, and he shielded them from the sun.

I said nothing and hoped that my expression would convey the message that I desired his virgin mouth.

He looked at my cock, which was so erect that it was aching.

Our eyes locked, and I could sense his decision-making process. I felt so in tune with his mind that I could feel his apprehension eroding. Was he a latent homosexual? No, the tag didn't fit the man, just like it could never fit the majority of men who have sex with other men for whatever reason, at whatever regularity. He'd said it so well the night of our first intimacy in Cúcuta: "I am a very flexible, eclectic man, perhaps a little daring at times."

It therefore didn't surprise me as he rose to a sitting position and took my cock inside his mouth without hesitation. He held it there, no doubt wondering what to do next. I could sense his initial alarm over the discharge of a rivulet of precum, but I could plainly see that it had excited him. His face suddenly registered the urgency of an imminent climax, so I pulled away to watch.

Nestor must have also sensed the rumbling in the big man's groin and began to whimper in anticipation. As Oso grunted like a silverback gorilla, Nestor pulled off the thick penis and jacked it rapidly. Oso's initial spurt of jissom shot up and sparkled in the brilliant sun. The second spurt was somehow caught in mid-air by Nestor's alert and hungry mouth. Finally, Nestor swallowed Oso's convulsing penis, most certainly savoring the robust taste of highly potent semen. And then Nestor turned onto his back, his head flush against Oso's balls. He

milked the shrinking cock, bending it over his eyes and nose, directing the last drops into his mouth as his own cock discharged with spectacular velocity.

Capturing their union in my mind, I walked to the far end of the rock and masturbated fiercely. Incredibly, I could project the sharp image of Nestor and Oso against the approaching thunderhead. I could feel their passion and taste their cum. My load seemed to rise from my toes and rush through my groin, finally exploding through my gaping slit. A joyous howl burst forth from my throat as my semen met the upward currents from the hot jungle below and sailed away like strands of white silk.

Glancing down, I saw just how close I was to the edge of the cliff. But instead of panicking, I took two steps back and closed my eyes, recapturing the image. And oddly, my climax continued.

The sound of thunder came from near Angel Falls and brought me back to reality. I was lured to the sight of Nestor, who was absently playing with Oso's limp cock while smiling at me.

"What an experience," I said, smiling back at him. "There're no words to describe it."

Both Oso and Nestor nodded in agreement.

Then I felt a sharp pang of sadness as I realized that our polar bear was due to go back to Colombia. Nestor saw my change of expression and probably realized what I was thinking.

Oso struggled to get to his feet and climbed down to his clothing on the next tier. He stepped into his shorts and sat down to put on his climbing boots. Nestor and I followed him and dressed in silence.

Having put on his T-shirt, Oso began to climb down the rock formation. He appeared very troubled. Nestor and I looked at each other and quickly followed him.

Halfway to the helicopter, he suddenly turned around. "I am not going back."

"What?" asked Nestor.

I wasn't sure that I'd heard him correctly.

"I said that I am not going back to Colombia."

Both Nestor and I were speechless.

"If you will have me, I want to stay." He seemed very emotional and on the verge of tears. "I am not a husband or a

father . . . or a grandfather or a coffee baron any more. I am not a drug lord. I do not want to be feared any longer. Everyone—my children, my wife, my brother, my mistresses, my employees—have all worshipped me out of fear. No one has ever loved me for the right reasons." He turned away and looked out over the panoramic view. "No one has ever dared to stick a cock in my face and expect me to take it inside my mouth." He glanced at me and grinned.

"Well," I said, feeling as giddy and impish as a child, "what do you think, Nestor?"

Nestor played along. "I don't know . . . Can we afford to feed him, I wonder?"

Oso's grin widened.

"He snores," I pointed out.

"Tastes good, though," Nestor said. "*Muy sabroso y delicioso!*"

"Unquestionably!" I added.

Nestor and I looked at him seriously as if in cue.

"We love you," I offered. "I think you know that."

He held out his arms, and we formed a three-way hug.

I lifted the chopper off the mesa and headed for Ciudad Bolívar. Nestor and Oso were already planning our next trip to the edge: a daring trip to California to see if my assets had really been unfrozen as the DEA had said.

By the time we'd landed, the master of stealth and the expert on contingencies had mapped out the entire scenario.

THE END

Special thanks are due my life partner, BRUCE, and my whip-cracking editors, THE VIKING and CHARLIE CHIARELLI.

This novel is dedicated to the memory of Honorary CR Cofounder and Principal Contributor, KENN RICHIE, who passed away on March 17, 1993.

PROFILES OF MODELS, PHOTOGRAPHERS AND ARTISTS

MODELS

FRONT COVER

BIG PAW, one of our most popular models, currently lives in L.A. with his partner of 45 years, fellow model BUNK. Soon, however, both will be departing for Idaho to be with their significant third, photographer LITTLE PAW.

PAGE 2

HORNED TOAD is a senior widower who lives in Connecticut. A very popular model for many years now, he just gets better and better looking each year. He's basically single, but he's seen a lot with MICHAEL OF GERMANY, another popular German model.

ZIPPER is probably the most recognizable of all our models, thanks to his exposure in CR and P.R. SIMON's "Daddy

for Dessert" video. A major television star winked at him at K Mart one day, and a married couple tried to pick him up at the grocery store after they'd seen the SIMON video. He lives in the Palm Springs area with his mate, model NIPPER.

JON, a very popular model and writer, resides in England, where he spends a lot of time sketching and writing. He is interested in human relations as well as deep emotional and physical concerns and seeks to be helpful to all.

PAGE 4

EL HOMBRE is an Asian/American living in Chicago. He's 42, 5'-5", 165# and seeks an honest, clean, financially stable man between 40 and 60 who wants a serious relationship. Penpals are welcome, too.

FRENCH TOP is 6'-4", HIV negative, French passive, and lives in Paris. He seeks 50+ with no beard and no moustache. He especially likes slim builds and white hair.

SWAN is in his thirties and lives in Rio de Janeiro, where he shares a house with model, **ROBY**. He seeks older men for correspondence and visits.

HANSRUDOLF is burly, thirtysomething, and lives with his older life-mate in Switzerland. He speaks several languages (English included) and knows a multitude of sexy, mature men throughout the world. He and his lover travel extensively and enjoy meeting new friends.

PAGE 5

KELLY is 38, a nonsmoker/drinker, HIV negative, and resides near the beach in the L.A. area. He's looking for an older partner and seeks a gentle, loving relationship with a fatherly type, safe only, man-to-man.

PAGE 6

LEW says, "I'm old enough to enjoy being a senior citizen and old enough to know better, but too young to resist." This Idahoan's hobbies include stained glass, glass etching, and porcelain work. He likes outdoor activities, cowboy boots and 501s.

MERRILL is 47, 6'-4", and has enjoyed a life-long interest in spankings. He is single and looking for a top or bottom or someone who is both. This Idaho resident prefers slender men, age 25 to 50.

PAGE 7

CHICAGO JIM, 29, is a writer who is partial to mature, well-hung men of color. He lives in Chicago with model, **LARRY**, who fits that requirement very nicely. **LARRY**, 42, is a strong, sensitive daddy bear who enjoys the company of hot men, regardless of race or age.

HAM, 66, and **EGGS**, 35, make up one hell of a delicious team. These rugged, blue collar-looking men (**EGGS** is a warehouseman and **HAM** is a roofer) enjoy Bonsai designing and meeting other couples, 40-70. They live in Oregon.

PAGE 8

THOM, our **KNOWING SATURN** Special Issue cover model, is a 70-year-old semi-retired construction worker who lives in Idaho with model and photographer, **JOEL**. Since their relationship is open, **THOM** welcomes contacts by men such as himself, only under forty.

BON VIVANT is single and likes to lie in the Idaho sun on the Boise River with a bottle of champagne, bon bons and a good book. He dislikes men who wear white underwear.

MOUNTAIN MAN lives in the Idaho mountains, where he is a logger. He likes to trek into the woods naked and will try anything once.

PAGES 57, 58, 59

SMOKEY MOUNTAIN BEAR is a bi, 50-year-old, discreet, shy and lovable southeastern bear who seeks correspondence with same or older.

GEORGIA EDDIE is a 50-year-old Atlanta bear who enjoys meeting other bears for fun and friendship. He's very affectionate, a trait one can detect from the hot photo spread we feature herein.

PAGE 60

THE WOODSMAN is 56, 6'-1", 180#, and lives in a Washington forest near a waterfall (except when he winters in Arizona). He seeks a lifemate who is stocky and mature. He can relocate.

THE COLONEL is pushing 70, but oh how he's getting better! This CR icon is currently on the road with his new love, model and writer **TOMCAT**, and they may just be heading your way. They're two mighty fine men who love meeting new friends.

STRETCH lives near San Francisco and is currently into foreskin restoration. He's in his sixties and is a talented pianist,

organist, songwriter and composer. He seeks younger, healthy stud-types who are self-sufficient.

JACK, our cover model on Issue #47, lives in the Orlando area and is looking for friends who want to visit Disney World and have lots of fun in other ways. He and his friend, Philip, look forward to hearing from new friends.

PAGE 61

BUNK (see **BIG PAW**, cover model)

THE NUDIST summers in New Jersey and winters in Florida. Obviously, he enjoys nudism, but he also likes photography, penpals, watercolor painting and traveling. He's 56, 5'-9" and 175#

SCOTT loves quiet times with friends, especially young, well-built, small-framed men. He loves cuddling, dining at home, nudist affairs, nature walks and bicycling. He lives near San Francisco.

PLOVER is one of our most popular models from a couple of years back. A brilliant stage actor, he is the 18-year life-mate of cartoonist, **QUETZAL**. They live in West Hollywood and enjoy meeting new friends.

BACK COVER

BAREKAT is our retired postman neighbor who just moved to Tucson recently. This bear of a man has always been there when we needed help and will be sorely missed. But our loss is the gain of some young Tucson guy who likes brawny, lovable teddy bears. Are you out there? This guy is gold-plated: a diamond in the rough.

PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHERS

JOEL is quite a prolific and excellent photographer with a great knack for finding some delightfully photogenic models. He's a very popular model as well. He lives in Idaho with his mate, **THOM**, one of our most popular cover models

KIM, a financial executive living in Atlanta, just turned 40 and looks sexier than ever. This bear of a CR model enjoys correspondence, travel and meeting (as well as photographing) other bears and cubs.

RICHIE II is a free-lance photojournalist, among other things. His talents are considerable, and he's just earned a master's degree in yet another field. He lives alone in a suburb of Los Angeles and loves older white men who enjoy the company of younger black men. Like his fellow photographers on this page, **RICHIE** is also a CR model.

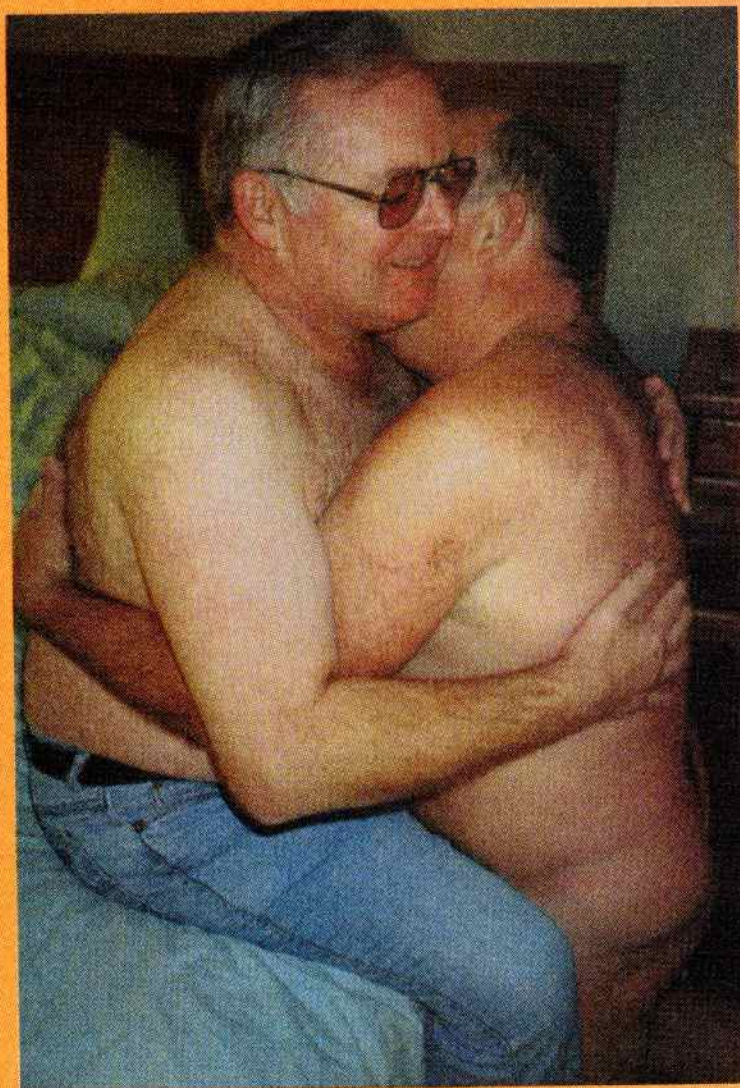
ARTISTS

WALTER MITTY is a 64-year-old outdoor-type who lives in Orange County, California. He loves the beach, films (from Disney and porno), and music of all kinds. Better known by our readers for his modeling, this fantastic artist will soon be supplying us with more artwork. We're waiting, **WALTER**!

RAM is our most loyal and consistent contributor. He loves the magazine and has been with us exclusively since the very beginning. This magnificent artist summers with his mate in Illinois and winters in Florida. He loves to garden and paint.

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF KIM

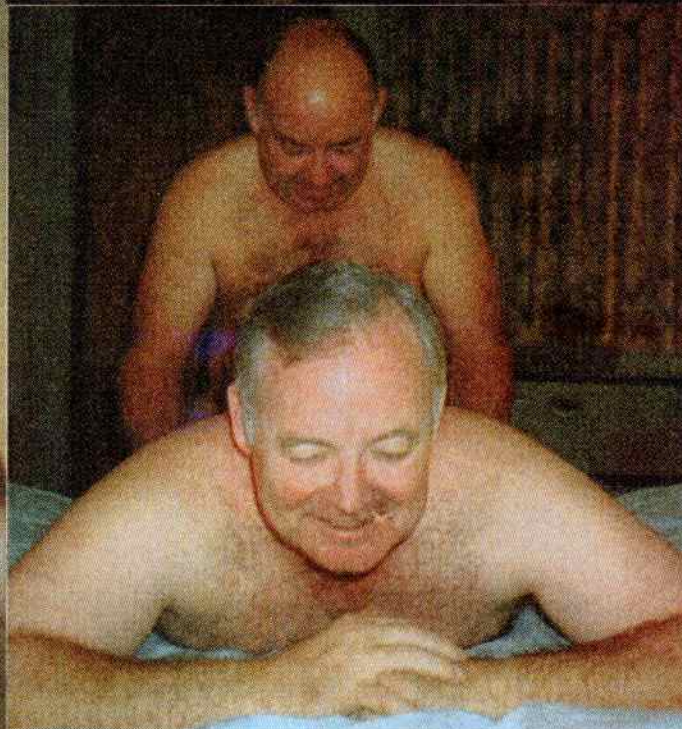
MOTEL RENDEZVOUS



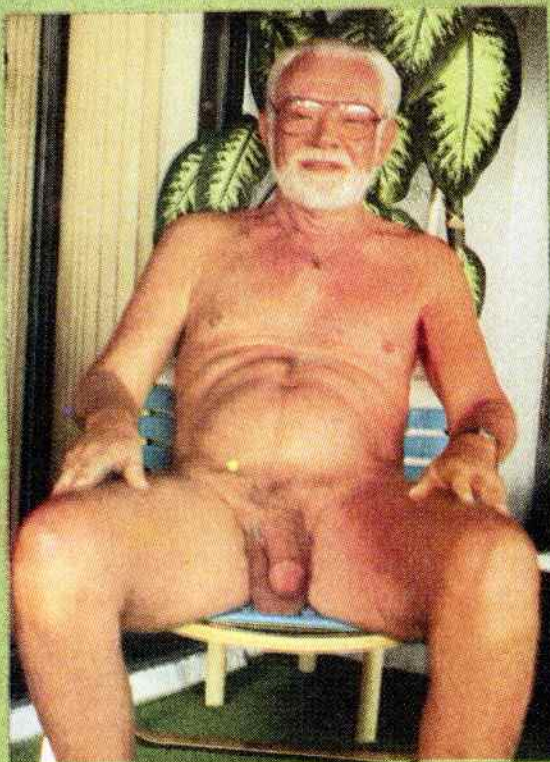
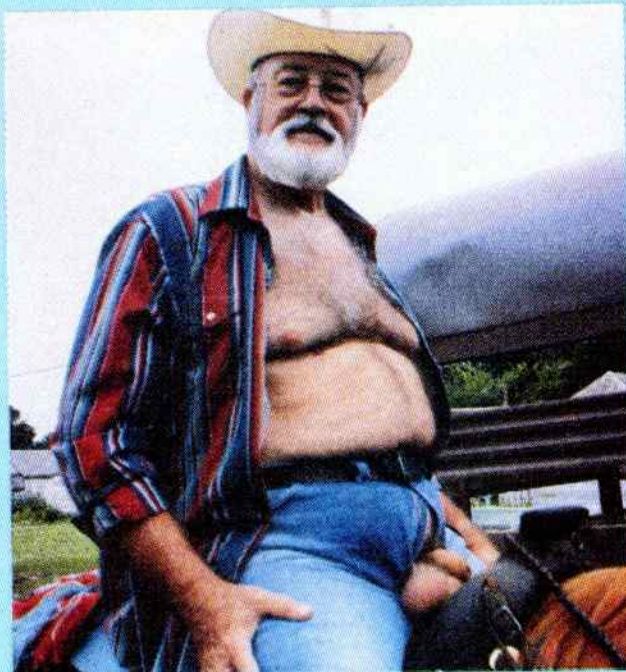
SMOKEY
MOUNTAIN
BEAR

GEORGIA
EDDIE

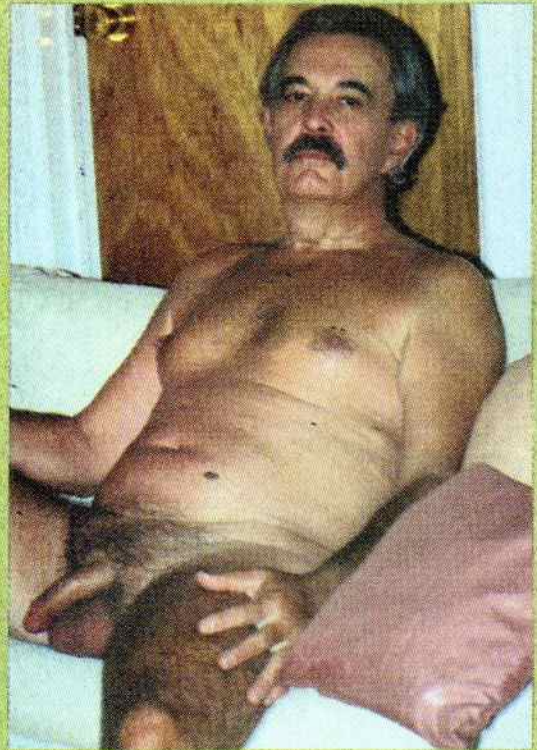
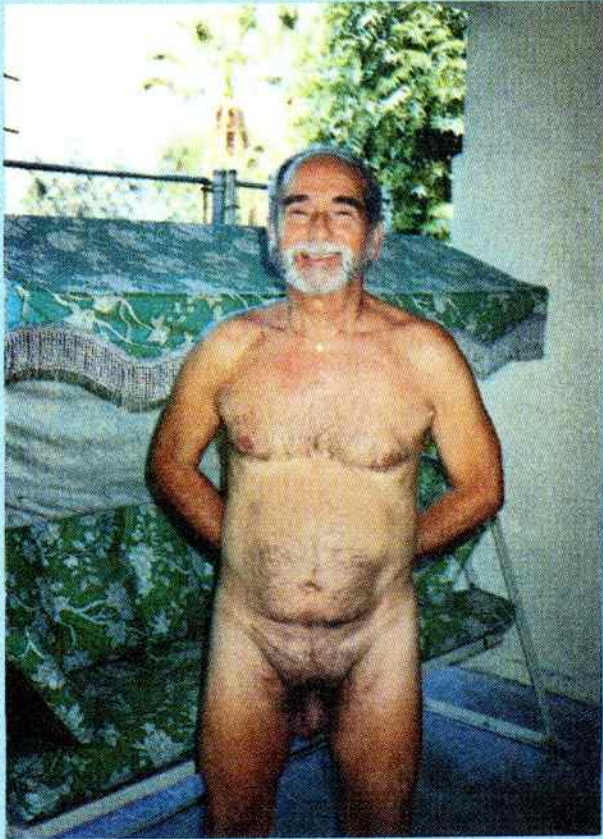




SENIORS CALIENTE



Clockwise from upper left: THE WOODSMAN - a self-portrait; THE COLONEL - photo by Cowboy;
STRETCH - photo by Michael; JACK - photo by Glenn



Clockwise from upper left: BUNK - photo by Big Paw; THE NUDIST - photo by Bread Ed;
SCOTT - photo by The Traveler; PLOVER - photo by Quetzal



CHIRON · RISING

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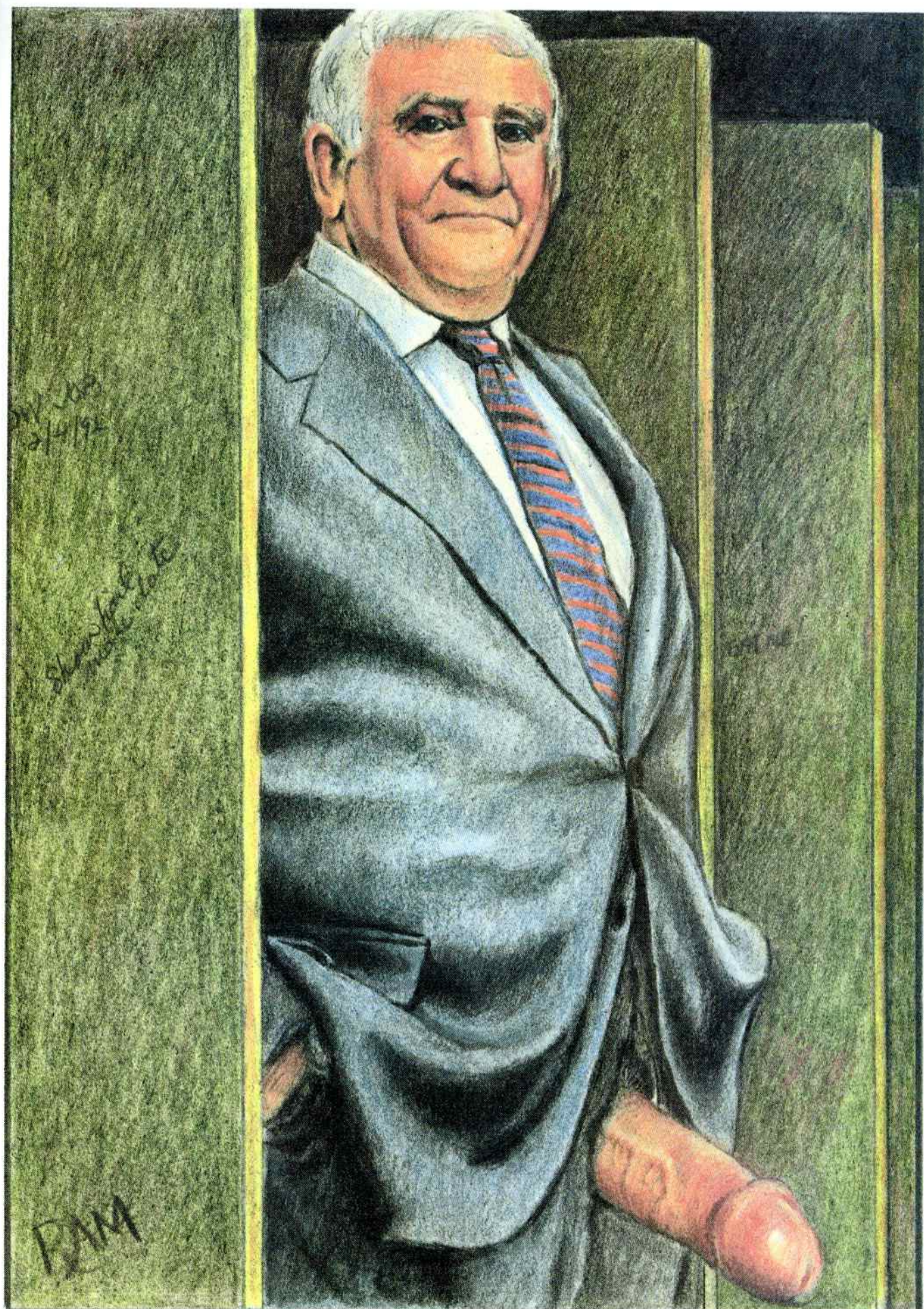
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[4864Luna, Phelan]





BAREKAT

photo by RICHIE II