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ONE BLOODY ALABASTER EYE
TREVOR CAMERON, TERRORIST HUNTER

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by
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The kid was young, green and scared. We had been running through heavy woods, mostly uphill, praying for the snowstorm to hit before the choppers could lock onto us with their infrared scanners or the gunners could see us through their night-vision scopes. We were both winded, close to exhaustion, and the vision of what we had seen was weighing heavily on our minds.

The whomp of the blades of a Russian Hind coming over a ridge stopped us in our tracks as we scrambled to unfurl the special ponchos that would hide our heat signatures and provide a slim chance of survival. With our rifles underneath us and the camouflaged, lightweight ponchos over us, we lay in the fresh, wet layer of snow that had fallen earlier and waited. If their instruments located us, we would never feel a thing. Missiles would tear the flesh from our bones in an instant and the war would be over for us. That was probably a better fate than being overtaken by the Gurkha soldiers somewhere behind us.

The Ghurkas were small, Nepalese troops favored by the British and much feared by their enemies. They were bred to be soldiers. Their size was not indicative of their ferociousness. The great knives they carried were passed down from father to son and, once drawn, could not be resheathed with honor without drawing blood.

In Korea and Vietnam, they had fought on our side. In this crazy conflict, it was hard to tell who was who and which side was which.

The sound of the helicopter faded into the approaching night, but the danger was not lessened. The Ghurkas were silent, deadly and as tenacious trackers as bloodhounds. I knew that only an act of God would save us. The kid thought I could.

“Where to now, Colonel Cameron?” he asked, with a composure that startled me. Could it be that he was not as frightened as I had thought? Maybe he just didn’t understand how dangerous and close to hopeless the situation was.

I took a deep breath and composed myself. It’s hard to be a hero when you are scared shitless. I pulled up a picture of the terrain in my mind and glanced at the compass to orient myself.

“We will keep going north until we hit the highway. Maybe we will luck out and catch a ride with a sympathetic trucker.” I kept the heat-masking poncho over my shoulders, put the rifle at ready and started out in a northerly direction.

We were deep in enemy-controlled territory, far from the relative safety of the city. The travel restrictions imposed on the general population cut deep into our chances of getting a ride with a sympathetic citizen. Only trucks and tanks were allowed on the major highways. We had missed our rendezvous and had been written off by our confederates as MIA.

Our mission had been to confirm the rumors of a major termination camp near the border. The reports had been true, but the security around the camp had been far more sophisticated than we had expected. No sooner had we snapped the first pictures of the naked men, women and children being herded into separate facilities and caught a whiff of the noxious smell of burning bodies from the short, wide smokestacks hidden by the towering evergreens, than the alarm sounded, the searchlights went off and we were running for our lives.

I felt a sense of hopelessness wash over me. What good would the photos do even if we survived to deliver them? Who would believe the pictures and who possessed the power to do anything about them?

There were rumors that we had friends in the Army and in high places, but no one with any juice was showing their hand at this point. If the existence of such allies were true, how much longer would it be, how many more lives would be sacrificed before they would act?

My eyes caught the kid's. He was staring at me questioningly. Was he reading my doubts on my face? "Come on, let's move it!" I said gruffly, turning my face from his.

Then I heard a rustling of leaves and turned to see the little, black-clad Gurkha in nightvision glasses with his knife pulled coming through the bushes to my right. I ducked and could feel the wind from the blade above my head. My own cold steel blade slipped silently from its sheath and I buried it to the hilt in his side.

Luck. There was no time to congratulate myself. Where there was one, there were others. I grabbed the falling Gurkha and swung him around until we were facing the direction he came from. I started to yell at the kid to get behind me, but there was no time.

A burst of automatic weapon fire came from the brush-filled forest. It was eerie to see the tracer rounds coming straight at me. The body I was holding bucked from the impact of a dozen bullets. I grabbed the Uzi hanging loose at the dead man's side and returned the fire.

I fired until the clip was empty, and then I unslung my own mini-fourteen from my shoulder while still gripping my formerly human shield tightly. I fired a few rounds at the suddenly quiet forest and realized I was still alive. And still standing there like an idiot. I dropped the bullet-riddled body and nestled between it and a moss-covered log. I removed the undamaged glasses from the corpse and slipped them over my own head, frantically searching the green shadows of the forest for my enemies and the body for anything I could use. I came up with a few 9mm rounds that would work in my pistol as well as the liberated Uzi. Whoever had fired at us was as good as invisible.

Suddenly I remembered the kid!

Using the glasses I scanned the scene and found him. The blood was hardly recognizable as such because of the glasses, but I could tell from touch, his pulse barely there and my fingers now sticky, that he was badly hurt. He had a surprised expression on his face as he looked up at me. It was as though he had thought that being with me had somehow made him invulnerable.

The blood was coming from a hole or two in his side. If I could get him out of these woods and to a safe place, he might have a chance. But this was enemy territory and those shots would soon bring other men in black who desired only one thing tonight, that we both end up dead. I tore open my med pouch and pulled a kotex from it. "Keep this pressed against your wound. If you leave a trail of blood, they will find us. Keep it snug." I ordered.

"Yes sir, Colonel Cameron."

"Forget the Colonel," I muttered as I swung him over my shoulder. "Just call me Trevor."

"Yes sir," he said, suppressing a groan. I found two more bodies, confirming the accuracy of my shots. Since the Gurkhas normally run in groups of four, I figured that I had missed one who was now looking for backup.

The kid didn't weigh much over 150, so with the nightvision I was able to make good time, but I could not be sure how much of a trail I was leaving. Within a half hour, the snow began to fall in earnest and I panted a sigh of relief as it covered our tracks and whatever drops of the kid's blood hit the ground. Then, over a ridge, I saw the subtle glow of a kerosene lantern shining through a hastily pulled blackout curtain covering the window of a cabin. Light smoke rose from the chimney. If the boy was to live, I had to take a chance.

The old man who opened the door took it all in with a glance. I never said a word, but he motioned me inside and closed the door behind me. I stood there, snow melting on his carpet, while he rolled up a rug and revealed a trap door. He helped me ease the kid through it and onto a cot. When he lit the candle, I removed the heavy glasses and he took a closer look at me.

"You're Cameron!" He said with raised eyebrows. "The Free American!" His tone was thick with awe.

"Damn right, he is. Just killed the hell out of a whole company of them damn Ghurkas, too!" the kid said through racking coughs. "Then he carried me here. Must've run five miles with me on his shoulder!" the kid exaggerated.

"I'm awful proud to meetcha, Colonel." Then he turned his attention to the kid. "Let's get this boy's bleedin' stopped."

I thanked him and sat down. I am still uncomfortable with this kind of attention. Notoriety is sometimes helpful, like when I need help, like now, but I am equally well known among the Opposition. Their instructions are to shoot first and establish my identity later.

"So Colonel," the old man asked in a conversational tone. "You ever been to Colorado before?"

Chapter One

I opened my eyes. It took a moment or two to orient myself, then a few more to convince myself it had been a dream.

The little Golden Falcon was loaded with every convenience a bachelor would want. The bedroom was equipped with a CD player, cassette player and a TV that swiveled and could be viewed from the living room as well. The living room contained one couch, one table, the large swivel chair I was sitting in and my computer — an old, slow 386 IBM with a hard drive and 5.25 and 3.5 disk drives. A laser printer and a modem, mouse and scanner covered my small desk and the adjoining wall. Everything was velcroed in its proper place, secure from the bumps and turns of the road.

My name is Trevor Cameron Hamilton. Not Colonel Cameron. I never cared to go into the service, and wasn't the kind of person who would rise high in the ranks anyway. I have never been to Vietnam or Korea. There is no war presently, and there are no concentration camps in America. There is some talk about a war with Iraq, but all is quiet here in Colorado.

I checked my watch and realized I had almost overslept. I had no time for coffee. I didn't want to be late for my fight.

He came at me with a furious series of punches. We had been at it for thirty minutes, but neither one of us had gained much of an advantage over the other. We were both perspiring heavily, and he was now tiring quickly, which I hoped would allow me to end this soon, before I tired as well. The flurry he was throwing at me now marked the onset of desperation.

I blocked the first two jabs, but the third grazed my ear and left me an opening. Before he could recover his balance from the near miss, his arm was trapped by my left and he was pulled into my right. The blow caught him solidly in the solar plexus, and the energy to fight left him suddenly.

The match was over. He leaned on me while he caught his breath. He was six foot, about a hundred and eighty. I could tell it bothered him a little to have to look up at me. Then he wiped the sweat from his eyes.

"I have to tell you, Trevor, there isn't a lot I can teach you. Have you thought about going on the circuit?"

"I'm not exactly the type for tournaments, Steve." He shrugged off my assistance self-consciously. He stood up and drew a ragged breath into unwilling lungs. There was a welt on his stomach in the shape of my glove.

"Maybe you should think about it. I could help with the expenses! You know, the fees, travel maybe?" Everyone is out to make a buck. I was certain that he could hear the roar of the crowd in his mind. When I didn't answer, he mistook my silence for possible interest.

"Someone your size, as quick as you are, would have a great chance to take the heavyweight class in the Denver tournament next month. Full contact karate is getting bigger all the time. In a few years, the tournament winners will be bringing in big bucks. I could maybe use someone like you to help train, teach my classes, too!"

We pushed into the locker room. I held up a hand. "Steve. Listen. I'm not interested in fighting in tournaments. I travel a lot. When I'm in a town like Aspen, I pay for a lesson or two, workout at different dojos. It's my form of exercise, not my occupation. I prefer to earn my living with my head not my hands."

He heaved a sigh, pulled off his sweat stained T-shirt and grimaced. The knotted muscles across his belly were still quivering. "Well, if you do as good with your head as with those hands, you must be rich!" His look was skeptical. I knew what he was thinking. My size and scarred features tend to mask my IQ and suggest possible professions like fighter or hit man rather than an intellectual or an executive.

"Not rich. Comfortable." I dropped my clothes into my bag, withdrew my shaving kit, climbed in the shower and turned up the hot water. The superheated water beat on my bruised, tortured muscles. I pulled the rubber band off my ponytail and let the water momentarily straighten out the long, curly strand of hair, my one visible sign of rebellion. It was my reminder of a long-haired youth, casual college days and years of study. The beard and mustache had come off when I started my first business, and the hair had been trimmed around the ears, unruly black locks tamed a bit and drawn back into a neat, rubber band-contained curl. That decision probably helped to secure my first real estate loan.

There was no need to go further. At thirty, I had everything I really needed and didn't have to please anyone but myself. After my shower I dressed in my standard jeans, boots, t-shirt and flannel top shirt. My tastes are simple and I choose my clothing by how it feels on me, not how others see me.

Steve was dressed and ready to lock up. No one had witnessed our bout. I demand private lessons. Steve Staverof made his living teaching karate. It does no one any good for a stranger to best the sensei in front of adoring students. "Come on. I'll buy you a cup of coffee at McDonald's," he said.

"OK." We grabbed our jackets and bags and walked across the street. The air was cool but not cold enough for the impatient skiers.

Over coffee, and after a proper amount of time, he asked politely, "Where are you from, Trevor?"

"Texas."

"You been in Aspen long?"

"No."

"Might snow soon."

"That's what I came here for."

"I figured. You know you might have to wait more than two weeks?" he asked, adroitly probing to see if I was just on a vacation. Snow was not expected for a month.

I had him at a disadvantage. I knew much about him from the information about the owner contained in his office. His business card told me who he was. I knew where he lived from his business license and his bills on the desk. His occupation, marital status and number of children could be deduced

from the photos on his office wall. His phone number was on the emergency sign in front of his store. On the other hand, I was a stranger who walked in off the street on a cold September evening, bought a lesson and beat the teacher.

"Sorry, Steve," I apologized. "I don't mean to be secretive or abrupt with you. I travel to buy property and businesses. I'm single and live in a travel trailer. That pickup truck across the street pulls it. My motorcycle sits on the back bumper of my trailer. With a cellular phone, I live where I want, run my affairs from afar, and have developed a yen for anonymity — and a habit of not explaining myself to anyone."

He nodded with understanding, a distant look in his eyes, the look of a married man and dutiful father who once had such freedom. . . or dreamed of it. His was also the look of a man with a mortgage, two car payments and three children whose dentist drives a Mercedes, probably largely thanks to the braces he's paid for, a man who can't go around the block without preparing the family. "You've seen a lot of the USA, huh?" His tone was wistful.

"A good share of it. Still got a lot to see."

"Well, listen, I've got kids waiting for me. Better get home. Shopping list is in my pocket." He stood up and shook my hand. "About that lesson you paid for. . ."

"I got my money's worth. No problem."

"Yeah, well, what I'm trying to say is. . .if you want to come back, there won't be any charge. I can use the workout, and I might be able to pick up something from you. I've never seen anyone combine styles like you. What do you call it?"

"I don't have a name for it. Just a lot of moves I picked up here and there, fighting guys like you in different cities. Taking a lot of lessons from a lot of good men. And I'd like that, stopping back in, if you don't mind?"

"No, that's great. You got a card?"

"Got one with my Houston number. I have an office of sorts there. Here's the number of the phone that was installed in my trailer yesterday." I wrote the number on the back of the card.

"Great. Here's mine. Just call ahead so I can break out the body armor! You've got some awesome power." He waved and I watched him walk away. A nice guy and a new friend who was going home to hearth and home, to family. Me, I was going to a cold trailer, a good book and soft music. No wife, no kids, no cats. Who is the lucky one? I wondered for a moment, and then answered my own question: Who knows?

I had just arrived in Aspen after an extended stay in Los Angeles. Smog City. Shakytown. Millions of people driving millions of miles and not going anywhere, running about like scurrying ants, polluting their little part of the planet. But that's just one view from the outside looking in! On closer inspection, Los Angeles is a vital pool of very talented, highly motivated individuals. My visits to L.A. are high energy, creative and profitable. Afterwards I tend to be attracted to smaller, out of the way places,

however, to get back to reality or something. But that is an overstatement perhaps. Maybe it doesn't get much more real than L.A.

Back at the trailer park, I went inside, turned on the computer and made a pot of coffee. Cup in hand, I flipped a switch on the phone and sat down at my computer. I pushed the right buttons and the computer dialed into AOL on a Denver line. I checked the electronic mail messages from my office in Houston and responded appropriately. There were a couple of personal messages from a girl I had met in LA asking about the chances of visiting me at the first sign of snow. I wrote back that it wasn't here yet, sent hugs and kisses and signed off. I switched the phone back on, turned up the heat, picked out a book, and sat down in my chair. A little tired, alone and content to be to be that way.

Living in campgrounds year-round may seem strange to homeowners, but to me, a bachelor, it is the only way to live. My 80 cubic inch Harley Lowrider was on its custom built ramp on the back of the trailer, the only possession I took with me that didn't fit inside the trailer. I had added a thick, reinforced security door to the trailer to prevent unwanted intrusions. With my fancy, case-hardened, expensive dead bolt that sticks, my safe embedded in concrete beneath my closet and my steel, double locked, bolted-to-the-wall gun case, I felt reasonably secure. My possessions were safe, and if the neighborhood goes down hill, it takes me ten minutes to move.

The cool wind came down the mountains and shook the trailer gently, rocking it on its springs like a baby's cradle. One of the many trees in the KOA brushed against the roof. I was absorbed in my novel, an old John D. MacDonald title, and scarcely noticed. But the harsh ringing of the phone brought me back to here and now. It triggered a strange sense of apprehension, which was an almost unknown emotion for me, but few people knew where I was. Fewer still knew my new temporary phone number. When it didn't stop after the fourth ring, I answered.

"Trevor Cameron?" the unfamiliar voice questioned. My business cards read Trevor Cameron Hamilton. My mother always calls me Cameron. Rarely had she used my step-father's last name, Hamilton, since she had left that heavysset man with sad eyes behind.

"Yes? This is Trevor," I answered.

"This is Doctor Young. Thaddeus Young. I'm calling about your mother, Mrs. Molly Bea Hamilton."

A chill ran up my spine, lifting the hairs on the back of my neck. "What is it, Doctor." I knew her time was near. It had been for years. Too much booze and too many cigarettes had shortened her lifespan. She had made contact with too many of the carcinogens mankind has created and indulged in. One had found her a desirable, weakened host and proceeded to be fruitful and multiply. Mother Nature's revenge: a micro-organism that infects man as man infects and destroys nature. I used to think this fitting retaliation for a planet, before it's dark, ugly hand came to claim one of mine.

"Is she. . ."

The doctor interrupted. "Your mother is seriously ill. She is in the hospital. She is still alive, but we feel you should be here before. . ." He took a deep breath and tried again. "We do not expect her to live

out the week. She has cancer. We operated, but it was too late so we simply closed her back up. She's still out and won't be coming around until later tomorrow. We need to keep her sedated for the pain. She wants to be off the pain medication when you get here. She made me promise before the operation."

There was nothing to say. "I can make it in a few days. Is there time to drive or should I fly, Dr. Young?"

"I think it's OK to drive. She won't be over the effects of the anesthetic for about 36 hours. I'm afraid she will go downhill quickly after that, however." He paused for a moment. "She seemed sure you would come in time?"

"I'm dependable that way." The trace of sarcasm slipped out as I looked for a pen. I corrected my tone with hint of apology. "Sorry, Doctor. You never expect this kind of thing. I'm a little shook."

"Even when you know it's near, it's hard to accept . . . or to deal with," he agreed.

"Which hospital?"

"Harris Hospital in Fort Worth. Room 309. Intensive care." He gave me the number. "Just ask for me."

"I'll be in Fort Worth tomorrow, Doctor Young. By 6:00 o'clock. I will telephone you if there is going to be any delay. Are you sure she will make it that long?"

"For you, I think she will. I'll see that she knows you are coming."

Returning my phone to its cradle, I sat on the edge of my queen-size bed and stared blankly out the front window of my bedroom. The Rocky Mountains were beautiful, bathed in moonlight, but I couldn't appreciate the scene. My mind became a seething cauldron as memories and emotion threatened to overwhelm rational thought. My mother is dying, screamed the emotions. As will we all, answered my rational mind.

Ours was not the closest of relationships. She loved me, I'm sure, but we had gone our own ways when I was quite young. As soon as I could fend for and feed myself, she had lost interest in me and gone on with her life. We lived together more as roommates than mother and son. She had left my father 30 years ago, before I was born, and then she had left my step dad. I was the only man she had ever let stay around for any length of time.

Thinking of her conjured thoughts of my real father. I rarely thought of him, a man I'd never known. He had lived in Florida and loved the sea. I knew that he was tall, six four, like me, and his hair was curly and his eyes blue gray, both also like mine Molly knew nothing more, or if she did, she never talked about him. Such limited knowledge of the man providing the sperm for my conception bothered me when I was younger, but now just seemed like another fact of my life.

I think my mother's memories of him had blurred through the years and combined with the main character of her favorite novels, MacDonald's Travis McGee series. I was six when the first novel appeared. She loved his books, and I think that, through the years, her reminiscing about her partner in the brief tryst that had resulted in my birth took on a fictional flavor. She had pressed MacDonald's books upon me as if

to say, look, this is what your real father was like! At the very least, I think she liked to believe that the man she had met that night in Florida had been the man who had inspired MacDonald's character.

I was easy to encourage. I read everything I could get my hands on as a child. John D. MacDonald, Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Mickey Spillane. Maybe because my father's name was Cameron, and because the description given by my mother was so similar to MacDonald's character, the series became my favorite also.

What was my father really like? Would he have approved of the man I had come to be? I shook myself out of this reverie. Daydreaming about things that might have been is not my style. I jumped out of bed, into my clothes, and ducked to get down the stairs. Then I filled up the coffee maker and turned it on.

It was getting dark early now. Slipping on a jacket, I walked out the door of the trailer, flashlight in hand, and cranked up the trailer. I sat in the truck and waited for the glow plug to go out. The diesel turned over slowly before catching as if to register a complaint about the chill in the air. The momentary lull gave emotion the upper hand, and my head dropped to the steering wheel as anguish threatened to spill from my eyes.

Self-control finally regained, I backed the Ford under the fifth wheel. Hooking up the fifth wheel takes about ten minutes. I lowered it, rolled up the awning, unplugged the power and phone cord last, and then plugged the power and brakes into the receptacle near the hitch. The doctor had been my first call on my recently installed service. And my last. I made a mental note to call the phone company <<**the name has changed twice since this name was used.**>> from my cellular first thing in the morning with a disconnect order.

Inside the fifth wheel for a last minute check, I poured a cup of coffee for myself, put the rest into my thermos and glanced at my watch, a Rolex Submariner, one of the few signs of success I allow myself. It was midnight. Time to hit the road again.

The KOA where I was staying had my credit card number. They would discover me gone on their morning count and process the bill. American Express would send the bill to my PO box and forwarding service in Houston. The lifestyle of a responsible, modern-day gypsy. Bills are paid, credit extended, all without any contact between payer and payee. I own both the forwarding service and the building it rents from a management company that I formed that oversees my properties, deposits my profits in the proper accounts and pays my bills.

I'm a gypsy at heart. My friends complain they never get to see me, that I am some kind of hermit. They're right. I mean well, but if I wrote everybody I know, I wouldn't have the time to do anything to write about. They seem to keep up with me through gossip anyway. As the man who handles my affairs puts it: "Everyone has a Trevor story!"

Driving at night gives me time to think. Out of Aspen by way of Leadville and Salida, the highway parallels the continental divide. It was slow going because of the winding road and the weight of the trailer, but the route was one of my favorites anywhere. The mountains next to the highway were all over thirteen thousand feet, and an icy wind rushed down from the towering cliffs and tried to swing the

trailer off the edges. It was dry or I would have been in real trouble. It was definitely freezing. Fortunately, fifth wheels track better than regular travel trailers. Another week or two and the highway would be closed for the season.

From Salida, I turned east, hoping to make Pueblo by daybreak. A little tail wind would help. It was around one in the morning. The winding roads and steep hills slowed me down yet further as the climb became more abrupt, but there were no tourists on the road at this hour. The CB radio kept me in touch with the truckers, who advised me of the location of the "Smokies."

I was at home on the road. I drink rarely, and in fact haven't been drunk since graduation night, and I don't like drugs except for a little pot now and then, which I find relaxing and much less dangerous or addictive than alcohol. So I'm a safe driver. I depend a lot on caffeine, but I've avoided picking up habits like uppers or cocaine or the little, wiry ephedrine pills they sell at the truck stops as bronchodilators.

I especially don't like cocaine, in part because buying it only contributes to the greedy, macho Colombians who import it. But I also hate the snooty, upper class, rich boys that look down the straw in their noses at the poor blacks smoking crack out of a coke can. Same damned stuff by another name, and a destructive drug no matter how you dress it up. And it is not only destructive to the mind and body of any given user but to the fabric of our society. Its use and abuse drains our cash and funnels it to the pockets of an elite group of billionaires who care nothing for our way of life. It gives the lawmakers an excuse to promote excessive law enforcement tactics that infringe upon every honest American man, woman and child's right to live freely, upon our constitution and the liberties it provided us.

In modern America, such abuse and such over-the-top responses by the government are facts of life. It doesn't matter if you approve or not. The drug finds its way into the upper echelons of business as well as the slums. I know too many people who are into it. A lot of truckers use it, and that fact ought to scare anyone who drives.

I am not a crusader when it comes to drugs or drug laws, but we are polarized as a society because of the stuff and our Government's approach to it. I side with William Buckley: legalize it, control it and take the profits out of the hands of criminals.

Being hassled by some backwater cop just because I don't appear to have a steady job and my hair is a little longer in back than his, especially if a cop uses my appearance as a reason to tear my orderly trailer apart in a vain search for drugs, offends me.

I could be judging unfairly. If I led a normal existence, living in the same neighborhood for ten years, driving the same roads, eating in the same restaurants, going to the local church and driving a Volvo with a wife and two kids in it, I would probably be pressuring police to watch out for people like me: long-haired transients with no apparent means of support and riding a motorcycle!

I know that things are worse in Florida. There the Coast Guard tear apart boats with chain saws. Why would anyone want to own a boat or live in Florida?

My stomach registered a complaint at being deprived of food, so I started looking for a truck stop. I turned up the CD player to listen to Hank Jr. sing about being born to boogie, and my question floated unanswered into the ether with the music, an unrecognized prophecy.

I opened my eyes, surfacing from my memories like a diver who went too deep for too long. I gasped for air and the old man and bloody boy turned to look at me with puzzled looks on their faces.

“You OK, Colonel?” the kid asked.

“Yeah,” I reassured them. “Your question just stirred up some old memories that I haven’t got to enjoy for a long time.”

“Well, hell Colonel, the way that snow is comin’ down, we ain’t got nothing but time. Ain’t nobody, not even the truckers, going to be out on a night like this. Why don’t you just sit back and share some of those memories with an old man. You are quite a legend in this part of the country, but nobody seems to know just how you got to be who you are now?”

What an interesting way to put it. I rolled his question over in my mind. How I got to be who I am now! What had happened? Why was I not working in some government job, the only kind of job available today, taking orders from some bureaucrat who did not even take the time to learn English, putting a couple of kids through the Global economy brainwashing and making my tax payments faithfully?

“What’s your name,” I asked the old man. It was out of character for me, I realized as soon as the words left my lips. In the course of my life, especially the last few, long years, I had developed an aversion to knowing people’s names. There were simply too many dead left along my trail. Hell, I didn’t even know the kid’s name.

“Steve Jones.” He stuck his hand out and I shook it with a bloody gloved hand. He didn’t seem to mind.

“I’ve been here before. Well, not right here, but in Colorado. It’s a long story. I’ve never been real fond of truckers since my last trip here. But I did meet someone I cared a lot about. You sure you want to here this?”

“Yes!” they both said in unison.

CHAPTER TWO

I shook myself and opened my eyes just in time to avoid going into the ditch.

My thermos was three quarters empty and the remains were cold and bitter. The truck was on its rear tank of diesel and I needed to rid myself of the pressing burden of used coffee. I was still three hours out of Amarillo and it was two hours until dawn. The Seventy Six station was a brightly lit oasis in a cold, dark desert of night.

"Hey, Magic Man," came the crackling voice from my radio. "You stopping here?" It was my front door, Jake the Snake.

"Got to, Jake. My tanks are empty and my bladder's full. Got to kick the tires and grab a bite to eat. Give my regards to the gals in Big D tomorrow night. This is Magic Man signing off."

From the radio came the hail from our back door, a trucker with an illegal, hundred-watt amp attached to his CB. "This is God sending you his blessings, little buddy. Don't let the big rigs blow ya off the road, Magic Man. I'm headin' for Houston. You northbounders, it's clear back to Denver. This is God talkin'. Go on Jake, I got the back door closed." When God spoke, everyone for fifty miles listened.

I swung into the station, gassed up and pulled my rig around and parked it between two giant Kenworths. Feeling slightly dwarfed, I got out and walked around back to check my bike. I gave a cursory glance at the Cobra chain attaching it to the bumper of the fifth wheel. The Cobra is the best defense against bike thieves. It can't be cut, shot or broken with anything less than an acetylene torch. It will also convert into one hell of a weapon.

I continued my security circuit, checking the trailer door and the passenger side of the truck hurriedly, still needing to go to the bathroom and hungry as hell, when I heard an angry, feminine voice heatedly arguing with someone. A deep-bass man's voice answered her threateningly. The words were muffled by the bulk of the truck beside me, but the tones were definitely hostile.

As I stood there, hesitantly, not sure whether it would be necessary to intervene, or if it would be appreciated by either party for that matter, the hostility turned physical. I heard the sound of a hand striking soft flesh, and the woman's voice turned into a whimper.

Suddenly, my mind was made up. I turned towards my truck's tire and relieved myself next to it. Never enter a situation that could lead to violence with a full bladder. That accomplished. I rounded the Kenworth in time to see a burly trucker lifting a limp, slight figure dressed in a knee length, black leather coat into the driver's side of a black Mack parked beside the Kenworth. She wasn't unconscious, but for little fight she had left in her, she might as well have been.

He hadn't seen me. The tall Kenworth had hidden my arrival and he was too intent upon subduing her to pay much attention. Maybe this was his wife and I didn't have any business interfering. I didn't really have the time to get involved anyway. Then he saw me coming around the truck and made up my mind for me.

"Get lost, asshole!" he growled.

I took one long step towards him and hit him so quickly he never saw it coming. I caught him beneath the chin with the heel of my open palm, sparing my knuckles and allowing the full force of my blow to be absorbed by his jaw instead. His head snapped back and his eyes seemed to glaze. The woman slid out of his loosened grasp, and as she fell, I slapped him twice across the face, my H-D Eagle ring taking a small chunk of skin with it on the back hand, just to show him how it felt. Then I turned to her.

"Are you all right?" I asked as I helped her up.

"I think so."

"Am I interfering in a family matter?"

"No. The jerk offered me a ride back at a truck stop in Denver. When we got here he wanted a head job. I declined and said I would stay here. 'Bull' here decided to show me who was boss." She jerked her head at the dazed trucker with distaste as she wiped a trickle of blood from a cut over her eye.

The moon was out and almost full. It reflected off her eyes and skin in a way that was almost dazzling. She reflected the moon's light the way the moon reflects the sun, but she also seemed to glow with an inner light that was more impressive than her quite impressive exterior.

Bull was beginning to focus. A slap across the face does two things. It is humiliating to be slapped by another man, and it automatically brings tears to the eyes and temporarily blinds you. However, a slap does no permanent damage and the marks fade before a sore loser can take the evidence to court. This guy wasn't thinking about court. He was still pissed. He stared at me with a simian look of astonishment. I was four inches taller but he had me by thirty pounds. Heavy arms and his weight had always been enough to back down or subdue his detractors, I was sure, and Bull was having a hard time accepting that I not only had struck him but was about to take away his prize: an easy piece of ass. A gullible, trusting type of rootless, restless womanhood deemed by some to be fair prey.

I had a hand hooked under her arm to help her off the oil soaked tarmac. He growled and started for me, thinking to himself that it was just luck that I had dropped him and that I had caught him by surprise. I let him get close enough to think he might have a chance.

A well aimed snap kick connected to his groin with an audible, meaty thunk. My knee met his head coming down. He rose to standing height and then some, his heels clearing the pavement by maybe an inch or more. With my free hand, I caught his neck, squeezed the carotid artery just enough to make the blackness creep in around the edges of his vision, and then pulled him close so he could see the blue of my eyes by the light of the moon.

"Bother me or the girl again, and I'll make your current disability permanent. Do you understand me?"

He was unable to breathe or speak but I could feel a slight nod of assent. I let go and he dropped to the pavement. I turned to the girl and motioned to the restaurant. "Would you like to join me for breakfast?"

She grabbed a small leather suitcase and a handbag off the ground and followed me without a backward glance.

"Where did you learn to fight like that?" she asked.

"I had a friend named Marvin Messick that took pity on a poor, skinny bookworm. He had been in Vietnam and a MP down at Fort Hood. He had a girlfriend next door to us when I lived in Fort Worth. As part of his therapy after the war, he decided to make it a personal project to see that I learned everything he knew about weapons and self defense so I wouldn't get picked on."

"I can't imagine you as a skinny bookworm?"

"It's the truth. Straight A's."

"No, I can see that. I mean the part about being skinny and picked on."

"Well, I didn't get a lot of exercise as a kid. I was already 6'4" at twelve, but I only weighed about 145. Then Marvin took me under his wing, worked my butt off, added a little muscle and brought me up to the 210 you see now."

We entered the restaurant and a bubblegum-chewing waitress waved her hand regally towards an empty table. Heads turned. The looks were for my companion. She was somewhere between 18 and 24, slim, with silver blonde hair cut short above her shoulders. She slipped off her coat and I could see small firm breasts straining against a dark blue blouse that accentuated her astoundingly white skin. Her waist and legs were trim and fit, those of a dancer perhaps. Her face was capped by an upturned nose that gave her a pixyish look. The red mark left by Bull's hand was fading. Her eyes were so light they seemed to be the same color as her skin, striking even with streaked eyeliner. She was an albino, I realized. She looked like an artist's subject, a statue sculpted by Michelangelo: marble-smooth skin, hair like spun silver, eyes the color of polished stone. When she looked at me, I could almost believe she was a statue of Diana come to life, Greek goddess of the moon. The only albinos I had ever seen were Johnny and Edgar Winter, the blues and rock musicians of the sixties. I had no idea an albino could be as beautiful as she was.

The cut over her eye was still bleeding. I took a napkin and gently dabbed the blood from her alabaster eye. The waitress came by, coffeepot in hand. We ordered breakfast. I sweetened my coffee lightly, no cream, and waited patiently, leaning back just enough that my body language was non-threatening and receptive. She still seemed reticent about talking, however, so I prodded gently. "Why are you hitching? Seems to be a dangerous way to go these days?"

"My . . . brother. He is in trouble in Florida," she said without looking me in the eye. Shame perhaps. "He needs help and I had no money for plane fare. He has a business in Miami. I thought maybe if I could get to Florida there would be something I could do. His partner didn't want to talk to me over the phone. I didn't know any other way to get there."

"You're a dancer?"

She looked startled. "How did you know? I've been taking ballet for two years at Denver community college and working in a dental office."

"You have a dancer's walk and body," I said truthfully, covering up the fact I had first figured her for a stripper before realizing that, were this the case, she would have had the money to fly to Florida. I took another stab in the dark to enhance her growing belief of my omnipotence. "Your brother, he's in trouble with the law? Drugs?"

She stared at me for a moment and then dropped her head, trying to deal with my insight, her own doubts and her belief in her brother. After a moment, she raised her head and met my gaze squarely. "They say he was selling cocaine. They caught him with three ounces. From what I've heard, that's not an excessive amount and his bail isn't that high. I don't understand why his partner won't bail him out or talk to me. I know Doug too well. He wouldn't be involved in something like that! We've always communicated with each other. His business was doing well. He might have used drugs at a party, but there was no reason for him to deal!"

Her faith in brother Doug was inspiring but a bit naive. You can never tell who will become entrapped by the lure of easy money. Treachery, back-stabbing and outright ripoffs occur enough in daily life. The presence of cocaine increases the risks at least a hundredfold.

I had seen it happen in normal businesses. One person has an idea and one person has the money. The idea works and money starts flowing. Then one party gets greedy and wants it all. Enter ripoffs, embezzlement or hit men, depending on the amount of money involved.

The drug angle is relatively new because of its ready availability to almost anyone now. If you are caught with anything, however, you are now guilty until proven innocent. Three ounces of coke, perhaps twenty four hundred dollars in Florida, is hidden in your house or under your car seat while you run into 7-11 for a pack of cigarettes. A further investment of a quarter for a phone call to the cops, and Presto! A partner is out of the way or up to his neck in lawyer's fees, bail bondsmen and bill collectors., and of course, the righteous partner is properly offended by the callous lawbreaker and offers a pittance to buy him out, to pay for legal fees and bail.

Drugs make it easy for people to set themselves up, get themselves caught. A businessman would have to be a soft-hearted fool not to take advantage of an opportunity like that. This could have been either. I didn't voice my thoughts to my young companion.

The waitress brought our food. As she sat the plates down and walked away, it dawned on me that the woman seated across from me and I were still strangers. She was confiding in a man she knew nothing about. I could have been another of the Mack driver's ilk, or worse. And I was listening to the intimate family problems of a girl who hadn't yet told me her name.

I stuck a hand out. "My name is Trevor. Trevor Cameron Hamilton."

She smiled, teeth as white as her skin. "Guess we got caught up in the moment, huh? My name is Donna Jo Belben."

We ate in silence. I picked up the check and tried to look pleasant and less dangerous. It's hard for me. If I'm not smiling, I've been told I look like Stephen Seagal just before he hacks the bad guys to bits—all malice and terrible intentions. So I smiled.

She returned the smile. "I don't know how to thank you for what you did back there."

"It was nothing."

She fidgeted a little in her seat. "Look. I hate to be an imposition or a pest. I'm still a little frightened by this guy. Do you think I could get a ride out of here with you? I don't even care if it is in the direction of Florida!"

"I can give you a ride as far as Fort Worth. I have to be there tomorrow." I glanced automatically at my watch and corrected myself. "Make that today."

"That would be great." She smiled at me and I fell into those incredible eyes.

I'm not a knight in shining armor, not even close perhaps. I just couldn't leave a woman in a place like this, especially one of the most strikingly beautiful women I have ever met.

She admired my rig. I tossed her bags in the trailer and opened the truck. It's four wheel drive, which makes it a big step up for a little lady. So, like John Wayne, I lifted her into the cab. She smiled. I beamed.

Pulling out of the truck stop and onto the on-ramp of the Interstate, I noticed a truck pulling out behind me, but I gave it little thought, other than as a "back door." I was too interested in my new-found friend to turn on the CB, however.

She appeared to be interested in me. "Why are you going to Fort Worth?"

"My mother is dying," I answered in a carefully neutral tone.

"I'm sorry!" she cried. "What a horrible way for me to open a conversation!"

I smiled without mirth. "It's all right. You couldn't have known. I should have been more prepared for it! I knew she had cancer. You can't just pretend it's not ever going to happen to someone you love."

She slid over towards me and touched my arm. She was a good listener. She leaned forward attentively. She looked, really looked, at me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Normally taciturn, I was surprised that I did. So I gave her the high and low points. My mother had given birth to me in Waco, Texas. Waco's only claim to fame at the time was the inhabitant's memories of and newspaper clippings about a tornado that rushed through one stormy day before I was born, destroying most of downtown. She went from job to job, and we both went from town to town, living with my stepfather when I was very young, but it was just the two of us most of the time. John H. Hamilton, my stepdad's name, was not a bad man but not much of a man period, either. Not enough of a man to hold Molly Bea's interest or to teach me much of anything that I could use.

As I child, I studied in the schools and streets of Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth. When I was a little older, she divorced John and never bothered marrying the others. I grew out of her world quickly. I held no animosity for the father I had never met. He had done nothing wrong in bedding my mother. I

doubt that he ever dreamed he had a son, imagining, as all men do, that the girl who has shared our beds took the right precautions.

Molly Bea was not a woman who looked much past her daily existence. I had been closer to her mother, my grandmother, Helen, who had been more a part of my childhood. After my grandmother died, and after high school and a couple of years of college were behind me, I made plans to explore the world outside Texas. I was on the road by the time I could drive, traveling, selling, and investing money and effort in a variety of enterprises until I had worked my way out of my mother's narrow world.

Donna let me ramble on. She encouraged me with glances, soft touches to my arm and words of support placed exactly in the appropriate pauses. Flashing lights of a trucker wanting to pass brought me back to the present. I flashed mine in response and hugged the right side of the highway.

I took a breath and automatically reached down and turned the CB on. It crackled to life immediately.

"Bull! Bull! Come on back to me, buddy. It ain't worth it. I repeat, it ain't worth it."

Bull didn't answer. The truck pulled up beside us. It was a black Mack. I caught a glimpse of the driver, his face contorted with fury in the dim glow of the instrument panel. I knew at once who the caller on the radio was trying to stop!

I floored the pickup. My pickup is a F250 Super Cab with four wheel drive and a one ton suspension package. It's turbo-charged, five years old and I don't owe a dime on it. It's taken me over the Sierras, the Rockies and through the Mojave Desert. I reward it by keeping it in fanatically good condition. I hoped that it had the balls to take this truck. At this altitude, black smoke billowed out of the exhaust pipe as I watched the turbo boost gauge climb. The heat gauge for the turbo was rising also. The speedometer wasn't rising fast enough!

My reaction caught him by surprise. I pulled ahead slightly on the downhill run, gaining a little ground. I could hear his larger diesel bellow and imagined the smoke that poured from twin stacks. His bright lights reflected in the driver-side mirror with blinding brilliance. His headlights were even with the back bumper of the trailer. He swerved sharply and I felt the trailer take the hit. It swayed drunkenly and I kept my foot in it. I pulled away by inches. The thought of my Harley on back taking a hit from the giant bumper of the big Mack sent a shiver down my spine, and I in turn sent a silent prayer into the air.

Donna was starting to panic. I shouted at her, "Reach into the glove box. Open the bag. Take out the pistol and insert the clip." She was not familiar with an automatic. She was scared and she dropped the clip on the floorboard. I was keeping one eye on our pursuer and one eye on the road. With a sinking sense of dread, I noticed the sign warning of a grade ahead: Trucks use right lane only. We were going up!

I couldn't hold the lead. He had me on horsepower. I could imagine the grin on his face. He knew he could pull me going up a grade like this. There was nowhere to go, except over the edge, a drop off into a ravine that was rapidly getting deeper!

Donna managed to get the gun loaded. She was staring at it in disbelief. I took it from her, cocked it and stuck it into my belt. The speedometer was dropping steadily. The turbo temperature was in the red and the water temperature was beginning to rise too.

Bull apparently wasn't going to risk the paint on his truck again. He was going to use the trailer to send us down into the dark depths over the edge of the mountain. He pulled up beside me, his bumper even with my door. In the dull glow of his instrument lights, I could see that his rage had turned into a grin of triumph. We were only doing thirty miles an hour now. We both downshifted frantically trying to find a gear to pull us to an advantage, but the speed kept dropping!

This chase had taken on a surreal quality. I knew this was a situation of life and death. The trucker was intent on revenge for his humiliation. His plan was clear. But it was happening in slow motion! We were two jockeys in a deadly race, but mounted on turtles.

The speed with which we were creeping up the hill gave me an idea. It was risky, but the alternative made it worth a try.

"Can you drive?" I demanded.

"I've never pulled a trailer!" she wailed.

"Don't think about that! Can you drive this truck? Can you hold it on the road?"

"I think so." She tried to get a grip on her fear. "What are you going to do? Shoot him?"

"Listen. He's going to try and run us off the road with the trailer. If I shot him he could still take us over the edge. We've got one chance. Just keep us on the road. If he drops back, stay a little ahead and watch for a signal. If you see that it's OK, pull over and stop to wait for me! Switch places with me as soon as he is past my window!"

The big semi pulled alongside. The passenger window was rolled down, and Bull leaned over and yelled, "So long, you son-of-a-bitch. Maybe she'll give you some head on your way down the mountain!" His laugh was slightly hysterical.

As he pulled ahead I said, "Now!" and let her slide under the wheel. "Stay as close to him as you can. Keep your foot on the floor until you know it's safe."

"How will I know?"

"We'll both be alive!" I yelled as I slid over the back seat and out the sliding back window and into the bed of the pickup. The bulk of the fifth wheel was close behind me. Too close. If she made a hard turn, I could be crushed.

There was no time. Bull was pulling away too fast. His door was now even with the front bumper. He was further away than was prudent for my plan, but I was committed to this course of action. I jumped on top of my truck and ran down the hood and dropped down on the wide, front bumper that held my winch. I could feel Donna's incredible eyes on my back, and then I heard her scream over the wind and roar of the engines as I jumped for the Mack across three feet of turbulent air and rushing concrete.

My left hand caught the grab rail behind the cab. My shoulder slammed into the side of the cab, and one foot found precarious purchase on the cold, slick steel running board. The other was dragging inches in front of the twin rear wheels.

"What the fuck . . .?" came from the cab of the Mack.

The muscles of my left arm felt like they were being ripped from my shoulder socket. I pulled myself onto the running board, drew the gun from my pants and stuck it into the window. His mouth dropped open as he saw me.

"I've heard of rude drivers, but you carry the term asshole to new heights. Scratch the paint on that truck or trailer and I leave a hole right where your brain should have been!" I snarled.

"How the hell . . .?"

"Stop this truck. Now, asshole!" I fired a round past his face. The bullet came so close to his ear it must have sounded like a jet. Specks of powder from the flash burned his face like a horde of tiny, vicious mosquitoes. The impact of the 9mm shell blasted the safety glass of the driver-side window to tiny fragments and propelled them across the highway. He finally began to take me seriously. The blood drained from his face and a smelly stain spread across his lap and the front of his seat. He slammed on the brakes.

Donna pulled ahead. "Pull it over to the side of the road. Don't make any quick moves. It's all I can do to keep from blowing your head off now. Don't give me any more of a reason!"

Bull pulled meekly over onto the shoulder and stopped.

"Now blink your lights."

He followed my directions. All his bluster was leaking down his leg. I opened the door and reached in to grab the mike of his radio. "Stop and wait there, Donna. I'll be along shortly." I said and then ripped the mike out of the radio. I slid in beside him, grabbed his shirt and jabbed him hard in the ribs with the barrel of my gun. When he opened his mouth in pain, I slid the barrel of the gun through his pursed lips until the sight dug into the roof of his mouth, chipping a tooth on its way in.

"Bull. I want to properly introduce myself. My handle is the Magic Man. If you should happen to live through the night, and you hear my name on the radio, I advise you to make sure you are going the opposite direction!" I forgave his inability to answer.

I used the mike cord to tie him up in his sleeper cab, and in an uncomfortable position with his hands jammed up behind his back as tight as they'd go without pulling muscle from bone to insure he didn't get a good night's sleep. Not that he could with such a smell. I shot out two tires and put the rest of the clip into the radiator. If he didn't freeze to death, someone would find him tomorrow, probably a state trooper.

I was proud of my restraint.

“Guess, back then, you never would’ve believed it would be the truckers who are our main source of communication and transportation, huh?” the kid spouted.

I nodded. “Got that right. There is a whole lot of things I didn’t know then that I wish I had. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I had a time machine or some other way I could communicate with that earlier self, to warn him of what was coming.”

“Hell, Colonel,” Steve snorted, “there weren’t nothing you could’ve done. I known all my life about these bastards and their insidious plans for us. My daddy was a Bircher and I hitched my wagon to the Libertarians, and then the Constitution Party. I went to every Constitutional Rally, signed every state sovereignty petition and voted for every asshole who swore he supported the Constitution.”

“Every time one of them bastards got into office, he either got bought off or scared off. The ones with balls had heart attacks and plane crashes. Seems like every time the government declared war on anything, whatever they was fighting got stronger. The Vietnamese kicked our ass. The war on drugs? What a joke! The drugs got better and more plentiful as soon as the federal government jumped on the bandwagon. Then the war on crime and that damn crime bill, and suddenly it was only the police and the gangs that had the guns and honest people were having their doors kicked in by both the bastards. In fact, it was impossible to tell the good guys from the bad!”

He looked up at me. “Hell, listen to me telling you ‘bout what happened. If only half the stories following you around are true, you was fighting these bastards right from the beginning.”

I shook my head. “It’s people like you who are the real freedom fighters. Maybe, if more of us had listened to you, we’d be in better shape now. Hell, I was just as naive as the next guy. I was young, had a little money and too much time on my hands back in the eighties. I was watching TV, reading the paper and thought I was on top of the world situation. I still thought the government, bumbling as it was, was intrinsically good. I believed that we still had the protection of the Constitution.”

“So what changed your mind?” Steve asked.

“I think it happened after I got involved with Donna. She had a problem and I wanted to help her with it. I had no idea, at the time, of the extent of the corruption of this country.”

"Got a little sweet on her, huh?" The kid, whose wounds seemed to have stopped bleeding, his strength seemingly coming back too, was excited. Few of the rag-tag regiment of freedom fighters had ever seen Colonel Cameron even talk to a woman, other than to bark orders.

"You could say that, " I smiled.

CHAPTER THREE

Donna and I left Bull and his memory far behind. A highway patrolman or another trucker would find him and release him. Just to make sure, I got on the CB after we passed Pueblo, near the Texas border, and told a few truckers to check on him. I also told them what he had tried to do so they wouldn't be that sympathetic to him. I doubted he would send the law after us. He wouldn't want to face counter-charges of attempted murder, kidnapping and attempted rape.

Donna was badly shaken by the incident. "I can't believe that he would try to kill us!"

"Maybe he didn't really plan on it. He might have just planned on frightening us and let his anger get out of hand."

"That's an awfully charitable way to describe what just happened," she said while studying me intently with those incredible eyes. "I thought you were going to kill him. You didn't, did you?"

"I was tempted, but he was unhurt except for his pride. What he just did doesn't call for the death penalty in any state I know of."

"Shooting him could have been called self defense, but you could have been killed trying a stunt like that too. I saw you dive onto the truck. I thought you missed. You scared me more than he did!"

"Sorry. It was the best idea I could come up with on such short notice."

"Are you always that impulsive?" she asked with a mischievous smile.

"Always." Our eyes met and the air between us shimmered with the heat.

"Trevor, what do you do? How do you afford to travel like this?" she asked seriously.

I answered in the same vein. "I buy income properties for a management firm." I neglected to tell her of my ownership of the firm. I have a reticence about talking about my business, preferring to be thought of as a biker-type with a good gig going. "I check properties out all over the country, and if it's a good deal, the management company takes over the purchasing process."

"Then you go where you want?"

She was getting to the point. "More or less. I doubt they would want to pay me to go to Brooklyn or East L.A., but any economically stable area has potentially profitable businesses and properties, so pretty much anywhere I want, yes."

"But you know how to handle yourself. I mean, I get the impression you know the streets, too."

I thought about that question. "I guess I do. I've been riding Harleys for years and party with some heavy people. I'm good with my hands and have been in my share of barroom brawls. I have an odd assortment of bums, bikers and businessmen I call friends. I don't gossip and I mind my own business. That fact gains me admission to some scenes that your ordinary businessman would either feel extremely uncomfortable in or wouldn't go into in the first place."

"Do you see those kinds of people for fun or do you have to?"

"Both. Let me put it this way. The company that controls all the Country and Western bookings in Northern California is owned by Hell's Angels. If I should need to see Willie or Waylon for a company that wants to use their name and pay them royalties for the privilege, I see a friend of mine in San Francisco. He has a beard down to his navel, weighs three hundred pounds and wears ragged blue jeans and has a tattoo on his arm that proclaims him a Hell's Angel. I don't need a press pass, permission from anybody's recording company or have to sit in an office for two days. Zeke walks into his dressing room and says, 'I want you to meet a friend of mine, Willie.' I make a commission if I make such a deal, but Zeke is a friend I see if I've got business with him or not. He's a family man whose wife drives a Mercedes, and he lives in a house on a hill in Berkeley that costs over a mil easy. So, how should I judge this man, as a biker tough guy with connections or just another businessman making his way in the American corporate landscape?"

"I think I understand," she said almost timidly.

"I don't mean to get on a soap box," I apologized. "I judge people by how I get along with them, how we react to each other, what interests we have in common. I do business with a lot of different types, but not all of them are friends, and I have a lot of friends from every economic stratum that I don't do business with. There are a few people who are both. I judge all of them by their actions, not just their looks or money."

"I guess I deserved a lecture for the way that sounded. It's just that you are a mass of contradictions. You are handsome, yet you dress in dark clothing and jeans with Harley belt buckles. You say you are a businessman, but your hair is long and you ride a motorcycle. You talk like a philosophy professor sometimes, and you take on a three hundred pound trucker with one hand holding me up. You don't work, at least not like the people I know have to work, and you drive around the country in a fifty thousand dollar rig, which you jump off of like Indiana Jones, and pull guns on homicidal truckers." She took a deep breath. "And I've only known you for a few hours!"

"So. What's your point?" I said with a straight face.

It took a second but my attempt at humor broke the tension. We both laughed until our stomachs hurt.

The tension gone and over her fright, Donna proved to be intelligent and a good conversationalist in addition to being an exotically beautiful woman. We chatted about the weather, her dancing and a host of other inconsequential and impersonal tidbits. We watched the sun come up and illuminate the bleak landscape of the Texas Panhandle. She was trying very hard not to burden me with her brother's personal problems, but I could tell it was on her mind.

"How far are we from Amarillo?" I asked.

"I just saw a sign that said twenty miles."

"Close enough." I reached into my pouch and withdrew my cellular phone.

Juggling investments and businesses requires constant communication. A word here or a suggestion there is all it takes to keep my ship on course. Unfortunately, Motorola has not got it's worldwide satellite phone system on-line yet. With it, I could be dug into a sand hill in the Sahara and still take care of business. Until then, the cellular system being set up around the country is liberating men and women from the confines of an office at an astounding rate.

Meanwhile, I had to deal with today. I called the phone company in Denver and had my phone service turned off. Then I checked my 800 answering service in Houston for messages. I had two. I handled both before I got out of range of Amarillo's cellular system. I had time to call Harris Hospital and update my arrival time. When I looked over at Donna, she was sound asleep.

I let her sleep. She didn't miss much. The scenery on Texas' Highway 287 is less than spectacular. I pulled off the road at noon and led her back to the trailer. I grumbled under my breath at the sticky lock that wanted to keep my key. She found it humorous. I fired up the generator and turned the air on. Texas in September had not yet felt the cooler air that was beginning to press into Colorado. Give the place time, however. The Panhandle in winter can make Chicago feel like the Bahamas. Once inside the trailer, Donna oohed and ahed in all the right places.

"This is so, so comfortable. I always thought living in a trailer would be cramped. I imagined camping as roughing it."

"I rough it when I'm hunting," I said, nodding at my gun collection secured in the specially constructed gun cabinet. You can look, but you aren't going to break through those clear doors without a ten pound sledge hammer. "This is my home, and I like to be comfortable at home. How would you like your steak?"

"Medium rare, thank you. Can I help? I'm not used to anyone cooking for me. I've been cooking since I was twelve."

"Just sit. I know where everything is and you'd just get in the way. This is a one-man, or woman I guess, kitchen. You watch and learn, and I'll let you fix dinner. Corn or beans?"

"Corn. Out of consideration for you. We still have a few hours left together in that truck." She wrinkled her nose.

"Corn it is. And a salad with your choice of bleu cheese, thousand island or oil and vinegar?"

"Thousand island. Does that shower work? I feel awfully grubby. Especially after having that guy's gross hands on me."

"Sure. Go ahead. You have fifteen minutes before your steak starts to get cold. The water should be hot by now, but it won't last too long."

"I'll be quick." She grabbed her bag that I'd tossed in the trailer and disappeared into the bathroom.

I lifted the coffee table in front of the couch, and then made the moves that magically transformed it into a dining table. The dining chairs stashed behind the couch unfolded. I quickly set the table and tossed the salad. I had just flipped our steaks and nuked a can of corn when I heard the water stop. By the time I got the food on our plates, the door slid open. She had changed into a red dress that hugged her body like a glove, showing plenty of dazzling white skin. I stared. I could not help it.

"I thought you might like some company when you go to the hospital to see your mom." She smiled and sent a shot of electricity through my body. I felt a stirring in my loins, which was definitely not brotherly love and a blow to my Good-Samaritan intentions.

"I don't know. She's in the intensive care unit. You could cause a lot of old men to have heart attacks if you go in there looking like that." It was only with great effort that I tore my eyes off her and remembered the two plates in my hands.

"Lunch is served."

She sat down and ate with gusto, murmuring appreciative phrases. I ate too, but I definitely no longer had the will power to take my eyes off her. Her hair was the color of spun silver, still damp but curling into a perfect coiffure without the aid of rollers. Her white skin flowed sensually over her fine-boned frame and under the red, silky material of her dress. I glanced at her furtively every time I raised a bite to my mouth. The steak did little to ease the new hunger I was beginning to feel with increasing severity.

As we finished lunch, she brought up her brother again. "Trevor, would you consider going to Florida?"

"I have to spend some time in Texas, Donna. I owe that much to my mother," I pointed out gently.

"I know that. I wouldn't ask you to leave before . . . I'm sorry, Trevor. That didn't come out right at all. I'm just so worried about Doug and I'm so alone and scared. And Florida is so far away. You . . . you inspire this incredible confidence. I just feel like you could handle any situation. I feel . . . safe." She turned those eyes on me and now I had to look away. A woman who looks like she does must certainly know the power of her gaze, her ability to look through a man and parboil his spleen by overheating his glandular systems.

"If things were different, maybe I could take a trip there. But I can't promise anything, Donna. This thing with my mother is going to take some time. You are welcome to stay here until you feel you have to go," I finished awkwardly. She didn't answer. We spoke no more of her problems as she helped me wash our dishes and put the trailer in order, and we were soon on the road again.

We pulled into a KOA north of Fort Worth near Eagle Mountain Lake off State Highway 287. I set up the trailer and we left immediately for the hospital. Dr. Young met us near Molly's room. He was young for a doctor, in his late thirties, a little overweight but well dressed and neat. He was cordial and bright. I liked him immediately. We shook hands.

"I'd like to say something reassuring, Mr. Hamilton . . ."

"It's Trevor, Doctor. Mr. Hamilton wasn't even related to me." He gave my hand an understanding squeeze and released it.

"Trevor, then. It's just that the cancer had progressed too far by the time we opened her up. I think the only reason she came out of it after the operation was to see you."

I nodded. I asked Donna to give me a few minutes alone with my mother. Though I knew it was going to be bad, I still wasn't ready for what I found. Her face was drawn by pain into a caricature of an old woman. Her hair was still red but streaked with gray. It hadn't been washed lately and lay plastered to her skull. Her eyes were dulled with pain and sunken but alert. She looked seventy years old.

"Hi, Molly," I said, trying to smile, but I failed and reached out to hold her hand. I hadn't called her Mom since I was a teenager. I could feel unused tear glands suddenly become active, and my throat threatened to seize up.

She smiled at me through her pain. "I waited for you, Trevor. I knew you'd come."

I had to clear my throat to speak, which gave me a little time to think of something to say. All I could come up with was, "I love you, Mom!" It was more blurted out than spoken, forced out by guilt from the years of separation. In the back of your mind, faced with the death of a loved one, lurks the thought: Maybe there was something I could have done, something I should have done differently, a different path I could have taken in this relationship that would have yielded some better result!

Even though we had never been close, she felt my unspoken cry in that special way that parent and child can communicate. "Trevor. I know I'm dying." Her voice came out in a whisper. I had to lean forward to hear her. She grasped my hand and squeezed it. "I know I wasn't the mother I should have been. You took good care of me, Trevor."

"But I was never there," I choked out.

"It was I who wasn't there for you, son. I always knew where you were and how to reach you." Pain etched her face and she lost her thread of thought. She knew she had so little time. The ultimate void would soon open before her.

"You are my son, and I owe you something." She broke into a coughing spell that lasted almost a minute. I started to go for the doctor, but the grip of her hand never relaxed.

"Trevor. When you leave here, I want you to promise me something!"

"Yes, Molly. Anything. Name it."

"I want you to find your father."

I didn't answer. I wanted to say, Molly, I've grown up without him. I don't need him now! I wanted to protest, but how could I argue with my mother's dying request?

She read my mind. "Listen, Trevor. I know you did real well without a father. You didn't need me that much either. But I short-changed you by not insisting that you get in touch with him before."

"Come on, Molly. I've no complaints."

"You grew up without knowing your father, and I never tried to find him. I'd like to think he was a real special man. I never talked to you about him because I was ashamed. There was no relationship between us, nothing."

"Molly... Mom. Let it go. You did all right by me. There is nothing to be ashamed of."

She wouldn't let it go, however, and I realized this had been eating at her for a long time. We had always avoided the subject of my father in the past. Her impending death had loosened my tongue earlier and was affecting her similarly.

"He was between women, I think. I was young and into partying. Some guy from Alabama owned this big boat at Bahia Mar in Fort Lauderdale. Friends told me almost everyone was welcome as long as they looked good in a bikini or shorts. I went, got a little tipsy, and spotted your father." A kind of serenity seemed to light her face from within as she remembered him. "He was tall and good looking, in a lanky, rough way. There was something about him though, an air of adventure, of danger. All the men were polite toward him, like maybe it was dangerous not to be, and all the women watched him. I was tickled to death when he noticed me."

Talking was too much for her. The effort was visibly draining her energy. Her life force seemed to seep from her frame. "It's OK, Molly. You should rest now."

"No time, no time," she cried, tears trickling. "Let me finish, damn it." I backed off. Hell, she knew she was dying. I hope to God no one wants to stroke me and go "there, there" when I'm taking my last breath either.

"I'm sorry, Molly. Go ahead. I'm listening."

"To make it short, he took me back to his old houseboat, made love to me and sent me on my way, polite as can be. I told a girlfriend of mine from New Orleans about him, and we went back the next night, so she could see I wasn't lying I think. He was still polite, but you could tell he was thinking about something besides us and sent us firmly on our way."

"A week later I was back in Houston, all set to go to back to Baylor. After two months I figured out I was pregnant. I knew it was his because I hadn't slept with anyone else. I ended up marrying Hamilton to give you a name."

"John wasn't a bad man."

"He was just the first one who asked. I didn't want you to be a bastard. I felt guilty about everything, the circumstances of your birth but also marrying John that way, but what else could I do? I had too much pride to show up pregnant at Cameron's door. Hell, it was just a fling for both of us, a one-night

stand. But I never lied to Hamilton or to you. That's why your middle name is Cameron, and that's why you knew from the start that Hamilton wasn't your father. He was a nice man, and I guess he cared about us, but he was never the man I'd like to think your father was."

She closed her eyes for a minute to regain her strength. When she opened them, she locked her gaze on me with a fierce intensity. "Find him, Trevor. Go to Florida and find him. He deserves to know his son. He deserves to know he has a son. And you need to know him. I'm sorry I kept you apart. God forgive me if I waited too long. Find him if he's still alive. I named you after him. His name was Shannon. Shannon Cameron!"

"OK, Molly. I promise."

I brought in Donna and introduced her to Molly. Donna and Molly were both embarrassed. The specter of death made all of us uncomfortable, so the conversation was minimal, stilted, and did not last long. Pain took over and Dr. Young motioned us out.

I stayed as Donna left the room. With a catch in my throat and tears in both our eyes, I said goodbye to my mother. Though we might see each other again, we might not, and we both knew it. This is one of the major turning points in anyone's life, letting go of a loved one, saying the final goodbyes.

"I love you, Molly," were my parting words. She nodded, slowly, painfully, and closed her eyes.

I gave Doctor Young the address and phone number of the trailer park I was staying in and asked him to contact me if there was any change. I had two stops to make before returning to the place I had parked the trailer. The first was at a funeral home near Mount Olivet cemetery where I picked out a coffin and a marker from a professional who never once used false sympathy, for which I even thanked him at one point. We worked out the financial arrangements, and I gave him my billing address. Donna was quiet and subdued. In the truck as we left, she helped me make a list of friends and relatives who would attend a funeral. Everyone I ever knew was listed in my database, and I would print the phone numbers when we got back to the trailer.

The second stop was a lawyer on the north side, near the Stockyards, a good old boy named Gene DeBullet, pronounced De bu lay. It was a brief meeting. I gave him my birthdate, my place of birth and my current mailing address, my social security number and five one hundred-dollar bills. I signed a couple of forms and shook hands with Gene, who forgot about me as soon as I walked out the door. The girl in the office would file the forms and fill out the paperwork. Gene had nothing more to do with the process. The paperwork would take a week before my name change became official, but as I walked out of the office, in my mind, I was no longer Trevor C. Hamilton. I was now Trevor Cameron.

"No wonder the Feds consider you such a mystery man," the kid said. "That's why they've never been able to get to you through your family."

It was getting late and I was tired, but a little tingle of alarm ran through me. This was a kind of sixth sense that I have learned never to ignore, but the biggest problem is that it doesn't work with any specificity. There is no neon arrow pointing in the direction of the danger, just an inchoate feeling that something is not right or is about to happen.

We had climbed straight down into this cellar, and I had not checked out the rest of the house. I had no idea if anyone else was here or if so if there were phone lines or if Steve was connected to the information superhighway. Just as the interstate was patrolled by tanks and armed men, the networks were monitored by Clinton's Clipper Chip Patrol. Telephones, TVs, computers and faxes could be monitored at any time without the knowledge or the cooperation that provided the service or the inhabitants of the house who used the phone or computer, unwittingly telling the government everything about themselves.

"Steve, are we alone here?" I asked.

"Except for an old alley cat by the name of Bru."

"Phones, cable or computer?"

"Phone. Got a satellite dish. Got an ancient 286. Wouldn't buy a new one after Clinton got his way."

"Mind taking me on a tour?" I asked mildly.

"Not at all, Colonel. Don't figure you got those gray hairs without worrying a bit 'bout your surroundings. I imagine the Insiders want to hang your scalp on their trophy wall while there's still some black left on it."

I followed him up the stairs and we walked the perimeter of the house. I nervously adjusted the light-leaking curtains and checked the locks on the doors and windows. I peered outside with the night goggles and could see no figures within the woods. The snow had already erased our tracks outside the cabin and all was still.

A thought occurred to me. "What day is it, Steve?"

"Christmas Eve, Colonel! Would you like some beans and rice?" I nodded. It had been a day or so since my last meal. "'Bout all I got till next week's rations. They cut us all way back. They're blaming it on you rebels, say you're blowing up the trucks with the food." It wasn't really a question but somewhere in the back of his mind, it was.

"We don't hit trucks unless we know they're carrying troops or weapons."

"Guess they've started shipping our food on those trucks then. Sure has been a lean season. Use to be able to stock a little wild game in the freezer, but nowadays, a shot brings too many of those Blue-Helmeted assholes down on you, looking for those illegal weapons."

I inhaled the beans and rice. The smell brought back old memories of a meal long ago. I asked permission to take a refill down to the kid.

"Sure. Wouldn't mind if it was the last of my stores. It's the least I can do. If I wasn't so damn old, I'd be out there with you, fighting these bastards. Let me tell you, Colonel, there's a lot of us out here who

don't believe a damn thing those Commie bastards in the White House and Justice Department tell us. Neither do a lot of the local cops and deputies."

I raised a finger to my lips as I looked around the kitchen for a phone. "Don't worry, Colonel," he assured me, "I keep the phone in the bedroom. They would get awfully bored listening in on my sex life." He laughed.

"You got a little portable TV we can check out, Steve?"

"Got one with a shortwave. We can pick up a station out of Colorado Springs from here. Want to see if they've got a fix on you, huh? Good idea. You take those beans down to the kid and I'll bring the TV."

"If it's just the same, Steve, I'll wait for you."

"More than OK Colonel. I don't expect you to trust someone you just met. But if I was your enemy, I wouldn't be hiding you in my basement, now would I? If I wanted to trap you, I wouldn't tell you about that secret tunnel down there in that basement that runs out a hundred yards to the woods. Speaking of trust, how long you known that boy you've been carrying around?"

Chapter Four

Not yet ready to return to the trailer, I declined Donna's offer to cook dinner. It had been many years since I had been back in Fort Worth, one of my childhood cities. When we left the attorney's office, I took her to a little Mexican restaurant called Vaquero's. It was just up North Main St. from Gene's office and across from Fort Worth's famous Billy Bob's, the world's largest honky-tonk, where you can get your picture taken on a stuffed bull and watch real bull riders at one end of the huge building. You can dance the two-step on a Texas-size dance floor while you listen to a bonafide Country Music star at the other end. You can compare the size of your hand with those of Waylon, Willie or Hank Jr. captured for eternity in concrete and lining one inside wall. If you are late getting home, they have an excuse booth that plays a variety of background noises like traffic jams, business meetings and other viable excuses for only a buck. And there are at least a dozen other interesting and entertaining ways to relieve you of your hard-earned money.

I had forgotten my cowboy hat, so we settled for tamales and enchiladas extraordinaire at Vaquero's. The atmosphere was authentic Tex-Mex, the prices were reasonable, and almost everyone eating there had a genuine Texas accent.

"Tell me about your brother, Donna," I said after we had ordered dinner.

The waitress in authentic Mexican dress set our authentic Mexican Margaritas made with Jose Cuervo down in front of us. Donna licked the salt off the rim of the glass slowly, sensually, raised the glass

and took a sip before she answered. I tried not to notice, but this woman was starting to affect me in ways I won't go into right now.

"Doug is three years older than me. We were friends. He was just the greatest. He never made fun of me and never let anyone else tease me about my looks either. He even read up on my . . . condition. He said that Albinism occurs in all races, all over the world. One of my ancestors was a Zuni Indian from Arizona, and the condition is more common among them than it is most ethnic groups. He always told me that it made me special, not a freak."

"I agree."

Her upturned nose wrinkled prettily. "I guess the boys all thought so too, at least once they outgrew cooties. They didn't seem to notice I was different after I got tits."

"They are noticeable!" I added brightly.

She ignored me. "I grew up in Denver. My mother died when I was twelve. A car accident. Dad started drinking. Doug had a part-time job and saw that the rent was paid and that I always had food on the table. After he graduated, he started working fulltime for a health food company in Denver. Dad died of a heart attack right after I graduated. We sold the house and Doug and I got an apartment together. I didn't have anyone else. I started dancing. I mean that I started dance lessons. We used the money from the sale of the house to start a packaging company and started selling vitamins to the store he used to work for."

The waitress brought us our food and warned us about the hot plates. The beans and rice were steaming. I started eating immediately, but Donna picked at hers. There was something bothering her. She wasn't telling me the whole truth, or perhaps she was tailoring her story for my ears. Complete trust takes a long time, and I hadn't been totally truthful with her either.

"Up until last month," she continued, "things seemed to be going well. Success wasn't happening quickly enough for Doug, and so he ran an ad for investors in the *Wall Street Journal*. He got a call from a guy by the name of Charles DiAngelo in Miami, and the next thing I knew he flew out to Florida. Then I shipped everything to him from Denver to an address in North Miami. Charles DiAngelo had other businesses and that kind of dazzled him. Doug had the experience in the health food industry and knew how to package, where to buy and how to sell, things like that. And as of July, Doug was really up. Things were going great, and he had started sending money home. Then I got a phone call last week from him. He was in jail in Dade County. I called Mr. DiAngelo, but he never called me back. So I put everything in storage and almost got myself raped or worse. Then I met you."

I guess it was her turn to stare. I shifted nervously, caught myself and got a grip on my emotions. She waited patiently. "My mother asked me to go to Florida and try to find my father. I don't know much about him, and it's been well over thirty years since she knew he was there, so the odds aren't good that I will run into him. If I do try to find him, however, it's going to take time to do it right. You asked me if I would take you to the Sunshine State,. My answer is yes. I would like your company on the trip down. I don't know what I can do to help your brother but maybe I could give you a little moral support."

She beamed at me. "If you are going to Florida, I would love to ride with you. Like I said before, you are bright and you inspire my confidence. You are also just cute as hell, with that curly pony tail and Tarzan build. But if you are taking me out of pity . . ."

"Whoa. Hold it. Thanks for the compliments, but there is one thing I don't feel for you, and that's pity. I'm sorry your brother is in a jam, and if I can help, I will, providing it doesn't take me too far out on a limb. I had to work my way out of where I came from, and consequently I am a realist. People do things to themselves and generally are responsible for becoming victims. There are circumstances beyond our control, but not nearly as many as most people seem to think. No, I don't pity you. You are a beautiful woman and could make it to Florida with or without me. I just think it would be more fun together. Can you afford to wait? It could be a few days, or it could be a month."

She stared at me and I thought I could see tiny flames dancing in her eyes. Probably just the reflection of candles . . . somewhere. She answered in a sweltering, husky voice. "For you, I'll wait. I wish, I wish that I had met you sooner, Trevor Cameron. My life wouldn't be the mess that it is at the moment."

She looked at me longingly, her eyes dancing with that pale, reflected light. I met her look with one of my own. This incredibly beautiful woman had finally pushed a button deep inside me. I wanted to take her in my arms and kiss her. I wanted to tear that red dress from her creamy skin and cover her body with my kisses. I knew she felt the same. Suddenly, I lost my desire for dessert. I paid our tab and we walked out into the Texas night. She slipped her arm in mine and every man's head turned to follow us out.

We cruised back to the trailer park without saying much. I guess we were both trying to imagine where all this was leading us. I pulled up to the office and got out to check for messages. The look on the fat lady's face as she handed me the folded slip of pink paper made it unnecessary to open it. I slipped it in my pocket and turned a deaf ear on her stuttered apologies.

Donna read the news on my face as I got in the truck, but she kept quiet as we drove to the trailer. Once inside, I unfolded the note, which read: Trevor, your mother died shortly after ten o'clock this evening. Please contact the hospital with instructions. My deepest sympathies, Doctor Thaddeus Young.

I turned on the computer woodenly and instructed it with shaky fingers to print out certain names and phone numbers from my data file. I used my cellular to contact the funeral home. I told them where to pick up the body and got a time for the funeral. Then I called the hospital. They required me to tell two nurses to release the body of my mother to the funeral home. I mechanically phoned the dozen or so people that might care enough to attend the service.

During this whole scene, Donna said nothing and did nothing to call my attention to her. When I had finished, she had a cup of coffee ready and slid it into my hand. When my hand began to shake and the sobs began, she was there to hold me, ignoring the spilt coffee. She walked me to the stairs and shoved me onto the bed. She slipped my shoes and socks off, unbuttoned my shirt and pushed me back on the bed. I lay there like a helpless baby, numb and uncaring.

"You can do the rest," she said and was gone, pulling the curtain across the steps to insure my privacy.

I lay there for a few minutes, listening to the sounds of her cleaning up after me. I remembered that I hadn't shown her how to make the couch into a bed, and then shrugged the thought off along with my pants, slid under the covers and turned off the light. Grief had left me dull and stupid. I was almost asleep when I heard the curtain rustle.

I opened one eye, and then the other snapped open. She stood there, her white skin in all its glory framed in the dimmed lights, liberated from her clothing. Her silver hair glowed like a halo around her head and shined like a beacon at the junction of thighs and hips. She was spectacular. A goddess.

I felt her body slide in next to mine and press up against me. "I think we both need to be held tonight. Am I being too forward?"

"No," I answered. Her body was incredibly firm and comforting. Her lips brushed my ear. I didn't think I could respond, however, and I told her so.

"Of course. I understand, Trevor. It's just been a long time since I liked someone as much as I like you. I know it's selfish, but we've been through a lot in the last couple of days, and it would make me feel so much better if I could just lay here next to you. I don't expect you to do anything. I know the pain you are feeling now, and I just want to hold you.

Then a surge of electricity jolted through me, seemingly transferred from her body and into mine, and desire overpowered depression and grief. Our lips met in a deep, passionate kiss, and our hands explored each other's body. Our lovemaking was slow, sweet, soulful and healing.

Later, as we lay recuperating, she told me with those moist, soft, wonderful lips, "If you think I am going to sleep on the couch tonight, you are wrong, Mr. Cameron." Then those lips moved on.

I found my self responding again. My mother was dead. I wasn't.

The kid was eating his beans and rice. That was a good sign. If he still had an appetite, I figured he would survive. At ten o'clock, we turned on the TV to the news.

"We have a late-breaking story. A band of Militant Fundamentalist Terrorists has just attacked unarmed employees at a government center where illegal aliens are held for deportation just outside Colorado Springs. All of the aliens, mostly Mexican s and Haitians seeking asylum, were killed in a fire that followed. A spokesman for the facility lamented the loss of life."

The spokesman was the camp director. He was heavyset with dark, brutish eyes that totally lacked any compassion or humanity. I marked his name and face in my memory. If I survived, he wouldn't. "These people never had a chance," he said into the camera "They were hopeful of qualifying for immigration, but

the odds are they would never have been chosen. Most were captured in the cities by the lack of access to our new identification chips. That in no way justifies the ruthless and inhumane attack on these poor people by these terrorists masquerading as so-called patriots!” A little spark of emotion flickered in his eyes as he read the last sentence.

The cameras shifted back to the unemotional announcer. “It is estimated that the death toll among the prisoners will number in the thousands. The Attorney General has sworn to find the rebellious patriots. He believes that they are being led by the notorious Colonel Cameron, and he reiterated his decision to execute anyone guilty of aiding or abetting the criminals.”

Then the aging, line-crossed face of the Attorney General appeared on the screen. I thought I could see his lip twitch and his eyes narrowed, and he seemed to be looking directly at me. “Cameron and his pathetic, cowardly assassins killed three of my finest officers tonight. The time has come for us to crush the insurrection once and for all. We will conduct intense investigations under the broad powers granted me as commander under the Martial Law declared by the President. Any citizen who provides us with the location of any member of the militia or information leading to the arrest and capture of these terrorists, specifically Cameron, could earn up to \$2,000,000.”

“The alternative is death!” said the image on the screen as if anyone needed to hear this threat at this late date.

Steve turned the TV off and the shortwave on. “Now I’m really honored, Colonel. They’ve doubled the reward for you.

Chapter Five

Despite the ongoing dream, I was happy. Deliriously happy. I thought briefly about contacting someone to find out if serial dreaming was a common occurrence, but the reality of my existence was too real for me to pay much attention to the strange dreams of an unlikely future existence.

Donna and I started for Florida five days later, laughing and giggling, in a state of connubial-like bliss. Donna had written her brother and told him to hang on and be brave for the cavalry was coming. I had buried my mother, shaken hands with uncles and aunts I had never seen, kissed cousins I would never see again, and we left Fort Worth, Texas behind in a cloud of diesel smoke.

I decided it was time for Donna to know the truth. I have slept with a lot of women. I always managed to separate sex and love. For the first time, however, I felt more than infatuation. Except for the

secret she would tell me in time, she put on no airs, wore little or no makeup, and the woman she showed me was real.

We got off the freeway in Houston, and I pulled the truck into the Westheimer district. The building was five stories tall and renovated four years ago. I got it for a good price when it housed nothing but crack addicts. I had lived in the building for six months, off and on, while supervising the construction. The crack addicts and the dealers soon found other buildings with more tolerant, understanding owners. Like roaches running from the light, they left my building and then they left the neighborhood altogether. The area began attracting other investors and businessmen as a result, and my building was now fully occupied.

Donna looked at the name of the building and her eyes widened. "Does this belong to your stepfather?"

"It belongs to me."

"The whole building?"

"Yes. There is more. Come inside for a minute."

I parked the trailer and truck and led her inside. Chuck Johnston managed the Hamilton Building and ran the Hamilton Management Company for me. He was conservative, lived on his percentages, and he was honest. Best of all, he was competent, and I rarely had to tell him anything twice.

I thought briefly of the possible complications brought on by the impulsively changing of my name. Just as quickly as the thought had come, however, I dismissed it. Mr. Hamilton had simply become Mr. Cameron. I could sign my name both ways. I had no desire to make this the Cameron building. Somehow this change of names all fit into the strange way I perceived myself. I was simply not comfortable in the role of businessman or real estate tycoon, and having more than one name was something like being two people in a single body, like having an alias. In spite of moderate success I had achieved, I still thought of myself as this mysterious persona I had created through the years. A biker, a drifter, which had now solidified in my new identity as Cameron. I was definitely a closet businessman.

We went into the office of Hamilton Management, the communications center from which I handle my affairs. There was no office here bearing my name, however. The receptionist informed me that Mr. Johnston was out to lunch. The office staff was up to about four girls it seemed. They were all staring.

It was cool today, so I was wearing a leather cap that read Harley Davidson and a black leather jacket made of deer hide and decorated with beads and cobra skin. Everyone looked like they were afraid I was there to rob them. Donna was watching me out of the corner of her eye. The cool reception we were getting made her wonder if I was lying or crazy.

"You may wait here for him, sir."

I smiled at her. "That's all right, Michelle. I'll wait for him in his office."

She didn't recognize me by sight and politely but firmly informed me, "Mr. Johnston's office is locked, sir." She popped up indignantly, intent on not being bullied by an ignorant, pushy, biker-type who was obviously out of place here.

"It's OK, Michelle. I have a key." I held up my ring of keys. I didn't get angry. She was merely being protective of my interests. It's not her fault that I never enter my own office.

Chuck's secretary, Bonnie, overheard and saw me for the first time. She jumped out of her seat and adeptly smoothed over the situation. "Mr. Hamilton! I'm sorry, sir! She's never met you before." Michelle turned pale.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hamilton. I should have recognized your voice. I . . . I didn't know. I mean, I never knew you looked like you look. You know?"

My voice is very distinctive, deep, gravelly, and I check into this office three or more times a week. But it had been a year since I had been here in person. This new employee had only been working for me for a few months. "It's OK, Michelle. I didn't expect to be here today. We're just passing through. Relax."

Bonnie came up and took my hands. She was tall for a woman, almost six feet, with short-cropped raven hair. She was extremely competent and had been with me since the building had been built. She unlocked Chuck's office for us and ushered us inside.

Once inside, she turned to me and gave me a hug and a kiss. "It's good to see you, Trevor. It's been so long that I almost didn't recognize you. I'm so sorry about your mother."

"Thanks Bonnie. I would like you to meet my friend, Donna Belben. Donna, this is Bonnie Rankin, Chuck's secretary and my right arm."

"I'm glad to meet you, Donna. You must be the reason for that lilt Trevor has had in his voice the last few days."

"I had a lilt?"

"Yes. You did. I know you felt badly about your mother, but somewhere in the gaps of your grief I could tell you were happy about something else."

"I take it," Donna interjected, "that you and Trevor have been working together for some time?"

Bonnie looked me over fondly. "We've known each other for a long time. We don't work together nearly enough."

I thought I could see a little blush tinge Donna's ears.

"Do you want me to page Mr. Johnston? He's out to lunch, but I can get him." Bonnie turned her full attention to me.

"It's not necessary, Bonnie. I just stopped to show Ms. Belben the office and to inform you both of some legal changes that you need to be aware of. I am on my way to Florida and plan to be there for a while."

The office door swung open and we all smiled at the surprised look on the face of the impeccably dressed, middle-aged man standing in the doorway. Chuck is thin, balding with a banker's paunch and pallor. In fact, he *was* a banker before I made him a better offer.

"Trevor! Boy, I just never know when you are going to turn up next. I'm sorry about your mother."

We shook hands. "Thanks Chuck. I was just telling Bonnie of my plans. If you have a few minutes, I have some things to go over with you?"

"Of course. Bonnie, cancel my two o'clock and tell Michelle to hold my calls."

I turned to Donna. "Donna, this is Chuck Johnston. Chuck, Donna."

"I've heard about you, Donna. But Trevor didn't tell me how beautiful you are!" He reached out to shake her hand warmly.

"I can see why Trevor puts so much confidence in you, Mr. Johnston. You are quite a diplomat. Thank you."

"Donna," Bonnie said. "Why don't you and I go get a cup of coffee and I'll show you around." She looked at me. "Is that all right?"

"Sure." I nodded. What else could I say?

Chuck is awfully quick. As soon as the door closed he said, "Don't you worry about an ex and a current one getting together?"

"Well, yes. At least now I have nothing to hide." I wasn't as confident as I sounded. Bonnie and I had been lovers once, while she was going to college and working for me part-time in exchange for a place to live upstairs while we were renovating. There had been some tense times with the druggies while we were together, and our common interest, our safety and getting this building into shape, had drawn us together. It had never been love, or even close to it, but we liked each other a lot. Still, women, once they have slept with you, seem to become fiercely protective.

Chuck and I brought each other up to date on affairs. He did not seem to be surprised by my actions and could see no problem in maintaining my Hamilton identity with a simple assumed-name form. He complimented me several times on my choice of companions. We went over the year-to-date printouts that are normally mailed to me, but I had little interest in them. My mind was filled with thoughts of my father and the woman I was falling for so hard.

Chuck sensed it and cut short his glowing report on my current financial status. Bonnie brought Donna back. They both seemed pleased with themselves, and there were no dark looks exchanged so I assumed they got along.

We left in the afternoon. I've made it a habit not to socialize with my Houston employees. Well, not since I had left Bonnie behind four years ago. But curiosity got the better of me.

"How did you and Bonnie get along?"

Donna smiled slyly. "Great, after she found out I didn't know about your money until now. Did you think it would make a difference in the way I thought of you?"

"I am not that talkative about my business affairs. What is unusual is that I've told you as much as I have."

"That's what she said. She thought she was the only woman who knew that much about you. She is a great person. I can see why you were in love with her."

"I liked her, and I still do, but you are the only woman I've met I think I could love, Donna. And I've met a few."

She looked at me in a very odd way, with an expression I could not quite read. There was something still unspoken between us, something that she either couldn't tell me or couldn't let go of. But whatever the secret that was hiding behind those eyes of stone, those eyes begging me to understand, she felt obliged to give me an answer of some kind.

"I'm falling in love with you, Trevor Cameron, or Hamilton or whatever name you want to go by. I've never met a man like you. But I can't promise anything. I've got some things I have to work out before I can let myself tell you how much I really care, before I can let myself care for you the way I think a woman should care for her man. I have to take things one step at a time. I can't handle a dozen affairs and obligations the way you seem to. I want to love you, and I certainly love being here with you. That's as far as I can go right now. You can have my body as many times a day as you want, for now. My soul may have to wait a while. After I get Doug out of jail, then maybe I can plan the rest of my life. I hope you understand."

"I think so," I said. "I'm really not trying to pressure you into some kind of permanent relationship. I'll take it day by day. I just wanted you to know how I felt, how I feel about you."

"That means a lot to me, Trevor," she said sincerely. "Where are we off to now?" she asked in a lighter tone.

"We're off to the swamp to spend the night. I've a friend down on the Atchafalaya River right smack dab in the middle of the swamp. I think you'll like him."

So we stopped in Louisiana to see my friend Clark, who, like myself, is semi-retired. The difference between us is that his income is derived from illicit sources. He is a dealer and connoisseur of quality, home-grown cannabis. No imports or hard drugs. He travels from the mountains of California to the swamps of Louisiana on yearly buying trips, checking out the grower's crops with all the airs of the wine connoisseur.

In my chosen profession, however that might be defined, it is a requirement that I be in full control of my faculties. I must make decisions on the spot that could affect my income and even the sources of my livelihood drastically. Therefore, I don't do drugs, drink moderately, rarely smoke pot or get involved emotionally. By the time we reached Louisiana I had already broken the last rule, so I was easy prey for Clark, who takes a perverse pleasure in reducing the serious, slightly menacing Trevor to a silly, giggling goose.

Clark lives in the swamp when he is in Louisiana, and only a handful of people know where. It is out of range of my cellular and has no phone or power lines. A generator supplies what little power he needs. Apart from the occasional chugging of the generator on days when it's cloudy enough to inhibit the effective collection of his solar cells or hot enough to warrant the use of air conditioning, it is peaceful beyond belief. We lost two days there. One of them I spent polishing my truck, a task usually reserved for

the carwash attendant. The other was lost watching beavers build their dam and other such momentous events.

Clark and Donna hit it off well. They invited me to go along with them to the beaver pond, but I was tracing a short somewhere between the switch and my roof-mounted lights. They accepted my refusal so readily that I almost felt a twinge of jealousy as they walked off into the woods, hand in hand.

Clark is short, well, short from my viewpoint, which is anything under six feet. Clark is five eight, heavysset and furry, the exact opposite of my physical description. By contrast, you can count the hairs on my chest on two hands. He resembles Meyer, another of MacDonald's characters, physically and intellectually. His IQ is close to 165, but he has few desires and little ambition. Not enough to force him out of his comfortable retreat or his dubious profession, though I have come up with half a dozen schemes over the same amount of years to entice him into a legal occupation. The thought of an intellect like his atrophying in the swamp when he could be working with me is one of the few that makes me feel like I have failed.

He is my best friend, and I trusted him and Donna completely. There was absolutely no reason at all for me to be jealous, but for the life of me I could not concentrate on that switch. So I decided to track them down.

I had dressed for the country that morning: blue jeans, denim shirt and old, beat up but comfortable cowboy boots perfect for slogging through swamps. Almost perfect. I had to use all my city-dulled senses to find them. I headed in the direction I had seen them disappear, and then by standing quietly, I could hear Donna's delighted laughter as Clark demonstrated his renowned wit, no doubt by telling her stories of some of our adventures together. Then I was close enough to smell the sweet, pungent smell of his special stash, which he broke out only for special occasions, old friends and beautiful women.

I came crashing out of the woods. I had planned on honing my stalking skills by sneaking up on them, but it was not to be. Cowboy boots were never meant for stalking. Marvin, the mentor from my youth, would have chastised me thoroughly. Clark heard me coming thirty yards away.

"This way, Trevor," he called.

I altered my course slightly toward the direction of his voice and found them sitting beside the beaver pond, which wasn't exactly a pond., but more like a river or creek. The dam had enlarged the creek but not enough to block the flow entirely. It was about twenty feet across at the narrowest point, which happened to be directly in front of me. Clark and Donna were sitting on the opposite side, giggling at my noisy approach. The joint was half smoked, so they probably would have laughed at anything, or so I told myself — but it didn't help. I could feel my ears turn red.

"How did you get over there?" I asked to hide my growing embarrassment.

"We used the bridge," Clark said trying futilely to suppress his amusement, "about a quarter of a mile that way."

He and Donna both found this tremendously funny. I wasn't the least amused. I looked around, and twenty feet to my left, an industrious beaver had gnawed through a medium sized pine tree. The tree had

fallen across the creek, its upper branches wedged firmly between other trees on the opposite bank near where Clark and Donna were sitting. Clark caught the direction of my gaze.

"It'll hold you. Come on across."

I tested the tree with my weight. I even jumped up and down on it, and it didn't give an inch. I looked at the other side. At least twenty feet of the tree's trunk was lying solidly on the other bank. Fresh teeth marks on my side of the bank led me to the conclusion the tree wasn't rotten. So, like some tightrope walker from Barnum and Bailey, I started across.

I am quick, agile and can ride a Harley with my eyes closed. Walking a tight rope is something else, however. Maybe I never became a circus performer or worked on the high steel because my center of gravity is so high.

I was, however, talking to myself like a madman: It's only a pond. It's only twenty feet across. The tree isn't a tightrope. It isn't swaying and it's six inches thick. No problem Trevor. The worst that can happen is that you get wet. . . and look like an idiot in front of your new girlfriend. You could back out and walk a half a mile. Just when you've managed to convince her you aren't afraid of anything and there's nothing you can't do!

So across it I went. I was doing all right until Clark said, "Maybe you should have taken off your boots?"

I was halfway across, and I looked down at my boots. The tree suddenly seemed much thinner. I took one more step and my left boot slipped.

Fortunately, some of the tree's branches was still on the trunk. I grabbed one to steady myself, but it broke.

Time seemed to stand still. Like a football game instant replay in slow motion, I felt myself falling ever so slowly. My knees buckled and I lowered my body towards the tree. As I fell past it, I reached out with my right arm and caught the trunk. My right leg caught also, just above my boot top and, still in slow motion, I swung under the tree.

Grabbing the trunk with both arms and legs, I hung there, upside down, my back six inches from the surface of the still, black water. The laughter of my friend and lover, which had been silenced momentarily as I fell downward, rung out again, drowning out the cheers and applause of the astonished and appreciative beavers as I made my way toward the bank on the underside of the tree. Hand over hand, leg over leg like a prehistoric sloth, I moved toward my destination, only to reach an impasse at the other muddy bank. I was on the wrong side of the damn tree.

"Do you think maybe one or both of you can stop laughing long enough to give me a hand up on the bank?"

Clark wiped the tears from his eyes. "I'm sorry, Trev. It just that you . . . you look like a giant blue sloth, hanging there like that."

"I wouldn't look like a sloth if you would pull me up on the bank."

They managed to drag me up on the bank. I laid there and glared. Clark managed to catch his breath for a moment. "You are the only person I know lucky enough to be able to fall in a cesspool and come up smelling like a rose, Trev."

"Or fall into a beaver pond without getting wet," Donna chimed in. Then they burst into laughter again. This time I joined them.

Back at the camp, by way of the bridge this time, we were sitting on the porch of Clark's cypress, one-room cabin. I was trying to dial in my new Aimpoint sight on my Rueger mini fourteen. The cabin was unpainted, as cypress doesn't rot, and was built on stilts for those occasions when the river that runs a hundred feet to the east overflows its banks. You can see the river through the trees from the porch, the strange mix of ocean-size ships, barges pulled by tugs and small, flat-bottomed skiffs, covered with fish and trapper's pelts, manned by rough looking men who speak with that musical, Cajun accent. The swamp has not changed in hundreds of years, nor has its people. They still carry weapons openly here in the backwoods.

Clark and I both enjoy guns, which we can fire from the comfort and safety of his front porch without alarming a single neighbor. Those that might hear are unconcerned about gunfire in this section of swamp.

My trailer was parked in front of the house, and I sincerely hoped that it wasn't raining too hard in Arkansas and that the river didn't rise before we left tomorrow. I plunked a couple more shots into our tin can target and returned the gun, now freshly oiled, to its nylon case. The sun was going down when I told Clark about my mother's request.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to try and find him, I guess. I promised her."

"That may be a little difficult after thirty years," he pointed out.

"I'm aware of that. Still, there are traces. A man can't live today without traces."

"I find that debatable. However, I'll concede the point in this case. He lived on a houseboat, in a marina, and there will be some trace of him there. Boat ownership can be traced through the state. Records can be accessed. It's tedious work, so I doubt that your mother is going to hold it against you if you don't take that route." Clark holds little stock in the conventional belief of an afterlife, so I imagined that this was the real meaning behind what he'd said: the dead don't care.

"That may be so, but a promise is a promise. I would know even if she didn't. Besides, I want to know more about him. Mom didn't even have a picture of him. He's a complete blank in my mind. To you, the word father brings a picture of a man, even if you did not know yours that well. At least you know what he looked like, whether he was good or if he beat you. I need to know something, anything about him. Besides, Donna's brother needs help."

Donna appeared to be uncomfortable whenever I mentioned her brother. I assumed she felt some kind of stigma was attached to his getting busted for drugs.

Clark turned to her and took her hand. Clark is a touchy, feely kind of person, and always has been. That trait never bothered me before.

"If anybody can help you, Donna, it's Trevor. If there is an angle you can use, he'll find it. He has a devious mind and the ability to recognize it in others. He is also one of the most convincing people I have ever known."

"I haven't been able to convince you to go to work," I grumbled as I got up off the porch, suddenly uncomfortable. I get that way when the subject of the conversation turns to me. It was starting to get dark, so I walked down the stairs to return my rifle to the gun cabinet. I walked out of the trailer to gather some wood for the fire. Clark was still talking.

"I went down to Corpus with Trevor once. He didn't take any money because he said he'd sell something before dark. We had a trunk load of patches or stickers or whatever he was selling at the time. Stopped at a gift shop. The owner was building an addition. He told us he didn't have time to deal with us, and even if he did, he wouldn't buy anything. Took Trev ten minutes to sell him five hundred dollars worth of that crap."

I had heard this before. It was one of Clark's favorites. I didn't want him to finish it. "Come on down and help me start this fire, Clark!"

He was on a roll, so he ignored me. Donna appeared to be enthralled. "I suggested we get a motel, now that he had money. He said no. We would find somewhere else to spend the night. But we were in a strange town and it was our first time there. We didn't know anyone. It took him less than thirty minutes in the first night club to convince a school teacher to let us stay over night. She even fixed us breakfast."

Clark, who views life intellectually, had always been impressed by my ability to meet and sleep with strange women. He places too much emphasis on it, however, even views it as a remarkable talent. It is no such thing, but rather, a comment on the insensitiveness of other men. Men tend to either take a woman for granted or do not bother to listen to them or treat them with respect. Therefore, there are far too many lonely, frustrated women out there, desperately searching for someone to share their life with.

The qualities I possess that attract women are also the ones that make me feel guilty. I am kind to them. I respect women and try to treat them well, and above all, I tell them the truth. No matter how I try to convince them that I am not ready for a relationship, that I will be gone tomorrow, they still think there is some way they can convince me to stay. When I don't, they feel a little cheap, and I feel a little cheap too, a little more soiled — and a little sadder even if the sex was great.

Donna looked at me with an undecipherable look. "A ladies man, huh?"

Clark looked startled. "I didn't mean to give that impression. I mean, women have always found Trev attractive, but he doesn't prey upon them, like some men do. He just has never found the right one, you know?"

I walked back up the stairs and met her eyes. "Clark's right. I have never met the right one. I've always been a loner. That doesn't mean that I'll never meet the right one. I am not set into any pattern or mold as yet. I promised I'd help you with the problem your brother is facing if I can, and I will do my best.

I enjoy you very much and have no desire to be with anyone else at this moment in my life. I can't change who I am or was or what I've done in the past. Please don't let Clark's stories upset you."

Donna thought about it. "I knew you weren't the kind of man who was saving himself for the right woman, Trevor. Nor have I saved myself for the right man. I guess we all feel a little twinge of possessiveness when we think about our lover being with someone else, whether it be in the future or the past." She turned to Clark. "I understand why you are fond of him. He kind of grows on you, doesn't he."

"That he does. I guess I was trying to tell you to enjoy him while you have him. The times we have spent together form the basis of my best memories. It gets harder and harder to turn down his attempts to make me over into his image of me." They both looked at me fondly, which made me uncomfortable.

"Maybe you should take a ride down to Florida with us, Clark. Take some time off. Relax."

"You make it sound tempting, but you are so transparent, Trev. First of all, this is the only place I have ever seen you relax. Second, you don't need me, therefore the only reason for your invitation is another attempt to legitimize me."

I threw another log on the fire, which was now blazing. "I think it's time, Clark. This isn't the sixties anymore. I don't put you down for what you do, but the time is coming when your luck has to run out. People don't just smoke pot any more. They do coke. They do crack. They get strung out. Sooner or later, if it hasn't happened already, someone is going to drop your name to save their own worthless ass. You have one of the finest intellects I have ever run across, and I think you waste it down here in the swamp. Granted, it's a wonderful place to get way from it all, but I'm not suggesting you give it up. Just give up the dealing. Your mind would really be wasted in some prison."

He looked thoughtful. "For once, Trev, your timing might be right on. I have lost a few friends lately, either to coke or the law. Maybe this is the time to quit, retire to the real world, perhaps."

"Come with us, then," I pushed gently.

"No. Not today. If you find something you like in Florida, leave a message for me at a number I'll give you in Alexandria. If there is a way I can help you and pull my own weight, I'll come."

Being alone, as I have been most of my life, leaves a certain sense of wistfulness. I was dependent on no one. I had lovers but no one off whom I could bounce ideas and concepts. Clark was the closest friend I had ever had. In this, the age of the drug war, I was afraid he might become one of the casualties. Maybe he had finally seen the writing on the wall. This was more than I'd ever got out of him before.

He turned to Donna. "Now my dear, what can I tell you about Trevor? I'm sure you've found it difficult to loosen his tongue and get him to talk about himself."

She looked at me hungrily. "His tongue is loose enough. He just doesn't use it for talking."

My tongue was far too loose today. In talking about Donna and Clark, I had revealed the source of my income to two strangers!

Hamilton Industries was still in business. It had survived the transformation of the United States into a Socialist police state. The signs were clear in the early nineties, at least to me. The transformation of Trevor Hamilton, begun emotionally with the death of my mother, into a man with two names who moved in vastly dissimilar worlds, had evolved over the years. Now Hamilton Industries was a protective system responsible for the financing of the Resistance, and the man I had become all those years ago, Cameron, was now the one leading the fight.

My alter ego, Hamilton, and Hamilton Industries, worked hand in hand with the new Government, paying the proper amount of taxes, turning in the right count of employees, allowing the correct amount of access to records and phone conversations, cooperating just the right amount with the authorities to the point where Hamilton had been invited by the Insiders to join the Council on Foreign Relations!

Which he had done.

Of course, I was no longer Hamilton and had not been for many years. But the information that had just slipped from my lips could prove fatal to the whole organization if I had spoken to the wrong people.

The kid had been assigned to me by the Colorado Militia as a guide. I had been told he had been to the sight of the termination camp and could guide me to it. We had been together only a few hours before boarding the truck that took us within a few miles of the camp, and I had nothing by which to gauge his loyalties. I did not even know his name.

Suddenly, I trusted Steve more than this boy I had carried here with bullet holes in him!

There were few young people within the Resistance. Most of the young had been brainwashed by the Socialist-influenced schools and thereby stripped of the knowledge of the greatness of our country and their heritage. They had been denied a moral base when prayer and the teachings of the Bible were outlawed.

Even many of my generation had suffered the same fate because of this insidious undermining of the biblical teachings upon which this country had been built. Assertions about God's protection of men like George Washington during the First Revolution had been removed from our text books as early as 1932 and replaced by drivel like the cherry tree story.

"Come on Colonel. I ain't sleepy yet. Tell us some more," the kid begged.

I looked at him for a few seconds before answering. Steve was strangely quiet. Was he just a little too eager to hear about my past? The information I had already given him was enough to seal his fate. Had I brought him into this battle only to have to kill him myself? As a result of my own stupidity? Could I allow either of them to live now that my loose lips and old memories had unconsciously supplied them with enough information to quell the last of the Resistance.

Had I, Colonel Cameron, the leader of the rebel force, the Free Americans, doomed the last hope of America? I silently cursed myself even as I started talking again. I could not allow my face to betray the importance of the information I had just given them. Maybe they would not make the connection between the name Hamilton, Hamilton Management and Hamilton Industries. Maybe!

Chapter 6

Sometimes I yearn for the simpler life, the uncomplicated, slow tempo of the swamp, a day spent fishing on the banks of the mighty river or an evening spent whittling. Then reality takes hold. Clark is fond of pointing out to me that I am a type A-plus personality and couldn't live like he does if I tried.

Our time with Clark was fun and relaxing, and the last day went by too quickly. Yet I was restless and felt the need to get moving. Florida beckoned.

Donna went to bed early, and Clark and I sat up late into the night. It was then that I told Clark about the strange dreams I had been having. "Have you ever heard of a serial dream, Clark?" I asked.

"No, but it is interesting, to say the least," he said. It was late and he was more than a little stoned. "Perhaps it is some form of precognition. Or maybe you are dreaming now."

"Now?"

"Yeah. Maybe this is the dream, and when you wake up, you are there, in the future."

"You're stoned, Clark." I reached over and pinched him.

"Ouch!" What did you do that for?"

"To see if this is a dream."

He rubbed his arm. "If you are the one that is doing the dreaming, shouldn't you pinch yourself?"

"Seriously, Clark. If this is something besides a dream, like precognition, it is certainly a bleak future for America. How could we go from what we are now, the land of the free, to something like that?"

"It could happen. Have you ever read the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*?"

"Are you talking about that anti-Semitic forgery that the Jews think was ascribed to one of them so the rest of the world would hate them?"

"Well, that's the way the Jewish organizations like the ADL refer to it."

"I'm not a big fan of the Aryan Nations. Besides, my dream had nothing to do with Jews."

"Doesn't really matter whether Jews wrote it or not. It's over a hundred years old, and whoever wrote it has been dead a long time. What matters is that it is a blueprint for one world government. Maybe someone, somewhere in the world, with enough money, power and influence, is following the steps outlined in it to do exactly that, create a New World Order. It is printed on the back of your Federal Reserve dollar bills, Novus Order Seclorum. A secular, read Godless, new order. Another point to ponder is the reference to a forgery. What is a forgery if it isn't an exact copy of the original?"

"What does all of that have to do with my dream?"

"I don't know if it has anything to do with your dream. I'm stoned, remember? But what you have described to me is a dark gloomy future in which you represent the bad guy. Knowing you as I do, you wouldn't be fighting against the government unless the government was the bad guys.

"I can't imagine that occurring, the government becoming that autocratic," I said.

“Well, I can. I deal with that all the time. The government would like to put me out of business and in jail. I don’t consider growing, smoking or selling pot a crime. There is no victim. God gave us all the seeds and plants on earth for our use, so why is it illegal? Was there a Constitutional amendment, like there was for the prohibition of alcohol, for hemp? Are you aware that it was once our largest agricultural crop?”

I waved for him to slow down. “Well, it *is* illegal and I think you are playing a dangerous game.”

“That’s not the point. What if government decided that you couldn’t pray, or that there were words you couldn’t use, things you couldn’t think?”

“You’ve been reading Orwell again? Thought crimes?”

“Good example. War is peace.”

“Next thing to come is the Gestapo?”

“Happened once, and it could happen again. Only they would probably call it something else, like Homeland Defense.”

“FEMA as the boogeyman?”

“Good example. Have a natural disaster, and FEMA comes in and confiscates your guns.”

“Nobody is confiscating my guns. It’s called the Second Amendment.”

“Trev, they are passing law after law restricting your right to bear arms. Try wearing one of your sidearms here in Louisiana. It’s a process called gradualism. They take a right and turn it into a privilege. Maybe they make you buy a license. Eventually they take away your right to do it at all. Like has happened to the right to grow pot. So what if they repealed the Second Amendment tomorrow? Would you turn in your guns?”

“I doubt that will happen. There are millions of gun owners in America.”

“There are millions of pot smokers in America, but thousands go to prison every month. I repeat, what if they did?”

“I guess I’d be a criminal.”

“Then your dream could become a reality. It is possible that the government could be Sovietized. And you could become an enemy of the state.” He got up and stretched like a bear.

“You’ve depressed me, so now you are going to bed?”

“Yep. But if it is any consolation to you, I happen to believe in multiple choice.” He walked over to a cluttered desk in the corner of his cabin and rummaged in a drawer.

“Multiple choice?”

“Yeah, multiple futures. We all have choices in life. If we make the right ones, we have a nice, pleasant, comfortable life. If you make the wrong decision, we end up dead, broke or in jail.... We end up in breadlines or waiting in line at the best restaurant in town. Ah, here it is.” He held up a small piece of paper. “Got this in the last head shop I visited. I thought of you when I saw it. Don’t know why. I got it for you.”

He handed me a small, official looking rectangular piece of paper, much like the old Texas auto registration cards. It read, “Texas Terrorist Hunting Permit, no bag limit, permanent, no expiration date.”

“They had them on sale. Said there wasn’t much of a demand for them. I picked it up cheap. I forgot about it until you told me about your dream. Hope you can avoid being the terrorist they are hunting.”

I looked at the faux license with mixed emotions. “I’ll put this with my Area 51 security clearance,” I told him and shoved it into my wallet. “Good night, Clark.”

We left Louisiana before daybreak the next day. I didn’t wake Clark. There has never been the need for goodbyes between us. It only took four hours to reach New Orleans from the swamp, and it was hard for me to drive through that city without stopping. The French Quarter has always held a special appeal for me. There are so many dark, curly haired people down there with pale blue eyes like mine that it makes me wonder if I have a lot of kinfolk running around this part of the country.

I was beginning to feel guilty about the thought of Donna’s brother sitting around in jail, however, so we pressed on. We spent a night at one of Florida’s beautiful roadside parks, the generator on for the air conditioning and to mask the smell of diesel emanating from the trucks beside us. We were up and gone early the next day, arriving in South Florida by noon on the first of October.

We crossed an invisible line somewhere north of Orlando. From the rolling hills and autumn-tinged trees of Northern Florida with a hint of chill in the air, we crossed a thermal barrier where the heat and humidity jumped ten points each. Jackets were shed, sleeves rolled up, air conditioning eventually turned on. The hills disappeared, and green became the predominate color. There were thunderstorms forming over the Everglades somewhere to the south and west. We crossed a portion of, and then skirted, what National Geographic called the River of Grass, a natural watershed one hundred miles wide that once flowed from Lake Okeechobee to the Florida Straits to form one of the greatest natural wonders of the world, the Everglades. A wonder that is systematically being destroyed by man’s well intentioned ignorance. Now a system of canals prevents flooding and dries out areas for building. Big Sugar, the activists say, is the worst polluter, next to Big Oil, we could have imagined. The pollutants they dump or that leach into the watershed are so bad that freshly caught fish in the Everglades can no longer be safely eaten by man due to the mercury levels.

As much as environmental activists like to point their fingers at Oil and Sugar as the culprits behind the destruction of our planet, however, the real culprits are the rest of us. In Florida, more mercury is released by discarded hearing aid batteries than by sugar, and as much oil is dumped by homeowners maintaining their cars in Florida in one year than was lost by Exxon’s Valdez. So I take my oil to Amoco to be recycled, I’ll worry about hearing aid batteries later.

I spent a little time reading the camping books and settled on a trailer park called Yacht Haven. It was located on State Road 84 in Fort Lauderdale. I took a site that bordered the New River and had dockage available. I knew little about boats or boating, but my father had lived that type of life and I had the feeling I was going to need a working knowledge just to get the people who knew him to talk to me.

I paid a full month's rent and listened to the tight-lipped lady at the desk explain the rules about pets and noise. I nodded politely and told her I had no pets. I could see a glare when she noticed the Harley, but they obviously had yet to write rules concerning motorcycles or she would have relayed them to me sternly. I got the trailer parked and hooked up, and then I went back to the office and used their pay phone to order a connection with Southern Bell, making a second call to Cellular One to transfer my service. They gave me an address where I could take my phone. The third call was long distance to Dade County Jail to get a line on inmate Douglas Belben. Twenty minutes of holding, transferring and other bureaucratic bumbling got me a location, visiting hours and a bail amount. One hundred thousand dollars, which a bondsman will usually handle for ten percent. Why had Doug, with a partner and a successful business, not been able to make a modest 10k? Donna was no help here. She knew little or nothing about the situation over which she had risked life and limb to get to the Sunshine State. The next logical step was to visit Doug.

The closer we got to seeing Doug, the quieter and more withdrawn she became. I wondered what had happened between her and her brother before he came here to elicit this response. I wondered if she had worked as a stripper or had done some hooking to help Doug get his business started and make the bills? I wished I could tell her that nothing she had done could make any difference to me, but to mention it was tantamount to accusing her of lying. Not a good foot to step off on in a budding relationship.

We made it to the jail at five o'clock that afternoon. I followed the directions I had been given, hitting I 95, which was rough going at rush hour and complicated by the haphazard construction zones stretching from Fort Lauderdale all the way to downtown Miami. We both breathed a sigh of relief when we finally exited at the 836 off ramp after a ten minute wait in the right hand lane as impatient and inconsiderate drivers cut in front of us a half-dozen times. These morons were not only ignoring us, but the signs, white lines and even police cars that were ticketing the one in ten they had the time to cite. I vowed to take a scenic route home. Hell, any other route back.

The jail was typical of any big city. It was surrounded by people recently released in tattered shirts and shorts, some without shirts, unkempt hair and three-day growth of beard. Some were openly rude and staring at Donna, some making lewd comments. None came within arm's reach of us, however. I was controlled, realizing, as they did, that I would not go out of my way to chastise them under the gaze of the law.

Unfortunately, our law making society has taken almost every course of action out of our hands. We still have freedom of speech. We have the freedom to be rude, lewd and crude. But let someone take offense and lay a hand upon the drunks or drug addicts, and someone will scream assault at the top of their lungs.

I once caught an employee ripping off cars to which he had access. In the process of firing him, I marched him around the parking lot, telling him my opinion of him and thieves in general, punctuating my terse, clipped sentences with the tip of my index finger in his chest. A dozen people witnessed the incident from the safety of their apartment windows. He was gone by the time the police arrived. I gave my name

and told them what happened. They took notes and left. The letter from the State's Attorney arrived ten days later explaining that Mr. Alfonso was charging me with battery. My attorney patiently told me, after listening to my explanation, that I was indeed guilty of battery by placing my finger upon him. My lawyer called his friend in the State Attorney's office and explained that his client was two hundred and ten pounds. If he had wanted to harm Mr. Alfonso, who was a thief to boot, he would have done considerable damage, and the state dropped charges. My bill was two thousand dollars.

Donna told me she would like to speak with her brother for a few minutes alone. They talked for ten minutes before she called me in. She had been crying. He looked angry.

He was an average looking guy and dressed in standard jail house garb: puke-brown dungarees and shirt. He was perhaps five ten, one forty, and had dirty blonde hair. It was hard to tell if the color was due to prison dirt or natural. He had brown eyes and a hawkish bend to his narrow nose, and showed no signs of Donna's affliction. Above and beyond the skin coloring, I could detect no family resemblance. They could have been half-brother and sister with different fathers, I thought. Then I realized, suddenly, how little I really knew about Donna and her family.

Doug and I couldn't shake hands. The visitors and prisoners were separated by glass. We had to talk by phone. Donna handed me the receiver. I attributed his attitude to being in jail. He was terse and had trouble meeting my gaze.

"Donna has told me what you are charged with. I would like to help, if there is something I can do?"

"You could bail me out so I could get my hands on Charlie!"

"That's your partner?"

"My former partner. He set me up. I never had any coke. I never dealt anything. Hell, I may be the only person in Miami that doesn't use it! He did this to get me out of the way so he could rip off everything I set up here. I'll kill him when I get out! Are you going to get me out?"

"I'm going to do everything I can to help you. You are charged with possession with intent to distribute. Your bond is set at a hundred thousand. You haven't been here long enough to be considered a resident, and without property I doubt if a bondsman would go the balance, even if Donna and I could raise ten thousand, which I can't at this time."

I hate liars, and I hate to lie, but technically, this wasn't one. I only had a few hundred dollars on me. I hadn't told Donna about the safe or my income. I might be in love, but I'm not a fool. People don't try as hard to separate you from your money when they are not sure if you have a little or a lot.

"Are you and Donna sleeping together?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business. Let it suffice to say that I care enough about her to see that she's OK and doesn't get hurt. Let's get back to your problem, shall we? I need to know everything you can tell me about your partner, your business and how you got stuck with the drugs."

I should have listened to the warning bells going off in my head. I didn't like Doug intuitively, but I decided I was making snap judgments about a guy behind bars who had just been set up, ripped off and

was now forced to rely on some long-haired biker type who was banging his kid sister. Maybe I would have been defensive too.

He simmered a minute, then made up his mind. A little help from anyone was better than what he had now. "What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with some names, addresses and phone numbers, if you can remember them. First, your partner, your company and your lawyer." I took a pen and memo pad out of my shirt pocket.

"Charles DiAngelo is my partner's name." He made it sound like a dirty word. "He lives in North Miami. The Spinnaker Bldg. One of the penthouses. Phone numbers I've got in my cell. I'll send you those by mail. Company was . . . is The Vitamin Warehouse, 1948 NE 151st Street, North Miami. My attorney is a public defender, a Mitchell Levinson. The office is downtown here, somewhere. Haven't seen him but once. He stopped in long enough to introduce himself and tell me he's my public defender. He had the arrest records but didn't even ask me if I was guilty or not. I guess he just assumes I am. That was two weeks ago. He hasn't been back."

"How did you get involved with DiAngelo?"

"I ran an ad in the *Journal*. He was shopping for a vitamin company, and I had one but was so short on money that I couldn't buy the packaging and labels I needed. He called and flew me down here to Miami to talk. I showed him the accounts that I was selling to and told him some of my plans to bring the costs down by buying overseas. That seemed to interest him. He said he liked importing. I tried to tell him some of my ideas for new packaging, but he blew that off. 'We'll use the labels you got now. Stay here and set up a warehouse. Have your customer lists and labels shipped here. I'll help you set up the corporation and give you some good people.' He slapped me on the back, said he liked my style. He took me over to his apartment building and introduced me to some muscle-bound goon named Carmine who is now my roommate. Charlie told me that Carmine would work for me, help get the business set up."

"How long ago was that?"

"About a month and a half. I didn't even go back to Denver. I had my . . . I had Donna send everything out from my warehouse, and I started shipping a few orders within a week. I even called all my customers and told them where I was and how great everything was going to be in Miami. Ha!"

"What kind of deal did you agree on?"

"You mean what kind of split?" I nodded. "He said I could keep the majority of the stock, forty-five percent. He'd take thirty-five for putting up the money out of one of his holding companies, and we'd keep twenty percent out as incentive bonuses for Carmine, if he worked out. Hell, he was putting out all the dough! I thought I was going to do great. He even set me up on a salary of \$600.00 a week, a rental car and my apartment."

"So when did things start to go sour?"

"After our second shipment of vitamins got in. That was about three weeks ago, just before Labor Day. It arrived late Friday from Customs. I didn't have time to get around to start packaging it. We took off for the holiday. I was out drinking one night at a nightclub down the street called Ronnie's. That was on a

Saturday night. I happened to swing by the office very late, for no special reason. I just needed to take a leak. There were lights on and DiAngelo's car, a white Caddy Seville, you know, that one that looks like the trunk was amputated, was there. Carmine's too. I stopped to see what was going on. They were in the back. Carmine came out when the door alarm went off with a gun in his hand! 'For crying out loud, Carmine,' I said, 'put that thing up. It's just me!' But he didn't. He just stood there with that gun pointed at my stomach. I began to get a little nervous. Then DiAngelo walked out and waved to him and he put it up."

"He said he was just checking up on his investment, doing his own inventory. He said that's the way he kept track of his businesses and the people who ran them. I told him he didn't have to worry about me, that I wasn't no thief. He smiled and said that he could see that, to go on and enjoy my weekend and he and Carmine would lock up."

"Did you go into the back, into the warehouse?"

"No. I thought about it, but then I thought that would make it look like I didn't trust him. I tried to talk to Carmine about it at the apartment later, but all he'd say was that it was Mr. DiAngelo's business."

"I started to go to work on Tuesday. Carmine said I should stop by the bank, First Union on Biscayne, to sign some papers for the corporation. I pulled up and started to get out of the car. Suddenly, I was surrounded by policemen. They jerked me out of the car, threw me down to the ground, guns out. A couple of Metro Dade plainclothesmen searched the car and pulled out a baggie full of white powder. I thought it might have been some samples of inositol or niacinamide, but they said it was coke. And here I am!"

"Did you try to call DiAngelo?"

"Yeah. He just yelled something about me being a thief and a smalltime drug dealer who tried to pull one over on him. He told me not to call him anymore. I didn't do anything, Cameron. I don't know what the hell happened! I don't know anyone to buy coke from or anyone to sell it to! I can't get anyone to believe me. The cops don't want to talk about it. My lawyer thinks I did it I guess, since he never talked about the possibility that I'm innocent. I got no money!" He dropped his head into his hands and began to sob. "This place is a hellhole. There aren't five guys in here that speak English, and two of those want to fuck me. I don't know how much longer I can hang on."

I felt sorry for him. I thought I was beginning to get a glimmer of what he had gotten himself into. I needed more information, but I also needed some help.

I told him we would be back and to be strong, not to show weakness to other inmates. I also told him to send me the numbers and addresses and anything else he could think of to my address in Fort Lauderdale. I let Donna say goodbye to him while I walked around the waiting room and picked up a few scraps of information on bondsmen. I tried to think of my next moves. This was DiAngelo's town. If I blundered around I could end up as Doug's cellmate. Or worse. I had the feeling Doug had picked a heavy for a partner.

Donna came out crying. I took her back to the trailer. She was not in a talkative mood. Neither was I. I had a feeling I just couldn't put my finger on, some intuition that refused to congeal into anything I

could recognize. There was simply too much emotion in this confined space for me to think straight, tears I couldn't dry and hurt I couldn't protect her from.

It was dark when I rolled my bike off the rack and started it up. I got a half a block before I remembered Florida had a helmet law, and I went back and got one, reluctantly. I hit State Road 84 and twisted the throttle until the wind shrieked in my ears. Now I could think.

Innocuous enough stuff. No more sensitive information. Keep it boring and superficial. It was getting late and they were getting tired. The kid's eyes were starting to droop. Steve stood up and stretched and pulled a quilt over the boy.

"He'll be fine down here. I'll plug in a little electric heater to keep the chill off. I think you'd be more comfortable on the couch where you can keep an eye on me and the door, Colonel."

I nodded. I was starting to believe I could trust Steve, but I couldn't afford to take any more chances.

"Interesting situation you got yourself in, Colonel," Steve told me as he tossed some blankets on the couch.

"How's that? I responded casually.

"The kid's pretty young and probably don't read much. None of them do these days. They've done a damn good job of dumbing down our youngsters. But I remember reading a bit, back a few years before all of this broke loose, 'bout a certain Hamilton Management company that changed it's name after it entered the ranks of the Fortune 500 and got on the big board. Seems like they expanded into manufacturing and such in the early 90s. The new name was Hamilton Industries. Course, I remember seeing a picture of the Chairman of the Board on CNN and he didn't look anything like you. The only thing is, he looked a lot like that friend of yours that you described. Probably just a coincidence, but if you did happen to make a mistake in the telling of your story, I just don't see how you could let me live through the night." He started back to his bedroom and stopped at the door.

"Colonel, I've got an old shotgun I found after they confiscated the rest of my guns. It's under my bed. I'd feel a little better if you could take charge of that for me. Sometime during the night, I might wake up and be tempted to try and save my own life by collecting that 2 million dollar reward. Two mil would let me move to Switzerland or Belize or some other place that still has the semblance of freedom. I would hate to think that I could be the one that killed the last American patriot!"

I took the shotgun. But even as sleep overtook me, the past would not leave me alone. Like an old black and white, late night movie, scenes from long ago entered my dreams.

Chapter Seven

Fate's a funny thing. Skeptical as to some kind of order in the universe? Then call it coincidence.

I had no place to go, no goal in mind, so I headed for the beach. I pointed my hog east and followed the signs. I made a jog on Highway One, which did not provide nearly as pretty scenery as the "other" Highway One, in California. This road was banked by fast food restaurants, motels and fruit stands. I followed the signs that say Beaches and cut over on Seventeenth Street. The surroundings began to get better as I entered a higher rent district. Marriott and other fancy hotels lined the Intracoastal Waterway, and private two hundred foot yachts equipped with global communication gear and helicopters sat on one side of the bridge. Four hundred-foot ships, Navy and cruise liners, sat on the south side. In between, the red and green navigation lights of a handful of tiny pleasure craft darted like lightning bugs between the huge ships docked at Port Everglades.

A short distance ahead, Seventeenth Street turned into A1A, the flat, sandy beach equivalent to the West Coast's mountainous Pacific Coast Highway. Fort Lauderdale boasts one of the few, unobscured views of the beach in South Florida. Further south, the view has been blocked by the ugly boxes that line the beach, depriving everyone except the favored few that live like bees in a hive, most too old or too jaded to even appreciate the view out their window. A ride down A1A in Miami at night reveals less than a quarter of those condo's lit. Now, the developers want to turn Fort Lauderdale's beautiful beaches into the private front yards of the privileged few by rerouting A1A and turning the pristine beaches into glass and concrete.

I loved the view. In the distance I could see a cruise ship out four or five miles, its lights glistening over the water like a floating city. The anchor lights of a half dozen fishing boats twinkled in closer to shore. Maybe the residents would care enough to vote out the first city official that even thinks about endorsing such a plan.

A row of charter boats to my left caught my eye. As I slowed to look, I saw the sign, Bahia Mar Hotel and Yacht Basin. I pulled in, past a lazy guard who thought about stopping me. Had I been in a car, he wouldn't have even looked. He decided it wasn't worth the effort. I cruised the parking lot and stared in awe at the vast array of boats in the huge Marina complex.

Remembering the Travis McGee novels, I was drawn to F dock. It was on the north side of the marina. Few cars were in the parking lot. One side bordered on the Intracoastal and was lined with seventy-foot and larger yachts. The inside of F dock was deserted. No houseboats. The next dock, G, was occupied by boats for sale through various yacht brokers. Bertram Yachts occupied the east side, the location nearest the highway. There was no one living on that side of the marina at all!

I parked my bike near the entrance to F Dock and walked along the concrete dock. Most of the yachts seemed lifeless, with maybe one crewman or a captain aboard. It wasn't the season yet nor was it a weekend.

I stopped at a plaque that marked Slip F18. It designated the spot as a literary landmark, the home of The Busted Flush, the fictional home of the fictional Travis McGee, creation of John D. MacDonald. There were notes pasted on the sign addressed to Travis and signed by Meyer, placed there by devoted fans.

I must admit, I am one. I have read most of John D. MacDonald's books. Travis McGee was always one of my favorite fictional characters. As Jimmy Buffet sings it, "I've read lots of books about heroes and crooks and learned much from both of their styles."

The similarities, the name, my size, my curly hair and my father's presence here years before Travis appeared in MacDonald's books had always intrigued me. Perhaps it had affected me more than I knew. Would I have adopted the type of lifestyle I now lived had I not read MacDonald? Could my father's lifestyle and appearance somehow have influenced MacDonald many years ago when they ran across each other in this very location?

These questions would never be answered now. MacDonald is dead. Even if I somehow found Shannon Cameron, I doubted if he would know the answer to these questions. Would he have noticed the quiet man studying him in some bar or watching him on his boat? None of this mattered.

I had just started back to my bike when a light hit me in the eyes. An elderly security guard driving a white, three wheeled golf cart shined his flashlight on me.

"Can I help you?" he asked politely.

"Maybe. Is there anyone here who has been with the marina for, say, twenty five years?"

He looked at me quizzically beneath shaggy, gray eyebrows. "I've been here almost thirty years, boy. Who you trying to track down?"

The thought crossed my mind about how my answer would sound to anyone but me. Thirty years ago my mother got laid by some guy who lived on a houseboat. You wouldn't happen to remember hearing about him, would you?

But all I said was, "You ever hear of somebody by the name of Cameron? Shannon Cameron? He lived here many years ago, on a houseboat. I'm trying to track him down. He lived on a houseboat here before the novels came out."

The old man still wasn't sure that I wasn't trying to scam him. "I might have. Why are you looking for him?"

"I'd like to talk to him. We've never met. He . . . he knew my mother, a long time ago."

He apparently made up his mind that I wasn't a threat or a kook. He lowered the flashlight and his guard. "Yeah, I remember Shannon. Always thought of him when I read MacDonald's stuff. He was a lot like Travis in that he attracted a lot of ladies. He looked a little like you, you know. Actually, he looked a lot like you. Same size, similar build. Same kind of eyes but lighter. By God, I'll never forget those pale blue eyes! Looked right through you. He had seen too much pain though. Drank too much. You ain't got the same haunted look. No offense."

"None taken."

"You figure you might be related somehow?"

I tried not to get excited. I tried to keep my cool. It was hard to do. I swallowed the lump in my throat, surprised to find the emotions I was feeling existed. "Might be." I tried to say it casually, but with less success than I would have liked. It had been years since I had grieved or thought about my lack of a father. I had always assumed he was dead.

"Come on, son. Can you lock up that bike? Sit down in this cart and we'll go over to the office and get a cup of coffee. I'll tell you what I can about your daddy."

Jeff Westheimer was the guard's name. He had come to work here at Bahia Mar when he was my age, over thirty years ago. He had known Shannon Cameron in the early sixties for over two years. Cameron had been a resident for several years prior to Jeff's employment. He said that Shannon Cameron was near his age and always had a beer or a cup of coffee for him while he made his rounds. He lived aboard the Sea Ducer, an aging houseboat on D dock.

"Shannon was an easy one to remember. He wasn't like most of the other people around here, the wealthy ones who look right past you like you was some kind of lamp post, here to just light their way, or the new fishermen with their great big, fancy rigs who couldn't catch a schooly dolphin in a feeding frenzy. Shannon looked at you, really looked at you. And when he asked about you, it wasn't no put on act. He waited to hear what your answer was. He was real people."

I sipped the coffee and let him talk. He kicked back in a chair and blew on his coffee as I leaned forward, projecting my very real interest.

"Shannon Cameron was a seafaring man. In his younger days, he roamed the islands, shipping out on freighters. He earned his captain's license early on and worked everything from container ships to island hoppers. He was an old-school man's man. He loved his rum and would run wild for days, roaring from morning 'til morning. He'd come back to his old houseboat to rest for a few days, and then he'd be gone again, on a ship or a drunk."

"Do you know where he is now, Jeff?"

"Nope. After that writer got popular, Shannon moved his boat out of here. Running from civilization, I guess. Tourists were always gawking at him, asking him stupid questions or offering him salvage jobs. He wasn't no Travis McGee. He attracted enough trouble without going looking for it. He could take care of himself in a fight, but he was no detective or con man. He knew boats and the ocean, and he loved them both. When he worked, he was the best man on the water, but his own houseboat was the only boat he would set foot on when he had been drinking. He said salt water and booze shouldn't be mixed."

The old man sighed and closed his eyes, lost in his memories for a moment. I wisely kept quiet, hoping he would get back on track.

"I heard he got in some trouble, like a lot of captains did, with the Feds. Might have done some federal time. Might have gone off to the islands for a few years. I heard rumors about him up until ten years ago. Ain't seen him for over fifteen."

"Do you know if he has any friends that still see him or would know what happened to him?"

He looked thoughtful, searching his memories. "Can't say as I do, son. We weren't that close. A lot of people knew him, but he never let anyone get real close. Kept to himself. You might ask around down at the fishing docks. He was a regular on a lot of the boats. He'd go fishing at the drop of a hat. He knew where to find 'em too. He was always welcome aboard. Talk with some of the captains that have been there the longest. I guarantee you one thing. If they ever met him, they'll remember him.

I thanked Jeff and he gave me a ride back to my bike. We shook hands and I promised to keep in touch and let him know if I found Shannon. Then I rode back to the trailer park.

I coasted back beside the trailer and slipped in without waking Donna. I lay awake for a long time, and when I finally fell asleep, I dreamed about my father. This time he was a figure with some form, some substance. His face was still masked in shadows, but he was becoming more real to me.

I got up early the next morning, filled with a restless energy. The desire to free Donna's brother was at the forefront of my thoughts. I wanted her free from fear and free of her guilt. I turned on my computer.

The 8088 chip on my four year-old computer was slow. While it loaded my extensive list of programs, I fixed myself a cup of coffee. I had three things on my immediate list to accomplish: to see Doug's lawyer, to meet with some law enforcement official handling Doug's arrest, and to learn more about the business Doug had started here. If DiAngelo was the type of person I pictured from Doug's statements, I doubted if he would allow just anyone off the streets to walk into his business.

I sat down at my workstation and pulled up Ventura Publishing with my mouse. It took about thirty minutes to come up with a credible looking ID stating I was John Selnick with the Food and Drug Administration. If they had a real ID to compare it to, I was dead in the water. The chances were slight, however. The FDA, like other government regulatory agencies, is slow and ponderous. DiAngelo could operate with impunity for years before signals reached the bureaucratic dinosaur's brain.

A Polaroid, a pair of scissors and a laminator completed the process. The result was an official-looking card with my picture on it. I fumbled through the drawer of my workstation filled with bits and pieces of junk, things I knew I would never need but couldn't bring myself to throw away. The search yielded a slim wallet to hold my new ID and a special investigator's badge. Put together, it looked official enough and should suffice. How many times have you asked a government agent for other identification after he's flashed a badge?

The smell of coffee and the sound of my rummaging woke Donna. She had slipped on a loose, transparent robe that accented rather than hid her obvious assets. She poured herself a cup of coffee and watched me dress.

"What's the occasion?" she asked as I picked out a tie to go with my black, pinstriped suit, both of which smelled slightly of mothballs and cedar.

"Speaking to attorneys and policemen types today. Neither of whom take anyone seriously unless they dress like them."

"Can I go?"

"Not this time."

"Are you mad at me?"

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"I don't know. I just felt like I fell apart yesterday. You stayed out so late and snuck in without waking me that I just figured you were mad."

"Well, I wasn't. I had a lot to think about. I just didn't want to disturb you. And I can handle what I need to do today better alone. Maybe you could do some shopping while I'm downtown. Food, soap and things like that."

"I'm being punished, huh. Just because I got upset about seeing Doug in jail and all!"

"Donna. I'm not punishing you. I'm trying to help. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. We can eat out from now on. There's a Dunkin' Donuts within a two-mile radius of anywhere in urban America where we can get coffee after we run out, and we can steal soap and toilet paper from the campgrounds!"

"I . . . I'm sorry, Trev. I just, I feel strange. I think I'm laying too much on you."

I smiled at her. "Don't worry. You're under a lot of stress right now. Let me get to work. Hold down the home front. There's money in the cookie jar for taxi fare and shopping. If you don't feel like shopping for food, shop for whatever makes you feel good. Or go to the beach. OK"

She tried to smile. It almost worked. "OK." I started out the door. She stopped me by grabbing my arm and whirling me around with surprising strength. "Trevor. Tonight we have to sit down and have a talk. There are some things I have to tell you. It might make a difference about the way you feel about me. I just can't play it anyway but straight with you. I love you, Trevor Cameron." She kissed me, deeply and sincerely, and shoved me through the door.

I floated out to the truck on a cloud. What ever was bothering her would be out this afternoon and we could get on with our lives. I would bail Doug out and send him home, and Donna and I would live happily ever after. I found myself thinking of him as a slightly irritating brother-in-law already. This relationship felt too good to be true. I had lived briefly with a couple of other women, but it never lasted long. I viewed these experiences more like protracted dates than relationships. "How would you like to go with me to San Francisco?" type of affairs. Sometimes, I had even sent them home on a plane. But each time, I thought it would be different than the others. What is it about living with someone that brings out the worst in us?

With Donna, things were different. I was different. Except for the distress created by seeing a loved one in jail, she was the best companionship I had ever known. I did not want it to end.

On the freeway, I used my cellular to call Mitchell Levinson's office. I lucked out and caught him in. He agreed to meet me that morning. I obtained directions from his secretary and managed to negotiate the freeway from hell successfully in a little under an hour.

His office was in a converted two-bedroom house just around the corner from the courthouse and jail. A pert little Cuban secretary unlocked the door.

"Bad neighborhood?" I asked

"Unhappy clients," she said, wrinkling up her nose. "Some of these Colombians are sore losers."

"I can imagine."

"They think just 'cause they pay for an attorney, they gonna get off. When they don't, they blame Mr. Levinson."

"I can see how that would make him nervous."

"You're not Colombian?"

"Texan."

"Thass good. Mr. Levinson got no Texans mad at him. Yet."

Levinson walked out and gave her a dirty look. He looked nervous. He reached out and took my hand.

"I'm Mitchell Levinson."

His grip was firm. Once, he had been an impressive man with dark good looks and a strong jaw. He was almost 6 foot, but now the muscles had started to loosen from too many hours behind a desk. The developing paunch almost hid the gun tucked into his pants.

"Mr. Levinson, I'm Trevor Cameron."

"Come on into my office, Mr. Cameron."

His office was sparsely furnished. A three dimensional waterfront scene made from driftwood hung on one wall. The other two were covered by an array of diplomas and awards. I noted with approval that some of these were law enforcement awards from the DEA and State's Attorney office. A window on the back wall was covered by blue mini-blinds, which were creased about eye level. Either Mr. Levinson was truly worried about his dissatisfied customers or he had been snorting some of his clients' goods, cocaine paranoid on occasion perhaps. No matter. Not my problem.

"I would like to retain you for some consulting work. Would you have some time free today?"

"I have some time free this morning, but I have to be in court by two, Mr. Cameron. What kind of consulting did you have in mind?"

"I'm new in town. I need to find out a little about some people with whom I might be doing business. Do you have any friends in law enforcement?"

"A few, Mr. Cameron. Yes, I should be able to help you there."

He glanced at the window, which was closed. His hand started for the blinds in an involuntary motion.

"Am I in danger, being here with you in this office, Mitchell?"

His hand jerked away from the blinds. "No. Well, I don't think so! Shit!" He ran his hand through his thick black hair. "This one's got me shook, I've got to tell you. "I got three of these guys off. One took the fall. Now their boss has decided I should give some of the money back. I tried to tell him that's not the way things are done here. You pay, win or lose. But, no way can you talk to those guys. I should have my head examined for taking drug cases."

"I'm just glad to see that the paranoia is justified."

It took him a second, but then he laughed. It was more of a bark really. "Ha. I guess it does look like I've been sampling some of their nose candy. No Cameron. I don't care much for my clients' choice of imports." He took a deep breath. "I was in the Israeli Army. I didn't have this much stress fighting with the Palestinians. The man in question is probably out of the country by now anyway. Probably just wanted to make me sweat a little. He sure did that. I got two kids now, and my wife's got medical problems out the ass. Guess I can't handle a combat situation like when I was single. Sorry. I owe my clients more. It won't happen again, Cameron." He nodded towards the window.

"OK. Here's the situation. I think one of your clients, Doug Belben, got into something way over his head. He was brought out here by a man named Charles DiAngelo, set up in an import business. He walked in when he wasn't expected and saw something suspicious, I suspect that DiAngelo had him put out of circulation."

"Hmm, Belben. Yeah. I've only met him once. Said he was set up. But they all say that, Cameron."

"I believe him. I want to know more about DiAngelo. He kept himself off all the records for the company Doug set up. They brought in inositol, mannitol, all white powder from outside the country. Maybe there was powder inside the powder, you know? If something goes wrong, Doug takes the fall. But if their product makes it in, nobody's the wiser?"

The lawyer thought about it. "That could have happened, I suppose. Take a little bit and plant it. They could afford it. This other stuff, mannitol and all. That's something used to cut drugs with, right?"

"Maybe. It's still a legit product in the health food industry," I pointed out.

I had friends who sold pipes and papers in what had been a multi-million dollar business in the eighties. Then came the war on drugs. Unable to reach the drug lords in Columbia, the DEA set out to close down an industry. If you sell mannitol along with pipes and papers, then they call it drug paraphernalia. Coin bags become coke bags. Lab glass becomes crack pipes. Corncob pipes become pot pipes. B vitamins become cuts. Mannitol is no longer baby laxative or teething bars. Everything becomes suspect. Alligator clips become roach clips. Close down all the head shops and you drive the junkies back into K Mart and Ace Hardware again, like in the fifties, but little is accomplished in terms of supply and demand for the real product.

"Belben wasn't running a head shop. He had legitimate outlets for his merchandise. There was something else going down," I added.

"It's going to be tough to prove he didn't know about the coke in his car!"

"I know. That's why I'm retaining you. We're wasting our time trying to prove him innocent. It's more productive to trade up. Let's play "Make a Deal." If DiAngelo is involved the way I think, let's give him to the good guys. Trade him for Belben!"

"You're talking about a set up! That means undercover work. Times are tight. The cops and DEA have got their hands full with a caseload that would break a mule. If they aren't already working on DiAngelo, we've got a problem. They just don't have the manpower!"

"I'll handle that end of it. My time. My money. You arrange the intro with the guys in the white hats so I don't step on the wrong toes and get shot by the wrong side."

"If DiAngelo is the type you think, then you need to worry more about him shooting you."

"I'm willing to take that chance."

"Why? What's he to you? You a friend of his? Or did his old lady hire you?"

"I just met him. I'm a friend of his sister. I don't think he has an old lady. Unless he met somebody out here?"

"Not out here. She lives in Denver." He fumbled through his files. "Yeah. Here it is. Donna Jo. A real knockout, too. He showed me a picture. An albino! I never saw one that good looking!"

I woke with a start, my fingers curling around the trigger of the shotgun. I listened intently for several minutes, but there was no sound other than the wind howling through the pines. I stood, walked to the window and looked out. The snow was starting to pile up on the windward side. This was a full-fledged blizzard. Nothing was moving in a storm like this. The chance for escape was non-existent, which was a disadvantage, but the immediate danger presented by Reno's <<A leftover from the first draft? The AG has no name, that I recall, in this one.>> storm troopers was also nullified.

I lay back down, pulled the covers around me, and let the painful memories envelop me once more.

Chapter Eight

It felt like someone had run a red hot poker through me.

Levinson dove into his work, making calls, shaking the vicious hold that fear had placed upon him. He never noticed the blood drain from my face and rush to my ears with a burning flash. I was lucky that he had no immediate questions for me. His question echoed around my skull, ricocheted through my brain.

"What are you doing this for?" It was a simple enough question.

Five seconds ago, I had all the answers. Now, all I had were unanswered questions! Was I really going to put my life on the line for a woman who had lied to me, a married woman who had cuckolded her husband while he was in jail, who had used me? Was I really ready to cross some mobster in an effort to free my lover's husband? Risk my life? Was she really in love with me or just using me to get her husband out of jail?

I had thought she had been a stripper. I had thought of a dozen things that could have been her secret. I had thought I could forgive her anything, but I had not thought of this possibility.

"Hey, Cameron. Listen to this! The local cops say DiAngelo is an OK guy. He's got a few goons and a few cops working for him in a half a dozen different businesses, from paint and body shops to detective agencies. No interest there, but the FBI has a file on him in its Organized Crime Bureau. The DEA is mildly interested as they suspect one of his rackets is large-scale dealing. I got an appointment with one Tony Miata, who might be interested in backing you up on this deal, if he thinks you can pull it off! Hey, you still with me?"

I shook myself out of it. "Yeah. Yeah. Sorry! I was daydreaming. Yeah. Let's go. We'll take my truck."

Tony Miata was an agitated individual with an aggressive attitude. He was short, stocky, about forty with receding hair and not a shred of vanity. Not about his hair, or his clothes, which he may well have slept in, or his appearance. What hair he had left was greasy and his fingernails looked chewed. The fingers on his right hand were stained with nicotine.

He met us just inside a crowded upstairs office. Up close, the DEA looks just like every other government office: people scurrying around with self-important tasks to accomplish, hands filled with stacks of paperwork. Except, here, it seemed like everybody wore guns.

Tony was a yeller. He yelled at everybody. The clerks, his comrades and us.

"What is this, Levinson? You tell me you got a line on a big bust and you show up with this fucking hippie dressed up to look like a man? If you want to get on my bad side, you're going about it in the right way!"

He looked at me. "What about it, punk? Didn't your mama ever make you get a haircut? What kind of scam you running? You want to go to work with us so you can do a little dealing on the side? Lookin' to me for a little protection? Who the fuck do you think you are?"

Levinson looked nervous. "Listen, Tony . . ."

I interrupted them both. "The new, no-smoking law really gets to you, huh, Miata? It's about time for you to sneak out back for a cigarette, isn't it?"

I turned to Levinson. "I thought we were going to talk to a pro? Who is this clown?"

The room fell quiet. "Any of you here know a little bit about courtesy? All you have to do is be polite, not like this jerk!" I yelled and pointed at Miata. They all stopped and stared at us. Levinson looked like he wanted to crawl under a desk. I turned back to Miata.

"My mother, who's dead now, taught me to be polite to anyone who deserves it, and to slap the shit out of anyone that doesn't have the capacity for common courtesy. What is it, Miata, you been undercover in the gutter for so long you've become one of the slimeballs, or did you develop this attitude from being short?"

His mouth snapped shut and I thought he was going to hit me. He took one step forward. I didn't move. I braced myself, ready to counter anything he might throw at me. Good work, Cameron, pick a fight with a cop, and in his own office. Miata glared at me and I glared back.

Now everyone in the office had stopped and was staring at us. A few made subtle moves, their hands flowing smoothly inside jackets. He yelled at them, "What the hell are you looking at? Can't you see we're trying to have a discussion here?" The rest of the people in the room resumed their activities, and Miata turned back to me. "Well, at least you aren't a wimp. Most tall guys I know are fucking wimps!"

"Most short guys I know have got an inferiority complex!"

"Maybe I can spare you five minutes of my valuable time. Joe, get Levinson here that file on Charles DiAngelo. Come on into my office, Kramer."

"Cameron," I said, following, knowing he knew my name. The fact that his abrasive manner was deliberate didn't make him any more appealing.

Once inside his office, he turned into a brisk, efficient cop. "First, let me say that I'm not interested in anything outside of a legitimate bust. If you can help me take down someone who deserves it, I'll listen. If you got a grudge, the guy better be dirty or you'll answer to me. Now, what's the deal?"

I laid it out for him, told him all I knew about Doug Belben. Told him where I thought Doug was coming from, naïveté most likely with a dash of desperation, my scenario for what had really happened to him, and my impression of DiAngelo's operation. I told this short ugly cop about everything except Donna and the icy fist that was crushing my heart. He took it all in, nodding to himself.

"You may have the correct view on it. It could be that you're right. But no jury is going to believe it. I doubt if I could convince a judge to let Doug walk, but I might be able to get his bond reduced . . ."

"No," I interrupted. "He would just get in the way right now. He'd go after DiAngelo and maybe get himself killed. I want some time to go after DiAngelo first, get some evidence that will stand up in court!" Even as I said it, I felt guilty. What is your motivation, Cameron? Want to bang the blonde just a few more times until you get her old man out of jail? Are you afraid to find out if she'll stay or go if you get him out? You've got the chance to get him out! You've got the money! What's your problem, Cameron? "Just make sure he's in a good tank. Make sure he doesn't get hurt. I'll put something together within a week."

"What else do you need, Cameron?"

"A concealed weapons permit would be helpful. I might need some coke. I'll be glad to sign for it if I need it, and you can do drug tests on me, if you want. I don't know yet if I'm going in as a buyer or seller. Either way, I don't want to get busted by some overzealous street cop if I have to hold. I might need

some surveillance gear. I need a number to call without a lot of bureaucratic red tape, if and when I need back up."

"The concealed weapons permit I can speed up for you, assuming you're clean, as I think you are. You wouldn't be playing around like this if you had anything to hide. I'll still check you out to cover my ass, though. I may be able to get you some coke, an ounce maybe, but no weight. You have to take your chances with the street cops. DiAngelo has friends on the force, and any word out on you will go straight to him. Surveillance gear you can buy for yourself right here in downtown Miami. There's three or four spy shops selling better stuff than we have. Just be careful what you say you're using it for. Half of 'em are owned by us. The others feed both sides info to keep themselves out of hot water. Anything else?"

"Yeah, no publicity, inside or outside of this office. I don't want to be labeled an informant or a snitch. I will pass on information on this one occasion. Don't expect anything else from me. You take the credit if I get enough information to make a case."

"We can handle that." He looked at me closer. "Why are you doing this, Cameron?"

"I promised his wife I'd help him. And I don't like bullies. When you get right down to it, that's what a man like DiAngelo is — someone who pushes poor defenseless guys around, who uses people and doesn't care who gets hurt."

The attorney looked at me sidelong when I said I was here to help the wife, when I'd said previously I was helping a sister.

"So why didn't you become a cop, Cameron?"

"I just told you, Miata. I don't like bullies, and most of you are fucking bullies. You justify it by saying, 'it's the law.' No offense. Unfortunately what you do is necessary. People have to be told what to do. I just don't want to be the one to tell them."

"It can't be a coincidence. There couldn't be two people who look so much alike with the same last name and the same type of an attitude. You related to a boat bum by the name of Shannon Cameron?"

"My mother thought I was. I've never met the man." Seems like my old man really got around. "How do you know him?"

"He got into a jam with some nasty people about fifteen years ago. A drug deal went sour. People thought he might have been involved. Other people put out a contract on him. They got one of his friends. One of our undercover agents got wind of the whole mess and approached Cameron. They went down to Mexico to find out the real story. Our man was killed while they were down there. I debriefed him Cameron later, but he didn't like cops either."

"It's not that we don't like cops, Miata. I think it's just you."

"You both are too fucking sentimental to be cops. I can't handle all this emotion. Get the fuck out of here. Take this number and check in with me as this goes down . . . If this thing goes down! Personally, I think you should go back to doing whatever it is you do and forget this whole thing. If you're clean, you got no reason to risk your life. You won't get in with this guy in a week. You won't get into him for a month."

And if you do, he's gonna use you like a paper towel and then throw you away. We might find your body and we might not. He might take you out on one of his boats and leave you about twelve miles out. We wouldn't even know where to look."

He stood up and looked me in the eye. "Cameron. You're not a bad sort. I am supposed to use anyone or anything I can to make a case. Most of these punks I deal with are in it just as deep as anyone they turn in. If they get hurt, I don't care. You aren't part of this scene. I can see that. This ain't the movies and the good guys don't always win. You'll most likely wash up on the beach, somewhere, a John Doe with no head or fingers. You ain't gonna change nothing even if you get lucky! Your friend Belben is lucky DiAngelo let him live. That was because he was too dumb to do any damage. You are not dumb. You get in DiAngelo's way, he has to kill you."

I couldn't argue with him. The more I thought about it, the more his prediction seemed likely.

"I'll keep on thinking about it, Miata. By the way, you know where Shannon is now?"

"Nope. He did some time. Got out eight, nine years ago. He took that old boat and left. Things were a lot quieter when he left. He attracted trouble like a magnet. I expect you will too. Here's the number. Think you can remember to call me?"

"I'll try."

"Don't expect us to be the fucking Calvary, McGoo. You get your ass in a crack, you're on your own!"

So what else is new?

Once we were outside, Mitchell turned and stared at me. "Jesus Christ. You've got fucking nerves like ice." He was sweating like we'd been outside all day. "I didn't bargain for this. I thought I had problems before! I could probably get shot just for standing here next to you. Do you come off like that to every fucking cop you meet?"

"Only if they come off to me like this one did. He was just checking me out to see if I had the guts to go undercover."

"No. He's like that to everyone."

"Did you get the information I need?"

"I got a dossier on DiAngelo. Not a real pleasant person. Neither is Carmine. He's his main muscle. What now?"

"Gee, look at the time, Mitchell. You're off the clock as of now." I took the folder out of his hand.

"Use me then lose me, huh?"

"You got it, bub."

"Am I going to know how this turns out?"

"Don't you think you have enough problems?"

"You're probably right." He was silent for the drive back to his place, and still sweating in spite of the air conditioning. "Well, good luck, Cameron," he said as we pulled up in front of his office.."

I don't know what caught my attention. Maybe some of Levinson's paranoia had rubbed off on me, but when I looked in my rearview mirror I saw an Avis rental car parked two houses down under a huge oak tree. Two men were sitting in it. They were watching his office intently. As he got out of my truck and walked to his office, his arrival created a flurry of activity in the car.

I pulled the truck down to the next driveway and slowly pulled in, backed up and turned around. I grabbed my phone and hit redial. His secretary answered.

"Tell Mitchell to look outside. You get under the desk and call the cops. Tell him he wasn't just paranoid. Do it now!"

I broke the connection and started slowly back down the street. The doors of the car opened. I could see the short, unmistakable shape of an Uzi in the driver's hand. A mask now covered the man's face. I laid down on the gas and the horn at the same time. Diesel smoke belched from the truck, and I saw his eyes widen as I cut from my lane and aimed directly for the driver-side of the car.

He slammed the door in time to save his legs just as my winch hit the door squarely. The car hopped crazily over the curb with the force of the collision. I kept the gas on and plowed two furrows in the yard with the bent wheels of the car until it came to a bone-jarring stop against an old, immovable oak.

Mitchell was quick. He hadn't lost his agility or his training. Before I could get out of the truck, he had dashed from his office to the hood of the car, gun in hand, barking orders at the stunned Colombians trapped inside the crushed rental. They dropped their guns and raised their hands, bleeding from cuts in their heads and arms.

I backed up to allow us to drag them out through the car's shattered windows. The cops arrived immediately from the police station two blocks away. They were astounded at the audacity of the hit men, the condition of the car, and the fact my truck had survived unscathed.

Levinson was appreciative. "I guess I owe you one, Cameron."

"I'll take an IOU. Mitchell. Sorry about those previous cracks about your paranoia. It looks like you were justified."

"They'll think twice before they try a stunt like that again. Listen, I overheard you talking to Miata about this Shannon Cameron. How would you like for me to check on him for you? I've got an investigator working for me part-time."

"I could use the help, Mitchell. Maybe you can access the prison records and try and trace his social security number."

"Yeah, I can do that. I'll get back to you. Thanks again, buddy."

All the way back up to Lauderdale, I thought about DiAngelo. I tried every conceivable scenario. Me posing as a buyer. Me posing as a smuggler. Trevor the Cat Burglar. Cameron, armed robber. Cameron, surveillance expert, loaded down with sophisticated electronics and invading the privacy of a man I didn't know, a man who could be innocent, for the sake of another man who could just as easily be guilty. I was

basing all of my perceptions on the word of a man and woman who were conning me. Both of them had lied, or at least allowed a lie to stand.

So I had come to Florida with this woman. I didn't owe her anything. I had only promised to do what I could. That doesn't necessarily involve getting killed.

I thought I loved her, but that was futile anyway. Her husband was sitting in jail. She would never belong to me or be a part of my life. I could live with that. Love 'em and leave 'em, with both of us a little closer to our goals. No one hurt, hell hardly inconvenienced.

What else was there to consider? Miata might think me a wimp if I backed out now? Maybe. Maybe he'd think I had made a wise choice too, an adult choice, a good business decision.

Maybe my father would have done it differently, I thought out loud. I can ask him when I see him. If I can find him.

OK. I had arrived at a compromise. I picked up the phone and dialed Mitchell.

"Mitchell. This is Trevor. I've changed my mind about this whole thing. Miata is right. If the whole damn DEA hasn't been able to get a case on this guy, who am I to think I can. I mean, I'm not James-fucking-Bond . . ."

"I think that's a great idea, Trevor. I think you should forget the whole thing and go down to the Keys and find your father. I've got information that I'm trying to narrow down that says he might be there, in the Keys. I was just trying to get hold of you."

"That's great. Listen. See if you can get Belben's bond reduced. I'll bail him out and see if I can get them settled somewhere while he goes to trial, him and his old lady, Donna." I couldn't work the proper amount of enthusiasm into my voice.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you and why I was trying to reach you just now, to tell you not to worry about it, pal. I just called down to drop Miata's name at the jail. He's gone!"

"Gone?" I said blankly.

"Gone! The guy was bailed out this morning."

"How? By who?"

"I checked. I'm still charging you for this, by the way. Just 'cause you saved my life is no reason not to charge you for services rendered. I have got to make a living, you know. His bond was covered by one of DiAngelo's bond companies. Carmine put up the deposit. Cash. Ten o'clock. Picked him up, probably. You may have passed them on the freeway!"

I've had this dream before, I told myself in my sleep as I tried to wake up. I couldn't bear to live through this again and again. God, let it stop!

But like a compact disc on replay or a dirty movie on a continuous loop, I was forced by God or my conscience to relive what happened that day night after night, agonizing over the details, trying to find

something I missed, some detail I could change, some way to stop the tortuous slide to the inevitable conclusion.

This relived reality marked the pivotal point of my life. This was the beginning of my secret identity, which was far more real than the one I chose to leave behind. This marked the dawning realization of the existence of an evil force bent on the destruction of innocent people. This was the point at which I took a vow to stop it, at all costs, to somehow atone for my naïveté.

Chapter Nine

I ended the call. What was going on? My head was spinning like I'd been hit. I guess we're all control freaks, some to a greater extent than others. We like to feel like we've got a handle on our lives, and on our destinies even, that at least we know where we're headed. At this moment, I felt like I had no control whatsoever. One second I was making decisions for everyone around me, feeling secure in my ability to direct my life and theirs, and now there were factors injected into the situation that I not only had no control over but had failed utterly to foresee. I had stepped on toes, meddled in lives, made decisions based on inferior data. This change of directions in the situation was my fault.

I put my foot down, pushing the truck through the traffic. There was a feeling in my gut that I had made a fatal error, maybe more than one.

What had happened? Maybe Donna found the safe, got into it somehow, and bailed him out?

No way. She couldn't know. Nor could she get into the safe if she found it. Besides, where did Carmine come in? DiAngelo? She certainly would not have contacted the guys responsible for her bother's present problem.

Then I saw the whole situation quite clearly, and I ran through the situation again in my mind: Doug looking out at me, nearly losing control because a stranger obviously sleeping with his wife. Donna probably crying and saying before I walk in, "This guy was the only way I could get here. He's got money. Don't tell him we're married. He thinks you're my brother. He'll bail you out, maybe get your company back."

Then I picture myself sitting there, smug, free, thinking, "It's none of your business if I'm fucking this woman I think is your sister but is really your wife. Just sit there and be a good boy and I'll do what I can. I don't have the money on me!"

Someone is lying to me, Doug must have been thinking, so DiAngelo gets another phone call. Tells the old boy, "Better talk to me, Charlie, my old lady brought in some heavy biker type. He thinks you used me to bring in a load. Get me out of here, give me back my company, and I'll call him off." Maybe

Doug even offered to point the finger at me as a gesture of good faith. Bingo. Two problems taken care of. Would he keep thinking, figure out the danger he had put himself in with DiAngelo by backing him into a corner this way? Probably not. He'd stop there, at the point where the lover gets taken out and he imagines getting wife and company back. So DiAngelo is a drug dealer. So what? As long as he promises not to do it again. *What the hey?* the moron will think.

Doug had signed a death warrant on all three of us. I pulled into the trailer park at Yacht Haven. The matronly woman at the front desk caught me and flagged me down as I pulled by the office.

"If you are going to have friends docking beside your trailer, Mr. Cameron, you are going to have to pay for the dock space as well."

"I'm sorry. I don't have friends with boats."

"Well, your girl friend does! Doesn't matter who knows who. If they dock here, they pay." She was adamant.

"I'll see to it in the future." I almost ran over her foot in my rush to get to the trailer.

The trailer was quiet. I saw no movement, and no sign of anyone having been there. I stopped the truck a good distance away and walked to the door. None of the lights looked to be on within, but the blinds were closed so it was hard to tell. I tried the door. It was locked, just as I had left it. I knocked on the door. There was no answer. DiAngelo must have come and picked her up on his boat. I ran to the back of the trailer and unlocked the bike. How long ago had he picked her up? Where does this river go that he might take her? How fast can he go? What can I do to save her? Does she want to be saved? Remember, she is with her husband.

I started the bike, put my helmet on and pulled the face mask down. I started down the drive. Then I realized I had no idea of where to go or what to do.

Defeated, I killed the engine. I sat there for a minute. Regroup, Cameron. Do something. Think! Find out the facts. Quit running on emotion. It took a few seconds before things began to focus. God! I had never felt so disjointed, so unnerved. Someone had taken my woman! Only she wasn't my woman. She belonged to someone else. I was the outsider, the other man!

I could grab a map out of the trailer to where the river goes, what roads parallel it and what their possible destinations might possibly be. That was a real long shot but the only one I could think of at the moment. I could also talk to the nosy old lady and find out what time they had left, what kind of boat they had, and maybe even what direction, up or downstream, they went. First I needed to change out of these banker clothes!

I could find out where DiAngelo lived. I had his file in the truck. I could knock on his door and ask to see her. Find out if she was there by choice!

I looked down at myself, still dressed in the suit and thought of how stupid I must look and how stupid I was acting. She left me a note. Sure. Nothing had happened to her. They had gone out for groceries. They're waiting for me to come home and talk it all out.

I unlocked my heavy, custom-made door with its fancy deadbolt. I opened it a crack as I struggled to get the key out of the stubborn damn lock, cursing and vowing to spray the lock with WD 40 for the ten thousandth time.

I would never curse that door again!

Time stood still. Through the crack I saw their bodies lying on my living room floor. Still as death. Hands and feet tied with fishing line, blood running from their heads and staining the carpet she had once cleaned for me. In a split second, I had time to think that indeed they looked alike now. His skin was now as white as hers., his brain glistening gray through a bloody fissure dividing his skull like some grotesque sacrifice on an ancient Mayan altar. Their blood blended together. The coppery smell of blood and another odor . . . gas . . . wafted through the crack.

I registered an incredible amount of detail in a few short seconds. Like the wire running to the desk lamp sitting wedged in his arms, the power cord stripped to reveal a few inches of the two copper wires bent into a circular shape. All the insulation was gone, the wires bare in the middle and separated by nothing but air. I could see the fishing line running from the cord, just below the cut to the other side of the door handle.

I watched in horror as the pressure from the heavy door pulled the wire taut and the circle of wire straightened, then touched.

I thought she was dead. I was frozen. Time stopped. Then she opened an eye, cracking the coagulated blood encrusting it. One bloody alabaster eye. Her lips moved and I saw rather than heard her say, "I'm sorry."

My reactions weren't good enough. Or maybe it had only been a milli-second and no human could have stopped it. Maybe I saw all of that through the spark even as the wires touched.

My world blew up. A giant hand took my door and slammed it into me.

Fire lashed out at me and caught my clothes afire, momentarily blinding me as I sailed through the air, me and my door and a few thousand bits of twisted aluminum.

I waited for the final impact. It felt like I had been flying for ages. I couldn't understand why I was conscious, and I couldn't understand why the fire didn't hurt. Then the fire was out, and everything was dark and cold and wet.

Water started to fill my helmet. I got a mouthful of salty, brackish water and my instincts and reactions returned. My feet kicked of their own volition as I reached out with my arms and clawed my way out of the abyss. There was a vibration in the water and I burst through to the surface in front of a very shocked fisherman in a small, open boat.

To his credit, he moved quickly enough to prevent me from slipping back into the brine as my fingers lost their grip on his bow. When I awoke, I was on dry land and staring into the eyes of a worried-looking Fire Rescue medic. Police and firemen scurried around me. Residents of the trailer park stood outside a ring of policemen.

"Well guy, you certainly are the luckiest man I have ever met!" the medic stated.

"What happened?" The sound of my voice startled me. It felt like someone had been burning old tires in my mouth. I smelled like it too.

"What happened is you've been blown up and set on fire. You also flew fifty feet, were half drowned and almost run over by a boat. All this in the space of about two seconds. You should be able to make a mint doing commercials for the state in favor of helmets."

He was packing up his gear, talking more to himself than to me. I was drifting in and out of consciousness. "Near as I can figure, that helmet kept the fire from frying your face and the explosion and from crushing your head. It probably contributed to your having enough air and retaining consciousness long enough to get to the surface too. The water put your personal fire out. You may notice that I have covered you with a blanket for modesty's sake. You must have had one hell of a door on that trailer or else we'd be picking shards of aluminum out of your body. Even your bike made it almost unscathed!"

"How about the people inside?"

He turned pale. The humor drained from his face. "Man, there is nothing left of that trailer except a gun cabinet and a safe. I'm sorry. I didn't know. It's still burning, dude."

Suddenly, I was very tired. Nothing seemed to matter. I closed my eyes for a brief second, and when I opened them the next time, doctors were cutting what was left of my clothes off. Nurses were dabbing my charred spots with acid soaked sandpaper masquerading as cottons balls and alcohol. Neon lights had taken the place of the sun. Then a needle slid into my arm and everything went away.

I dreamed about Donna. Doug was there too. They were hand in hand, their eyes and skin really turned to stone. And then there was Tony Miata saying, "See!" I tried to wake up, but every time I opened my eyes, that fat cop was still there and wouldn't go away.

I finally gave up blinking and focused my eyes. He wasn't a dream. I could smell him. He smelled like ashes.

"I got your stuff. The guns, the safe, a few pieces of leather and some odds and ends. You have no clothes."

"Aren't you gonna say I told you so?"

"No."

"You know who did it?"

"If you hadn't been with me this morning, I'd say you."

"DiAngelo?"

"At home all day. Carmine brought Doug back to the trailer and supposedly dropped him off to wait with wifey to confront you. He said Doug was real pissed off about you fucking his old lady."

"Why did they bail him out then?"

"Had a change of heart. He finally convinced them he was set up. By you maybe, through more of your biker friends so you could get to his old lady. Doug was supposed to move back in with Carmine and report for work tomorrow."

"They were tied up. Blood was running from their heads. Doug was dead, his brain exposed. She was still alive." I felt and sounded dull, as though all emotion had been blown out of me.

"There was no sign of ropes."

"He used fishing line."

"Smart. It melted in the heat. You were right. She didn't die from the blow on her head. The explosion and the subsequent fire killed her. She had smoke in her lungs."

"Then I killed her." I closed my eyes and saw her, laying there without a hope in hell that I could get to her in time. If I'd done something differently, made another choice other than going the route I had, maybe she would be alive.

"It was supposed to have killed you, also. The trailer was filled with propane. Something went off when you opened the door." I told him about the lamp cord. He just nodded. "Ingenious! Why you weren't killed made me a little nervous, at first."

"The door and the helmet."

"Yeah. we fished the door out of New River. Hell of a door. If the walls had been strong as that door, you wouldn't even have been stunned."

"You were right, Miata. I was out of my league."

"Your problem is that you care, kid. It puts you at a hell of a disadvantage."

"Are you going to get him for this?"

"Not me, Cameron. It's out of my jurisdiction. No drugs. Maybe no murder charges even, given his alibi. This could be ruled accidental death. Maybe the local cops hypothesize that the happy couple came in to wait for you. She accidentally turns on the stove or the air blows out the flame and no one notices, and twenty minutes later, just as you get there, the guy is nervous and lights a cigarette. Boom." There was something in the way he said it. He was nervous and he didn't like what he was saying.

He ignored the nurse's dirty looks as he lit a cigarette. "Fort Lauderdale makes the call. They'll want to talk to you about it. I also heard about your run in with the Columbians over at Levinson's. You really jump into things headfirst, don't 'cha?" He politely blew the smoke over my head.

"What about Fort Lauderdale? Can't you tell them about Carmine? About DiAngello? Carmine was the last to see them! Doesn't that make him the number one suspect?"

"He was halfway home when it happened, eating lunch at Hunky Dory's on the water in Hollywood. The cops could say you did it as easy. Personally, I don't think there was enough time for you to set a bomb. The old lady stuck up for you, said you never went into the trailer. I think she's sweet on you."

"She saw Carmine there," I pointed out redundantly.

"He admits being there. Took Doug home by boat."

My head was starting to hurt again. My ears were ringing and my skin hurt.

He noticed. "Don't let 'em make you a junkie, Cameron. You're going to be OK soon." He pressed a button hanging on my bed. I guess I wasn't being real observant. I was hardly aware I was in a hospital. A nurse came in and stuck a needle into a tube leading from a plastic bag above my head, and I started a slide into a painless oblivion. I barely made out his parting words.

"I got you that concealed weapons permit. If you still want it! I ran you through the computer. You are clean as a baby's butt." He dropped a card down on the table besides the bed. "Call me when you get out of here. We'll do lunch."

I woke early the next day.

All things considered, I had come out virtually unscathed. I had no broken bones, no serious burns. The fire had burnt my clothes and the back of my left hand and arm slightly, and every muscle in my body was bruised. The helmet had prevented a serious concussion, but my ears were still ringing all the same.

The doctor stopped by on his rounds and told me they were going to keep me there for a few days for observation. He told me to rest and relax. He said that, due to my superb physical conditioning, there was nothing broken, just severe bruising and a possible concussion. I was welcome to stay as long as I needed. Obviously they had found out I had insurance.

I tried to follow the doctor's orders. Fat chance. I had a steady stream of visitors.

A nondescript guy in a suit stopped by. He looked like he had been chosen for his ability to blend in with the wall paper. He told me Miata asked him to keep an eye on me for a while as I had made enemies rather quickly. It takes most newcomers a bit longer, he said,. He promised he would screen my visitors carefully.

Thank God for that. If he hadn't been screening people for me I would have run out of room in my room! It almost filled up with reporters. We, my new doorman and I, would allow no cameras or photos to be taken. I told them I had opened my door and my trailer had blown up. I was just a tourist who just got into town. Yes, my friends, Douglas and his wife, Donna had been inside the trailer. No, I doubted I would be staying long.

The Fort Lauderdale police came and ran the reporters out. Five different detectives took five statements, and then they all came back to double check everything. I told them a little more than just the facts of their deaths. I told them Donna's parents were dead, or so I had been told. I knew little about Doug. I gave them Miata's name and Mitchell Levinson's as part of my alibi. I told them what I saw. I told them it had to be Carmine. They promised they would question him. They said there was nothing but my statement that Donna and her husband were tied up that would point to this being anything more than a terrible accident. It could have been a murder/suicide by a jealous husband. I had been sleeping with her, hadn't I?

Are you sure Doug was tied up also? You stated, Mr. Hamilton, or Cameron, that you hadn't really looked at Doug. Had you?

It's possible, isn't it, they asked, that it could have been someone I knew who killed them and blew up the trailer? An enemy from Texas who followed me and wanted to hurt me by hurting my girlfriend?! A friend of mine, maybe, who was following my orders to take out her husband and just got carried away?

What bike gang do you ride with? Why do you have an ID that says you are a FDA Inspector? What's in the safe? Why do you have an UZI, a mini fourteen, a 20 gauge shotgun, a nine millimeter pistol and a thirty-ought-six with a scope? Tell us again, why are you in Florida?

I lay there and answered their questions over and over again. I listened to their accusations and ugly insinuations. I let them speculate and gave up trying to focus their attentions on Carmine. For some reason, the mention of his name slid from their minds like egg off a teflon skillet. I offered no protest and no defense except for the truth. I felt no anger, just bruised, listless and apathetic.

I tried to find out what they were going to do with Donna's body. It seemed it would be held at the morgue for awhile. I was told that there wasn't enough left of her for a funeral. Forget about it, son. You aren't even related. The ashes will be sent to his parents.

"Scuse me, Colonel," a voice outside my dreams called to me. "You might as well get up. I think you might just get more rest when you're awake Steve handed me a cup of coffee as I sat up.

"I figured out from your screams that she died. Sometime soon you're going to have to decide what you are going to do with me, but in the meantime, you might as well tell me some more of your story. I don't think I want to try and sleep any more anyway."

Chapter Ten

They released me on a Tuesday, the ninth of October, to start picking up the pieces of my life.

A nurse bought me a pair of shorts and a shirt from the money I had in my pocket. I took a taxi from the hospital to Yacht Harbor. The little old lady took on the responsibility of looking out for me to the point of offering me a place to stay. I thanked her but told her I had enough money to get a motel.

Some of the other campers helped me load my Harley onto the truck. I would have never got it loaded by myself. Every move I made hurt. The paint was singed slightly on both the truck and the bike, and the bike had a dent on the side of the tank from being blown over, but both were otherwise in good working order.

I drove downtown to pick up the remains of my belongings from Miata. I thanked him for holding them for me. I also took the concealed weapons permit. He asked me what my plans were. I told him I was

continuing the search for my father. He helped me carry my fire-scarred cabinet and safe downstairs to my truck. We parted company with a handshake. Neither of us mentioned DiAngelo.

He asked if I was staying in town and where. I said I hadn't thought about it. He said he would help me with the police investigation if he could, and to notify him of where I would be staying, should anyone have any further questions or need to get a statement. I promised.

I drove back up north, vowing that this was the last time I would take this particular freeway anywhere. A tropical depression with a man's name was just fizzling out just beyond the Bahamas, thus sparing Miami once more from the ravages of a hurricane. Marcos, no relation to Ferdinand, was springing from the remains to threaten the West Coast of Florida. Not a good time of year to own a boat here, I reckoned.

Without conscious thought, I found myself pulling into Bahia Mar. A pleasant young man named Steve informed me it was pre-season and yes they did have a room available at the special rate of only \$60.00 per day. He offered to have someone help me carry up my bags. He looked anxious. I gave him a credit card, which had fortunately survived the fire and near my near drowning. I told him my things were in the truck. He signaled for a bell boy.

"You can leave the bike in the truck. Just bring in the other stuff," I told the young man. I looked back up at the clerk. "I'm traveling light. I will be buying all of my clothing here, not to mention toothbrush, razor and shampoo."

He brightened up and welcomed me to Florida. Then the bellboy rolled the cart inside with a dismayed look. His uniform was covered with black streaks of soot and ashes by the time he finished. My jangled array of weapons were visible through the blast-etched plastic. My safe was there, jagged pieces of flooring still attached. With my bandages and my clothes covered with soot and ashes also, I must have looked like some kind of lunatic crook who had just ripped off a pawn shop. The clerk couldn't hang onto his smile.

Plastic still works miracles in America, however, land of equal opportunity, where they don't discriminate as long as you can pay your way and can prove you are a real American by flashing your Visa. No one cares if you rob banks as long as you have a credit card. Mr. Hamilton was welcome here. Cameron had no credit cards, and I don't think that version of myself could have rented a room with all the cash in the safe.

I went up to my room and thought about all of the things I could be doing, needed to do. It was about three o'clock. I tried to find a part of my body that didn't hurt. Failing that, I called room service and ordered lunch. I sat and stared at the remains of my life on the floor of the hotel room until I dozed off. I never heard the knock, never smelled the food. I found the tray sitting inside the door the next morning. I ate my cold dinner for breakfast.

I took it easy the next few days. I let Miata know my current address. I went shopping for a new wardrobe. Due to the abundance of nautical styles at Bahia Mar, my new look was mostly shorts, tropical-

looking shirts just conservative enough to avoid being be marked as a tourist. I khakied out, preferring the soldier of fortune, great white hunter look to the surfer-boy-tourist look. Gone were my dark colored flannel long sleeve shirts, leathers and warm jackets, and this was not the place to replace them. I picked up a few pair of Levis and a couple of bags to put everything in.

I was too sore to fight at a dojo and too depressed to do anything else. Life had lost it's flavor.

I spent a few hours walking up the beach, then down the bustling strip of bars and shops of Fort Lauderdale. If you do this before noon, you miss most of the tourists who are still recovering from their night before. The surfers were enjoying the high waves from the storm system, but those began to die and the ocean was beginning to lose the wind-whipped whitecaps.

I couldn't get her out of my mind. I would see a couple together, laughing, and I would start to cry. I would see a beautiful girl on the beach and my tears would start to flow. I tended to hang out in the bars and drank more in that week than I have in all of my previous years put together.

I spent the afternoons walking the docks, reading the names of the boats and talking with the mates of the fishing charters, chatting with a few of the inhabitants of the south side of Bahia Mar. Boaters struck me as being more open than the standoffish campers I had been living around. They were more relaxed and had more disposable income than campers. I was looking for old time residents. Anyone who might give me a lead on my father.

I got a call from Miata once. He told me to call a Captain Freeman with the Fort Lauderdale Police Department to answer some routine questions. I said I would call in a few days. I had to rest for awhile. Damned if Miata wasn't beginning to sound human.

At night, I would go down to the marina and talk with Jeff, who was the only one I felt I could talk with at the moment. He listened to me pour my heart out more than once about the girl I had lost, but finally he lost his patience.

"I know you are hurt, and more on the inside than the outside, seems to me. But when you gonna get it together, boy? Quit moping around and drinking to dull the pain! It ain't gonna bring her back. Feeling sorry for yourself ain't putting her killer away. You wait for the cops to do it and you'll wait the rest of your life. Your daddy wouldn't have been just sitting around. I can damn well tell you that!" He snorted and left me alone to finish his rounds.

That was the night I quit drinking. The next day I went out and jogged on the beach, limbering up my stiff and unused muscles. At noon, I strolled the dock nearest the street and gawked at the variety of fish brought in by the charter boats with the rest of the tourists. I resisted the hawking of the mates aboard the boats. "Come on, buddy, we've got room for one more today!" and "The sails are really biting out there. This is sailfish weather!" Until Friday.

I awoke early Friday, before six. I walked down and had a light breakfast and strolled to the docks. This time the criers got my attention. The day was clear, the waves 2 to 4 feet. The crew of the Misstery

were just getting ready to throw the lines off. The captain, Marcia Fenny, it said on the sign, yelled down at me from the fly bridge, "Come on. We need one more. It'll only cost you fifty bucks!"

According to the information I had gathered, Marcia had been on the docks for thirty years. What better way to corner her and ask a casual question? Hell, I had on boat shoes. I was wearing khaki! I started to leap lithely to the boat, but my muscles protested.

I decided to wait and let her back the boat closer. One of the crew helped me aboard with the comment, "You look younger than you move."

I shook hands with John and Myrtle Davidson from Nashville, Tennessee, Roy Abrams and wife Julia from New Jersey, and Bill Tuttle from Arkansas. Bill was an old hand at this and assured me that he would be able to show me the ropes. I shook hands with everybody and told them my name. The mate, thin, wiry and in his sixties, was setting the Penn International rods into the holders on the cockpit rails.

"Trevor Cameron? I thought there was something familiar about you. I've seen you on the dock a couple of times. You any relation to Shannon?"

"My father. I've never met him though." I guess when you live somewhere as long as he did here, you get to be a nodding acquaintance of everyone.

Marcia overheard us. "The way Shannon got around, it's a wonder there aren't more of your brothers and sisters come around. You got a sister, you know?"

That news caught me totally off guard. I am used to being in some kind of control of my life. I was the kind of kid that had to know what he was getting for Christmas before Christmas. Surprises! Bah Humbug. I want to know in advance! "No, I didn't."

"Come on up here," she called down.

I went up the ladder as well as I could. The day was warm and I had pulled off my shirt. We were moving along slowly, in compliance with the "No Wake, Idle Speed" signs posted along the canal. She was staying in between the red squares and the green triangles that obviously marked the boundaries of the Intracoastal. Green marked the ocean side of the canal, red the mainland side. She sped up for a short distance and then slowed down as we came upon the Marriott and Pier 66 Marinas, where the fancy private yachts with helicopters and hot tubs were docked.

"You come out here to hate him, like his daughter did?" she asked frankly.

"No. He didn't do anything wrong. He never knew I was born. My mother never told him or wanted to hold him accountable. Neither do I. I just wanted to meet him. To know what he is like."

"He is a good man. Everybody liked him that didn't have a scam up their sleeves. You're starting to look more like him."

"More?"

"Yeah. With all those scars and scratches and bruises you've gotten recently. Must be a Cameron trait. Shannon got one or two new wounds a year, usually in barroom fights. He made a few mistakes. Got in with the wrong people. And he wasn't real dependable. But he was a good man, as I said."

"You know where he's gone?"

"He retired. He didn't want to be found."

"I'm beginning to understand," I said, wincing a bit as the Misstery came down over a wake beneath the bridge.

"Asshole!" She yelled down at the offending boater. "Supposed to be a No Wake Zone. Assholes either can't read or don't care. Gets worse every year. Never thought I like to see more regulation out here on the water, but if it would get some of these jerks off the water, I'd vote for it. You OK? You appear to be a might sore?"

"I'll be all right. I got hit by a door. What about this sister?"

"Well, Shannon had this affair with a friend of mine from my hometown in Ohio. They were hot and heavy for a few months when he was on the wagon. Then he fell off and he was hard to be around. Beverly broke up with him and went back to Youngstown. She had a kid, a girl she named Jean. Shannon was off somewhere in those days more than he was here, and they never got together again. She didn't ask him for nothing and he never knew. She swore me to secrecy. Not hard to do. He wasn't around that much. Went and did time. Moved down south, just ahead of the tourists who thought he was famous."

"But you kept in touch?"

"Yeah. With both of them. People were going in and out of the state joints back in the seventies like they was country clubs. Smuggling a load of pot in here and there was real common. It was easy to keep in touch. She was my friend. We kept in touch until she died. Jean showed up here one day to tell me and wanted to know who he was and where he was. I told her. That was five years ago. She found him and later thanked me for it. Then she went back to Youngstown, and last I heard was going to become a veterinarian."

Marcia broke off as the boat lurched suddenly. I caught hold of a stanchion to steady myself.

"We're going out into the Port Everglades Cut now. It's going to be a little rougher. We're fishing for sailfish so we won't be going out too far. I forgot to ask you if you needed any Dramamine?"

I looked at her blankly.

"You know, for sea sickness. Do you get seasick?"

"I don't know. I've never been out to sea."

She looked skeptical. Maybe she was afraid I'd throw up on her fly bridge.

So we left the quiet waters of the Intracoastal for the surging, swaying Atlantic, the bounding blue, or green in this case. I watched her instrument laden dash with interest.

"What is this?" I said, pointing.

"That's the depth finder. It's digital. Shows what the depth is under the boat and what the bottom looks like. See that! That's a fish. Probably a big barracuda at this depth. See we're only in forty foot of water, and that's because we're still in the ship channel. The water is only fifteen foot deep on either side of us. The shoreline tapers off here gently, more than on the Gulf and the Keys but less than Bimini. There it

drops off two thousand feet a half a mile from the island. This gizmo also shows the temperature of the water and our speed and how far we've gone."

"What about that," I asked, pointing to a device with incomprehensible rows of numbers.

"That's the Loran. It tells us where we are, what direction we are heading and what direction we have to go to get somewhere. There are different towers sending out signals. This deciphers exactly how far we are from each tower. Put the two together and that's where you are." She got out a chart and pointed at the circular lines with numbers. Each line was a graduating number. Where those lines intersected showed up on the Loran. It was confusing at first, but then she showed me how it compared with longitude and latitude and I picked it up quickly from there. It was just a cross between a radio and a computer. She showed me how to program in a point, say Bimini, and when you entered the coordinates, the distance popped up on the screen along with a compass heading to take. I was so absorbed in her instruction that I was surprised to find us several miles off shore.

She killed the engines. The mate had the poles rigged. The waves out here were higher than they looked from shore. The mate motioned for me to come down. "If we're going to catch some fish, I think you're going to have to do it."

Out of the five, Myrtle Davidson was the only one who wasn't retching over the side or lying green on the bunks. Her husband had escaped by going to sleep. Myrtle smiled at me. "You go ahead, sonny. Have fun. I don't like to fish. I just like the rocking of the boat. John always forgets that it puts him to sleep."

Bill Tuttle looked up and nodded. "Go ahead, boy, you reel the first one in." Then he was back over the side.

The mate put out live bait on a kite with one reel attached to it to hold the bait near the surface. The wind was stiff enough to get the kite up with no problem. The line with the bait was threaded through a quick release clip a few feet below the kite. From there it went to the rod on my left as I was facing towards the rear, starboard to experienced seamen.

According to the depth finder, we were over a reef in about ninety feet of water. We would drift and fish anywhere between ninety and a hundred and ninety, that being the depth sailfish like best. Another line was put out with a balloon. The bait was on a hook placed just under its upper fin. The balloon was tied two foot up the line. The mate cast the fish and balloon out with the wind as far as he could. The little fish and the wind took it further from the boat, drifting over the waves. Marcia killed the engines and we drifted.

The sun beating down combined with the rocking of the boat, was relaxing to me. I have never been prone to any type of nausea. I can ride all of the rides at the carnival and state fairs without a qualm, so I loved this motion. I felt sorry for the others, but Mildred and I were digging this drifting up and down over the waves.

Just then there was a distant twang, and I watched the kite shoot up, released from its weight. A moment later, the starboard rod bent and strained toward the ocean. The line smoked out of the reel with a high pitched whine. The mate grabbed the pole and gave it a jerk. Then he handed it to me.

I had risen out of the fighting chair anxiously, and he pushed me gently back into it and sat the butt of the rod into the gimbal between my legs. Then he shouted instructions to me over the whine of the reel. Marcia started the engines and swung the boat around until the line was straight behind the boat.

"Pull the rod back and up when he stops taking line. Now! Then reel down as you drop the tip of the rod. Good. Now with the thumb of your left hand, guide the line back on the reel so that it stays even, and don't let it bunch up in the middle. This is a deep sea reel and it doesn't even out the line like a little spinner. That's right."

Just then, a giant blue flash of light broke the surface of the water a hundred yards away from the boat and a long bill swished back and forth nearly yanking the rod from my hands. The Z he made in the air still glistened in the spray as he fell back into the water and made another run. The line flew from the reel, squealing. I imagined the drag was smoking like the brakes of a runaway truck careening down a mountain road.

"Good, good. Keep that line tight when he jumps. Don't give him any slack. When he slows down, pull that rod up and reel like hell. Oh shit!"

The second line started smoking. The mate grabbed it and set the hook. "A double header, Marcia."

"I got it!" Bill Tuttle rallied. Lifting himself off the rail and grabbing the rod, he sat himself down in the other chair with no help from the mate and began to fight his fish in earnest silence.

Both fish jumped a half a dozen times each. Even the Abramsons came around to watch and cheer us on. I forgot about sore muscles. I forgot about Donna, Dad and DiAngelo. I forgot about the boat, the mate and the captain. It was just me and him. Him trying to get away and me trying to bring him in.

After every jump, I gained a little ground. Finally, he jumped no more. The leader appeared over the gunwale and the swivel touched the end of the rod. The mate wrapped the leader in a gloved hand and I stood up and looked my fish square in the eye. He didn't blink. I did.

I asked the mate. "What now?"

"It's up to you. We can boat him, take it to have it mounted, smoke it, or you can let him go."

"Will he be all right?"

"Should live to fight another day."

"Cut the line."

"We'll tag him first. That way, if he gets caught again, we'll know a little more about them."

"As long as it doesn't hurt him."

"It won't," Marcia said from behind me, reaching past me with a long black stick, a slip of plastic from a pointed pin on the end. It slipped into the fish just in front of the huge dorsal fin. The mate lowered

him gently into the water. With a great flick of his tail, the fluorescent blue fish faded into the depths. We did the same with Bill's.

"Well," Marcia said. "What do you think?"

I looked out over the expanse and pointed out to sea. "What's out there?"

"Dolphin, marlin, wahoo, Bimini, Nassau, Cat Cay, the Bahamas, deep blue waters, sharks, crystal clear coves teeming with lobsters, snapper and grouper. A lifetime of islands, and somewhere, Shannon Cameron."

"I think I understand him a little better now. Know where I can find a good boat?"

"You sure are a long way from the sea now, Colonel. Probably a good thing. I prefer Colonel Cameron to Admiral Cameron."

"I spent enough time on it, Steve. I still get back there from time to time. Just not as much room to run as when you are out on the sea. There are too many people looking for me these days. Back then, I was nobody. A face in a crowd. The only reason anyone looked at me was because of my height. Nowadays, they either want to kiss me or kill me, depending on their political bent."

"That's true, Colonel. Cameron. You have certainly become either this century's George Washington or Frank and Jessie and Bonnie and Clyde all rolled into one. Guess just how you go down in the history books all depends on who wins ."

"I've gotten pretty accustomed to the fact that I'm just a soldier behind enemy lines. You learn very quickly that it's kill or be killed, and after a while, it just becomes like a reflex, something you have to do to stay alive. The reason you are doing it sometimes slips from your grasp, but you still do it. The rational part of your mind still screams, 'This is crazy. You are going to die if you keep fighting!' But it just isn't heard anymore."

"Some folks say you and all of the people that believe in you are the ones that are destroying this country, that this guerilla war is tearing American to pieces."

"We didn't declare this war. They did. They started the shooting at Ruby Ridge and Waco. We held off, tried to settle it by kicking out all of the Democrats back in 94. Then the first thing the Republicans did was throw out the 4th Amendment and give the OK for the Federal Rapid Deployment Force. They started kicking in doors without a search warrant, seizing houses for a little pot, and taking guns, gold and valuables. When Americans tried to defend themselves, they were charged with murder. Not one of the Feds were ever charged with anything. It took us long enough to realize that was their plan all along. They had been eating away at the Bill of Rights all the way back to the turn of the twentieth century. It wasn't until Clinton was disgraced and Bush took over and declared the National Emergency over the currency collapse that we finally realized we had no choice but to fight."

He looked at me carefully. "When you say these things, you don't sound crazy at all."

I smiled and took a sip of my coffee. The state-controlled media had tried to portray me as just a crazy follower of the martyred Osama Bin Laden. The illegal underground papers and radio broadcasts have done a good enough job of trying to set the record straight. The problem was, however, that much of what the media said was the truth. I was responsible for many more deaths than I could keep track of. Time and circumstances had turned me into a cold-blooded killer in a very real but unofficial, unrecognized war. I wondered if I would have to kill Steve before I left. I hoped not.