

CHAPTER SEVEN

I DIDN'T GET ANY SLEEP ON THE PLANE. I TRIED to reason through what I'd learned in Miami, but images of Altigracia's body, speared by the hard, overhead light, kept interrupting. I forced them away.

What had the men in the Chevy gotten from her? Where Peel was? Maybe she died before she told them. And maybe she hadn't known herself. No, she'd just come from Colombia. So had they been staking out her place since Mike disappeared, or had they known when she would be coming back?

It was too many questions for five in the morning. My stomach burned, my head ached, and my thumb throbbed. I got a glass of ice-water from the stewardess and leaned my seat back, but my mind kept circling the problem. Maybe I could sneak into that DEA agent's hospital room in Gulfport and worm some answers out of him.

Thinking like that showed just how tired I was. I let it rest.

The sun was rising over the Superdome as the plane settled into the smooth, clear air above Moisant International. The terminal was almost deserted, with kids in wrinkled jeans sprawled in wretched sleep over the chrome-and-Naugahyde benches. Old black men drove propane-powered buffing machines across the floors. The little snack-and-magazine shops were closed and shuttered.

I picked up my station wagon and headed east. I tried to check for tails, but it's impossible to be sure on the interstate. I crossed the Rigolets and reached the Pearl Rivers, where tendrils of mist clung to the brown waters and sleeping cranes stood on one leg in the shallows with their heads under their wings. The rising sun hung low above the highway, too low for the sun-visor. I felt like I had sand under my eyelids.

I reached the Dairy Queen in Bay St. Louis by seven o'clock. Lee answered with a groggy, "Lo?" when I called her room, then, "I'm asleep. Call me later." She hung up. I grinned in appreciation.

She drove past the Dairy Queen fifteen minutes later. I watched for a tail, but none of the cars behind her followed when she made a U-turn at the next block. She came back and pulled up beside me.

She rolled down the window. "You look tired."

"I'm whacked. No sleep last night."

"Poor thing. What do you want to do?"

"Park your car and get in. We'll drive around and talk."

She nodded, rolled up the window, and drove around to the side of the building. I unlocked the passenger side and she got in. She was wearing a thin tank-top and pale blue shorts with a rolled cuff. She had her hair pulled back in a french braid that left wispy curls at the temples.

"You look nice and fresh this morning," I growled.

She laughed. "Well, don't be nasty about it. Soon as we can, I'll take you back to the motel and give you a long, hot bath.

Then you can get all the sleep you want. And how're your burns?"

"They hurt, but I'll live."

"I've got some aspirin in my purse. Want some?"

I put the car in gear and pulled onto the road, going east. "I told you, I don't take drugs. So tell me exactly what this guy said on the phone. The guy that bought the Porsche."

She bit her lip. The rising sun flowed over her face and lit it. "Well, he said that he'd bought it from Mike, and that Mike had told him to call me for the key to the storage stall. He called three times. The last time he sounded pretty pissed. He said he had to haul the car back to Dallas today."

I cocked my head. "He said 'haul?'"

"I think so. Maybe he said 'pull.'"

"Not 'drive?'"

She closed her eyes. "No. I got the impression he was going to tow it back."

"We'll find him, then. We'll look for a truck and trailer."

"Why a trailer?"

"Nobody would pull a Porsche with a tow-bar. How many motels are there in Bay St. Louis?"

"Um. . .four. Two of them are up ahead, and there's a couple on the interstate."

"We'll find him. We'll look for a truck with Texas plates pulling a flat-bed trailer." I glanced at her. "He's going to be very cagey if he's in with Mike. We've got to go carefully with him. There's the Bay Motel up ahead."

I slowed down and turned into the gravel drive. It was an old motel, built when Highway 90 was the main artery from Florida to New Orleans. Now it catered to itinerant construction workers. It was about half-full, but there were no Texas trucks pulling trailers.

We drove down to the Starlite. It was a little better, with a fake-stone facade and slanting glass picture windows in the office building. This one looked like it specialized in long-term tourists on a budget. No trailers here, either.

I went back to the Dairy Queen and drove north to the interstate. Behind the Holiday Inn, parked in front of a first-floor door, was a mid-Eighties GMC pick-up truck with an orange U-Haul flat-bed sticking out into the traffic lane. The pick-up had Texas plates.

"Bingo," I said. "Ninety to one that's our man." I cut the wheels to head for the exit.

Lee grabbed my arm. "Bunny! There's a girl coming out of the room."

I twisted around. The door was open and a tall pale girl in a tight dress and patterned hose was coming out. A man's head appeared in the doorway behind her. He had longish black hair combed up in a ducktail. They spoke for a moment, then she went along the sidewalk and he closed the door. As she stepped down to the pavement I could see her bony face and heavy make-up. She was wearing a pair of six-inch heels that made every step an adventure.

"I can't say much for his taste in women," Lee sniffed.

"You get what you pay for."

"Oh, you think she's a. . ."

I laughed. "What else would he get his first night in town? She's either pro or semi-pro, from her get-up."

"He probably picked her up in one of those strip bars along

the beach. He sure could've done better."

I said dryly, "She probably looked pretty good about two o'clock last night. Listen, you think you'd recognize his voice? I mean, if he's the guy who called?"

The girl got into a rusty Trans Am with a crumpled fender and drove off.

"For sure," Lee said. "I couldn't miss that Texas twang. That was one of the things I hated about living in Austin."

"Okay, let's try something." I drove around to the lobby.

We got out and went in to the bank of pay phones. "Okay, that was Room 128. I'll look up the number for the motel here, and you ask for that room. When he answers, ask for Bob or Tom or somebody. Try to get him to talk a little, maybe ask him if he's the guy from the home office. And use some kind of accent so he won't recognize your voice."

"I'll try," she said dubiously, "but I'm not very good at this kind of thing."

"He won't be suspicious. Just don't overdo it."

I gave her the motel number and she dialed it. She went through the little charade, then hung up. "It's him, all right. I think he was asleep. . . he didn't sound suspicious at all."

"Fine. Okay, let's go. I'll take you back to your car."

"What are you going to do?"

"Find out from him when he bought the Porsche, and maybe where Mike is, if he knows."

"What if he doesn't want to talk?"

"I'll persuade him."

We went back to the station wagon and got in. I headed across the interstate toward Highway 90. After I pulled in beside her car, she hesitated for a moment, eyeing me, then reached over and gave me a light kiss on the corner of the mouth.

"Remember," she said, "you're all I've got. Don't take chances."

I nodded. She got out and went through the sunlight to her little car. I watched as she got in and started it and drove off. Then I opened a very secret compartment under the car and got out one of my throw-downs, a little .25 Raven auto with a broken grip. I buy them from people at local gun shows, so I don't have to show an I.D. or sign anything. At least in Louisiana. What a state. Then I took out my trusty Model 19 and clipped it on my belt. The Raven I put in my pocket.

I opened my clothesbag hanging against the rear door and changed into a white shirt, then went around and opened the tailgate and rummaged in my catch-all box. One roll of duct tape. Back in the front seat, I tore a couple of pages out of my notebook, transferred my pen from the old shirt to the new, and drove off.

The truck and trailer were still in the Holiday Inn parking lot. I combed my hair in the rearview mirror, got out, and went up to the door. The curtains were pulled across the window. It looked dark behind them. I knocked. No answer at first. I knocked again, hard and peremptory.

"Who is it?"

"Hotel management," I said loudly. "Sir, you'll have to pay for an extra person before leaving."

"What?" The curtains pulled back at the side of the door. A smooth, grayish face appeared under a mass of black hair, hanging in oily locks over his ears. He'd gone back to bed.

"Sir," I said loudly, "I'm from the motel office." Then I let

my voice slide down to the point where he wouldn't quite be able to hear it. "You paid for one person, but you had a guest overnight. You'll have to pay for another person."

It was a calculated move. He might have heard me, and said something about coming to the lobby later. In that case I'd have to move out of sight and wait for him to come out. But he took the bait. "Wait a second," he said, and opened the door.

I had the 9 mm. out and down by my leg. I brought it up and put it into his naked belly. He had the lean, flabby build of a whiskey-drinker. His muddy eyes opened wide. I pushed him back into the room without effort and kicked the door shut behind me.

"What the hell's going. . ." he started, but by then I had him turned around and my hand over his mouth, the pistol up against the turn of his jaw.

"Make a sound and I'll drill you. Got that?"

He nodded. Now came the tricky part. I snatched out my handkerchief and stuffed it in his mouth. With the muzzle in his back I pushed him onto the bed face-down and ripped a strip off the roll of duct tape. He didn't like that. He tried to lift his head off the bed, but by then I had the pistol back against the nape of his neck.

"Keep cool, cowboy," I said, "and you'll live to tell your grandkids about it." He relaxed under me.

I put the pistol back in the holster, snatched his head off the sheet with one hand in his greasy hair, and pulled the tape across his mouth. I wound it around his head twice, leaving his nostrils clear. His breath whuffed through them.

Another strip secured his hands behind him. After I'd got them taped, I stood up and caught my breath, holding the pistol loosely by my side. He had his head turned to the other side, but I could see his eye straining to look at me.

I rolled him over and pulled him to his feet. He swayed like a drunken man. With a hand clutching the short hairs at the nape of his neck, I steered him between the beds toward the bathroom. On the way I turned on the teevee, moderately loud. His eye rolled like a horse's.

I pushed him into the bathroom and closed the door. He started jerking wildly, trying to pull his hands free of the tape.

"Take it easy," I told him. "Cooperate with me and nothing'll happen to you."

He made some choking sounds with his mouth, fighting the tape. I gave him a shove and he fell backwards into the bathtub, his head making a hollow sound against the wall, his bare white feet splayed up in front of me. I put an arm around his neck and helped him sit up.

I looked at him. He'd been a pretty boy once, in a hill-country way, with a long, straight nose and curly black eyebrows. Time, whiskey, and cigarettes had taken their toll.

I sat on the toilet. "Okay, my friend, we're going to have a little talk. Actually, I'm going to talk and you're going to write. The way we're going to do it is, I'm going to let your right hand free. . . you're right-handed?"

He didn't respond.

"Okay, I'm going to let your right hand free, and I'm going to give you a pen to write your answers. If you try anything, I'm going to hurt you. Do I have to make myself any clearer?"

He didn't nod his head, or shake it either. Just a baleful stare.

"I see that I do. Okay, cowboy, let me lay it out for you.

Now, some guys, they start friendly and get nasty when they get frustrated. Well, my doctor says I'm not supposed to get frustrated. Bad for my blood pressure. So I just start nasty."

I slid out my belt-knife and grabbed the waistband of his jeans. His eyes got round and his face went a shade grayer. I sawed gently at the fabric until it parted, then I cut down to the crotch. He wasn't wearing underwear.

"Jesus Christ," I complained, "you oughta wash 'em first, son." I got up and turned on the vent-fan. "Well," I continued conversationally, sitting down on the rim of the tub, "Here it is. If you don't tell me everything I want to know, and tell me the first time I ask you, I'm going to cut your dick off.

"A lot of men worry about losing their balls. They're scared stiff of it. Can't get a hard-on no more. But you know what's worse? Keeping your balls and losing your dick. How about wanting some puddin' and not having a dick to get it with? What do you think about that?"

He just stared, the cords in his neck standing out like rawhide thongs.

I took the tip of the blade and stuck it in his pants. "Okay, now, I'm going to free up your right hand. Do I have your full cooperation?"

This time he nearly broke his neck nodding yes.

I pulled the knife out and stuck in it my belt, wrapped the tape around his waist, and made a few loops securing his left hand. Then I cut his right hand free and pulled it clear of the tape. He shook it a little. I kept the Model 19 well out of his reach.

"Okay, you stay right there. Don't try to get up." I pulled the sheets of paper out of my pocket and handed him the pen. "First, what is your name?"

He wrote in a crude, unlettered scrawl, "Roy Dance. What going on?"

"I'll ask the questions. If I get the right answers, I might tell you some things. But that comes later. Now, Roy my boy, where is Mike Peel?"

The pen wavered. He stared at me and wrote, "Dont know."

"Aw, shit," I said. "Now I gotta cut your dick off. Sonofabitch."

He shook his head violently and wrote, "Dont know, swear to God."

"You bought a car from him?"

He nodded.

"You got the title?"

He nodded again.

"How'd you get it?"

"Mike gave it to me."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"You saw Mike yesterday? Where?"

He shook his head and wrote, "In mail. Letter."

"What do you mean?"

"He call. Say send car to Columbia. Say he will send title. I get letter with title."

I stood up. "Well, well, well. Where is the letter?"

"In bag."

"All right," I said. "I'm going to look through your bag. If I hear you moving around in here, I'm going to come back and start making pepperoni. So you better keep absolutely still."

I went into the room and lifted his cheap leatherette bag off the floor. On the teevee, a hatchet-faced woman with a stripper's body was explaining what it was like to be a sex surrogate. I found the letter crumpled into a side pocket. I took it back to the bathroom.

Roy hadn't moved. I sat on the toilet and took a Bill of Sale, a Mississippi auto title, and a letter out of the envelope. I read the letter. It was written in a fast, neat hand on lined note-paper.

"Dear Roy—like I said on the phone, I need you to do something for me. Here is the title and a notarized bill of sale to one of my Porsches, the 911. It's in storage stall #32, Log Road Mini-Storage, 3217 Log Road, Bay St. Louis. Call my girlfriend Lee at 601/772-8081 to get the key. If you can't reach her, you may have to use bolt-cutters on the lock, but don't let anybody see you.

"I have signed the title, but left the buyer's name blank. Take the papers and the car to a freight forwarder in New Orleans. You don't need to put the title in your name, since the car is being exported. The freight forwarder will handle all that. Look one up in the phone book.

"Tell the forwarder you want to send the car to the following person in Colombia—Dr. Reynaldo Sosa, Edificio Blanco, Calle 24, Cali, Colombia. His phone number is 77642. Tell the freight forwarder to appoint an agent in Cartagena, Colombia, to receive the car at the port, and tell him to give the agent there the above address and phone number. Enclosed is two thousand dollars for shipping and four thousand for you, like we agreed. After the car arrives in Colombia, I will send you another four thousand.

"VERY IMPORTANT—do not tell anyone about this. Tell my girlfriend Lee that I sold you the car on the 24th. The date on the title. Tell her and anybody else who might ask that that was the last time you saw me. Say I came to your house and told you I needed money. You paid me ten thousand dollars for the car. That's the number on the Bill of Sale. No matter what, do NOT tell anybody that I called you or wrote you this letter. After you have sent the car, burn this letter and the Bill of Sale. If you have any problems, call Dr. Sosa and give him a message for me."

I looked at the envelope. Mailed from Corpus Christi, Texas, on the twenty-seventh of July. The day after he disappeared. The title was signed and dated the twenty-fourth, but the Bill of Sale had been notarized in Corpus Christi on the twenty-seventh. I shook my head at Peel's stupidity and put the papers back in the envelope.

"Well, well, well, Roy. I see you decided your dick is worth more than Mike's life. You may be right. Don't feel guilty, though. . .his little trick didn't fool us any. We knew where he was. We just wanted to know what you knew." I sat on the toilet. "Just a couple more questions, Roy, then I'll leave you alone. Have you heard from Mike since you got this letter?"

He shook his head.

"Ever been to Colombia?"

Again a shake.

"You know this doctor? Reynaldo Sosa?"

Another shake.

"You did business with Mike?"

No response. He watched me warily.

"Aw, for Christ's sake, I'm not the heat. If I was a cop I

wouldn't be operating like this, would I?" Not exactly the truth, but never mind about that. "You did business with Mike?"

He shrugged.

"Okay, I guess you can tell that you're not going to get the other four grand. But I'll give you two thousand cash, right now, if you can tell me exactly where in Colombia I can find Mike."

He shook his head earnestly. I didn't press it. "Mike was working with some guys in Miami," I went on, "some heavy hitters. Can you tell me anything about them?"

He shook his head again. There was something moving in the back of his eye, but I had already lost my enthusiasm for the job. All I wanted now was to get out. I stood up and looked down at him. He was a pathetic figure, jammed against the side of the tub with his pants cut open and his face stiff with fear and shame. I had a fleeting mental image of a gymnasium full of laughing girls.

"Okay, Roy," I sighed, taking the papers out from under his hand, "it's been a rough morning for you. I'll try not to make it any worse. Turn around."

Maybe he thought I was going to cut him loose, but instead I pulled his right arm down and taped it to the left. Then I worked him back until he was sitting against the faucet. I wrapped the tape around the faucet and wrapped a couple more lengths around his waist.

"I'm leaving now," I told him. "Soon as I'm gone, you're free to start trying to get loose. But I want to ask you a favor. . . just go on back home and don't say anything to anybody about what happened here. Don't say anything about the letter you got from Mike. If Mike calls, tell him the letter and the title were stolen from your house. Don't make me come looking for you in Texas."

He rolled his head back and forth, leaving a grease slick on the tub wall. I stood up with a grunt and went out. The sex surrogate was describing how she had cured a man of impotence caused by fear of losing his manhood. I turned the sound up for Roy's benefit.

I drove to the Dairy Queen and called Lee. She came immediately. I unlocked the passenger door and she got in. "What is it? Mike. . .? He's. . ." She was breathless, as if she'd been running.

"I think he's in Colombia." I told her what'd happened at the motel and handed her the letter. She read it slowly, lips moving silently. When she was done she let it drop to her lap.

"Bastard," she whispered. "Goddamn bastard. That's how much he cared for me. He let me think he was dead, ran out on me to Colombia. . ."

I patted her on the arm. "Lee, he was trying to save himself. He couldn't have told you what he was up to without taking the chance that you would tell someone."

Her eyes snapped with anger. "Then why did he come up with this stupid plan to get that car sent down? Wasn't that taking a chance?"

I nodded. "Yeah, and look what happened. It was greed, pure and simple."

"He can't live without that damned Porsche. That car means more to him than I do." Her voice rose. "Why didn't he take me with him? I would've gone to Colombia."

I looked at her. "Would you have? Life on the run? You don't look the type to me."

She started to make a curt reply, then shut her mouth with a click.

"Do you love Mike?" I asked.

She was startled by the question. Finally she shook her head, twisting her hands together. "No," she said, "I guess I don't. I guess my pride is hurt more than anything else." She managed a smile. "Besides, this isn't such a shock. I knew all along he didn't die out there. It was too. . . convenient."

I turned the airconditioner up to the last notch. The Dairy Queen was opening for business, and a couple of cars with kids in the back were pulling into the drive-through.

She smoothed the fabric of her shorts with her hands, wiping the perspiration from them. The sunlight on her bare legs showed a fine blonde down.

"So what now?" she said in a bright voice. "No buried treasure, I guess."

"Well, like we talked about before, he probably took anything portable and accessible with him. I would say that your best bet is to liquidate everything and do it quick, before the Feds seize it."

She shrugged hopelessly. "That won't amount to much."

"I don't imagine it will. You'll have to get the best price you can."

She looked away. "Mike always wanted the best of everything, you know. He told me that once. He wanted to learn what was the best of everything, so he could get it. The best SCUBA equipment, the best guns, the best cars, the best watches—he loves Rolexes—the best. . ."

"The best girl," I finished for her.

She gave me a quick smile, a flash of genuine amusement. "Thanks. I needed that." The smile faded. "So this is the end of it for you, right?"

"You mean, the end of my involvement?"

"Of course."

I stared through the windshield at a family poking around in the hills of conch shells that surrounded a dilapidated shack across the highway. "Well, something's going to happen about those two agents I popped. That kind of thing doesn't just go away."

"You said you won't go to jail over that."

"No, I don't think I will. But it'll have to be resolved."

"So that leaves the question of what you're going to do."

I turned to sit athwart the seat. "I guess I'm going back to New Orleans. Some people got to work in this world."

She got hard around the jaw. "So you're going to run out just like Mike and leave me with nothing?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Find Mike, of course. Tell him that unless he lays some heavy cake on me, I'm going to the Feds with where he is."

"Heavy cake?"

She waved an impatient hand. "Money."

"Why should he pay you anything? Did he take anything of yours?"

"Because he's got it," she said hotly. "Look, while I was with him, he must've made a million dollars. If we were married, he'd have to give me some of it."

"That doesn't mean he's morally obligated to do it."

She showed me the back of her head. There was a line of feathery hair running down the middle of her back into her tank-

top.

She turned. "Look, you wanna preach, go on teevee. I'm offering you a job. Besides, if you get in a bind over those two DEA agents, knowing where Mike is might be your hole card."

"Are you saying I ought to find Mike so I can finger him for the Feds?"

Her eyes shifted a little. She seemed to be looking at my right ear. "I'm looking after my interests. I suggest you look after yours."

"What you're suggesting is that I could look after both our interests at once."

"That's right."

I locked my fingers behind my neck and stretched until my vertebrae clicked like abacus beads. "Well, Lee, I don't think there's anything more I can do. I'm not going to birddog Mike for trade-goods. And I'm not going to Colombia on a percentage of what I can extort out of him." I wiggled my fingers and grinned at her. "When I start extorting, it'll be to my own account."

"Look," she said, getting a wild look in her eyes, "maybe he had to leave his stash. He might be glad to pay a percentage to have you get it for him."

I laughed out loud. "Why would I give him anything after I got it? No, I don't think Mike'll go for that."

She flushed and set her mouth in a thin line. "How about if I just pay you to find him?"

"Pay me with what? I've already earned the guns."

She held out the title to the Porsche. "The car. If you find Mike in Colombia, you can have the car. Even if you can't get any money out of him."

I shook my head again. "I don't think so. It's a generous offer, but you'd better sell that car yourself as soon as possible. And that still doesn't change the fact that, basically, what you're asking me for is extortion. Extortion from a drug dealer is still extortion."

She nodded and put it away. "All right, Bunny. I don't blame you." She opened her door. "You want the keys to the storage stall? You can go get the guns if you want."

"Uh, I'll wait a couple of days. You going to stay at the Crescent Moon?"

"I guess so. Until I find an apartment."

"I'll call you tomorrow. Usual rules?"

"Okay," she said, and got out. I watched as she went slowly to her car and sank into it. She drove out of the parking lot without looking back. I sat there for a few moments before driving off.

I had an unsettling sensation driving down the interstate toward New Orleans. My station wagon began to feel odd and clumsy, like someone else's car. I looked around at another man's things: the teevee, the little refrigerator, the fax machine and telephone. The sensation became more intense. I now saw myself as I drove along the highway, a bitter little man in a big car, ready to run down the world. I saw a runt. A dwarf.

I blinked a couple of times and everything sorted itself out, but I was left with a metallic taste in my mouth and the smell you get in your nose when you need action. I wanted some action. I was hard for it. I was about to call Mickey when my phone rang. I answered it. Lee said breathlessly, "Bunny, Bunny, you there?"

"What's going on, Lee?"

I heard the sound of a car engine whining. "They're chasing me. I don't know if. . .oh, shit!"

"Lee, who's chasing you?"

". . .two, two guys. I can see two guys. They're in a blue car."

"Where are you?" I started looking for a turn-around. The median here was low and soggy.

"I'm on Gallagher Road. Bunny, they're gaining on me."

"I'm turning around now," I said. "Head for the interstate. Call the cops."

". . .I'll try to make. . ." There was a squeal of tires, then a hard, flat report in the earphone.

"Lee, Lee, are you okay?"

"Bunny," she said, her voice shaking, "They're shooting at me. Oh, Jesus, please help me. . ."

The phone clattered. I saw a narrow, muddy track ahead, running south to the other side of the interstate. I braked sharply and swung the car off the road, tail slewing in the puddles. I could hear tires screeching in the phone, and then two more shots.

"Lee, you okay?"

No answer. It sounded like she'd dropped the phone. I bounced up onto the highway and headed east. Within a few seconds I had the 390 out of its cage and howling in the wind. The speedo needle was steady on one hundred. I'd done 125 once outside of Shreveport, but the old girl had almost gotten away from me, so now I keep it under 110.

The phone was quiet. I kept calling Lee's name, but there was no answer. I could hear a motor running, but it sounded like it was idling. There was traffic noise in the background. I swung around a tractor-trailer, fishtailing in its slipstream. I flashed past the Bay St. Louis exit. Then I heard a voice in the phone. "Bunny, you still there?"

"Lee, what happened?"

She took a breath. "I lost 'em, Bunny. I'm hiding behind a Dumpster right now. I hope to God they don't find me."

"What exit do I take? I'm coming up on the first Gulfport exit now." I slowed to eighty-five. I was still passing the travel-trailers like they were sliding backwards.

"The next one. I'm behind the K-Mart. You'll see it when you get off the interstate."

"You don't know where those guys are?"

"I lost 'em in a subdivision. I don't know where they are now."

"Okay, I'll be there in two minutes. You probably ought to get out of the car and hide somewhere close. They won't be able to find you before I get there."

"O-okay, Bunny. I'll see you." She hung up. I slowed to sixty for the exit.

The K-Mart shared a vast parking lot with a wholesale grocery store. I drove slowly past K-Mart's auto repair bays and turned into the narrow service alley. At the far end I could see Lee's Fiero poking out from behind a big green Dumpster. I bumped over some flattened cardboard boxes and stopped beside her car. I turned off the engine and got out.

The smell of rotten vegetables floated in the air like a mist. There was a narrow band of trees on the other side of a shallow ditch, and through them I could see the high wooden fence of a

subdivision. I called Lee's name.

She stepped out of the woods and jumped across the ditch. Her face was white under streaks of dirt. There was mud on her knees. She came running up to me. Her momentum carried her into my arms. "Oh, Bunny," she cried, "oh, Bunny, I was so scared."

I held her close. The skin of her back was smooth under my hands. "It's okay, kiddo," I said. "It's okay. It's all over."

I tried to step back, but she held onto me.

"Look," I said, "we ought to get out of here. Let's go somewhere and talk."

She pulled back and looked at me. "Where? We can't go to the motel, can we?" She disentangled an arm and rubbed at the dirt on her cheek.

"Not yet. Don't you know some place? A park or something?"

"Oh," she said, "there's a nice park a couple of miles north. It's real small."

"Okay, you lead. I'll stay close."

She pulled free like it hurt her, took a couple of steps, then went and got in her car. I followed her out to the road and under the interstate. I couldn't see anyone following, and by the time the houses gave way to pine forest, the road behind us was empty.

We passed an abandoned service station with gas advertised at sixty-five cents a gallon, then she turned left by a state park sign. We wound past oaks dripping with Spanish moss and stopped at a little gravel parking lot with log curbs. There was a narrow, grassy verge leading down to a dark, slow bayou carpeted with water lilies.

She got out as I was pulling up. She adjusted her tank-top and waited for me as I came around the hood of the car. "Let's go sit down by the water," I said.

She took my arm. "Do you have your gun?"

"Two of 'em."

We found a low knoll that projected out into the stream and sat down. I crossed my legs and rested my elbows on them. Lee sat facing me. Her fingers twined nervously in the short grass.

"Well?" I said.

She looked up. "I don't know how long they were following me. When I left you, I was heading for the motel when I saw this blue car—like a Grand Am or something—staying about the same distance behind me. To check, I turned off the highway and went through a McDonald's drive-through, but when I got back on the highway, they were waiting for me. They started following me again.

"So instead of going to the motel, I turned onto Gallagher and headed north. The car stayed behind me, but when I got out of town, they started gaining on me. I tried to outrun them, but my little car looks faster than it goes. I couldn't get away. That's when I called you."

"Could you see who was in the car?"

She hesitated. "Not really. They looked like. . . Spanish guys, you know. It was dark in their car. I couldn't really see them." She gave a wheezy little laugh. "I was looking at the gun. It looked like a cannon."

I said slowly, "You didn't see their car at the Dairy Queen, did you?"

"I didn't notice it. I guess I wasn't really looking. Do you

think they followed you?"

I opened my mouth to deny it, then shut it. "I don't know. I don't see how, but that doesn't mean anything. So how'd you get away from them?"

She started to answer, but at that moment a car pulled into the parking lot. We both jerked around. My hand went to my waist. But it was an old clunker with fishing poles tied to the roof. A fat family, all of them tanned the color of leather, got out and started noisily organizing a fishing party. I looked back at Lee. "Go on."

"Well, as soon as they got level, I saw one guy aim a pistol at me. I hit the brakes as hard as I could, and they shot ahead of me. I guess that's what made him miss. Anyway, there was a road going into a subdivision right ahead, and I turned down it. I don't know what they did after that. They probably turned around and came back, but I never saw them again. I found another road that led out of the subdivision, and kept going north until I got to the K-Mart." She laughed and rubbed at the drying mud on her knees. "Jesus, Bunny, I was about to pee in my pants."

I patted her knee. "Hell, you did great. I don't imagine too many people give those characters the slip."

She kept talking, but the nervous energy was starting to seep out of her. "Anyway, that's when I realized that the phone was still on. I'd let it fall on the floor when they started shooting, then I forgot about it. I was surprised to find you still on the line."

"Hell, by then I was headed this way at a hundred miles an hour."

She stared. "Really, Bunny?"

"That's right."

She took my hand with both of hers. "You know, I almost didn't call you. After what. . . after what we said at the Dairy Queen, I thought you didn't. . ."

She let it hang.

I took her shoulders. The fishing family was moving off toward the other side of the park, and their voices seemed far away. A fish jumped in the still water. I said, "Lee, you don't know how guilty I felt. I felt like I'd abandoned you to be killed." I grimaced. "Maybe I did. Maybe those guys had a string on me in Miami, and were waiting for me when I got off the plane in New Orleans."

I sighed. "I'm sorry, I really am. I watched my six on the way from the airport, but I didn't really have any reason to think I was pulling baggage. I don't know how else they would have found you, though."

Her shoulders were soft in my hands. It felt like I could knead them into anything I wanted. "I don't blame you, Bunny," she said quietly. Her arms came up. Then I was folding her into me, and she was turning to stretch herself across my crossed legs, and we were kissing. Her breath stank of cigarettes.

Finally she eased herself away and sat up. Her bare midriff fluttered. "Well," she said, "this is a nice way to spend a summer day, but it doesn't solve anything."

"I guess you're right," I said. There was a whirring in my head, like a gyro spooling down.

She ran her hands through her hair and lifted it off her shoulders. "I guess I've got to go find another motel room. You think I dare going back to the old one?"

I sat up straight and felt around inside my mouth with my tongue. It didn't feel the same in there. "No, I think you need to get out of motels for a while. You can't be safe having to go out for food all the time. I know a lady who manages some apartment complexes in Kenner. She usually has one or two empties. We have a deal—I pay her a little rent when I need a place for a few days, and she pockets the money."

"How long do you think I'll have. . ."

"Until Mike gets found or gets dead, whichever comes first."

"But that could be weeks!"

I stood up. "Written him off, eh? Yeah, it could be weeks. And the bad thing about being in your position is that getting tortured is the only way you can convince these people that you don't know where Mike is."

"Why is that?"

"No matter what you say at first, they won't believe it. They'll have to put it to you a little to see if you stick to your story."

She shivered in the bright, hot air, then put a hand down and pushed herself up. She brushed dead grass off her shorts.

"Come on," I said, "let's go. I gotta get back to work."

As I walked toward her car, I saw a glint of bright metal on the fender. I bent down. It was the dented rim of a bullet hole, six inches forward of the driver's door.

"What is it?" Lee asked, walking up, "Did somebody hit me?"

"Yeah. With a bullet. Another foot back and it would've got you, too." I walked around to the other side. "Went out here, right behind the light. Just a little sheet-metal damage. Good thing it's a mid-engine car."

She put her finger over the hole. "Bastards."

"You say you saw the gun?"

She straightened. "Just for a split-second."

"What'd it look like?"

"Just a big black gun, that's all. Why?"

"It sure made a nice, neat little hole."

She shrugged and got in her car. I got in mine. She reversed up to my window. I rolled it down.

"Maybe I have written Mike off," she said. "But he wrote himself off a long time ago." She rolled her window up and sat looking ahead. I backed up and drove away. She followed.

I called Rita Heckler on the way. All she had was an unfurnished efficiency in Kenner with a lease starting the middle of next month. We dickered for a while, then I got her to agree to open the place and leave the key inside. She even volunteered to push a rollaway bed in.

The parking lot of the Oak Hill Apartments was a narrow lane between the two buildings of the complex. There weren't any oaks in sight, and the nearest hill was a hundred miles north, but that never stopped a real-estate developer. These were working-class apartments, and the lot was almost empty. The one Rita had for us was on the ground floor. We parked in front and went in.

Lee hugged herself and stared around at the empty room. The refrigerator door was open. A small mound of trash lay in the center of the square of linoleum that defined the kitchen.

"I'll bring you some bedclothes and stuff from my apartment," I said. "Also some cooking things and some food."

"Thanks," she said dully. She went over and sat on the bare mattress.

"Uh, I guess I'll go get those things. I'll knock three-two-two, okay?"

"Yeah."

I set the lock and let myself out. My apartment was only about six blocks away, on the second floor of an eight-plex off West Esplanade. There seemed to be a new family downstairs, but I'd never met the old one, so who knows? I drove past my parking spot, cased the adjacent buildings, and came back. I couldn't find anyone out of place, but the danger was that I didn't know who was in place. I cocked the Model 19 and carried it left-handed under a folded jacket as I went up the steps.

Exhaustion made pools of glue that dragged at my feet. I walked past my window, but could see nothing except the closed drapes. I came back and ran my finger along the door-jamb. The hairs were gone.

Someone had been inside. I sighed, inserted the key into the lock, and got down on my stomach on the balcony. Then I reached up with my left hand and turned the key. I pushed the door open with my shoulder.

The door stayed on its hinges. I got up, dusted myself off, and slid inside, closing the door behind me.

Nothing was changed. The place hadn't been tossed. I moved carefully, looking for monofilament. The kitchen was as cheerless and empty as I had left it. One Budget Gourmet Three-Cheese Lasagna box in the trash.

But closing the bathroom door was careless. There are some men who keep their bathroom doors closed, and some—men who've always lived alone—who don't. My visitor had left the bathroom door closed.

Like a lot of bathroom doors, this one had a hole in the center of the lock where a pin could be inserted to spring the latch in case Junior locked himself in. I straightened out a coat hangar and sprang it from a prone position on the floor. The door swung inward.

There was a very well-made apparatus screwed to the other side of the door, chest-high. It had a three-legged frame made from strap aluminum, with a battered old five-shot revolver lashed to the apex with baling wire. A length of cord was wound around the door handle and went up to an eyescrew in the door, then to the pistol. It went through an eyescrew in the wooden grip and back to the trigger, where it was tied off. The pistol was cocked. It was ready to fire right through the door.

I dismantled the contraption and put the pistol in my pocket. Then I collected bedclothes, towels, kitchenware, and a few toiletries lying abandoned in the bathroom. I put them in a duffle bag and went out. This time I didn't bother with strands of hair in the door.

I drove around until I was sure I was light, then wiped down the pistol and tossed it in a Dumpster. I stopped at a pay phone and called Dr. Sosa in Colombia. It took a double handful of quarters for the first three minutes.

A woman answered, "*Hola?*"

"Dr. Sosa, please?"

She put the phone on hold, than an old man picked up.

“ello?”

“Dr. Sosa, this is Roy Dance in New Orleans. I got your name and number from Mike Peel.”

“From whom?” he said sharply. He spoke English with a faint British accent.

“From Mike Peel. He asked me to send a car to you.”

“I see.”

I waited. He said nothing further.

“Is he there in Cali?”

He hesitated. “I am sorry to inform you, sir, that I do not know Mr. Peel.”

“You didn’t know that he’s sending a car to you?”

“Em, no, I did not.”

“I see. Well, I’m coming down to Colombia tomorrow, and it’s very important that I meet with Mr. Peel.”

“You are coming from New Orleans tomorrow? Very well, then. Perhaps you should come to visit me in my office tomorrow afternoon. Perhaps by then I will have heard from Mr. Peel.”

I had to suppress a chuckle. “That’s a good idea.”

“The plane from New Orleans lands at 12:30, I believe. Shall we say three o’clock? Do you have the address?”

“I have it,” I said. “I’ll see you at three.”

I called American and got booked on the 8:00 a.m. one-stop to Cali. Then I picked up some groceries and drove over to the Oak Hill Apartments. I scanned the area as I drove slowly between the buildings.

There was nobody sitting in his car in the parking lot, and there was nowhere else to pancake, so I pulled into the space in front of the apartment. Lee answered the door like she’d been standing behind it. She took the groceries from me and put them on the kitchen counter. I put the duffle bag down. She looked at my face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just thinking. I look like that when I’m thinking.” I knelt down and unzipped the bag. “Look, you still want me to go to Colombia?”

She knelt beside me. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing, I tell you. Do you or not?”

“Of course I do. Changed your mind?”

I piled the clothes on the bed and started untangling the silverware from the toiletries. “Maybe. You still willing to give me the title to the Porsche? I’ll pay my own expenses on the trip.”

She frowned. “I think you found something out,” she said. “What is it?”

I grinned. “I just talked to Sosa. I’ve got an appointment with him for tomorrow afternoon.”

She pressed her lips together. “I don’t know, Bunny. It might be a trap.”

I laughed. “Of course it’s a trap. That’s why I’m going down. Sosa said he didn’t know Mike, but it’s a sure bet he’s playing cute. Mike’ll probably be waiting for me when I get to Sosa’s.”

She shook her head. “I don’t like it. I never thought Mike was violent, but he’s desperate now. And Colombia is a violent country. He could have you killed.” She put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t go to Colombia, Bunny. It’s not worth it.”

I patted her hand and stood up. “This is how I make my living, baby-doll. Remember that guy at the Mardi Gras Motel?”

She laughed softly. “Yes, I remember him. Okay, Bunny, but please be careful.” She turned and picked up her purse from the bed. She took out the title to the 911 and handed it to me.

I took it and folded it into my pocket. “I’m leaving at seven in the morning. You just sit tight here for a couple of days, and when I get back, I’ll either give ’em Peel or we’ll get you under federal protection. Okay? That’s what I’m doing for the Porsche.”

She came up close. “Let me go with you.”

“No way in hell.”

She looked around with a sheen of panic in her eyes. “I can’t stay here. It’s like a . . . a prison cell. I’ll go crazy.”

“Calm down,” I said. “It’s better than a coffin. You can make it ’til I get back.”

I refolded the towels and took them into the bathroom. “I’m going to take a shower,” I called out. Lee didn’t answer. I closed the door and took off my clothes and stood on my toes to inspect myself in the mirror. I’d looked better. And younger.

I turned the water on as hot as I could stand it and got in. It stung my swollen scalp. I kept myself turned to keep water off the burns on my stomach and finished my shower as quickly as possible. I toweled off gingerly, got dressed, and went back into the room. Lee was putting away the groceries. I kind of liked that. I lay down on the bed and didn’t want to get up. I decided to think for a while.

Lee said. “You going to sleep?”

I looked over. “What? Oh, sorry. Yeah, I’m tired. Mind if I crash for a while? We can go out and get some supper later.”

She came over and sat on the edge of the bed. One hand stroked my cheek. I closed my eyes again. “My little killer rabbit,” she said softly. “My funny Bunny.”

I didn’t say anything. After a while she lay down beside me on the narrow bed. I moved over and put an arm around her. I could feel the press of her nipple against my side. Sleep crept up on me like fog.

The smell of something burning woke me around six. I sat up and smacked my lips. Lee was sitting cross-legged on the floor, smoking a cigarette, using a coffee cup for an ashtray.

“Good morning,” I croaked.

She stubbed out the cigarette and got up. “Feeling any better?”

“Some.”

“Good. Let’s go get something to eat. I didn’t have any lunch.”

I swung my legs over and rubbed my eyes. “I didn’t either.” I put my shoes on and glanced out the window. Kids were playing in the narrow strip of grass between the building and the parking lot. I loaded up with hardware and we went out.

I took her to Ghiardello’s, a toney restaurant near the old Jefferson Downs racetrack. I eased the station wagon in among the Caddies and Lincolns in the parking lot. It was dark, cool, and quiet inside, with tuxedoed waiters moving like ghosts between the tables. Candles guttered in glass globes. We were shown to a table in a dark corner, up against the carpeted wall.

The waiter couldn’t believe I didn’t want to drink anything except water. He suggested wine, beer, tea, Coke, and juice.

Finally he gave up and took Lee's order for a Beck's. I ordered grilled snapper and she had the shrimp in garlic butter.

A waiter spilled a drink at the next table. Lee smiled behind her hand. I said, "You look at home in ritzy restaurants."

"I feel at home. But you look uncomfortable."

"Yeah. Places where I usually eat, you wipe the counter yourself when you sit down." Not exactly true, but it was the role I liked to play.

She crossed her arms and leaned forward. "You're a fascinating little man, Bunny. Kind of like a mongoose. . . small and dangerous and terrible to look at."

I laughed. "I'm not a mongoose. I'm a bunny rabbit."

She smiled, then let it drop. "So what else happened in Miami? Things have been so crazy, you never really told me."

"Well," I said, "it's a long story. Jack's under surveillance, for one thing." I told her about the meeting in Monty Trainor's parking lot, the tail, and the agent's phone conversation.

She picked up her fork and tapped it lightly against the water glass. She held it to her ear. "What does that have to do with Mike?"

"Mike was the one who went out in a boat to meet the ship that brought the coke up from Haiti. I followed Jack onboard the ship in the Miami River. Apparently they're in deep shit because they haven't got anyone else to go out to meet it, and the captain refuses to bring the stuff into Miami. I heard Jack arguing with him. Jack finally said he'd find someone else to go out. I guess they have to meet offshore because the Coast Guard has such a tight net around Florida."

The waiter brought our salads and a rack of dressings. I sprinkled a little bleu cheese over mine. Lee drenched hers in ranch.

"How did Mike get caught?" she asked.

"Don't know. Probably random stop. It was a Customs boat, though, from what Ross told me."

She looked up. "I thought lawyers weren't supposed to talk about their clients."

"Ross is pretty slippery. He wouldn't exactly talk." I told her about the pen-and-paper game.

"And you think Ross is involved?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. He met Jack at a Seven-Eleven after Jack went to the ship. I saw them arguing in the car—probably over the fact that the captain wouldn't bring the stuff up the river." I leaned back. "My guess is that Mike talked plenty to Customs."

She shook her head, shifting a mouthful of lettuce to her cheek to talk. "Mike might've agreed to turn in a bunch of crooked DEA agents, but he wouldn't have rolled over on Jack. I know it."

"You know the old saying, 'Friendship stops at the prison gates.' But in any case they're wired onto Jack big-time. My guess is that they've just clicked onto him, because they're still in the surveillance phase, trying to piece together his connections. It's almost a sure thing Mike fingered him."

"Maybe they were already onto the deal. Maybe that's how Mike got caught."

"Could be."

We ate in silence. She wolfed down the last of her salad and poked around in the remains. I pushed mine away. She took a sip of beer and surveyed the restaurant. It was filling up. Most of the clientele were young professionals in sport clothes and

blow-dried tansures.

The main course arrived. My fish was dry and flaky, the potato overbaked. I ate it anyway. Lee snipped shrimp off their tails with a flash of white teeth.

I leaned forward. "What're you going to do if I can't blackmail Mike into forking over some cash? Find another drug dealer to live off of?"

Her face hardened. "I think you can get down from the pulpit, Bunny. You don't know me that well."

"All right, Lee, I was just asking. You're a smart girl. And you're tough, like me. I can't see you living off other people."

"Isn't that what you do? I mean, what can you show for a day's work? You live off other people's troubles."

"So do lawyers and doctors. At least I don't cause their troubles."

"You don't?"

I dropped my eyes. I couldn't say I didn't. I said, "Drug dealers deal in trouble. You live off their profits."

"So do their lawyers. And the real estate agents who sell them houses. And the grocer who sells them food." Her lips had gone bloodless. "What do you think paid for that Porsche you're so hot for? And what's worse? Being a drug dealer or being a killer?"

That was an easy question, but there was no use answering it. I lifted my hands and let them fall to the tablecloth. "Okay, Lee, let's drop it."

She reached out and put her hands over mine. "I'm sorry, Bunny. The truth is, I've thought a thousand times just what you're saying. I want to do something on my own, I really do. My trouble is, I'm lazy. I didn't plan on becoming a . . . a professional girlfriend for drug dealers, but after I started running with the crowd, it just happened. I never said to myself, 'Now I gotta find another dope smuggler so I won't have to go back to Shoney's.' It's just that the men I'm attracted to are, I don't know, men in danger. Dangerous men."

"Not exactly the same thing," I said. "But, listen, Lee, I care about you. I'd like to see you break out of the rut. I think you can do anything you want."

The waiter reappeared and she ordered coffee. Then she took my hand again. "So why don't you make me your assistant? I'd be a good P. I."

I laughed. "I think you would. You sure showed the right stuff on Airline Highway."

"It's a deal? I could even get a license—I don't have a record or anything. We'd open a real office."

I eased my hands out from under hers. "My life isn't all that great. If I could do something else, if I didn't have the personality I do, I'd be in some other line of work myself. No, I don't think you'd like doing what I do."

She drew her hands back. "Well, we could try it. It doesn't have to be 'til death do us part."

Her coffee arrived, with a little jar of real cream. She spooned sugar into it. Then she lit a cigarette and blew smoke toward the ceiling. She got a happy look on her face.

I drummed my fingernails against the tablecloth. "Lee, did you tell Jack that I'm a dangerous dude?"

Her eyes jerked down to mine. A flush crawled up her neck. "Did he say I did?"

"Not to me. To somebody on the phone. I overheard it."

She dropped her eyes. The cigarette smoked between her fingers. "Yes, I told him that. I didn't want trouble between you. I was trying to tell him not to think he could push you around." She looked at her cigarette like she just remembered she had it. She took a deep drag and blew the smoke straight up.

"Did you know that Jack smokes crack?" I asked.

"No. Does he?"

"Yeah. I saw him and some girl smoking a crack pipe in his apartment."

She rolled the cigarette in her fingers. "I knew he snorted coke. Everybody in Miami does that."

"Do you?"

"What? Use coke? No, I don't take drugs."

I smiled faintly. "You say that after drinking a beer, drinking coffee, and smoking a cigarette?"

"Don't be such a prig. You know what I mean. Illegal drugs."

I didn't say anything. She stubbed the cigarette out. I called for the check, paid it, and went around to pull Lee's chair back. We went out into the sticky night.

The little one-room apartment was cold and bleak. I turned down the airconditioner. Lee sat on the bed. She bounced a little, like she was testing it.

"Well. . ." I said.

She looked up in alarm. "You aren't leaving, are you?"

I jingled my keys in my hand. "I'm still pretty tired. I think I'll make an early night of it."

"Are you going back to your apartment?"

"No, I'll get a motel room somewhere."

She stood up. "Don't do that. Stay with me. I can't stand being here alone."

I gave her a half-smile. "Who gets the bed?"

She looked at it, then at me. "There's room for both of us, if we're friendly enough."

I tensed the muscles of my stomach. Still pretty painful. "I don't know how athletic I can be."

She stood up and pushed into my arms. "Don't worry, Bunny Rabbit, I'll handle the gymnastics."

She unbuttoned my shirt and drew it off my shoulders. She unzipped my pants and let them fall to the floor. I watched as she slipped out of her top and shorts. Her chest was flat-muscled like a swimmer's. She saw me looking at it.

"I know," she said, "I don't have much up top. I hope you don't mind. Some men think it's deformed or something."

"I've never made love to a deformed girl before."

"Asshole. I've never made love to a midget, either." She drew a quick breath. "Oh, Bunny, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"I've been called worse, by uglier women. Besides, I'm the same height as Napoleon—five feet, two-and-a-half inches. And he was supposed to have been a hell of a lover. Let's get in bed."

She pulled back the covers and helped me under, then slipped in beside me.

"Let me handle everything, okay?" she murmured. Her breath still stank of cigarettes.

I lay back. "I'm not proud."

She mounted me like a horse. I had a single clear thought as she rode me off into the sunset: the question was not whether a

bargain had been struck, but who was going to leave the money on the dresser in the morning.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I WOKE MYSELF ABOUT FIVE AND GOT DRESSED in the cold dark room. I left my belt-knife in my bag and went beltless. Lee slept restlessly, legs tangled in the bedspread. I dug in her purse until I found the key to the storage stall. She groaned and muttered something into her pillow. I left a note saying that I would call my answering machine from Colombia, and that she should leave a message on it if anything came up.

It was a cool, wet morning, heavy with fog. The parking lot was slick with condensation, the windows of the station wagon misted over. I wiped them down before leaving. I reached Bay St. Louis at six. The only other person at the storage place was a man loading boxes into a potato-chip truck. He nodded at me as I drove past.

I turned on the overhead light in the stall and closed the door behind me. The 911 still crouched under its cover. I selected a few tools from Peel's Snap-On box and pulled the cover off.

There was nothing hidden under the seats, under the molded trunk liner in front, inside the door panels, or behind the dash. I eased myself out and stood back, looking the car over. To search any further would damage the car and make me late for my flight. I covered the car up, put the tools back, and locked the stall behind me. The potato-chip man was gone.

The New Orleans airport was packed with business travelers. There was a long line of shouting, gesticulating Colombians at the Avianca counter, tugging rope-bound suitcases forward as the line inched along. A couple of Anglo men in light suits were ahead of me.

The girl behind the counter studied my passport and handed me a tourist card to fill out. She didn't like me paying cash for the ticket. I collected it and headed for the gate. As soon as I had passed the security check-point, two men in sport coats stepped forward. One of them held out an arm like a traffic cop. "Excuse me, sir."

I stopped and looked at him. He was a short man, only a few inches taller than me, with a smooth, heavy face and a wide, flat forehead. "Yes?"

He held a badge out and down by his thigh. "U. S. Customs. May we talk to you a moment?"

"Long as you like, as long as I make my flight."

He gave me a thin smile and waved toward one of the unmarked doors that line the corridors of international airports. The other man, taller and older, with an expression of