

PRAISE FOR JERRY JAY CARROLL

“Jerry Jay Carroll’s sequel to his clever debut novel, *Top Dog*, leaves the door open to yet a third book in the series; the ending alone will leave readers begging for more . . . The novel’s best passages—which should not be read late at night—come when Bogey is stalked by rapacious pig-faced assassins. Equally entertaining (at any time of day) is Carroll’s giddy, cynical take on political campaigns.” —*NEW YORK TIMES*

“A stylish, funny combination of parable and moral tale . . . Imaginative, seductively written, and a pleasure to read. *Top Dog* is a first rate entertainment.”
—RICHARD NORTH PATTERSON

“A witty, adult and imaginative fable.” —MARTIN CRUZ SMITH

“If Kafka and Tolkien shared an office on Wall Street, this is the novel they might have written.” —*SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE*

“A captivating romp.” Grade: A —*ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY*

“The Shaggy Dog meets J.R.R. Tolkien in this entertaining debut effort. The premise is wildly silly and metaphorically transparent and has absolutely no right to succeed on any level, but Carroll—through a combination of reasonably swift pacing and gruffly funny internal monologues—pulls it off.”
—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*

“Carroll’s tight, colorful prose proves zesty and absorbing. His characters ring oddly true. And his plot has touches of that Tolkienesque irresistibility, that thing that keeps you up past bedtime turning pages to learn what happens next.” —*SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE*

“I stumbled upon this gem while wandering the shelves of a half-price bookstore. I’m so happy I picked it up. Love finding random awesomeness. Anyway, it is a great adult fairy tale. It’s a light-hearted, comical examination of good and evil ... The main character is very likable and had me laughing out loud several times which is rare for me. —ELISE AT GOODREADS

“*Top Dog* is an excellent example of what great fiction should be: creative, amusing, completely immersive, yet containing the seeds of some very serious ideas. It makes for some wonderful reading, and in the end, is actually quite thought provoking as well. A very intelligent, playful and ultimately serious read. I recommend it to anyone who is looking for something out of the ordinary this summer.” —AMAZON REVIEW

“This is a book that makes you step back and re-evaluate your priorities, while entertaining you at the same time. I enjoyed the mixture of fantasy and “real-world” settings, though the comparison made me wonder which world is in fact the more fantastic. For anyone who enjoys a little off-beat fantasy or even a morality tale, this is a worthwhile read.” —AMAZON REVIEW

“Cleaning up some bookcases, I ran across this novel and its sequel, *Dog Eat Dog*. Am reading through them again, enjoying it just as much as the first time. Yeah, yeah, alternate worlds have been done to death, but being changed into a dog? Not a wolf, not a dragon, a dog. These two books are sheer pleasure, and if you can’t separate that from reading great literature, shame on you ...” —AMAZON REVIEW BY LAO T. SUE

“*Top Dog* is one of those books I keep buying for myself (because I give it to people who never heard of it) and for others. It’s one of the most creative and entertaining books I’ve ever read. In fact, it can be read as pure entertainment so it’s easy to overlook how deftly the writing and plotting are done. It’s a fantasy, sort of, but if you’re not a big fan of fantasy, don’t worry; neither am I. It’s

much more than that. It's a fantasy only in that certain fantastical elements are used to tell the story. No swords and sorcery ... well, some sorcery, but it's really a story about the nature of Good and Evil and the constant battle between Them, and how one not-so-good guy gets roped into having to make a choice." —AMAZON REVIEW BY RICHARD BEST

"Vastly entertaining tale. Very amusing, which is often a rare commodity in the SF/Fantasy genre. I identified with the dog. I enjoyed his ability to communicate with animals and through mental telepathy with the powers that be, but not with the Two Legs. I liked the concert of a human trapped inside an all too real dog's body. I would recommend this to anyone, just not a SF/Fantasy fan." —AMAZON REVIEW

"The writing is witty and original, the hero is certainly not the classic hero type, and the book ends before you realize it, it's that good! Now I'm sorry I haven't bought the second book already ... have to wait till I get it! So—go get *Top Dog*, you're going to love it! —AMAZON REVIEW BY DR. ZOIDBERG

"A roller-coaster ride through an astonishing world. Jerry Jay Carroll effortlessly plants you in the middle of a breathtaking adventure—completely implausible and yet thoroughly believable and engaging, thanks to his gifted writing. It reminded me of the opening moments of the film "The Fugitive"—you begin on the edge of your seat and never get off it through the rest of the book. Michael Crichton's (later) book *Timeline* borrows much of Carroll's theme: an unexpected trip to another era, where brutal reality is confronted and life and death decisions are commonplace. Couldn't put this one down. His sequel *Dog Eat Dog* is even better. *Inhuman Beings*, while written in an entirely different genre, is also outstanding. I say, order everything Carroll's written and take them all on vacation with you. You won't be sorry." —AMAZON REVIEW BY C. BEF

“After reading (and very much enjoying) this author’s book *Inhuman Beings*, I had to go out and find more of his writings. This story, the prequel to his current *Dog Eat Dog*, had me smiling and reading with a sense of glee. The story may be one we’ve heard before, but never quite told with the hero (anti-hero?) having such a unique perspective. And Jerry Jay Carroll is one of the most entertaining storytellers to come along in the past few years.” —AMAZON REVIEW BY EDWARD ALEXANDER GERSTER

“This is a witty book which delighted me from cover to cover. I found myself missing Big and the other characters in the book long after I finished. I’m thrilled Jerry Jay Carroll has come out with a sequel.” —AMAZON REVIEW

“I started reading this in a bookstore, and before I knew it I was three chapters deep. Had to buy it then. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed it, and have loaned it to several friends. Not a single person’s come back and said they didn’t like it.” —AMAZON REVIEW BY DECTRA

“If you’re looking for a fantasy that stands out for its originality, I would recommend *Top Dog*.” —EVELYN C. LEEPER, NEW ENGLAND SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION, INC.

“When I read Jerry Jay Carroll’s genre-blending *Inhuman Beings* earlier this year, he jumped immediately onto my list of favorite new authors. Even so, when I saw that *Dog Eat Dog* was a sequel to *Top Dog*, Carroll’s debut novel, I was doubtful. Could that weird mix of satire and fantasy be pulled off a second time, without seeming stale or self-derivative? Yes, it turns out: *Dog Eat Dog* is every bit as fresh, entertaining and funny as its predecessor.” —VICTORIA STRAUSS

“Wall Street corporate raiders are about the last thing you expect to show up in classic fantasy world. But that’s just the beginning of Jerry Jay Carroll’s

Top Dog, a very clever and urbane take on the hoary old-style fantasy. Yes, it has all the trappings of Tolkien—evil sorcerers, good sorcerers, battles, villages. And yes, I’m probably not going to spoil much of anything if I suggest that good tends to prevail in these types of stories. What Carroll does that’s really different is to ensure that getting there is all the fun. That’s because the voice of William B. (“Bogie”) Ingersoll is such a joy to read and so refreshing to hear.” —RICK KLEFFEL, *THE AGONY COLUMN*, BOOKOTRON.COM

“*Dog Eat Dog*, the sequel to Jerry Jay Carroll’s *Top Dog* manages to be funnier, more topical and just as exciting as its predecessor. While you could probably read it without having read *Top Dog*, let’s just pretend that you’ve done the right thing and read that novel first. *Dog Eat Dog* begins with Bogie back in the world, but not the corporate raider we’ve known from the past. He’s reformed, he takes in stray dogs, has discovered his moral compass and knows where true north lies. But don’t take this to mean that he’s become boring. Bogie is just as scurrilously funny as ever, and no less cunning . . . It’s no matter what genre paradigm is at work in Carroll’s novels anyway. No matter what he’s writing, his wit and crackling prose pretty much overshadow everything else that’s going on. As much as anything else, *Dog Eat Dog* is political satire, one wherein the candidate in the lead is running with the help of Satan himself . . . As ever, Carroll’s prose is what keeps the readers coming back for more. He’s so darn funny and endearing, it’s almost unnerving. He’s no slouch when it comes to wrangling a bang-up plot, either . . . Carroll is a real find, and in these days of the great National Humor Shortage, we need all the laughs we can get.” —RICK KLEFFEL, *THE AGONY COLUMN*, BOOKOTRON.COM

“A thoroughly enjoyable book for those fans of fantasy that have grown up (if not matured). We’re not dealing with high literature, but with a storyline based on a Wall Street type turned into a dog, what do you expect? Still Carroll writes well and has produced a very fluid read, I’m looking forward to reading *Dog Eat Dog*.” —AMAZON.CO UK REVIEW

“This was a good fantasy fable about learning what’s important in life and what’s not. I liked the main character, William Bogart Ingersol, aka “Big the Dog,” even when he recounts his past behavior. I also liked the interactions between “Big” and the creatures and people of the Fair Lands.”
—KRIN5292@LIBRARYTHING

“Although not quite as good as *Top Dog*, this book was still an addictive read. I have become a fan of all of Jerry Jay Carroll’s works (3 so far). Especially interesting (small give away here) ... is when he gets turn into a Chihuahua, not the best dog to be when you want to fight the prince of evil.”
—AMAZON.CO UK REVIEW

“*Inhuman Beings* is published by a science fiction imprint, and doubtless will be marketed as science fiction. Really, however, it’s a genre-blender, a dizzy melding of one of the most cheesy of pulp SF concepts with hardboiled shoot-em-up detective fiction. There is absolutely no reason why it should work, but it does—wonderfully. The narrative moves so fast the reader doesn’t have time to question what’s happening, and Carroll manages to invest even his most impossible situations with a crazily consistent logic. He’s aided by a tight, lean prose style that doesn’t waste a word and yet at times can be surprisingly lyrical, and by a very dry sense of humor, which invests Goodwin’s interior musings with a great deal of charm, and makes him much more interesting and sympathetic than the two-dimensional B-movie character he outwardly resembles.” —VICTORIA STRAUSS

“The author of *Top Dog*—“Wall Street” meets “The Lord of the Rings”—this time blends film noir with an alien conspiracy theory. Again, he spices things up with a flashy manipulation of sarcasm. Goodwin Armstrong is a typical ex-cop/gumshoe, down on his luck. Just when he thought things could any worse, a survivor of a brutal divorce, Security Concerns, a “Private-Eyes-R-Us,” begins to kill his business. His financial situation forces him to take

on a case involving a psychic, Princess Dulay. She believes that aliens have invaded, and are taking over people in the San Francisco area. Also, they are killing psychics because they can sense the aliens' presence. Armstrong takes on the case, and through a long and painful process becomes a believer and fighter for the cause. Carroll manages to take many elements and genres and skillfully blends them into an entertaining plot. Driving his tale is some strong and well-developed characters. Carroll's narrative has the traditional feel of a quest, but with modern dressings. His real strength lies in his ability to create substantial, believable characters that a reader can sink his teeth into. The story elements are not anything new, but he plays them off each other in a clever and invigorating style. Grounding his characters in reality allows him to take the reader deeper into reality. He structures the tale so that it unfolds as memories from Armstrong, whom they are holding in a government type facility. This device allows him to create mystery and build suspense. The result is a fast and fulfilling read. Jerry Jay Carroll is the reigning master of recombinative fiction, a refreshing voice. He not only makes everything old new again, but knows how to plot, develop characters and heat things up."

—AMAZON REVIEW

THE HORROR WRITER



ALSO BY JERRY JAY CARROLL

Top Dog

Dog Eat Dog

Inhuman Beings

A Dog's Life

The Great Liars

The Horror Writer

**THE HORROR
WRITER**



JERRY JAY CARROLL

Swaggering Press

The Horror Writer is a work of fiction:
The premise and plot are the product of the author's imagination.
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This is dedicated to the prize-winning poet Judith Waller Carroll

MAYBE only a horror writer
can understand the universe

CHAPTER ONE

THE OBESE PILOT died of natural causes as Amazonia began to show again below the cloud cover. If he made a sound, it was drowned out by the cockpit noise. The small plane kept flying straight and level.

She was enjoying the scenery, but he brooded on the terrors below. Predators sprang on prey and tore off chunks of living flesh and cracked bones for the marrow. When they left with full bellies, scavengers feasted on the remains. Change perspective and ant hordes jumped into view hurrying to war with another colony. After titanic combat on a tiny scale, the victors swarmed through nurseries to devour the larvae, putting an end to their rivals for good. Snakes wound up rough bark to swallow peeping fledglings in the nest; their larger cousins squeezed the life from wild pigs, sheathing fangs to draw them into the dark chamber of digestive acids. Even the trees were locked in slow-motion death struggles, stealing light from each other and grappling in the soil with their roots, oblivious to the strangling vines stealing up their trunks. Survival of the fittest was everywhere in this green hell, even the air was dangerous; the warmth and humidity were a perfect growing medium for microbes. A minor scratch was all it took, rapid infections followed with fever, pain, delirium and jerking limbs. Insects swarmed over the bodies where they fell, only hair and bones left after a week. Imagining horrors was what Thom Hearn did for a living, but he knew he was beaten by what went on below. It wasn't even close.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Carrie Alexander shouted over the engine roar as the last few grains in the hour glass trickled out for the pilot.

"It's not the word I'd use," Thom Hearn yelled back.

A long, bony man with a beaky nose and a red pompadour warning of a hot temper, he was not picky about words. In his prime he pounded out ten thousand a day, fifteen thousand when the planets were aligned. Back then he wrote seven days a week, fifteen hours a day. The work was full of misspellings,

typos, grammatical errors—he didn't care! All that mattered was getting his chaotic and deranged thoughts down on paper. But not even the most obsessive-compulsive person could keep up that killing pace.

After his first megahits stayed glued to the bestseller list months on end, he assembled a stable of writers with the usual mental health and drinking problems to bat out prequels and sequels based on his originals. These rolled off the presses after getting the inimitable Hearn touch. Dogs smoked pipes and quoted Cicero, malevolent trees burst through bedroom walls and reached with stick fingers for sleeping maidens, buck-toothed demons came up the bathtub drain in glop with a fur of kinky pubic hairs. You never knew what was going to happen next. Men fearful of robbery went about with gold nuggets packed in their noses, claiming this gosh-darned cold just wouldn't go away. A woman too lazy to get out of bed fused with her mattress and spread venereal disease when she humped it out on the streets after welfare was cut off. Even weirder stuff happened in the short story collections. In one, Joseph Mengele got sprung from Hell for a year's sabbatical as a truck driver's hemorrhoid. *Mein Gott, nein*, he cried out piteously. Hearn jacked up the pace in the final drafts, shortened sentences and took out the long words his writers tried to sneak in.

"This rainforest just goes on and on forever," Carrie called from the back. The small plane began to bump and rock and her cowgirl whoop said this was more fun than barrel racing. Hearn asked if she saw an air sickness bag.

"Sorry, none back here."

He looked with sorrow at his dapper new Panama hat, a hand-woven Montecristi bought special for the trip. A thousand clams. He would never get the smell out, not in this climate. Evil omens were coming so fast they needed to take numbers like at a Häagen-Dazs store when it's hot. Not a bad line, he thought. Despite his nausea, he took out his notebook and gold pencil.

The pilot's shoulder nudged Hearn when they hit an air pocket. Then a violent movement of the plane bounced him onto the steering wheel and the jungle far below filled the windshield in a death dive. Hearn was thrown forward into his seat belt harness and stomped the floorboard as if to slam on brakes. When he was a kid, the characters in his collection of vintage comics at these moments cried "*Aieeee!*" or "*Nooooo!*"

"What's happening?" Carrie yelled.

"I think he passed out!"

"Get him off the steering wheel!"

Terror giving him the strength of ten, Hearn hauled the mammoth body back into the seat and she grabbed a handful of his thick Beatles-style mop to hold him in place. Jumbo Joao was his name, fittingly enough. The mildest exertion had brought on sweat that made his shirt cling like a second skin. Blue tattoos of roast chicken, a thick steak and other savory dishes appeared beneath the thin cotton like photographs developing in fixer.

“Pull the wheel back on your side!” she shrieked. He pulled on it with all his might and the plane leveled off and then began to climb so steeply it started to stall. “Not that much!” Her fingers were feeling for Jumbo’s carotid artery. “He’s dead.”

We’re next, Hearn thought.

Ed Herlihy’s staccato voice, the one on the Movietone newsreel reporting the Pearl Harbor attack, started up in his head. *Thom Hearn could be lolling under an umbrella on a white sand beach or lifting his hat to a beautiful woman in a sunny palazzo in Rome. Instead, he will die in that foul jungle below. La fin, as the French say. Il finite in Italian. His best-selling books are published in forty-seven languages.*

“We’ve been in the air three hours,” Carrie said in husky voice, “we can’t be far from the airstrip.”

Hearn looked down at the trees again. The plane was too light to penetrate that thick canopy. Primates would swing into the wreckage when it cooled. After the flesh rotted away, they would wrench bones free for use as tools or to club one another silly. He saw it so clearly.

“We need to get higher to see more,” she said. “See that knob in the middle? No, the next one to the left. Push it forward.” The engine roared louder. “Pull back on the wheel at the same time.” The airplane began to climb. “Trade places,” Carrie ordered. “Backseat driving isn’t going to cut it.”

“You know how to fly?” They would be saved!

“I took lessons, but it was a long time ago. See that button on the wheel? It’s the autopilot.”

He pushed it and struggled out of his seatbelt. The handoff was tricky because it was a tight squeeze over the seats with the pilot’s body threatening to pitch forward again.

“Watch for the airstrip,” she ordered after taking the wheel. “Keep his head back, dammit.”

“Have you ever landed a plane?”

“I can do it better than a dead man.”

Joao used pomade as thick as axle grease and it had a powerful smell from the tropical climate. Hearn dug down to a scalp as warm as a bun fresh from the oven for a firm handhold of sticky hair, fighting against a queasiness that took his mind off the air sickness.

Her head was bent close to the instrument panel. "This looks about the same." She looked at Joao's map with the big X as if marking a pirate treasure. "It's by a river." She banked the plane to one side and then the other. Fifteen minutes later, still pulling on Joao's hair like a Roman charioteer with runaway horses, he spotted the thin scar in the jungle.

"Is that it on the left?" A worm of river bordered the cleared spot.

"That's got to be."

She turned to make an unsteady approach, the wings rocking back and forth, and the sense of impending death closed in on him again. They would undershoot the landing strip or the wheels would ...

"Don't forget the wheels," he said.

"I'll lower them now."

... or the wheels would collapse because they came in too steep and fast and they would cartwheel down the strip in a yellow fireball. He thought time was supposed to slow in situations like this, but instead it was herky-jerky. The strip seemed far off and then it was just ahead. She hadn't buckled her seatbelt and would go through the windshield and die from a hundred cuts, a more merciful ending than waking to see bone splinters jutting through skin and pain that ...

"Hang on," Carrie said as tree tops whipped at the undercarriage.

They hit the ground and bounced. When they came down again, the plane twirled in a ground loop that pinned them to the cabin wall like the Tilt-a-Whirl ride. When it plowed to a stop, Carrie kicked open the door. "Throw me the gear," she shouted from the ground.

The fumes from aviation fuel made him light headed and he barely made it out before the plane went up with a *whoosh*. They retreated from the smell of Joao cooking in his own fat.

"I forgot the flaps," she said in a shaky voice. "I got a new job and had to quit before we got to andings."

"You got us down in one piece," he said unsteadily, "that's all that counts."

CHAPTER TWO

CARRIE'S PLANE WAS late to their rendezvous and she had hopped out while the props still turned and loped with her backpack jumping on a shoulder to the tin shed where Hearn fanned himself alongside Joao.

Hearn was under the impression people in this part of the world had stick arms and legs and swollen bellies, but guessed he got it mixed up with Africa; he didn't follow things that much. Who had time? After they introduced themselves to each other, Joao lifted an arm as thick as a yearling hog to point at clouds like great, gray sacks of moisture. He said something in the local patois that Hearn had given up trying to understand.

"I think he's saying we should hurry," Carrie said.

She was late thirtyish, good looking with cornflower blue eyes and a mass of tawny hair, trim in walking shorts and a blouse with epaulets. A man in corporate life could be as ugly as a box of frogs and nobody cared, but women who climbed the ladder were expected to be fit and attractive. Hearn made a mental note.

Lumbering and gasping from the effort, Joao led them past a sleek two-engine Cessna to a single-engine airplane with enough dents to suggest that it was soldered together from kicked cans; rust where wings met cabin gave an impression of hairy armpits. Hearn had instant misgivings, but Carrie popped into the backseat and Joao heaved himself up on the pilot's side, making the aircraft groan and lean to one side. The seat behind him had been removed to allow room for his great buttocks.

The cabin was no bigger than a closet and felt hot enough to pop corn. Hearn's long feet rested in sandals on balled-up potato chip bags and mummified fruit peels. They bumped to the end of the strip and Joao gunned the engine for the takeoff. It took a worryingly long time to rise from the runway baking in the heat, a pack of skinny dogs chasing after them. When they leveled off, Joao consulted a map with the sigh of a man who carried a heavy cross through life and expected nails at the end of it.

“No go much here,” he had said. “It . . .” He struggled to express himself. “. . . too far.”

Those were his last words, when Hearn thought back on it. Turning from the burning wreckage, he looked at his watch. It seemed a lifetime had passed, but was it just under four hours since they had taken off? “My face hurts,” he said.

“It’s from clinching your jaw. Try and relax it.”

He slapped his cheeks as they stood in the shade of the trees fringing the dirt strip. The blazing sun seemed no farther away than a high fly ball.

“I wonder where the guides are,” Carrie said.

“Time is meaningless to these people,” Hearn said. “I Googled them.”

The website said the Obsobquiesboodelies—the closest English came to their word for themselves—were a tiny folk who wore nose bones and cod-pieces and still used bows and poison arrows; they had been pushed to this remote area thousands of years ago by stronger tribes. They spoke in a rudimentary language of clicks and whistles supplemented by hand gestures. Their culture centered on a root that produced fermented liquor strong enough to roll eyes up into the head and make legs do a jig before hitting the ground. The Obsobquiesboodelies got tanked-up when the moon was full and weren’t sober again for a week. Two botanists who came to collect a secret herb of theirs that worked like magic on hangovers disappeared in the jungle. Some said they got lost, but others blamed the Obsobquiesboodelies: primitive as they were, they were smart enough to want a good price for what mankind craved after too much holiday eggnog. The men took girls as young as eight for wives, replacing them when age began to show in the teen years.

“They’ll see the smoke,” she said. “My God, that sun.”

“I think I might have ruptured myself pulling Jumbo off the wheel.” He had a stiff neck as well, whiplash most likely.

“The sun goes down fast in the tropics,” Carrie said. “We’d better set up camp in case they don’t get here by dark.” Her tent went up quickly while he read assembly instructions with growing ire from a pamphlet printed in six languages. He continually slapped at whining mosquitoes and biting flies. Sweat squeaked in his ear.

Carrie was a big name in hedge funds according to the pleasant young man who had coordinated travel arrangements. “I suppose you’ve heard of the Mooter Fund?”

He hadn’t but said he had. “Why is this place so far away?” Hearn asked.

“It’s totally virgin rain forest. The retreat grounds are must-see for green tourists when we’re not hosting a conference.”

“Why’s it so far away?” Hearn repeated tonelessly.

“We think there is an advantage to its isolation. The team-building process is enhanced without the distractions of the outside world.”

“That pole goes on the other end,” Carrie said now. “Want some help?”

“Thanks, I can manage.”

He got it up at last and inflated his air mattress while she went for firewood. It was beyond stupid getting in that junk heap with wings. Why not say “forget it” when he saw what shape it was in, or put a foot down even before that when he got a look at Joao? It was clear the man could check out at any moment. But he was too macho to show fear in front of an attractive woman, it was as simple as that. What a fool.

“It’s hard to find anything dry enough to burn,” Carrie said bustling back with an armful of wood.

Hearn gazed at the feeble flames when the fire got going. His knee pain and this new abdominal throbbing had merged in a beat that could be danced to.

“Maybe they expected the plane to buzz their village to say we’re here,” Carrie said. She pulled strings of sweaty hair from her face and tucked them behind her ears. Fine lines above the upper lip and the beginnings of a fullness under her chin said she was not as young as she looked at first.

“They’re probably already on the way.” As soon as he said it Hearn knew that wasn’t true. People did the bare minimum in heat and humidity this brutal. The tribe would understand the meaning of the black smoke. They would take their sweet time before moseying around to see what there was to salvage.

“I walked around the perimeter, but I didn’t see any trail,” she said. “Help me look again.”

Ed Herlihy’s voice again: *The overnight trek to the resort, what fun it sounded like; a pleasant ride on the river with colorful native paddlers. And then a leisurely stroll to the resort as you drank in the natural beauty. No mention of the bugs and heat that sapped your strength. No, they didn’t want that getting out, did they? Hearn and the woman discovered a faint trail leading to the river. He kept an eye out for snakes; one was called Two Steps, that being how far you got after its bite. Hearn thought that was probably hooley; more likely it took an hour to die, and by then you were screaming for it.*

What scared him more were the brutes that dropped from trees and looped around their victims, squeezing so hard that eyes popped out. He pictured

the rippling contractions as his body was drawn into the maw. After a few weeks, teeth, bones, belt buckle and whatever else could not be absorbed would get expelled as a turd. The book world highbrows who despised him for his success would roll on the floor. Ashes to ashes, shit to shit: some wag would come up with that and it would go viral. Not speaking ill of the dead wouldn't apply in his case; he was too hated for the normal decencies. His fiction's theme of the struggle between good and evil had fallen out of fashion as they were explained away by new scientific thinking or academic fancies. The glimpses of optimism, let alone his fondness for happy endings, was seen as fuddy-duddy. But the book-buying public liked his work, at least until the last few. The writers who pleaded to do his authorized biography would find a way to work in the shit—to-shit line while pretending to deplore the cruelty of the salon. Parasites and leeches! He saw through them like window glass. The phony smiles, the honeyed words. One even wanted his views on French literary theory, for God's sake. What did he know about that tripe? He kept putting off the would-be Boswells, playing their own game, saying he had to think about it some more. He'd keep that white lie going until he was tits up. Every scrap of his private papers down to dry cleaning receipts was to be burned to ash. He smiled when he pictured their anguish. The pricks would have to write their lies without any help from him.

The path veered back and forth between thick trees and at times was nearly swallowed by the undergrowth that grew so fantastically fast in these hot-house conditions that you could almost see it happening. Then the river came into sight. "Look," she said excitedly, "there's a boat." It was a rubber dinghy snubbed fore and aft to trees.

"We finally catch a break," he said.

Getting away from it all had seemed the right thing to do. New faces and scenery—just what was needed to haul Team Hearn from the doldrums, that and some changes to his writing team. Rot set in from time to time; he was used to it. The writers were thrilled at first to get a decent salary for what they were used to doing for peanuts, but as time passed they resented being bound by the Hearn formula. So many words to a sentence, so many sentences to a paragraph, so many pages a day. They became bored and rebellious. They thought they would have time for their own writing after work, but the bucket dropped down the creative well came up empty; they had been drained dry working on his stuff. After eighteen months or so they began trying to subvert the formulas; Hearn could predict it almost to the

day. The arch-fiend *Gar-eee* became a committed vegan or the clean-cut Ned Bunky, smart as new paint in his crisp Eagle Scout uniform, cooked heroin on a spoon. With so many irons in the fire, he sometimes didn't spot the sabotage until he went over the proofs.

His stuff still sold, but not as well as before. The sales dip came at a bad time and alarm bells were going off. His celebrity lawyer-agent, Sidney Dibble, relaxed and tanned by outdoor recreation Hearn had no time for, was negotiating a new contract with a corporate giant that had wandered into publishing in the ancient past when "synergy" was on everyone's lips.

"There was a boardroom coup because of the profit squeeze and the doddering old crocks were thrown out," he reported to Hearn, "I've seen it coming for years. They've got a new major domo in Zurich up from the chemical division and the bastard's playing hard ball." A story leaked to a business magazine was headlined "Is the Well Running Dry?" The photo showed Hearn raking fingers through his hair as if tearing it out was next. That thick head of hair attached in a single line to a beaky nose was the logo on all his book jackets.

"Let's walk away until they crawl on their knees to beg us back," the pugnacious Dibble had urged. "Maybe it's time to cut our own deal with Amazon." He was short and thick with a bald head that shined as if he polished it after brushing his teeth. "How many manuscripts are on ice?"

Hearn had to think for a minute. The *Highland Park* movies based on his books had four sequels in various stages and a prequel, *The Abominable Seed*, was in the works. His team cranked out a steady stream that included books for children and Ned Bunky adventure stories for teens. In all, fifteen manuscripts were in the vault at the Montgomery Street branch of Wells Fargo. They ranged from the hundred-and-twenty pages standard for a Ned Bunky to a couple of horror novels as thick as loaf pans. One of these brought back the arch-fiend *Gar-eee* from the grave where readers had every reason to believe he had been planted for good. Moviegoers had voted the *Gar-eee* movie franchise scarier than Chuckie and Freddie Krueger put together.

The product line was so ubiquitous that "Hearnist" had evolved from light dismissal to unforgivable insult. "I'm laughing all the way to the bank," he told Charlie Rose when this came up. "I've got the hide of a rhino," he said to Jeffrey Brown on the *News Hour*.

"So it's not as if you have to hit the ground running when they finally get real," Dibble had said in his gravel voice. "Take some time off."

The invitation to the conference on *Patterns of Thinking: a New Consideration* hosted by the Echchols Foundation came in the mail. It described daily seminars presided over by the world's most important people. They included central bankers, CEOs, astrophysicists, monks, rabbis, tech wizards, artists, university presidents, financial bloggers, and heirs to famous fortunes. Photographs in the glossy brochure showed Bill Clinton bending with ear cupped to hear Kofi Anna's whisper, and Mark Zuckerberg and Angela Merkel chatting as Henry Kissinger in his heavy-framed eyeglasses looked on owlishly from his wheelchair.

The river was thick and brown. There it is, Hearn thought, Shit Creek itself. The pestering insects were thicker and hungrier. This must be when the ones active by day were joined by the nocturnal buggers. He slapped and swore.

"Let's see, where are we?" Carrie said as they headed back to their tents. "Oh, yes, I remember that tree."

"They all look alike to me." His neck was killing him.

She moved off waving her arms to keep the bugs off and they got back just before darkness fell like a curtain dropping to end an act. The monkeys and birds shut up and the jungle took on a sinister watchfulness. The knot in his stomach tightened one more notch.

Foundations and nonprofits were always after him, and so were the companies that advertised on cable when the hour was late and rates dropped. He got pitches to narrate infomercials for chainsaws (used often in his fiction), pepper spray, and home security systems. Echchols, he learned, worked to foster international understanding. He flipped through its quarterly journal. The problems discussed at these gatherings, hunger and war and so forth, had been around forever. You could talk until blue in the face and nothing would ever change. But the idea of letting the fields lay fallow for a season had appealed to him. It might cure the problem of dreaming up new ways to kill off characters. His brutes shot and slashed, choked and stabbed, beat and burned. They hung victims in woods, nailed them to walls, threw them off high places and plunged them into vats of acid. They were blown up, consumed by fire, crushed to death, and torn apart by wild animals. Readers didn't like him to repeat himself, but lately he had been stumped. He had never thought of killing off a character by having his pilot die in flight—not bad, really. Some sort of timed poison would do the job. He made a mental note.

Readers loved the heroes that brought his monsters to justice. *Gar-eee* was finally collared by hard-bitten homicide cop Pete Martin working with Emma

Fouchet, beautiful and shapely raven-haired expert on the occult. Gar-eee made his comeback in one of the manuscripts in the bank vault, bringing back Martin and Fouchet from the bed-and-breakfast they bought to get their minds off the dark things they had seen. The children's books (ABC/Disney had a first-look option) were tossed off quickly by Team Hearn, and the typical Ned Bunky adventure rolled out every six months. The books had bigger type and more air between the lines, but fans never complained that they were shortchanged by the Hearn brand that featured its own app and a website that accepted every major credit card and offered bonus points. Something was always about to happen in his fiction or just had. Under a new contract being negotiated, his books would be sold next to the hot dog machines in a nationwide gas-and-grub chain.

"Salesmen kill for that location," Dibble had crowed. "It was between me and the Snappy Tom guy at the end."

"What was he like, the pilot?" Carrie asked, shivering at the dark just beyond the reach of the feeble flames.

"He had sort of sad eyes, what you could see of them over his cheeks."

"Only Americans got that obese before, but the rest of the world is catching up fast." They agreed Joao's death must have been from a stroke that had been coming on for years, that or a massive heart attack. It was their bad luck it caught up to him when it did. "How did he ever get his pilot's license renewed?" She was silent for a moment. "Bribery, I suppose. It's a way of life here."

"Lucky bastard. At least he didn't suffer."

"I wouldn't mind a good, stiff drink," Carrie said, hugging her knees. The campfire smoke hung in the air and kept the insects at bay, although bolder ones zipped past on recon every now and then. Even with the solar furnace gone from the sky the air felt like fever.

"Scotch all right?" He drank a double every night after Team Hearn knocked off work. His four wives had preferred their chardonnay, nattering away and then going cold when he paid no attention because his mind had wandered back to the stories the team was churning out. Could an ice pick be driven through one temple to the other with a ballpeen hammer? Would maniacal laughter lead to a sore throat? There was always a host of these questions to think about. He was surprised when they flounced from the room and more so when they filed for divorce.

"I loathe scotch," Carrie said.

"Good, more for me."

“Maybe just a little.”

He got the Black Label from his backpack and poured two fingers each. She shivered and made a face.

“It’s better with ice,” he said.

“I bet it’s not.”

“Give it back then.”

“I don’t think so.”

She boiled water in a pan with a folding handle and shook in dehydrated noodles from foil packets still in her backpack from hiking in the Alps.

“I never heard of this country before I got the invitation,” Hearn said with gloom.

“It’s a new one,” she said. “The drug lords said the government cost too much, so they split off a piece for themselves.”

“How did you know that?”

“You learn a lot of oddball things in my business.”

“I paid for that whiskey in dollars and they wanted to give me two shopping bags of their currency in return. I said keep the change.”

“Right, terrible inflation. Apart from drugs, the economy is based on ground nuts. Any profits are stolen with guns we sold them to fight the left-wingers, who are now the right-wingers. The fire’s almost gone. We’d better get in our tents or we’ll be eaten alive.”

From habit he studied her as the model for a character. She had a cocky self-assurance he supposed was necessary in the financial racket. She must be a major player because only the *crème de la crème* had been invited, or so he was led to believe. He’d make up his own mind when he saw them. They were to “enrich” one another’s perspective. It was nonsense, of course. Cross-pollination didn’t occur in the real world because these people would have nothing to say to each another. Scientists and theologians, software designers and performance artists, international lawyers and ethicists—it would be a Tower of Babel. Still, it was flattering to be picked after all the mud thrown his way.

Ed Herlihy’s voice cut in. *What was there new to say about anything? Birth, death. Love, hate. War, peace. The ground had been worked to death back from when holy men lived in caves and ate grasshoppers to nowadays when clergymen in turtlenecks and gelled hair stride back and forth on Jumbotron screens. The idea of God satisfied people for millennia, but the modern mind is restless. Science won’t be satisfied until it has the workings of the universe down cold, but evil is more*

interesting to Hearn because it's so in your face every day. Does evil exist because goodness needs an opposite polarity, or is there an even more galling explanation?

An animal screamed, dying a terrible death in the darkness. Survival of the fittest—more of the eternal cycle. The jungle listened for a few beats after the scream, and then furtive rustling started up again.

“I’ve heard of hedge funds,” he said, “but I don’t know how they work.”

His tent, made in some foreign sweatshop, had a strong chemical smell almost certainly damaging to the lungs, but it would keep out the insects and their diseases. The flies, fleas, mosquitoes, ticks and lice and what have you carried malaria, dengue fever, yellow fever, typhus and probably plagues last seen in the Middle Ages. There were microscopic worms that got into the blood stream and made you an invalid for life. He took the insecticide from his pocket and shook it. Nearly full, but how long would it last when you were pouring sweat?

“We’re way smaller than mutual funds, but our investors are bigger,” Carrie was saying. “That gives us more leverage. We invest longer, hold concentrated positions, and even buy illiquid assets. You’re a partner rather than a client. If you’re rich, we make you richer.”

“How rich to get in?”

“Our minimum is ten million.”

“Christ.”

“We can cost you an arm and a leg if we mess up like back in 2008, but we’re losing money right alongside you. Did you bring your boots inside your tent?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Be sure and shake them upside down in the morning. No telling what might make a nest there. There’s something called the Brazilian wandering spider that comes out at night. Its bite is fatal within twenty-five minutes.”

“I’ll bring them in.”

He heard her smack her pillow into shape. “You want the first watch?” he asked.

“What first watch?”

“If something sneaks up we won’t both be sleeping.”

“What could we do about it? Plastic forks and knives are all we’ve got, and we can’t even run for it. Two steps from the tent flaps and we’re lost in the darkness.”

“At least we’d stand a chance if the natives came for us.”

“We say indigenous people today. Why would they do that?”

“All right, I’ll take the first watch,” Hearn said. After a couple of minutes, deep breathing was the only sound from her tent.

His passport, wallet, money, credit cards, smart phone, tablet, checkbook, clothes; everything was gone with his new Panama. There would be no end of trouble straightening things out back home. *If I get back*, he thought. This isn’t Adventure Land with college students in safari gear pretending to be guides.

He waited for Ed Herlihy to pipe up with his gloss on the day’s events. Unpredictable as ever, the star of the Golden Age of Radio was silent. It had started one day without explanation—no high fever, no head injury from a crash, no reason whatever. Medical tests turned up bupkis. Why Ed Herlihy’s voice and not, say, Harry von Zell, also on that compact disc he got for a buck at a thrift shop when he was a pauper dancing on street corners? Someone had slipped it into the case for a Metallica CD, and the clerk wouldn’t take it back. Why an old-time radio announcer in the first place? He played it one lousy time and the voice stuck in his head. Gradually he got used to it like you do a dog barking next door.

“It’s morning,” Carrie called out.

He meant to rest his eyes for only a moment.

She was at the net entrance of his tent. “Did you stand watch?”

“Until an hour or so ago.” His neck felt like it had turned to marble.

“I thought I heard snoring.”

“I don’t snore.” His former wives would have said so. They didn’t leave anything out in the depositions.

“Okay, it was thunder.”

They sat in shade protected from the sun but not the blow-torch heat. Despite the thick hair, his head felt like it would burst into flame in the open. Add that to the pestering insects and who could blame the natives for getting drunk and staying that way as long as they could. He longed for home. Housekeepers, gardeners, a lesbian secretary who also doubled as a personal trainer, and a chef were on the staff. They called themselves Team Hearn and wore T-shirts with that logo at the annual picnic where his writers bet on when he would drift away from the games to his laptop. Women wanted him, or his money anyhow, but his monkish life didn’t allow time for anything more serious now than the occasional one-night stand with a painted hussy.

“How do you do whatever it is you do?” Hearn asked, pouring dirt from one hand to the other just to be doing something. Boredom wasn’t the worst part of this, but it was up there.

“Dozens of phone calls every day while keeping my eye on the Bloomberg screens,” she said. “A crazy number of emails. Meetings—God, the meetings. A lot of flying around to talk to people. I study stacks of quarterly and annual reports and yards of financial publications. I spend hours on the internet every day.”

She had large eyes under strong brows and her nose was a little too large. More striking than beautiful, he thought, correcting the original impression.

“Hedge-fund management is high-energy,” Carrie continued. “The field is filled with fanatically hard-working competitors doing high wire acts before an audience of very fickle clients. Nobody stays hot all the time, but if a cold spell lasts too long investors take their money and run. If a trickle becomes a flood, you close your doors and sell the office furniture. That’s what happened to a lot of us in the mortgage-backed derivatives wring out.” She brushed an ant off her leg. “When I started as a junior executive, hedge funds managed hundreds of millions. Now it’s billions.”

“It’s hard to imagine that much of anything except stars,” he said.

He had read somewhere that the best way to get an idea of the Milky Way was to think of an Olympic-sized swimming pool filled with sand, each grain representing a star. Bad as that was it was just the start. Fill up another pool the same size and each grain of sand in that case would represent a galaxy like the Milky Way *each* with its own billions of stars. Being made to feel small was one thing, but this was ridiculous. He had pushed it out of his mind and not given it another thought until now.

“With this kind of money at risk,” Carrie continued, “the burnout rate is high. People have heart attacks, drink too much, get divorces, go to bed and don’t get up for a week. Some kill themselves.”

“Sounds like a tough business,” Hearn said, not really that interested.

“It is—very. But the money’s nice.”

When it got dark again, they crawled into their tents.

“I know you’re the famous writer,” she said through her tent wall, “but I’m sorry to say I’ve never read any of your books.” That wasn’t quite true. She came across a copy in an airport VIP lounge in Geneva and glanced at a page.

He hung the body from the hook and cut from sternum to groin with his hog-butchering knife. The viscera slid out like a load of sausage down a greased chute . . .

She had quickly closed it.

“You should’ve stuck with it a little longer,” a friend told her later. “You feel ashamed of yourself later, but at the time you can’t put it down.”

“They’re not for everyone,” Hearn said from his tent. “The movies, either. There’s a lot of blood and ...”

Guts. The thought flashed of them sliding down the greased chute.
“... so forth.”

CHAPTER THREE

HEARN JERKED OUT of a sleep crowded with terrifying dreams. In the one just before waking he sloshed through a low-ceilinged cave with a dim lantern held aloft. His feet began to sting and he realized he was in a snake and his shoes were being dissolved by stomach acids. Wonderful, he thought as he sat up, a lifetime before me of serpent-themed nightmares. He pulled on clothes still clammy from yesterday's sweat and crawled outside. The ungodly screech of monkeys and birds had already begun. It was merely warm but the sun was going to take care of that.

"How long do you think we should wait?" he asked as they sipped instant coffee in tin cups. They were from the last foil packet in her backpack.

"I don't think later than nine. The resort's on the river. We're bound to run into it."

"What if they send a helicopter and we're gone?"

"They'll see the boat is missing and look for us on the river."

Ned Bunky would be in his element here. He was just a lad when the series began and would be nearing forty now if Hearn had allowed him to age. Ned was fearless and athletic, a daredevil who could fly an airplane, sail a boat across the Atlantic, and climb Everest as well as any Sherpa. He went through all sorts of training in the books, including a survival school where he lived off country like this with only a pocket knife and a bit of string.

Hearn cleared his throat. "I'm not sure striking off on our own is a good idea."

"Stay if you want," she said, beginning to take down her tent. "I'll tell them you're here."

Hearn watched as she packed. "I don't think we should split up." Christ, alone in the jungle. He'd go off his rocker in a day.

"So come with me then."

"What if we miss the resort?"

His imagination leaped to action stations as mental klaxon horns went off. *Ah-oo-gah, Ah-oo-gah*. The river would continue to narrow and the trees close in until the light was as dim as a nap room for toddlers. When the current finally petered out in thick rushes, they'd be forced to get out into the leech-filled muck and push the boat like Bogart and Hepburn. He pictured it so clearly.

"It'll be a big enough that we won't miss it," Carrie said briskly. "Anyway, it beats starving to death."

"Okay, you sold me." The words were no sooner out of his mouth than he was second-guessing himself. This was the sort of snap decision that put him in Joao's plane in the first place.

They floated downstream wearing haloes of gnats. She had changed to shorts and a tank top in her tent. She must have a personal trainer, he thought, looking down at his belly. I've got to get in better shape.

They didn't speak as they drifted except for Carrie warning against wasting the bottled water they found in the boat. "I wouldn't want to drink from the river." Channels clogged with green and yellow algae branched off into swamps and bogs. "Which one should we take?" she asked.

"The right," he said. "It's bigger and the other's got more scum."

The green walls sliding past sucked up sound like a dead telephone held to the ear. Rotting vegetation was turning to wet slime for thousands of square miles with green shoots rising through it as life regenerated itself inexhaustibly. The muddy goo along the banks shivered and plopped from marsh gas. They saw an enormous yellow and green Anaconda—the snake he feared most. Its blunt head made a V-shaped ripple in the river as it swam. Its broad back looked big enough for hop-sotch. He pictured it rising from the water like the serpents on ancient maps.

"What if it comes after us?"

"Smack it with the paddle," Carrie said. "Give it a good one."

But it disappeared into a tunnel-like waterway.

The croaking of frogs was deafening when they started up as if a conductor had brought down his baton on the Concerto for Amphibians. Yesterday we were somebodies in a connected world, he thought, but today we're nobodies back in the Stone Age. It was further evidence, if any was needed, that life can turn on a dime. The World Trade Center people came to work thinking it was just another day.

Rashes from heat and insect bites broke out on their skin. His perverse

insides, normally stopped up by travel, reversed course. Mortifyingly, they had to keep putting into the bank to allow him to claw his way through the pestilential jungle far enough for decency's sake. Rather than lower his bare bottom within reach of whatever thing waited for this chance of a lifetime, he crouched with his legs shaking from the strain and let fly. He wiped with an oily rag from the boat.

"Don't feel bad," she said in an attempt to ease his humiliation. "You'll get so you'll just hang your rump over the edge of the boat."

"You couldn't be more wrong," he said coldly.

An hour later, Carrie quietly laid her paddle across the gunwales and looked around.

"Do you feel it?" she whispered.

"Feel what?" He was examining a spot between thumb and forefinger that paddling had rubbed raw.

"*Shush!*"

Something was watching them.

The hair rose on the back of his neck. "Quick, out to the middle." They dug to midstream where the sun burned down. "Bad idea, we'll get sun stroke out here," he panted.

"I don't feel it now, do you?" she asked.

"No, it's gone."

He wondered if it was the shy tribal people, but she shook her head. "There was no peeking-from-the-bushes about that. The feeling was so *invasive*."

"Maybe we just imagined it," Hearn said hopefully.

"You know better than that."

She was right. Whatever it was had awakened some cave man sense deep in the brain. They couldn't see the danger, but they *knew* it was there. And then it was gone as if a switch was thrown or a gaze turned elsewhere.

Seething clouds moved in from the west, and then rain roared down and the river boiled from the impact of the heavy drops. Soaked to the skin, they bailed with the tin cups. The downpour ended as quickly as it started, and they returned to the shadow of the banks when the sun burned through the remaining wisps of cloud. The relief from the heat was quickly gone and the jungle steamed. Diamonds blazed from a million raindrops.

In the afternoon he spotted purple fruit growing on the bank. "Think that's edible?" he asked. "I'm famished."

His arms trembled from paddling and his eyes smarted from the sweat

that poured from his brow. They nosed the boat to shore and he pulled one off the bush. He could see his reflection in its polished surface.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” Carrie warned.

She was right, of course. Poison might stop the heart after ten beats, or his air passages would slam shut and he’d turn blue. He tossed it into the river and the water suddenly churned.

“My God!” she said, “What’s that?”

“Something as hungry as me.”

The thrashing subsided and the river resumed its thick, sluggish sewage in-flow look.

“I was starting to think about jumping in to cool off,” she said in a small voice.

“You’ve got to think twice about everything here.”

The hours dragged by and the sun began to sink. “It might be dark when we reach the resort,” she said, “and there’s a chance we’ll miss it. Let’s make camp while we still have the light.”

“The last thing I want is another night in this filthy place.”

“If you have a better idea.” Her voice said she doubted it but was willing to listen.

Hearn didn’t have a better idea; he didn’t have any ideas, period. How could you think in this situation? A pilot dying on you followed by a crash landing was bad enough—he wasn’t recovered from that yet and maybe never would. Then there was all the other stuff including the possibility they might be lost for good. Not to mention that weird feeling they’d got back there.

They found a postage stamp clearing and stepped ashore from the bow rather than put a foot in the river. Sweating had left salt on his skin, and one of his eyes was swelling shut. They pitched tents and built another smoky campfire, crawling into their shelters when it went out.

Hearn was awakened from exhausted sleep by a deep humming.

“Do you hear that?” he said through the tent wall.

“My God, what is it?”

Then the hum was lost in the sound of crackling and splintering. Some vast thing approached in a colossal fanfare of destruction. Its hammer blows made the ground shake. *Thump! THUMP! TH-UUUMP!*

“Maybe it’s the Echchols people,” he said.

“It must be huge.”

Whatever it was, everything in its path was being pulverized.

“I think we’d better get out of here,” she yelled.

“Shit, I dropped my shoe.”

He felt around on the ground as she blundered past. Something moved under his hand. He froze for the fangs. Two steps before dying.

“Come *on!*” Carrie screamed from the boat.

He broke free of his paralyzing fear thanks to the greater fear of being left behind and limped on a shoeless foot to the sound of her voice. They pushed off, digging paddles as hard as they could. Sweat in his eyes after a few strokes, mosquitoes in his mouth that he had to open wide for air. He spat them out and wiped more off his face with the back of his arm as he switched the paddle. Carrie’s breath was coming in shrieks.

“Stop paddling,” she gasped. Everything was being torn apart at the camp site.

“It’s in the river now,” Hearn said.

“Get going!”

His bare foot felt a thrum on the boat bottom, and he sensed the mass of the huge thing wading through the river after them. The paddle seemed to add a pound of lead with each stroke. If they didn’t spot the resort in the darkness, he thought, it’s all over.

“Look!” Carrie cried.

Through the red star-bursts in front of his eyes Hearn saw a torch-lit path. “That’s it,” he said.

They aimed for a landing where old-fashioned gaslight lamps cast pools of light on the water. They lurched from the boat and he tottered after her until the ground rose and he did a face plant.

She bent over him, breathing hard, hands on hips. “It’s gone,” she was saying when things swam back into focus.

CHAPTER FOUR

“**A**ND YOU SAY you heard something loud?” The resort executive had arrived with flowers and something that fell short of a sincere apology. “Very loud,” Hearn said. “I’d say shit-your-pants loud.”

A. O. Clymond was the name on the metal plate attached to expensive blue serge. He was a mole-like man with hooded eyelids and large nostrils. The hand he offered was as soft and unresisting as a rose petal. Hearn sometimes disliked a man or woman on sight and rarely found a reason to change his mind. His eyes narrowed and he lowered his head slightly like a bull considering a charge.

Clymond’s manner said Echchols had been put to a great deal of trouble over this business. As soon as the plane’s wreckage was discovered, he said, a helicopter was sent and people were still beating the bushes. “But you didn’t actually see anything?” he asked a second time.

The way he put it irked Hearn more. “Is your hearing okay?”

“And you say it followed you in the water—that’s the story?”

“That’s the fact. We heard a big splash and a kind of churning sound.”

“There is no heavy equipment in the area, and it seems from your description that a trail would be left from something that size.”

“Without any doubt.”

After they had stumbled into the resort, security people were sent to the river but reported seeing nothing unusual. He and Carrie were treated at the resort clinic for dehydration and innumerable insect bites. Then he was led to a luxurious cabana where he showered, fell between silk sheets and slept like a log.

Clymond made a light throat-clearing sound and Hearn sensed a change in subject was coming. “I’m at a loss to explain it, but a mistake was made.”

Hearn felt the blood rush to his face. This was an old story. “The invitation was supposed to go to Tom without an ‘h’ Hearn, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, the distinguished author of the book on the neural correlate of consciousness.”

People were always mixing them up. Tom Hearn the scientist got mail and telephone calls meant for Thom Hearn the writer and vice versa. He had answered pages for Tom Hearn at airports. “If this is about brain science,” Hearn would interrupt, “you’ve got the wrong man.”

He stomped around the room now, spun on his heel at the far wall and returned in a fury to shake a fist in Clymond’s face. “I could’ve died a hundred different deaths out there. I’m suing you for every cent you’ve got.”

“A lawsuit is not necessary. We will agree to any reasonable restitution you request.”

“I want the fucking shirt off your goddamned back, that’s the reasonable restitution I want. You might as well file for bankruptcy now.”

“I’m sure you’re a fair person, Mr. Hearn.”

“Oh, you’re wrong there, my man. I’m as unfair as they come.”

“Your anger is understandable,” Clymond said, stealing a look at his watch.

“Do you have any idea how screwed you are? I’m not some nobody, some, what-do-you-call-it . . . some doormat you can wipe your feet on.”

“Naturally, you’re our guest while you’re here. I promise you won’t regret your stay among us.”

Hearn stomped around some more, but his mighty anger needed an anvil to pound. Clymond, rocking on his heels with wrists crossed like a funeral director, offered only a fluffy pillow. The breath whistling in Hearn’s beaky nose slowed as he ran out of steam. They stared at one another.

“Ms. Alexander was quite understanding. I just spoke to her on the tennis court.”

“She’s playing tennis already?” Hearn was dumbfounded.

“Yes, with our pro. She is going from there to the golf course; a very active woman it seems.”

Their luggage and its contents would be replaced, of course; if Hearn would please list the items lost. Whatever he needed would be supplied at no cost from the resort shops, which offered only the finest quality merchandise. If he would like to make additional purchases, all major credit cards were honored as were personal checks. Clymond bowed himself out in an Old World way, and Hearn took out his gold pen and jotted down notes for his characters file.

tall, cold, very formal—creepy. v precise. poached egg eyes like they’re about

to close, ape-like upper lip. smirking foreignish head waiter type. sympathetic on surface but doesn't really give a shit

The swelling around his eye was gone so he wouldn't need to wear a glass eye or a pirate's patch for the rest of his life, a fear that had lodged in his mind. Actually, he felt surprisingly good considering all that happened. The pain in his neck and abdomen were gone and, strangely, so was the chronic one in his knee.

The cabana was furnished in a shooting camp style with bamboo furniture and animal skins on the wall and floor. A warrior's skirt of woven fronds had one wall all to itself, and a brass plaque said it was Maori; a huge TV screen covered another wall. Tall windows and French doors led to a veranda with a stunning view to a big lake with white sails far out. Other thatched-roof cabanas, each with its own swimming pool, were scattered across the park-like grounds. A picturesque village built with the same South Pacific paradise touches lay on the near shore. The innervating heat and humidity of the jungle were absent and insects didn't rise in a body licking their chops when he stepped outside.

"Hi, neighbor," a hearty voice called.

A vigorous, stocky man in his fifties in walking shorts, sandals and a yellow polo shirt bounded up the veranda steps with youthful zest. "Dan Fallon," he said, extending a meaty paw. "Venture capitalism. Just get in?" He glowed with health and purpose.

"Last night."

"I've been here four days. Fabulous place, the best resort I've ever seen, and I've seen them all. I'm damned if I know how this has been kept secret. Your trip all right?"

"Actually, it wasn't. Our plane crashed."

"You're joking! Anybody hurt?"

"The pilot died while we were in the air, and we had to land the plane ourselves."

"Gosh sakes," Fallon marveled, "I didn't hear a word about it. Got any more of that coffee? I want to hear the details." Hearn led him to the kitchen and Fallon poured himself a cup from a sleek black and chrome machine. "They've got the best java I've ever tasted," he said.

Hearn explained what had happened, making adjustments here and there to put himself in a better light.

"Lucky you knew something about flying," Fallon said.

“Just enough,” Hearn said. “I was rusty though. She had to tell me to put the wheels down.”

“C’mon, no false humility. I admire a man who stays cool in an emergency. That noise you heard, what do you think it was—a trick of the mind?”

This was more like Clymond. “It was real enough to us.”

“No offense, but you’ve heard of mass hysteria. Why’d you land on the river anyway? They’ve got a runway here big enough for a 707.”

“We were going to hike in.”

“What for?”

“It sounded like a good idea.”

“I came on my Gulfstream. You have to bribe customs—a murderous-looking bunch of bastards—but it’s worth it. Lost all your stuff, I suppose.”

“They’re replacing it.”

“I’ve read all your books. People make fun of me for it, but everybody relaxes in their own way.”

Hearn steeled himself. Readers felt they had a right to pick his plots apart and mock his characters; he had to admit they were just cardboard cutouts, really. They got guff from friends for being low brow and seemed to need to take it out on him. In a joking just-between-us way they pointed out how this book or that could have been better, quite a bit better in fact. Hearn got it. Pointing out the faults was a way of telling the world, “Yes, I read his stuff, but I’m not a complete idiot.” Some volunteered that they read his books on the toilet.

“Oh, you must get it all the time,” Fallon said merrily. “Crap for the unwashed masses and all that, but I don’t give a damn. If your books take my mind off things for an hour, where’s the harm?” Fallon chuckled and shook his head as if admiring how Hearn kept the rip-off going. “I gotta hand it to you, pal.” He drained his cup and stood. “There’s a great crowd for this conference, everybody top notch. You don’t even have to go to the meetings. They’re taped so you catch them later if you’d rather be out on the golf course. But I’m the kind of guy who likes to rub elbows and look in eyes. So you’re here because of a major foul-up.”

“How did you know?” Hearn said.

“I was the one who pointed it out to what’s-his-name, Clymond. He’s a cool customer, but I could tell he was shook up. ‘But how could this happen’ he says more to himself than me, and I saw his point. Like I said, the people at these conferences are high end.”

“Thank you.”

“You know what I mean,” Fallon said, throwing an arm around Hearn’s shoulders and rocking him back and forth in a jollying manner. “C’mon, don’t go all cold and stiff on me. You’re an entertainer, not one of these eggheads or some boring business guy like me. Be proud of it! Well, gotta run.”

You need a hide like bark in this racket, Hearn thought for the millionth time. It wasn’t just the fans who gaily confessed how guilty they felt wasting time on his books. Other authors complained how more worthy work, including their own, got buried in the Hearn avalanches. The phenomenon was a source of wonder and outrage at book industry events and studied in pop culture courses. Nor was it limited to talk. Protestors in animal masks burst into book stores and pushed over displays of his fiction.

When Hearn stepped from the car with Dibble at a bookseller’s festival, they jostled him and pulled his famous hair. They waved signs that depicted him as a hog slobbering over the work of better writers as his own books squirted from a swollen rectum. As police closed in, the mob turned their backs to Hearn and dropped trousers to expose insults inked on bare behinds.

“Trite trash,” one bottom said.

“Witless drivel,” another declared.

“Idiot Savant,” proclaimed a hairy rear that rivaled Joao’s in size.

“You can’t buy this kind of publicity,” Dibble yelled over the din.

Police swung night sticks when scuffling broke out with the festival organizers. Hearn was arrested for his kick to the backside of the Witless Drivel man as he bent to pull up his trousers; he spent four hours in a jail cell without belt or shoelaces. After autographing scruffy copies of his book from the jail’s library for the staff, he put the time to use observing fellow prisoners as characters for his fiction.

It occurred to him later that Dibble tipped off the cops and the news hyenas to what was going to happen. That would explain the videos on network news and his mug shot on *The Smoking Gun* website. And then he wondered if Dibble wasn’t the brains behind the vandals in the first place. Why advertise, he liked to say, when publicity was free. A tabloid ran a story about a trailer park slattern who claimed he was the father of her five kids. Maybe Dibble was behind that, too.

“You have so much and we barely make it on welfare,” her quote said under the photo and headline that said SINGLE MOM ASKS HELP FROM RICH AUTHOR.

“Look at this.” He indignantly passed the tabloid to Dibble. “She doesn’t have any teeth.”

“I know, I know,” the agent said soothingly. “I’ll get the lawyers on it.” Dibble had talked him into putting an old-fashioned steam whistle outside the writer’s wing on his estate. It sounded the start of work, the half-hour lunch served at nominal cost in the commissary to writers and the cleaning staff, and the end of the work day. Dibble had foreseen that this touch, resented as degrading by haughty aesthetes, would be played up in spiteful exposés and memoirs written after they left. “There’s not an editor in the country that would turn down that story,” he coaxed, “they all secretly would like that arrangement. I know what you’re thinking, what do you get out of it? Simple, they keep your name in circulation.”

He didn’t care about “restitution.” The rich were right: after you had enough, a few million or so, money was no longer anything you thought about much. He wanted to see regret and shame and, yes, why not begging for mercy? “I’ve got a wife and family, I can’t afford to lose my job.” He pictured Clymond on his knees, hands clasped in appeal. It would be small return for what he had been through.

He could work very well here, he thought, block out a Ned Bunky in under a week. Young readers didn’t care if characters were thin as long as there was plenty of action and loose ends got tied up on the last page. Give them a zippy pace and a happy ending and they kept coming back for more. The next one on the publishing schedule saw the young hero settle a civil war in the Horn of Africa after bringing both sides to the table on the promise of seeing his conjuring tricks with coins and white doves.

After he showered and dressed in slacks and polo shirt, he was brushing his teeth when a woman’s voice said, “Are you feeling better?” He tensed and looked round. “Who said that?”

“I’m Sarah, the health monitoring system.”

“Where are you?”

“Small cameras and microphones are in seventeen locations in the building.”

“What for?”

“Instruments monitor and record your vital signs and other health indicators.”

“So I’m being watched?”

“Monitored.”

“What’s the difference?”

The voice was cool. "You filled out a health questionnaire."

"What about it?"

"We are monitoring the conditions you listed."

Echchols Foundation had said the information was for insurance purposes, so he had checked boxes and signed a form allowing them to take necessary measures in the unlikely event of his incapacity. "I'm not sure I like the sound of this," he said.

"My voice tone and level were tested and found agreeable."

"I mean the idea of being watched all the time." And another disembodied voice to listen to? No thanks, Ed Herlihy was enough.

There was a knock at the door. Mr. Harrington, a younger version of Clymond, said, "We assume you lost your conference materials, so here are duplicates. There's a session this afternoon on Power Communications, but people will understand if you are absent."

"I'm not in the mood."

"There are social gatherings at the end of the day. This is a list of them."

"I'll think about it. What's this Sarah thing? I don't want cameras watching me all the time."

"Our guests find it a useful precaution, but if you'd like to opt out that is certainly your right."

"Shut the damned thing off."

Privacy was a thing of the past, but who cared? Hearn had read that forty-four percent of the population would not object to body cavity searches at the airport. Trading freedom for security, the old story.

"Did you see the library down below?" Harrington led the way to a climate controlled room with books floor to ceiling.

"It's impressive," Hearn admitted as he looked round.

He browsed through the library after the young man left. Many of the shelves were lined with rare books and first editions. A copy of *De Antiquitate Britannicae Ecclesiae* bore the date 1572. This must be worth a mint, he thought, carefully turning the brittle pages. He took books out at random to inspect them until he came across one behind another as if hidden; Its cheap cover made it seem a poor relation among all these leather-bound treasures. His first thought was it was some wanker's cache of pornography, but it was a handwritten journal. The top of the first page said "Echchols."

"This is one of those unspoiled paradises that you fervently desire will forever remain undiscovered, but of course shall not. First the intrepid, who

eschew the beaten path; then the cognoscenti; followed by the bored rich; and finally the coarse iron mongers and mill owners and their dreadful families. The proprietors in the village now innocently unaware of the charm of this treasure will be tutored in the arts of fleecing visitors. The charming, narrow streets will become choked with carriage traffic and ‘improvements’ made to cobbled lanes to facilitate a greater crush of humanity past shop windows. Thus will innocence be lost and it will become just another insipid destination bereft of charm or originality. At least I will be able to say I knew it before the mobs eradicated its present character. We arrived late after an exciting voyage from upriver with dusky boatmen who brought us to shore. Dark was falling as I strolled these quaint streets. I selected a restaurant with crossed spears on a door that opened into a cozy, candle-lit interior. Rather than more of the native motif, the inside had the dark, heavy-beamed look of the Middle Ages, and I half expected straw on the floor, dogs under tables and a dray horse with his head in at a half-window in the rear. A fat pink-faced host clasped hands to chest and made me feel that my arrival was a most momentous event in his life. A smiling waitress with thick yellow braids and a low-cut peasant’s dress that showed large dugs to considerable advantage took my deerstalker and cane and led the way to a table sturdy enough to support Italian tenors of the dreadnaught class.”

It was clearly the work of a professional writer, and Hearn hesitated. He didn’t read other authors for fear of contaminating his style, but he felt he might relax the rule in this case.

“I suppose I expected plain country fare—roast meat cooked to desiccation with some traditional starch accompaniment and vegetables with every semblance of life ruthlessly boiled out of them. Instead, the variegated dishes I ate were beyond any praise I could bestow. They served silken house-smoked sturgeon with roasted beet salad and osetra caviar, seared scallops atop spinach flavored with garlic, something with which I have hitherto been unfamiliar but greatly enjoyed, and squash blossoms stuffed with oxtail ragout. The exhibition of this repast was as perfect as a painting by an Old Master, and the service flawless with much additional display of the serving woman’s paps; whilst the dessert trolley almost defied description: chocolate truffles, tarts with candied cranberries, gingerbread roulade with caramel and glacéed fruits—I could continue without end. The sophistication of this small bistro, no more than an ordinary pub where from outward appearances one might reasonably expect to find the usual meat pie or joint

of beef, not to mention swinish drunkenness, rivaled any renowned restaurant of my acquaintance. It was all the more remarkable because I was the only patron on the premises.”

Hearn scornfully returned the journal to its hiding place. “To risk immodesty,” the Englishman had written at one point. That was why he avoided other writers. One dose of Henry James and it took days to wring semi-colons out of his work.

That feeling of being watched suddenly swept over him, far stronger than before. And then it was as if his memories were being shuffled like a deck of cards. A scene from infancy—light through the slats of a crib—and then a forgotten quarrel in his thirties with his first wife. “You stupid man!” Maryanne cried with her face contorted with anger. Dozens more flashed through his mind, his near drowning in a lake and a memory of his time as a busker, and then as suddenly the feeling was gone. Carrie had called the sensation on the river “invasive,” and she was right. It was like somebody in hobnail boots walking around in your mind yanking drawers open.

Hearn put a hand to his forehead. It should have been Tom Hearn, the so-called future Nobel laureate, who was afflicted with this case of delayed post-traumatic stress syndrome or whatever it was. His own troubles filled the plate quite nicely, thanks, without taking on someone else’s. He had seen that Hearn on television; he was tall and stork-like with a genius nimbus of hair and obviously had no shortage of ego. He had sent a letter asking that he, Thom, change his name to reduce confusion “in light of our mutual if disparate fame.”

A short time later, the other Hearn arrived at a Chicago scientific conclave to discuss *X-Ray Crystallography: Whither Now?* A man in a donkey mask threw a bucket of runny pig shit in his face and ran off hee-hawing. “A pail of it right in the kisser,” the elated Dibble exclaimed on the telephone. “It’s all over the news. The late-night talk shows want both you guys on their shows, but Mr. Science says he wants to put the incident behind him. What a schmuck. I pitched just you, but the bookers said no soap so I’m working the gossip shows and blogs.”

“That could’ve been me with the pig shit running down my face,” Hearn said. Dibble brushed that away. “A million bucks worth of publicity,” he mourned. “That doesn’t come down the pike every day.”

Hearn walked to the side of the cabana with a window that looked out on the fifteenth hole of an immaculate golf course and drew a few deep breaths

to calm himself. A golfer addressed a ball with his putter on the far end of the green. He kneeled to calculate the path, walked to the hole to deliberate and returned, doing this twice more. Finally, drew the club back and struck, but the ball trickled only half way. The man's enraged cry reached Hearn.

"Son of a *bitch!*"

Dejection as he trudged to the ball. His next stroke sent it zipping past the hole and into the long grass; his rapid, choppy steps after it expressed his barely controlled fury. He stood over the ball again, buns wagging, and then collapsed and lay without moving.

Hearn cupped his hand over his eyes to scan the fairway for anyone who could help the man, but no one was in sight. Familiar as he was with death on the page, the real deal gave him the heebie-jeebies. He never looked when he passed freeway wrecks, and changed the channel when they showed body bags in the aftermath of the slaughter of innocents by crazed young men.

What if mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was needed? Hearn couldn't help it, he was fussy about some things. Apart from the revolting nature of the act, it was possible the man had dropped from a disease that would easily be passed on to him. He saw it so clearly: years of pain before merciful release. He thought about telephoning the resort office. No doubt they would be disgusted; famous author can't be bothered to walk a few steps to see if a man is dead or alive. Word would be carried to the outside world; one more bludgeon for his enemies to bash him with.

When he reluctantly went outside, he was astonished to see the golfer back in the original position. After a brief glance at the far-away pin, he stroked the ball and it rolled swiftly across the green and rattled into the cup. He tore off his cap and did an end zone dance as if thousands cheered.

"Are you all right?" Hearn called.

"Am I all right?" the man repeated. "Did you just see that?"

"I saw you fall down before and wondered . . ."

"Fall down?" He was a squarely built man with a blue jaw and a mean look. His eyes narrowed and his teeth showed in a snarling smile. "What do you mean?"

"Right over there," Hearn said, pointing. "After your first putt."

"Look, pal, I only took one."

"I thought you'd had a heart attack," Hearn said.

"Are you crazy? I was on the green in two and sank it for an eagle."

"I'm just telling you what I saw."

“Don’t try to rain on my parade, asshole.” The man took a step toward him. “I don’t take shit from anybody.”

“Look,” Hearn explained, “I only walked over in case you needed help.”

He wondered if he was one of those tycoons who took over healthy companies and looted them. Security goons escorted shocked workers to the gate weeks or months later, and their jobs went buh-bye to some foreign country. His scan of the bios indicated that many were guests here.

“Get the hell away, you fucking lunatic.” He gripped the club with two hands as if was ready to close the distance and take a swing.

Hearn stalked back to the cabana. No good deed goes unpunished, were there ever truer words? At least he hadn’t been giving the bastard the Kiss of Life when he woke up.

CHAPTER FIVE

CARRIE WAS SURPRISED that she didn't miss the grind that began when the town car picked her up before first light to carry her to her office in the Deutsche Bank building at 66 Wall Street and took her home most nights around ten. She was a multi-tasker totally hooked on adrenaline. She took call after call through the day as she watched the Bloomberg screens and sipped tea with honey for her throat. She skimmed financial reports while chairing meetings.

Into the phone: "The euro is under too much pressure not to come down." To the next two calls she said only "Yes" and "No."

The screen crawl said three OPEC countries had increased their holdings of Treasuries. "We need to shake up our Dubai office," she told the room. "Okay, Freddie, your turn. People are unloading technology and buying ship-builders in Korea. Should we jump in?"

Then an aside to her gofer as Freddie gathered himself: "Call my mother at home and see if her elbow hurts enough to see a doctor. She'll ask for me, but say I can't come to the phone." To the room: "Where did this report come from? It's hooey. Freddie? We're waiting for your pearls of wisdom."

The room cleared out and people filed in for the next meeting. Lunch with an investor, a cocktail party for Fed governors, dinner on personnel matters with a company partner. Her head hit the pillow around midnight.

Carrie was an action junky. "Next," she barked at assistants when she had speed-read one portfolio and was ready for another. A chubby young woman fresh out of Wharton was lean as a greyhound inside of two months. Carrie's philosophy was never let yourself become the captive of events. Beat the competition to the punch and take no prisoners. "Success goes to the quick and nimble," read the inscription on the figurine of the female runner on her desk.

Quick and nimble meant making heavy bets on the new Wall Street darling and getting out just before it hit the wall. Figuring out the upside versus the downside was what separated the men and women from the boys and girls.

“Can you hold them off?” she asked the mercenary who had just dug his cell phone from a pocket.

He and the rest of the security detail on an offshore rig were blazing away at guerrillas firing from circling powerboats. Carrie got his phone number after the first news flash from an Intel source she cultivated for just such occasions.

“Yes,” the mercenary answered, “they are nothing.” Heavy automatic weapons fire stuttered in the background. “Who is this calling?”

“Buy,” Carrie said into the telephone in the other hand. “But spread it around so they don’t know it’s us.”

“You did hear that pirates are attacking one of their rigs even as we speak?” said the cut-glass Oxbridge voice on the other end. “People are unloading until the situation is clarified.”

“Buy,” Carrie repeated in the very firm voice she used when she meant *now*.

“Buy?” the puzzled mercenary said into her other ear. “Buy what?”

“More guns,” Carrie said.

The Mooter Fund earned thirty million and change off that phone call, but could easily have lost twice that much; so it was good she had steady nerves. The following day a helicopter dropped off a case of good champagne at the oil rig so the guys could celebrate in style.

But here she was as languid as a cat with a place in the sun. She suffered no withdrawal symptoms from her frantic pace, no desire to get back into the elbow-digging rat race and breast the tape ahead of the other high achievers for bragging rights.



She had reason for celebration herself today. The tennis pro had taught her how to fix her backhand, the only bad part of her game. If she tightened her grip on the racquet it would correct her tendency to hit too long. And then in the afternoon she drove the ball two hundred yards off the tee at every hole of what was quite the loveliest golf course she had ever seen.

The day began awakening to sunshine pouring through the window and the smell of coffee brought by a silent servant with an obedient smile. Fresh fruit, squeezed juice, and a croissant light as air were on the tray. For a change her dreams weren’t stressful or strange. They had little kids, puppies and kittens bounding across flowered meadows. Disney couldn’t have done better when Walt was alive.

The spectacular setting, the days humming with sport and conference

events, the smorgasbord of brainy speakers saying brilliant things—it was all too wonderful for words. She had never been so relaxed and yet full of energy. Her mind had to stretch to hold all the new ideas.

She was used to being the smartest person in the room, but these men and women were her equals and some had freakishly high IQs. Some had decided life here was as good as it got and planned to make the resort their permanent home. That was fine with Echchols.

It sounded to her like she was gushing like a sorority girl when she talked about the sumptuous cabanas and grounds, the super-efficient staff; the well-ordered days with their lectures and seminars—some conducted on the paddle-wheeler that plied the lake; the astounding restaurants and exquisite shops; the Vegas-style acts that entertained them in the evenings.

Who could have predicted it after that awful start? She had been ready to blow off the conference and fly out the next day, but she had awakened to a glorious day feeling marvelous and it stayed that way. She was playing her best tennis ever and her new golf prowess made her think she had it in her to join the pro-am circuit. Long shots off the tee and dead-eye putts; strong serves and lobs with perfect backspin—it seemed she could do nothing wrong with club or racquet.

The clubhouse had an interesting mix of global movers and shaker she knew to nod to from Davos and Bilderberg. Mirrors she passed confirmed her feeling that she was aglow. She felt marvelous, never better. She shook hands and kissed cheeks. Men respected her for her mind, but she didn't mind if they found her attractive as well.

She spotted her good friend Ueli in the crowd one afternoon and they embraced. "I *knew* you'd be here," Ueli said with a laugh.

She was the leggy blonde Swiss wife of the Swiss billionaire Christophe who went by a single name like a rock star. But unlike most of the skinny beauties on the arms of rich, older men, Ueli had a good brain to go with her bubbling personality.

"I almost didn't make it," Carrie said. She told her about the crash and what followed on the river.

Ueli's green eyes got bigger as the story went on. "I would have died from fright," she said when Carrie finished. "I would have fallen down dead. Full stop, end of story."

"I thought it would bother me more afterward, but I feel really great."

"Isn't it amazing how well you sleep here? I've been having such wonderful dreams."

“Me too!”

“Everybody talks about it. Christoph thinks it’s the air. He wants to buy the whole place. Isn’t that wild?”

Christoph was small and gnomish with a bald head and rimless spectacles; he reminded Carrie of a lawn ornament from Middle Earth. She couldn’t imagine sex with him, but wealth and power were aphrodisiacs for many women.

“Can I come back and visit?” Carrie said. “Pretty please?”

“I’ll tell Christoph he must sell you a cabana so you can live here too.”

“Groan,” Carrie said, “I’m not married to a billionaire; I have a job.”

“For vacations then. I’ll make sure the price is right.” Christoph was so wrapped around her finger he never looked at another woman.

“Count me in even if the price is wrong. The golf course is the best I’ve ever played, and all the facilities are five stars.”

“Christoph says he’ll make a Mafia offer to their board of directors.”

“I wouldn’t sell if I were them.”

“Oh, he always gets his way,” Ueli said laughing. “The first time I saw him, I thought what an unattractive little man no matter how much money he has. That night we were in bed together. He was surprised it took so long.”

The two of them got a table and killed a couple of umbrella drinks while Ueli gossiped about the men at the conference; who were queer, who had eyes that said they weren’t to be trusted, who were too married to be interesting, or so into themselves as to be not worth the bother.

“We’ve got to find you a man,” Ueli said. “Can you honestly think of a better place to look?”

Carrie had to admit she couldn’t. As gene pools went this was the mega jackpot. She had eggs frozen and ready for insemination when the time came for a family. As it never seemed to do, for one reason or another.

“Hermod will know who Christoph should talk to about buying this place,” Ueli said, the idea just occurring to her.

“Who is he?”

“Just the most fantastically good looking and charismatic man in the world. Seriously! He is listed as the program director, but I bet he runs the whole show.”

Ueli described a brainy man as sinewy as a mountain climber who had noble features under a mop of golden curls. He could as easily be in his twenties as his forties. His deep eyes mesmerized and seduced.

“Too good to be true,” Carrie said firmly.

“I’m a little in love with him, and so is every other woman here.” She laughed. “Their husbands don’t know it yet.” She tilted her head playfully. “You told me about your poor pilot, but nothing about the other man.”

“He’s an author.”

“How interesting!”

“I wouldn’t say so, not really. He doesn’t have much to say, and he looks at you like you’re an object he wants to describe accurately.”

“*That’s* not so promising. What’s his name?”

“Thom Hearn.”

“I know that name! He writes bestsellers.”

“Yes, but they’re scary stories. I’ll even take bodice rippers over that.”

“*Der Stern* said he’s the Henry Ford of fiction, and they weren’t being complimentary.”

“How’s he like Ford?” Carrie watched as two men in robes and turbans passed their table. A lot of exotic people were here. She heard there was even a North Korean.

“People write his books like on an assembly line basis. It’s like Legos; this part goes here and that one plugs in there. They say he has up to a dozen writers at a time.”

“Funny, I always thought writing was solitary work.”

“He’s working with Silicon Valley on software so he won’t have to deal with writers anymore.”

“He’s a little on the stubborn side,” Carrie said. “I did notice that. I’ll Google the article.”

“You’ll have to wait until this is over, silly. No contact with the outside world means no internet.”

“I forgot we agreed to live in a vacuum,” Carrie said with a laugh.

“Christoph thinks it’s a good idea, and no one likes his more. He says he thinks more clearly without all the YouTube distractions.”

“They’re not distractions to me, it’s how I work.”

But she had to admit the itch to check her email and Facebook page and surf the net every two minutes seemed to be fading. Amazing. She thought her brain had been rewired like everyone else’s.

“Did you know he was an orphan?”

“It didn’t come up.”

“He had quite a hard life when young.”

“He never said a word about it.”

“Do you expect to see him while you’re here?” She had her sly look.

“Let’s talk about Hermod instead. I hope I don’t lose the power of speech when I gaze into those deep eyes.”

“There’s an idea,” Ueli said. “Why not you and Hermod going off happily ever after?”

“He could probably give you ten reasons why, and I might have a few myself. What kind of name is that?”

“It’s Norse: it means messenger of the gods. The way he talks tells me English is his second language, or third or fourth. Christoph says he has an amazing mind, and he *never* pays compliments. Definitely the man for you.”

“You said every woman here is crazy about him,” Carrie said. “That’s a lot of competition.”

These sisters, the female CEOs and foundation executives in attendance, were a high-powered lot as smart as new paint. If they ever met a glass ceiling, they blasted through with every hair in place. They had commanding airs, were perfectly groomed, and had killer wardrobes to judge from what she’d seen so far. She had spotted cocktail outfits by Valentino, Patou and Lacroix.

“So he’s from Scandinavia?” Carrie asked.

“Christoph can’t place his accent, and he’s been everywhere. All of you hot shots get a one-on-one, but not the poor spouses. Boo hoo.”

“How many women brought their husbands?”

“I don’t know, but I bet the ones who did are sorry now,” Ueli said with a wicked look. “Dinner by candlelight for the lucky few.”

“With my luck,” Carrie said, “it’ll be a handshake after coffee.”

“Oh pooh,” Ueli scoffed. “You’ve broken dozens of hearts.”

“I’m not in your league, sorry to say.”

Ueli had placed in a Miss Universe Contest when she was in her twenties and had gotten even better looking.

“Men think brains are more important than looks these days.”

“Really?” Carrie said dryly.



She had met a lot of men in the money trade. She jetted around the world to look in faces and read body language in people who wanted to sell her on something. They ranged from folksy CEOs with straw hats and thumbs in

suspenders to pony-tailed tycoons in Armani suits who talked in machine-gun bursts of MBA jargon.

“The numbers say something different,” she’d interrupt if her shit detector went ding-a-ling.

She never accepted the figures they threw at her no matter how innocently she batted her eyes. Records were examined with a fine-tooth comb before she gave the green light. The smoother the pitch, the more she looked for hidden danger. Sometimes she hired private detectives to snoop.

Early in her career she had juggled a busy social life with men as driven as she was. Those relationships began well, but flamed out. They turned out to be too self-involved, too arrogant, or too threatened by her. They were hard-faced and were proud of being tough, or wore false smiles and pretended they thought women were really their equals. They drank too much, used too many uppers to stay ahead, or they took the office everywhere with them, even to bed. She sometimes thought people who reached the heights were as specialized as those whales with tusks. Some saw her as a target for merger and acquisition to tap into her brain power. They might be great entrepreneurs or deal makers, but they were stunted in areas important to her. Openness, generosity or empathy—forget it. It was good to have them advising you on your investment portfolio, but you didn’t want them in your life.

A typical case: A glossy-haired, well-tailored merchant banker named Derek Baaker seemed nice enough, and she decided to see if there romantic possibilities. One night after working late they went to dinner at a cozy Italian place where candles guttered in wine bottles. A gypsy violinist with a thick moustache and knotted red bandana on his head moved from table to table. She had a martini and kicked off uncomfortable shoes, ready for some fun. But Derek continued to press her about the new Brazilian infrastructure bond issue. They had coffee after dinner and as he talked the image formed in her mind of a frog with a throat that inflated and deflated as it croaked.

“Do you like music?” she broke in to make it go away.

“Music?” he said, knocked off stride. He thought he had been nailing his bullet points one after another. “What kind?”

“Any kind. Rock, country, techno? Opera?”

Derek turned a spoon in his coffee as he thought. “Barbershop quartets are okay.”

A point lost there. “How about hobbies?”

“What?”

“Do you have one?”

“My hobby is work,” he said.

Carrie guessed that answer got him the job with Bingham-Klienhoffer, but there was no reason to doubt he meant it. So he was down more runs and they were in the late innings. He was handsome, had a nice build and a Princeton background, so she was willing to cut a little more slack.

“Are you reading anything good?”

“Milton Friedman on monetary policy,” he said promptly. “Can’t put it down.”

“I mean for pleasure.”

He chuckled. “I’m afraid I don’t have much time for that.”

“Movies?”

“Come on,” he said with a smile, “we’ve gotten a little off course here.”

“Do you suppose that gypsy knows something we could dance to?”

“I suppose I could ask,” he said reluctantly.

“Only if you want to,” Carrie said sweetly.

He pushed back from the table, squared shoulders and walked to the gypsy. There was a discussion; Derek fished in his pocket for some money, and then more when the man said something sharp.

“He says he can play anything. Um, would you like to dance?”

They quickstepped around the floor to *Ole Dan Tucker*. The gypsy gave her a look of compassion as they passed.

“I was actually in a barbershop quartet when I was at college,” Derek confided.

When they returned to the table, he rubbed his hands briskly. “Well, back to business.”

Smiling, she slipped her shoes back on and signaled for the check. “I’ve had a wonderful time.” The nurse who stayed with her mother would be glad to get off early for a change.

“This is on Bingham-Klienhoffer,” he protested.

“My treat,” she said. “Call me next week. We might be able to do business after I take, you know, a closer look.”

He wasn’t even the worse of the lot, more in the middle of the pack. It was a pack that had thinned now that forty loomed like the guillotine. Some men found wanting earlier were available again after broken marriages. They had more stomach and jowls and less hair except for in their ears.

An anonymous note informed her one day that she was known as the Iron

Maiden among other less polite names. It hurt at first, as it was meant to, but she got over it. At some point, she decided she would have to choose between men and yoga and yoga was still ahead.

Her mother soaked up what little spare time was in her life. Nearly every bone in her body had been broken when she was run down in a Manhattan crosswalk despite an imperious hand raised commanding the rushing traffic to stop.

“Why do you work so hard?” Gabrielle asked in her querulous way no more than a dozen times a week. She really meant was why didn’t Carrie devote more time to her poor mother?

More time, she thought—my whole life wouldn’t be enough.

Gabrielle was always dissatisfied. Her eggs at breakfast were too runny or too hard. It made her physically ill to look at the new wallpaper. She would have to put on her sable if the house got any colder; if Carrie wanted her to catch pneumonia why didn’t she just say so? The Eskimos used to push old people onto ice floes—at least you could admire the honesty. The country had gone to the dogs in so many ways she couldn’t bear to watch the news any more. One minute people were talking calmly and the next shouting at each other. Walter Cronkite had never raised his voice, nor had Chet Huntley or David Brinkley and yet somehow the news got reported. “And that’s the way it was,” Walter said at the end, removing his reading glasses with the heavy black frames and neatly stacking the pages of his script. In a half hour they had given you all the news you cared to know. Now you were bombarded with it all hours of the day and night, every nasty detail rubbed in your face if you let them. Nothing was as good as it used to be. Even the weather didn’t measure up. It was too hot or too cold, too rainy, or why didn’t it ever rain anymore? She had the housekeeper push her wheelchair to the window to monitor the shiftless gardener. If he missed a leaf when he raked, the housekeeper was sent to point it out.

“Have some fun once in a while,” she told Carrie. “I would’ve had even more in my life if I’d known I was going to be run down by a drunk in my seventies. It wouldn’t hurt to bring a man home once in a while. Surely, you know some.” Typical, that dig. “I’m a woman who likes a man around. I’m not one of those uptight women against smoking if that’s what he likes to do.”

“I don’t do anything but work, Mother,” Carrie said. “And I don’t know anyone who smokes.”

“Work on having fun if that’s the only way you can get it done.” And then

a quick switch to the trembling voice of martyrdom: “I suppose I’m wasting what little breath I still have.”

She had been a dark-haired beauty when young, and was as cruel as a cat with men. One killed himself and another entered the monastic life. She’d had four husbands and who knew how many lovers—Carrie guessed at least a dozen. They were part of the family and football or baseball was on TV, and then they were suddenly gone. The house seemed sad for a long time.

“I won’t be mistreated by any man,” Gabrielle told her after one of those vanishing acts. “I won’t allow it.” She flounced her hair in the mirror. Men were unfeeling brutes. “He never thinks of me.” Or they were too weak and clinging. “If I go to lunch with the girls he thinks I’m sleeping with another man.”

Carrie believed that surmise was not badly off the mark. Her mother had lived for the hunt. After she had plundered another woman’s marriage, she lost interest in the prize she worked so hard to gain.

“You can have him back,” Carrie heard her tell some poor soul on the telephone going on in tears about her fatherless children. “I had no idea he was so boring.” Dwayne was his name and he and his things departed in a taxicab that afternoon.

Carrie grew up thinking if men were that temporary, it didn’t make sense to give your heart to just any charmer with a nice smile. Her father had generated two other families, giving her a host of half-brothers and half-sisters she didn’t like. Dad was always affable when they met, as if she was someone he had rather liked at one time and always meant to get back to. She was used to thinking of herself as solitary but not lonely, but was beginning to wonder who was kidding whom.



When she got back to her cabana the message machine was blinking. Hearn’s voice: “Do you mind if I drop by for a minute? There’s something I want to talk to you about.” A pause, and then, irritably, as if she’d tried to brush him off with some lame excuse. “Look, I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

She had just finished freshening her makeup when there was a knock at the door. Hearn pushed past her, as tense as back in the jungle.

“You know that feeling we had on the river that we were being watched?”

“Honestly, it would be hard to forget, wouldn’t it?”

“I had it again, but worse. Swear to God, it was like somebody pawing through my mind.”

“You better sit down. Can I get you a drink?”

“Black Label if you’ve got it.”

The bar had everything. There was even a ladder on wheels for the higher shelves like in a private library. She counted sixteen other scotches in the inventory.

“Aren’t you having one?” he asked.

“I just came from having drinks with a friend. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Hearn related the feeling of being watched again and memories flashing through his mind like the montage of the year’s movies on Oscar night.

“If you’re wondering if I’ve had another one,” she said, “the answer is no, thank God.”

That scene on the river already seemed a year ago, and she felt a flicker of resentment at being reminded of it. Hold on, she thought, *that’s* strange. How could she have talked so calmly to Ueli?

“Something else happened,” Hearn said. “I was watching a golfer line up a long putt, which he misses badly. When he’s ready for his second one, he suddenly falls to the ground. I go to help and suddenly he’s back at the exact spot where I saw him first, and this time he makes the putt and goes into this dance.”

“Anybody with him?”

“He was alone.”

“I sometimes cheat myself when it’s just me.”

“There wasn’t enough time to get back where he was. I lose sight of him for maybe half a minute while I’m coming outdoors and—*Bam!*—he’s lining up the putt again.” He took a long swallow. “And don’t forget he fell down like he was dead.”

“Did you talk to him?” she asked.

“Yes, to ask if he was all right. He’s celebrating like he just won the U.S. Open. Then we get into it over how many putts he took. He says one and I say two because I saw it with my own eyes, and he threatens to clock me with his putter. At this point I just walk away.”

Carrie thought as he crunched ice annoyingly.

“If I hadn’t been with you on that trek through the jungle, I would’ve said you imagined it.”

“That’s why I wanted to talk. I knew you’d get it. Things have been weird ever since I got involved with these people. It turns out they didn’t mean to invite me in the first place. There’s a scientist with the same name. He’s the one they wanted.”

“How infuriating.”

“You’ll be called as a witness in the lawsuit I’m going to file, just so you know. I’m going to ask for a hundred million in damages. They want to pay me off on the quiet—‘restitution’ they call it—but I want a shit storm of bad publicity to rain down. People will think twice before they agree to come to these things.”

He put his glass down and walked round the room to work off his anger. His tall pompadour tilted like a pagoda in an earthquake each time he turned.

“I’m wondering why I’m so calm about it,” Carrie said.

“It didn’t happen to you, that’s why.”

“No, I mean what we went through. It was like it was a long time ago until you walked in. Is it because this place is so nice. Maybe they put something in the water so you chill out.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. Did you know you’re under constant surveillance? There are cameras everywhere. Supposedly they’re monitoring health problems on the questionnaire we filled out.”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

He calmed down talking to her, but she had a feeling he wasn’t telling her everything. After he left, she drew a warm bath and was about to get in when a voice said, “For optimal results, the water should be two degrees warmer.”

“Thank you, Sarah.”

“How is your tennis elbow?” Sarah asked.

“Surprisingly good for the workout it got today.”

“There is ibuprofen in the bathroom medicine cabinet. Do you need anything else?”

“No, thank you.”

She dozed on an inflatable pillow. The charge of anxiety from Hearn that had rubbed off slowly went away as she surrendered to the calming bath. That extra two degrees of warmth in the water made it perfect.

When got back to the cabana, Hearn realized he hadn’t told Carrie about the journal he found downstairs. This mental battering was too much. He remembered an abandoned old wharf he saw on the Oregon coast. It’s pilings were just about rotted out and it looked like the next big storm would finish it off. It wasn’t a bad line to describe his own condition. Still hanging in there but for how much longer?

CHAPTER SIX

“I’M GOING ON a run down by the lake this morning,” Ueli said over the telephone. “What are you doing?”

“Tennis before lunch,” Carrie said, “golf this afternoon.” She was in a foursome that included a theoretical physicist, a Napa Valley winemaker and an English soccer star.

“Tennis in the morning and golf in the afternoon. You’re in a rut.”

“Can you think of a nicer one?”

“And tonight?” There were four social events on the events calendar.

“The barbecue on the green.”

“Christoph wants to see the movie. He heard from that woman who runs the Hollywood studio that it’s the best film ever made. *The best!* Do you know how many movies she must have seen in her career? It begins in Napoleon’s time and ends in modern Washington, DC. It’s about power and how people will do anything to get it and keep it. Scores of great actors, not one of which she recognized. But it’s six hours with two intermissions! I’m not sure I can sit still that long. Beresford’s her name, Natalie Beresford. Is it Universal or Paramount that she runs? Doesn’t matter. She told Christoph she’s never heard of the director or anybody else on the production side, but right from the beginning you surrender totally to the story. It’s like total immersion.”

“That’s funny,” Carrie said. “Everybody knows everybody else in Hollywood.” Her hedge fund had once invested in a slate of films by First Line, losing enough to swear off that crapshoot for good.

“Oh! I didn’t tell you what Christoph said about what happened to you on the river. That feeling you were being looked at?”

“More than just looked at,” Carrie said.

“He said the same thing happened to him!”

“That makes three of us.”

“I wish it would happen to me,” Ueli said plaintively.

“Trust me, you don’t.”

“Where is your writer friend keeping himself? I once saw him walking, but that’s all. Christoph said he’s read his books in the French and Italian editions. He says they’re trashy, but that means he likes them. What do you think that feeling was? Christoph thought he was having a stroke.”

“I don’t have any idea, really.”

“Maybe it’s voodoo!”

“Don’t you need drums and candles and somebody bites off a chicken’s head?”

“You’re being disgusting. Let’s have a drink after the barbecue. You’re *not* just going to go home and go to bed?” Ueli sounded like that would make the top ten of the most impossible things she’d ever heard of.

Carrie laughed. “I could very easily get addicted to early evenings, thank you very much.”

“There’s a man I have my eye on for you, a single man and the Indiana Jones type according to his bio. That Italian place on the square is simply fabulous. You want to meet there?”

Indiana Jones turned out to be a rumpled egg-shaped anthropologist with shoelaces that came loose and dragged until he stooped ponderously to retie them. He had dandruff on his shoulders and a pendulous lower lip that glistened. Milton Waverly had devoted twenty-five years to the study of similarities between the Mayan feathered snake god Quetzalcoatl and Isis, usually, as he said, portrayed by ancient Egyptians as a serpent with wings or feathers. The lecture he gave, sounding through the later part like he should pause to give his throat a clearing, was so dry it could have been published in an academic journal without changing a word. Carrie thought she even detected footnotes in the way his voice changed emphasis.

“So there’s a connection between the two civilizations?” she asked when he lifted his eyebrows at them to indicate he was finished. “Oh, dear me,” Waverly said, “I don’t know that I’d want to take that leap without further evidence.”

“You couldn’t even guess?”

“No, no, no.” Waverly threw his hands up in what seemed to be authentic horror.

“My heavens,” Carrie said with a glance at her watch, “is it really that late? I must fly.” She gave Ueli the evil eye. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Don’t you want to hear about the movie?” Ueli asked. “It was everything they said it was.” Christophe sauntered off saying he wanted to think about

it. “I have some thoughts on that subject,” Waverly said, clearing his voice at last. “I made some notes.” He was reaching in a pocket for them as Carrie waggled her fingers in goodbye.

Humming along in the golf cart back to the cabana, Carrie thought about the film. It just wasn’t possible for the head of a Hollywood studio not to pick up some hint about a project so huge and fantastically good. The industry was powered by envy, gossip, back-stabbing and hot air. Nothing stayed secret for long.

She looked up Natalie Beresford in the resort directory when she got back to the cabana. “Hello?” she said into the receiver. “Is this Natalie?”

“This is Natalie.”

“I’m not disturbing you, am I? Is this a good time for you?”

“As good as any.”

Her voice was careful and measured; the voice of a woman who had learned to say no without making enemies. The photo in the directory showed an attractive middle-aged woman in a severe suit that said she meant business and Hermes scarf that said there was another side.

Carrie gave her name and briefly explained her background.

“I’m looking you up as you’re talking. Okay, here you are. Mm. You run a hedge fund. That’s interesting. What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to ask you about that movie they’re showing here.”

“My God, it’s all I’ve thought about.” Carefulness was suddenly thrown to the wind. “It’s driving me crazy! Have you seen it?”

“No, but friends have. They said . . .”

“It’s the greatest movie ever made, there’s no question about it; nothing has ever come close. You’re unbelievably involved from beginning to end. You’re happy, you’re sad, and every emotion in between. It’s just six hours . . .”

Just, Carrie thought.

“... but it feels like a lifetime crammed with events and seems to pass in no time at all even with the intermissions. There are births, deaths, love and hate, sacrifice and betrayal, history and modern times, scores of characters—oh, it has everything! They used thousands of extras in the war scenes, real people not CGI. The budget must have been fantastic.”

“But you didn’t recognize the names of anybody involved, that’s what I was told. I was wondering how that’s possible, somebody as well connected as you.”

“That’s what’s driving me nuts,” Natalie said, her voice rising. “The writer, director, producer, cinematographer, the *actors*, for God’s sake. There wasn’t a

face I knew or a name I ever heard of. Not one! There were at least six Oscar-winning performances by nobodies who should be big stars.”

“So it’s impossible,” Carrie said.

“Well, obviously it’s not because there it was, up on the screen. It’s just that I can’t explain it.”

“I’m going to say something weird.”

There was silence on the other end. Then, cautiously, “Go ahead.”

“A lot of strange things are happening, and I’m wondering if it has something to do with this place.” She told her about the crash and what happened on the river. Also the mind-looting episodes.

“It’s funny you should describe it that way,” Natalie said, “because it’s exactly what I thought at the time; I was afraid something was seriously wrong. They checked me out at the clinic, but couldn’t find anything.”

“It happened to two other men I know about, and who knows how many more? We need to talk,” Carrie said.

“There’s something else,” Natalie said hesitantly. “I would never have mentioned it except for your call.”

“What is it?”

“At the screening I sat where a woman in the audience was in my line of sight. I knew her a little, we had spoken once or twice. We were all into the movie, but she kicked it up a notch—several notches. Crying, laughing, and wringing her hands, rocking back and forth. It seemed what was on the screen was realer than life to her, more intense and profound. Okay, you’re saying she was a real movie fan, but it was more than that. She didn’t come back after the first intermission, which I thought was strange. And then fifteen minutes later there she was, *on the screen*.”

“She went up on the stage?” Carrie asked.

“No, she was *in the movie*! She was wearing gingham and a bonnet in a Conestoga wagon whipping up a team of horses as the Sioux chased them across the prairie. Then the wagon overturned and she and the children were thrown out with the body of her husband, who had been killed by an Indian arrow. I was speechless, dumbfounded. I saw her again an hour later. She was Roosevelt’s mistress come to visit him in Warm Springs just in time for his stroke. It was her, I was positive. She gave me such a look of appeal from the screen as if I could help her with the president. There is no doubt in my mind whatsoever it was her, none.”

“Are you busy now?” Carrie said. “I could come right over.”

A pause. "I'm expecting someone."

Something in her voice said it was a man.

"Oh, in that case maybe tomorrow."

"Yes, I have to talk to someone about this. Let's meet at the clubhouse for breakfast."



Ed Herlihy's voice came to Hearn as he walked on a trail: *The resort was bigger than he thought. The cabanas were connected by flowered paths and stretched along the near shore as far as he could see. A nice breeze from the lake. A little bit of paradise you might say. Hearn had laid low licking his wounds, more shaken than he let on even to himself.*

Boats up to a sixty-foot ketch were available for guests at the resort marina. Hearn took a small sloop out on the lake, enjoying the breeze and the sun on his back. He kept a boat in Sausalito that sailed stiffer than this sleek beauty. The lake was large, perhaps five miles from end to end, and was dotted with small islands green and lush. The first few were rockbound, but the next had a pretty cove with a beach like refined sugar.

Ed Herlihy: *He tied up to a red buoy and swam to shore and lay with his T-shirt wadded up as a pillow, lulled by the lazy slap of waves. His workaholicism was lifting like a drug leaving the system. What was the point of his unremitting labor? In twenty-five years no one would read his books, if anybody still read at all. They would be long gone, even from ratty second-hand stores if they were still around. Why shovel more words into the furnace of days? He had never really thought about it like that. If you were a writer, spirits fell as soon as you stepped into a bookstore. Thousands of books were on the shelves, a tiny fraction of those published in the past. And what about the new ones flying off the presses or zip-ping through the internet every day? Three million a year somebody told him, and the pace was picking up as more people believed they had a book in them—and maybe more than one when they thought about it. "Furnace of days"—not a bad line by the way, but not for him; focus groups showed his readers didn't like prose with a pinky finger lifted. They wanted hooks and haymakers to the jaw. Short words, short sentences and short paragraphs. And they didn't have all day so he had to keep things moving.*

"Sir, I don't think you should be sleeping in this sun."

He thought he was dreaming.

"Sir?" A soft toe touched his side. "You'll get a terrible burn." A woman

stood over him so small and perfect that he absurdly thought she was a fairy or lake sprite. “The sun is not a friend to people with red hair.”

Hearn scrambled to his feet and loomed over her like an NBA center. She had wheat-colored hair and green eyes and wore a beach cover-up and sandals. Her makeshift sun hat was woven from lacy ferns and blue flowers. His mind automatically reached for a cliché. Cute as a bug. The phrase appeared often in his books.

“Hi,” she said gazing up at him with a smile, “I’m Ariel.”

“My name’s Hearn.” He looked up and down the beach. “You’re alone?” It seemed wrong that someone as small should be unprotected.

“I had friends drop me off for the day. The Abimnolas. He’s with the United Nations, and she’s Swedish and works for the Green Project. They wanted to see the eastern shore, but this island called to me.”

“I don’t know them.”

“There are so many people it’s impossible to meet them all.”

“So they’re coming back for you?”

“Yes.”

Smiling still, she seemed to wait for him to say something.

“This is a pretty nice place.” Lame. He was reminded again that he needed to work on his small talk.

“Yes,” she said, looking round, “there were people here long ago.”

“You found some ruins?”

“No, I just . . .” She gave a little shrug. “. . . know.”

“It seems too small.”

“Oh, they didn’t live here. This was a holy place they came to at special times.”

“You picked up on this just since your friends dropped you off? Pretty fast work.”

“Their happiness imprinted the island.”

It was preposterous and he was about to say so, yet the island did seem to have a kind of serenity.

“What do you do?” she asked.

“I’m an author.”

“I think books are wonderful,” she said. “What kind do you write?”

Hearn gave himself a promotion. “Thrillers.” Good usually conquered evil in the end, but not always or entirely. His stuff was too sordid for her. “You wouldn’t like them.”

"I bet they're really good."

"You might like my books for children."

"You write for children?" she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "You must be a very nice man."

"I don't know about that," he said.

She took his hand. "I'm sure of it. People who write for the little ones are very special."

"There's good money in it," he said gruffly.

"Would you like to see rest of the island?"

"Sure."

They walked on the white beach, Hearn feeling self-conscious about holding hands. The island was only a few acres, the size of a small suburban park. They climbed a faint trail that meandered through trees and undergrowth, rising steadily toward the middle of the island. In the green and gold light he had the feeling she might fade away if he let go of her hand.

"You don't feel them, the people who were here?" she asked.

"No, I don't. Sorry."

"A little farther and the view will take your breath away."

They stepped from the trees into a natural clearing on the crown of the island. The 360-degree view was just as she promised. Green jungle ran down to the beach and the turquoise water that darkened farther out where it was deeper.

"Spectacular," Hearn said, looking down at her. "I must have skipped over your paragraph in the bios."

"I don't really know how they even knew I was alive."

"Come on," he said, "don't be modest. Everybody here ..."

"I suppose I do have an unusual ability."

He asked what it was.

"Mental."

"You're clairvoyant or psychic or something?"

"That too." Her quick glance searched his face. "You were badly treated as a child."

Startled, Hearn said nothing.

"It's okay if you don't want to say."

"It's just—how do you know that?"

"I feel it like I feel those who were here before. Your father was a bad man, wasn't he?"

“Wow, where’d they find you?”

“A bunch of us live in the San Juan Islands. We grow organic food and sell it at farmers markets.”

“Us?”

“People like me. Mostly women. The money they gave me will keep our little group together a long time. I’ll miss them.”

“That sounds like you aren’t going back when this is over.”

“I think Echchols has other plans.” She was silent again, and then burst out, “I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

“Whoa,” Hearn said, bending to look in her eyes. There was no mistaking the fear in them. “What’s this all about?”

“I didn’t know it would be like this. It’s so different and strange.”

“I know what you mean about strange.” He told her what had happened on the river, but not the mind invasion part because he didn’t want to get her more scared.

“There are forces and presences here we don’t understand. And the people who run Echchols — they’re just blanks to me. I can’t get a sense of any of them. It’s like they don’t have inner lives.”

Hearn thought of Clymond. “Maybe because they’re zeroes.”

“You don’t understand!” She pulled her hand from his. “It’s because I’m small. People act like that all the time. I’m twenty-eight, not a child.”

“Sorry, I was thinking of the manager. Maybe you’ve met him. His name is Clymond; a real cold fish.”

“But they’re all like that! Haven’t you noticed?”

Hearn admitted that he hadn’t.

“They come and go like ghosts.”

She folded her arms and looked out over the lake. “When I felt this island calling to me, I wondered if the ones who went before were saying they’d hide me.”

“Hide you from what?”

Her tiny face turned up toward him. “I don’t know, but I have such a feeling of dread.”

“Aren’t we letting our imaginations run a little wild?” he said gently.

“Some scientists studied me because of stories about my mental powers. My right brain is way overdeveloped because, they said, of left-hemisphere dysfunction. They thought that might explain how I could tell the next card in the deck and stuff like that. They wanted to know if I was dropped on my

head when I was a baby. How would I even know that? So if my imagination is running wild, I couldn't stop it if I wanted."

"But you didn't see any of this coming?"

"It's not like I can turn it on like a light switch."

"Then how do you know about plans for you?"

"I just have a feeling, that's all. I know you'd like to help me, but you can't."

"I've got a little money and ..."

"It's a lot," she broke in.

"Okay, a lot; and I'm not exactly unknown."

"You're not vain or boastful, so you must be important."

"Wait a minute," he said, trying to lighten things up. "I might be the world's biggest liar for all you know."

"No, I'd know."

"But how ..."

"How did I know about your father?" Her look begged for understanding.

"If Echchols has some sort of plan for you, maybe it's a good one."

"Maybe." She obviously didn't believe it.

"Why bring you all this way for something bad?"

"Maybe I'm an experiment. Maybe you are too."

"I'm here by mistake." He explained the screw up.

"Maybe it only looks like a mistake, but it was planned all along."

That put him back on his heels. "Do you sometimes have the feeling something is trying to get into your mind?"

"Did it succeed?"

"I'd have to say so. A lot of old memories got churned up."

"I didn't let it get into my mind." She put her fists to her temples and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. "But it was so hard to fight off I got a bad headache."

"Look, you can depend on me if there's trouble."

"You're going to have your own trouble; there won't be time to think of me." She touched his arm. "Please don't be offended, but I need to be alone now."

"Can I give you a lift back to the marina?"

"No, thanks."

"I'd like to be your friend."

Ariel's smiled. "Oh, you already are."

Turning several times to wave, Hearn walked back to the beach and swam out to the boat. As he sailed off the thought struck him that maybe Ariel had

gone off her meds. Long-vanished people offering refuge from forces and presences? That was locked-ward talk. But how was it weirder than what was going on with him?

CHAPTER SEVEN

EVIL, THE THEME of his work, came up in his early sessions with wizened Israel Kossman, a tiny, age-spotted psychiatrist in his eighties who had seen it all.

“Where’s it coming from, you think—childhood? That goes without saying for most of the people who walk through that door. Mom a bitch, Pop a bastard? Hey! Are you listening? Stay with me, okay? This is costing you money and me time. Which character were you thinking about, Freddie Fox or that crazed killer, what’s-his-name?”

“Gar-eee,” Hearn admitted. “It was Gar-eee.”

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re going to put me in a book. I don’t want to show up as the kindly medical man or a homicidal maniac hiding behind the mask of the kindly medical man. That’s not what you’re here for. Look at yourself. What kind of life do you have? You sit in a room twelve hours a day making up stuff for people to read in airports.” He pointed at the window. “Meanwhile, you’re oblivious to the real world.”

As the layers peeled away, they saw that his father was the source of his writing with his mother having only a small extra’s role. “He was big and scary, Mom was small and scared,” Hearn said.

“How many kids?” Kossman said.

“Two brothers and a sister.”

“Tell me about your father.”

“A drunkard; one leg was shorter than the other.” He had walked with lurching side-to-side motion like someone ducking punches. The foot on the short leg flopped like it was on a hinge.

“Birth defect?”

“Polio.”

“Okay, I can see trouble coming.”

“When he was sober a backhand was about the worst you got. If he had a bad hangover, it could be a good slapping around. Friday was the day of doom. He got drunk and if the good times were rolling he blew every nickel of his paycheck. That meant we went hungry and Mom had to hide from the landlady.”

“Prohibition didn’t work,” Kossman said, “but you have to sympathize with the idea behind it. Who knew it would lead to the goombah crowd.”

When his father came home stinking of whiskey his eyes were as flat and hard as black buttons. If he couldn’t make the world pay for being a cripple, by God his family would have to do.

“Mom locked the doors and windows and we listened to him limping around the house trying to get in.” One foot was heavy, the other light, like he was hop-scotching. Skip-step. Skip-step.

If he had drunk himself stupid, James gave up after a while and lurched off ducking those invisible punches; he might not be seen for days. But if the bar closed or he ran out of money, he’d get in somehow and then muscle his way past the butter knives that Mom stuck in the door jam.

“They sprang free when the door slammed open and flipped across the room like little gymnasts in silver Spandex,” Hearn said.

“Nice word picture,” Kossman said. “I see why you went into writing.”

“And there he stood in the doorway in all his glory, the mighty lord and master of Drunk World.” His smirk said All right everyone, payback time.

“What did you do while this was going on?”

“Hid under the covers or played with my toy soldiers. Pretended it wasn’t happening.”

“How old?”

“Five or six, I guess.”

The kids were lined up for interrogation, and he took on the air of a judge hearing evidence. “What have you been telling them about me?”

“Nothing, James,” Mom quavered.

“You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth.”

He asked trick questions and challenged their timid answers. “You’re lying! She told you to say that, didn’t she?”

“No, Dad.”

They were hiding what they really thought. They were no different than the people who made fun of him. The inquisitor stepped aside for the judge. The belt was slowly unbuckled and drawn from the pant loops.

“No, James, don’t,” Mom cried.

Doubled back like a subway strap, it made a flat smacking sound when it landed. This is for my short leg. This is for what people say. This is for my shitty job. This next one is for . . . this one is just because.

“I bit him on his bad leg once,” Hearn said.

“What happened?”

“He threw me against the wall. My head bounced off it and I was woozy. I remember the others begging him not to hurt me more.” With James gone or passed out, they would creep to their mother. Sometimes she was bleeding or an eye was turning purple.

“I had a lot of nightmares as a kid,” Hearn said. “And I began to write on a tablet.”

“Escaping from reality,” Kossman said.

His father couldn’t hold a job for long, so they moved a lot and kept to themselves. Mom believed a bad husband had to be endured for the children. She was also ashamed to call the cops.

“Yes, that’s a problem even today,” Kossman said. “They don’t want the neighbors to know.”

His teenage sister snapped one time, running off to call the police. They told him to watch it and left. Just another chicken-shit domestic beef to them. They didn’t need the paperwork of an arrest.

His daring sister returned, face alight. “Did they arrest him?”

James sprang at her from behind the door.

He drifted into vagrancy and years later died in a jailhouse. His head hit the concrete floor when another prisoner yanked him from the upper bunk in a fight over who got to sleep in it.

“I don’t understand why—I hated the man—but I cried at his funeral. My aunt’s husband Charles, a pipe fitter, told me to be a man and I stopped.”

“First death in your life?” Kossman asked.

“Yes.”

“That explains it. Look, I could give you some fancy explanation for why you’re screwed up,” Kossman said, “but what we call it doesn’t make any difference. So your old man didn’t live long enough for you to get revenge—makes no difference anymore, not the tiniest bit. I’m not saying drop the fantasy bit. It’s your bread and butter, and maybe it has some therapeutic value. But throw some reality into your life now and then.”

“Just keep doing what you’re doing,” Dibble said. “Don’t listen to this guy.”

I've come across a few psychiatrists in my time. They're half-crazy, most of them. That's why they become shrinks in the first place."

Echchols had seminars and panel discussions every day on subjects from nanotechnology to Sixteenth Century music. They were feasts for nerds in Hearn's opinion. But he had to admit maybe that was sour grapes. While others were getting educations, he had worked in fast food or handed out flyers, anything to keep body and soul together while he hammered the keyboard and burned through reams of paper. Knowledge for its own sake was a luxury he couldn't afford when he was young, or had time for now that he was in the chips. He figured he was too far behind anyhow to play catch up.

He usually took a seat in the back so he could duck out when he lost interest. But judging from snatches of conversation the conference had hit one out of the ballpark.

"I'm as cutting edge as anyone, but I learned a whole lot of new stuff about bead-based genotyping ..." A young red-haired man in a warm-up jacket and backward-turned baseball cap.

"... a prophetic exposition of seventh generation wireless technology ..." A vivacious woman in a beige Prada suit.

"... the effect of metastable level populations on the ionization fraction ..." A bald man in sweater and jeans who wore his glasses midway down his nose.

"A brilliant speaker who's pushing the conceptual envelope ..." said an earnest man with a long head who wore a red bowtie.

"... the formalist movement of the early Twentieth Century ..." said a man with a Scottish burr, "never really got its shite together."

"... regarded from this angle, the problems of man's relation to the state ..." The bosomy, middle-aged woman with rhinestone glasses caught Hearn eavesdropping and glared.

His old habits never took vacations or even weekends off. He studied people here as models for new characters and jotted notes on their looks and ways of talking.

bearded expert on fungi says mushrooms can save world. Jeans, blue polo shirt, intense. Fungi connected underground like computer network. 300 miles worth in dirt the size of a man's shoe. Put fungi on worst pollution and a while later—presto, problem solved.

Hearn put his scribbles into a drawer at the end of each day and the beginnings of a plot began to form. Suicidal Islamic terrorists release a killer fungus that spreads around the world. Western scientists must travel to a remote

island where a creature unknown to science guards a rare counter-fungus that can save us. Hearn was stumped about what kind of creature that could be, but then it came to him. *A fungus with a brain!* This story would write itself.

The resort had several bistros on its grounds. Out strolling he came across one snuggled in foliage near the main conference building. The bamboo chairs and tables were empty under slow-turning fans.

“Boy, am I glad to see you,” said the bartender, a young man in a floral shirt with a trendy haircut. The tattoos on his arms were like murals.

Hearn ordered a Black Label and water.

“Wanna better scotch?” His name was Skip and he spoke with a Queens accent.

“What’ve you got?”

He produced a cushioned leather menu. “If you can name a scotch that’s not here, the first drink is on the house.” He laughed. “Actually, so is the second and third and as many you want. It’s all on Echchols.”

Hearn paged through the menu before settling on Laphroaig. Skip put a perfect ounce and a half in a glass with a pour that began at the rim and ended with the bottle held shoulder high.

“Very nice,” Hearn said.

“I’ve got a million tricks like that.” He swept an arm to take in the empty room. “It’s all wasted here. This place is dead every night. You people are definitely not party animals.”

Hearn liked talking to bartenders. They saw people at their best and worst and had theories about human nature.

“How long have you been here?” he asked.

“They just hired me for the conference. The money’s great, but I like more action.” He picked up three cocktail shakers and juggled them. “Would you believe I was Bartender of the Year a couple years ago?”

“No kidding.”

“A hundred and fifty of us from all over the country. Talk about nerve wracking. I won first place with a drink I invented, Plymouth Gin and strawberry juice with passion fruit foam.”

“Sounds tasty,” Hearn lied.

He didn’t know why you would want to add anything but water to good liquor, except for gin. Tonic was permissible if the weather was hot.

“Yeah, it blew the judges away. They scored me high on technique and personality. These contests are like the Olympics—you gotta train for them like

an athlete—but they’re totally worth it if you win. I got a new job out of it at a really hot spot in Manhattan for twice the money. The Cranberry House—you know it?”

Hearn said he didn’t.

“Wall Street types, mostly. When the market’s up they want to celebrate. When it’s down they drown their sorrows. Either way, big tipppers.”

“Why leave a deal that sweet for a place this dead?”

“A fantastic offer, unbelievable. Guy comes in and says Echchols wants the best bartender in the business for a short-term gig and names a number. These people have so much money they don’t know what to do with it. Cranberry gave me a leave of absence for a couple of months so I don’t walk on them, they like me that much. I thought it was gonna be great. Lounge around a resort all day, do my thing at night. I was right about the first part, but an empty joint is a drag. There have been a few busy nights, but usually the hours crawl by until I close up. Shall I top that up or do you want to give another brand a try?”

“Do they treat the help all right?”

“Only like kings and queens. They’ve got some top chefs working here, and believe me those prima donnas are high maintenance; but no beefs even from them. The permanent staffers keep to themselves in their dorms, but we’ve got our own pads, maybe not as nice as what you big shots got but good enough for a working stiff like me.” He gave the spotless bar top in front of them a wipe with a cloth. “So what brand of genius are you?”

“I’m not,” Hearn said.

“C’mon, everybody here is the tops at something. Why should you be any different?”

Hearn didn’t feel like explaining he was there by mistake. “I write books.”

“Yeah? What’s your name?”

“Thom Hearn.”

Skip stepped back, staggered. “No way!”

Hearn guessed he had a fan in Skip.

“Are you really *the* Thom Hearn? See, only the top people! You’re like my totally favorite writer, man.”

“Well, thank you.”

“I’ve read all your books except the ones for kids. You’re fantastic!”

Hearn murmured more thanks; glad no one else was around. His more rabid admirers could be embarrassing.

"I get them the first day they come out. I stood in line four hours for *Midnight Slasher*. I can't put 'em down once I start. Thirty-six so far, right?"

"Eighty-four, counting the YAs and picture books."

"No, I mean just the thrillers and the horror stuff."

"Thirty-six sounds right."

"What's with the hair? Your pictures show it standing up like the Tower of Pisa. That must take a ton of gel."

"I usually only do that for public appearances. Nobody recognizes me when it's combed straight back."

"My favorite books are the ones with Gar-eee. I have to sleep with the lights on. How do you think that weird stuff up?"

He had been asked that a million times. "It just comes to me." Same answer a million times.

"I don't think the movies are near as good as the books. Cable makes them worse the way they cut them up for commercials"

"I agree."

"They ruined *Executioner's Hanging*, just flat out ruined it. It didn't have the great ending the book did. The guy doesn't get blown to smithereens so the parts can't come together again, like you wrote. You ought to put out your own movies like King, but I guess you'd rather take the money and run."

"Hollywood's a different world," Hearn said.

Dibble turned a blind eye with the best of them, but he said he felt pure as the driven snow in Tinsel Town. "Those guys are evil," he said. "If they were running Madoff's scam or Enron, they'd never have been caught."

"I got to tell you I'm glad Gar-eee's dead," Skip said. "He gave me the most sleepless nights. I wouldn't mind seeing more books with Pete and Emma, though."

"Are you sure Gar-eee is dead," Hearn said lightly.

"No way! You mean he's coming back?"

"You didn't hear it from me."

"Woo-hoo! That wasn't on the countdown on your website last time I checked. So when's it coming out?"

"We still have some details to work out."

Hearn agreed to another scotch and Skip flipped the bottle from one hand to another and passed it behind his body before the flashy pour. "Never a drop spilled."

Looks, personality, style—the guy's the whole package, Hearn thought,

making his usual mental notes. You had to have small fry padding the pages to let suspense build up. Then you brought back the blood and hair on the walls.

“You must see all types in this work.”

“And you know what? Everybody’s crazy! I mean it, crazy in his or her own way. No exceptions.”

“That’s how it looks from that side.”

“Some hide it better than others. Guy was in here the other night saying something was reading his mind and he needs a drink bad. You came to the right place I tell him. A double Gordon’s on the rocks. He looked scared and his hands were shaking. Some invisible force is reading his mind, he says. His head felt like it was being squeezed in a vice. I’m all *whatever*. You keep a straight face in this racket.”

“Did he give you any details?”

“He’s walking along one of the paths and—Boom!—something is like checking out his thoughts.”

“Did he tell you his name?”

Skip laughed. “Would you? He finishes his drink, knocks back another and he’s so drunk when he leaves it looks like he’s walking into a head wind. In New York you can’t let a customer get that loaded because of the liability bullshit, but this place is as safe as it gets. A security guy will sling you over his shoulder if you can’t walk. Those guys are so muscle bound you wonder how they wipe their ass. A woman comes in another time and says people are disappearing. She makes a friend, they arrange to meet, and she never sees her again. She says it’s like they vanish from the face of the earth. Happens to her three times. When she asks at the front desk, there’s no record of them ever being here.” Skip twirled a finger at his temple. “I’m tellin’ ya.”

He looked over Hearn’s shoulder at someone coming through the door. “Boss!”

Hearn turned to the most handsome man he had ever seen. He was tall, slender but muscular with a curly gold hair and moved with the easy grace of an athlete. He wore the unofficial resort uniform of casual jeans and polo shirt.

“Thom Hearn,” Skip said, “meet the *man*. Hermod, you’re looking at the best writer since Dean Koontz.”

He had a powerful handshake and a manner that made Hearn feel like they had been buddies before and were picking up where they’d left off.

“A glass of Jirma,” he told Skip. “Mineral water from Burkina Faso,” he explained to Hearn. “Try it some time.”

“What’s Burkina Faso?”

“A country north of Ghana, south of Mali. You probably knew it as Upper Volta.”

“This is the world’s best,” Skip said, pouring Jirma into a glass. “As it goes without saying.”

“Nothing but the best,” Hermod said.

While the two discussed bar business, Hearn put Hermod under his character microscope. The man had a presence that said born leader. You couldn’t make him a walk on; no, he would have to dominate a story. He felt rather merry.

“Shall we get a table?” Hermod said to him, gathering bottle and glass.

“Pretty quiet night,” Hearn said when they sat down. “But then Skip says they all are.”

“We do not get the drinking crowd,” Hermod said. “But some like a little fun, and we wish to cater to them as well. Skip is a performer who likes an audience, so this resort leaves something to be desired for him. I have wanted to talk to you.”

“Don’t worry,” Hearn said, “I’m not going to sue you.”

He was surprised to hear himself saying that, but the desire had gone. This place tried so hard to make you feel good it seemed small to hold a grudge.

Hermod made a shoo-fly motion to show how trifling a lawsuit was in the scheme of things. “We are at a total loss how it could happen.”

“Mistaken identity,” Hearn said. “Forget it, no big deal.”

“But,” Hermod said strangely, “we never make mistakes.”

“Everybody makes mistakes.”

“Seriously, we don’t.”

“The letter ‘h’ is the villain of the piece. I have one in my first name, the other guy doesn’t. Mistaken identity—it happens all the time. He wants me to change my name. Fat chance.”

“The invitation was not the only mistake. The man who flew the airplane was not who we selected. We would never have our guests transported in such a questionable aircraft.”

“I almost didn’t get in, that’s how flaky the set up was.”

“And then the guides did not meet you.”

“All’s well that ends well,” Hearn said to cheer him up. He liked the guy. Hermod rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

“Look,” Hearn joked, “maybe it’s something as simple as a voodoo curse.”

“The local people do speak of malevolent spirits. It makes the region taboo to everyone but the locals.”

“Why don’t they care about the taboo?”

“If it is a question of survival, you find a way to ignore taboos.”

“Why are the other tribes afraid?” Hearn asked.

“The spirits can frighten them to death, so it is said.”

“Something like that nearly happened to Carrie and me. I was afraid I was going to have a heart attack.”

“It was dark and you were in a bad situation, lost in the bush. The human imagination, especially one as flourishing as yours, can ...” He left the sentence hanging.

“Nope,” Hearn said. “There was something, and it was big. While we’re on theories, what’s yours about the mind thing?”

“Mind thing?”

“Carrie and I both had the feeling something was reading ours on the river, and Skip there tells me a guy came in here the other day saying the same thing.”

“Thom,” he said, “first something chased you and then something read your mind.” He had a droll expression.

Hearn felt a pilot light of anger. “You want names for this stuff? Call one Joe and the other Bill. Joe chased us and Bill read our minds.”

“Rational people,” Hermod said, “do not believe in spirits. Still, what did Shakespeare say?”

“I can see you’re about to tell me.”

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

“I missed out on college, so there’s a lot of stuff I don’t know. Philosophy is one of them.”

“Philosophy was their word for science.”

“Science is not a strength either.”

Hermod sipped mineral water. “You began writing at an early age, so I understand. Sold your books on street corners?”

Oh, those early, bitter days.

He had bought a pair of tap shoes from a second-hand store and taught himself to clog dance. When he got some routines down, he pushed a wheelbarrow heaped with his self-published books to a busy corner on Market Street and set up shop. When people collected to admire his fancy footwork, he stopped and hawked his books.

“This is a guaranteed page-turner,” he said holding one high.

He promised chills and thrills, more than the ordinary person could take. “Don’t let your kids read these.” Sometimes he read bits in the voices of the characters. When people moved on, he clog danced again until another small crowd formed. It took grit to put yourself out there like that. You could generally count on a guy who thought he was a comedian to stop and heckle. But the payoff was he learned at the retail level what the public wanted. Thrills and chills, good versus bad. Slap them together right and you were in clover. The writers he hired for Team Hearn laughed when he said try it sometime. It was too much like an ad on a matchbook cover. They thought how you became a best-selling author was to write good books. It was his turn to laugh.

“I didn’t make a ton of money, but I got all the fresh air a man could want,” he told Hermod. “How’d you know about that?”

“Our guests are thoroughly vetted. We did a hurry-up job after you got here.”

“I must have passed or you’d have put me on the next plane out.”

“There was nothing that would disqualify you.” Hermod said. “There were those tickets for obstructing a public sidewalk . . .”

“The cops gave me a hard time when store owners complained.”

“. . . and that arrest, but we decided there were mitigating circumstances.”

“You saw the photos of those butts?”

“We decided there was sufficient provocation.”

“Putting a boot to the guy with ‘Witless Drivel’ on his keester was one of life’s peak moments.”

“This mind-reading feeling you describe?” Hermod said. “Tell me more.”

“It’s like somebody bores a hole in your skull and sucks everything out and blows it back in. The only one I know strong enough to fight it off is a woman named Ariel.”

“Ariel—you know her? She has been rather elusive, and I have yet to meet her. I would love to know the secret of her mental powers.”

“She says her brain is different.”

“Oh?”

Hearn sensed sharpened interest and for some reason it put him on guard. “She didn’t say how.”

“Do you mind if I ask where you spoke to her? Her cabana has not been occupied since the first night.”

There was no reason to lie to such a nice guy, Hearn thought, but he did anyhow. “I met her on one of the walking trails. We chatted for a few minutes. She said she’s having a ball.”

Hermod considered this. “We thought she was perhaps upset about something.”

“She’s happy as a clam. Thinks the place is great.”

Casually, Hermod said, “Did she say where she’s staying?”

“No, but she was heading up toward the jungle. I pegged her as a tree hugger. She’s probably camping out; not used to luxury and so forth.”

“I apologize on behalf of Echchols for these unpleasant experiences you’ve had.”

“No problem, not your fault.”

“Our commitment to our guests is a pleasant and stimulating visit.”

“I’m not saying it hasn’t been stimulating.”

Hermod took another sip of the water from Burkina Faso. “Was there by any chance another pilot at the airstrip?”

“Who should have flown us instead of Joao?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“There was another plane parked there.”

“A twin-engine Cessna?”

“Yes, but no sign of another pilot.”

“Maybe he was delayed. Another five or ten minutes and . . .”

Hermod’s mesmerizing eyes were locked on his.

Captain Kirk to the bridge, Hearn thought, raise the shields, Scotty.

“Joao had a map with a mark where we were going,” he said. “Where does he get that if somebody else was supposed to do the flying?”

“It is possible that he stole it. Mr. Hearn?”

“Hmm?”

“I asked a question.”

“Sorry, I drift off now and then. It used to drive my wives nuts.”

“Do you think the map might have been stolen?”

“I guess anything’s possible in this wicked world.”

“Guesswork is not in the Echchols culture.”

“More power to you.”

Hermod slapped his knees and stood. “I am supposed to be somewhere in

five minutes and it takes that long to walk there.” He shook Hearn’s hand and said he was glad for the chance to talk. “We will do it again.”

He left and Hearn returned to the bar. “Impressive guy,” he said to Skip.

“There’s a lot of big shots here, but nobody blows me away like him. There’s nothing the guy doesn’t know. I’m not kidding. He comes in here with some scientist or mathematician and you can tell they’re talking like equals. He plays better golf and tennis than our club pros, and you ought to see him at the amateur theatricals. He sings like Bono and plays I don’t know how many instruments.”

“It doesn’t seem fair does it?”

“I hope he never comes back here or he’ll make me look like a beer-and-shot hack from a skid row dump. I bet the man gets more ass than a toilet seat.”

“I get the feeling he doesn’t like things to go wrong.”

“Nothing ever does. A tight ship doesn’t even come close to describing this operation.”

The door opened and two stylish women entered laughing at something one had just said. Hearn watched their reflection in the mirror behind the bottles.

“The one on your left is Lady Jane Upswitch,” Skip whispered. “She’s huge in Third World causes and the other is the wife of somebody big.”

After hesitating, the women came to the bar. “Hello,” Lady Jane said to Hearn, “mind if we sit here?”

She had dark, dramatic looks, the kind photographers like.

“Is it okay with you, Skip?” Hearn said.

“No problem.”

She laughed. “We wouldn’t want to break anything up between you guys.”

“She could never do that, could she Skip?”

“No way.”

“I’m Jane Upswitch and this is my friend Arabella Sloane.”

The other woman was fashionably thin and had a petulant mouth. They ordered cocktails that Skip served with his flourishes.

“You just missed Hermod,” he said.

The women exchanged dismayed looks. “I told you we should leave sooner,” Jane said.

“God damn it,” Arabella said.

“Luckily, Thom Hearn’s here to take the edge off your disappointment,” Hearn said. “Like card tricks? Bring me the deck, Skip.”

“Very funny,” Arabella said with a look that was meant to burn him to gray ash.

She took out a long cigarette from a gold case speckled with diamonds and Skip had his lighter out in a flash. She inhaled and blew out smoke. "He's always booked, so an accidental meeting is your only chance." She obviously believed Hearn didn't deserve a one-on-one with the great man. "What did you talk about?"

"Shakespeare, what else?"

"He's an expert on that too, of course."

"Let's say he tested the limits of my knowledge."

"I've heard your name somewhere," Lady Jane said. She was much nicer than her companion. Neurotic bitchiness was absent for a start.

"He's the famous author," Skip said.

"I think my first husband read your books."

"I don't know anyone who reads books anymore," Arabella said.

"Jesus and Gutenberg wept," Hearn said, signaling for a refill. Laphroaig went down as smooth as custard.

"Who's he?" Arabella said.

"The Son of God. Shocking ignorance these days, Skip."

"Tell me about it."

"Gutenberg," Arabella snapped, "who's he?"

"Oh, Arabella," Jane said. "He invented the printing press." She turned to Hearn. "Or was it moveable type?"

"One or the other."

"I suppose this is one of those facts everyone is supposed to know," Arabella said in a brittle voice.

"More or less," Hearn said.

"Clutter your mind up if you like, but I'd rather keep mine open." She covered a yawn. "I'm so tired from the aerobics. I think I'll go home to a hot bath."

"I'll stay a while," Lady Jane said.

"I see my glass is empty, Skip," Hearn said after she'd gone.

"Let me take care of that." He did another elaborate pour and excused himself.

"What did you do to get picked for the conference?" Hearn asked. "Win the Nobel Prize?"

"I guess it was the anti-mine campaign Diana started. Or maybe it was clean water for the Third World. Famine, women's issues. Sometimes I can't keep track of them all."

"Princess Diana?"

“Yes.”

“How many years has it been?” Hearn squinted to keep her in focus. Shit, he thought, how’d I get half drunk? That Laphroaig was sneaky as hell.

“I was a child when she died so tragically, but it seems like only yesterday to me. Such a dear woman.”

They got to talking about her good works. The best bits were her stories about trips to back country infested by private armies and guerrillas.

“We can’t outshoot them, so I’ve learned ten different kinds of sweet talk.”

“Brave woman.” He was beginning to slump on the stool, so he stood up and leaned against the bar.

“You do what you can.” Her eyes were suddenly misty and her voice far away. Or maybe they had been that way for a while and he hadn’t picked up on it thanks to the Laphroaig. “My work has cost me two husbands.”

“Sorry to hear that.” He motioned to Skip. One more and call it a night.

“I can’t really blame them,” she continued. “I was always away. In Africa one week, Asia the next. They never saw me except when I’d pop home here and there. They had their mistresses, but they weren’t enough.”

“You didn’t mind?”

“Of course not,” she said. “I married them for their money and they married me for my fame. You’d be surprised the doors that opens in London and Washington.”

She put a hand on his arm. “We’re always looking for money, Thom. Sorry if I look pushy, but you can’t hang back in my work.”

“Let me see what I’ve got,” Hearn said, reaching for his billfold.

“I’m being serious.”

“I’ve got—what?—four hundred and twenty-six dollars. How about I keep the single and you take the rest?”

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the cash after a small hesitation. “But I mean would you become one of our blue chip members?”

“Well, I . . .”

“We want a complete ban on anti-personnel landmines. They kill or maim twenty-six thousand people a year, many of them children.”

“Sounds like a good cause.” A knee buckled and he nearly went down.

“Could I sign you up as one of our Minesweepers?”

“Sure, why not?” He turned to see his glass rolling down the bar.

Skip mopped up the spill. “You didn’t lose much,” he said. He did another fancy pour.

“Let’s get some music on the jukebox,” Hearn said. “Like to dance, Jane?”
 “I think I remember how.”

He led her out on the floor with a sailor’s rolling gait.

“Oh, you sing too,” she said. *Strangers in the Night* was in her right ear. Lady Jane was light on her feet and able to follow his unusual movements.

“Here comes a twirl,” he warned. Or “Ready for a dip?” He broke free for solo versions of the Twist and Funky Chicken.

He got winded and when the juke box changed songs he absent-mindedly returned to the bar, leaving her behind. “Give us another, mate,” he said to Skip. “And put some booze in it this time.”

A man whose face he recalled from somewhere mocked him from behind the bottles. The idiot was asking for it with that smirk—no, now it was a glower. Hearn took off his Rolex and laid it on the bar.



He awoke the next morning immediately aware that the sun’s quiver held many of these arrows of pain. He rolled over with the pillow on his head and fell into the dark pit again. Thirst and a pounding in his temples woke him again much later. He stared around blearily. Why did people drink? No amount of fun justified the agony—and what was this other feeling? *Guilt!* Beautiful, the icing on the cake.

The morning was far gone, and it might even be past noon. He sat up in a bed so torn up it looked like dogs had been fighting there. Why was this awful Funky Chicken music throbbing in his head? And was there a woman here last night? Lord, don’t let it be a prostitute! His imagination burned rubber from the starting line. Syphilis, gonorrhea—*AIDS!*

A note was propped up on a night table. “Darling, thanks for a wonderful evening! And thanks for the donation!!”

He remembered now, Lady Jane.

Relief flooded him. At least she wasn’t a skank from the street. But how had they got here? A man making faces at him—that was his last clear memory. He put his feet down on the floor. His clothes were everywhere, but he still had his socks on. What donation? He tottered into the bathroom and relieved himself. His mouth was as dry as cotton ready for the harvest. “This will help,” said another note leaned against a glass with a dark fluid. Not hesitating, he drank it straight down. He didn’t care if was poison so long as the end was fast.

He went back and lay down on the bed and in a few minutes he felt better,

and a half an hour later as good as new. He showered and dressed. That hang-over remedy must be the secret herb the *Obsobquiesboodelies* used. He spotted something on a chandelier. He retrieved his checkbook and looked with a sinking heart. He'd written a check for a hundred thousand dollars to the Stop the Mines Campaign. The receipt from Lady Jane said he was a Most Excellent Commander of the Minesweeper Brigade.



The following afternoon he dropped in on a Deconstructing the Text panel that featured a Marxist, a feminist, someone in queer studies and a few others from obscure realms of academic study. When the room was full, the panelists marched in from a wing and were introduced. Each read statements and then the discussion part began. In no time they were interrupting each other.

“What we traditionally consider ontological, normative, or epistemologically foundational,” one panelist said, “is, for Nietzsche, irreducibly rhetorical, the product of a fluid tropological economy whose currency comprises units of metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy.”

“That remark could have come from someone in a frock coat and chin whiskers, Professor Worthy.” An intense man as thin as a stiletto spat out the words.

Hearn hadn't noticed before how comfortable the seats were in these meeting rooms. They adjusted to the occupant and had warming and massage features. It was easy to drift off like the woman already lightly snoring one row away.

“If by that, Doctor Pambianco, you mean we've advanced deeper into doltish gibberish thanks to the textural necromancy you represent with such distinction, I quite agree.” Professor Worthy was a round man with a hooked nose like Punch who looked very satisfied with himself.

Smarty-pants radical and smug establishment type, Hearn thought, all heated up over something no one gives a damn about one step off a university campus.

The moderator seemed to be falling down on the job. He was an Echchols staffer, well groomed and smooth like they all were, but instead of trying to cool people off, he let the panelists savage one another.

“Very interesting,” he'd say blandly, turning to another expert. “And where do you weigh in?”

It was always furiously against the previous speaker, so the hullabaloo started up all over. Hearn didn't understand how people could get so worked up over stuff as trifling as this.

Doctor Pambianco suddenly couldn't take it any longer. "*Maiale*," he cried.

He pulled a pistol from an inside pocket and fired into Worthy's comb-over. Blood and brain splattered the other discussants. The dozing woman came awake with an ear-splitting scream and cries came from all over the room.

"He's with the other fossils now," Doctor Pambianco announced. "He should never have been invited here to spread his spite and calumny."

He stepped to the front of the platform with pistol leveled, as if daring anyone to move. The other panelists tip-toed behind him and disappeared behind curtains, a last glimpse of kicking heels showing they had taken off running. The moderator stood with arms crossed and head slightly tilted as if curious what the next interesting development would be.

"Is Professor Zielinski in the room?" Pambianco shouted.

Partly blinded by the spots that lit the stage, he peered into the room with one hand shading his brow. Hearn heard a quick intake of breath to his left; Zielinski, no doubt. A lean middle-aged man in a sweater and skinny jeans too young for him gripped the arms of his seat.

"Are you out there, my friend?" Pambianco said softly. "I've never thanked you for the fine article in *Semiotics Review*." The moderator said something in an undertone and Pambianco focused on the man down from Hearn.

"There you are, Zielinski. Stand up."

Zielinski stood with his knees knocking. Hearn always thought the expression was figurative, but Zielinski's patellas clapped like castanets.

"Doctor Pambianco," Zielinski said with desperation, palms up as if to stop traffic. "I didn't mean . . ."

"Five thousand words soaked in very elegant malice and the stain can never be erased. Well, the tables are turned now, professor."

Pambianco fired and Zielinski fell between the rows.

People lunged for the exits and Hearn was trying to hoist himself up—the chair seemed reluctant to let him go—when Pambianco spoke again.

"The next one who moves gets a bullet."

Hearn did the calculation. Five steps up the center aisle to the push-bar door. No, he'd never make it.

The alarm must have gone off by now and Echchols security people would be struggling into body armor. A command post would be set up. Did they have a hostage expert to talk to this maniac? No guessing what the demands would be. Maybe he'd threaten to kill a captive every hour until they gave him a million dollars, a plane to take him where he wanted to go, and an apology

in Semiotics Review. Pambianco took several pistol magazines from pockets and slammed them on the table. Probably nine rounds in each, Hearn thought. Enough bullets for all of us.

There were thirty or forty terrified people still in the room, so it could be a long standoff. As if sensing this, Hearn's bladder sent a signal of brimming fullness. The seat adjusted to his squirming like a mother with a restless child on her lap.

Pambianco was in full rant, striding back and forth on the stage. The world was a vile place filled with evil people. "They are nowhere concentrated in greater numbers than in the English departments." He was an adjunct professor and knew what it was like to be crushed under the iron heel.

"I'm on food stamps, people!" he shouted.

Despite his years of education, he couldn't afford to marry. He bought his clothes at Salvation Army and drove a clunker that was always breaking down. "I can't afford a dentist." He pulled his lips back to show missing and decayed teeth. Lattes from Starbucks? Forget it—he could barely afford Folger's instant coffee crystals.

This trip has been jinxed from the start, Hearn thought. They should have died in that crash. Or in the jungle. Or when that monstrous thing chased them. It's only when you're in danger of losing it that you realize how precious life is. How many times had that thought been chewed over by lame hacks? Pambianco had fallen silent as if in a brown study. The captives were dazed in their seats, some apparently in shock. A few whimpered or prayed. As time passed it felt as if they were in a state of suspended animation. Hearn's mind began to wander.



The Ned Bunky novels took the Eagle Scout adventuring around the world, school books in tow so he didn't lose any ground in his studies. He was as likely to be in Samarkand helping break up a Russian mafia ring as in the Antarctic exposing pollution by a Fortune 500 company. The books spun off animated films and happy meal action figures. A Wall Street analyst said the downturn in demand for the Hearn brand might be because the market was saturated, but Dibble believed more promotion would solve the problem. His people worked the social networks, and he schemed for more ink and network exposure.

"Too bad you don't need rehab for drugs or kinky sex," he had said. "The public is a sucker for those kinds of stories."

“Christ, I wouldn’t want it known,” Hearn said.

Dibble had tried to line up a Halloween booking on the college lecture circuit for a book launch, but he started late and there were no takers except a community college in Enid, Oklahoma.

“I won’t give a speech wearing a mask and fright wig,” Hearn said after he studied the offer.

“Fine, I’ll tell them no dice.”

It didn’t bother Dibble when his ideas were shot down; he had a million. When Hearn complained about the critics over lunch one day at John’s Grill in San Francisco, Dibble scoffed.

“Ever heard of Elfriede Jelinek?”

“No,” Hearn said.

“How about Imre Kertesz, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio or Jose Saramago?”

“Nope.”

“Wisława Szymborska, Kenzaburo Oe or Camilo Josi Cela?”

“Who are these clowns?” Hearn said.

“They all won the Nobel Prize for literature.” Dibble leaned back with triumph. “And I could have thrown in Naguib Mahfouz. You know what? The critics may love ‘em, but you move more product out the door than all of these knuckleheads put together. So who cares what the bastards say?”



“And somebody even said Thom Hearn was at this conference.”

Hearn was jerked back to the present.

“That rotten hack,” Pambianco asked. “What’s he doing here? Fools like Worthy and Zielinski might have some small claim to our attention. Their ideas are shit, but at least they have them. Why invite a fucker like Hearn to a conference for thinkers? Do you know how many good young writers don’t get published because he sucks up all the money? Hundreds, man. I’ve been in demonstrations against him. I wish I had him in my sights right now.” He pretended to take aim. “Bang, another scumbag on the marble slab.”

Hearn felt like an iron band was tightening around his chest; the seat kept adjusting to his agitated movement. Pacing the stage, Pambianco was off on another rant—their capitalist masters.

“You want to know why everyone’s fat? It’s Wall Street’s fault! Fast foods and super-size portions so everybody gets diabetes and needs drugs. Know why the popular culture is so stupid? Madison Avenue, which is totally owned

by Wall Street! Wall Street's behind everything, including Hollywood, the TV networks, and Thom Hearn. He's their tool, man."

Hearn was stung. Nobody knows better than me what it's like at the bottom, he thought. Living on beans and cocktail weenies and pushing a wheelbarrow on Market Street. He might still be at it if the newspaper hadn't done an article with a photograph that showed him with hand cupped to mouth singing out, "Hey-O, get your scary stories here."

Reading the story in the lobby of the posh Fairmont Hotel, Dibble was interested enough to walk to where he clog danced before a group of Japanese tourists, his fringed muffler ends flying from his spins. The cold wind off the ocean stung like a horsewhip.

"How much for the novels?" Dibble had asked, pawing through the wheelbarrow with expensive fur-lined gloves.

"Ten bucks apiece."

"I'll give you five."

Dibble took copies of *The Head Chopper; A Bloody Time in the Old Town Tonight*; and *Fate, the Wiseguy*. A month later he telephoned to say he had sold them to a New York publisher.

"I didn't know you were a literary agent," Hearn said.

"I am now," Dibble said. "Your titles are shit, so they're changing them. The rest will come out pretty much the way you wrote it."

"The rest?"

"You know—the stories."

"Pretty much the same?"

"They're touching up the beginnings and endings, but the middles stay the same except the stuff they had to throw out because it was too much. You're a real natural, they say, a gusher. That's what sold them, the way you spew it out. I had a hunch myself, but I wanted an expert to confirm it. That's why I went out on the limb for you. The fact you're willing to put yourself out there for marketing was a big plus. A lot of people can write, but they don't have a clue how to move merchandise. We're going to make great partners, you and me."

"I'm not so sure . . ."

"Look," Dibble said, "you want to freeze your ass off on street corners tap dancing for tourists until your legs go? This was no easy sale. I had to follow a guy into the men's room and pitch him over the partition while he was taking a shit. He's yelling to go away, I'm violating his privacy, yatta-yatta, but I got him to agree to read the first one."

The rest was history. *The Head Chopper*, renamed *Someone Waits*, took off right away, and the other two were even bigger. The wheelbarrow, bronzed, had a place of honor in his mansion and the tap shoes were above a fireplace. The last time he danced in them was on *Larry King Live*, where he clattered away as he thought up the plot for a scary story based on an idea Larry pulled from the air.

“So this story you just told us will actually be a book coming out later this year? You work that fast?”

“That’s right, Larry.”

“Amazing. And it doesn’t bother you the big shot critics say your books are crap? My producer says they compare you to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, whoever that is.”

“I wouldn’t be telling the truth if I didn’t say it smarts now and then, Larry, but basically I’m not bothered.”

“You know who this Bulwer-Lytton character is?”

“I can’t help you there, Larry.”

If the wave he rode swept away the work of others in the bookstores, how was that his fault?

Pambianco put the gun on the table and held his head as if it was about to explode. Before anyone could move, he picked it up again and resumed pacing, continuing his harangue in a louder voice. The conspiracy against him had so many elements even he had trouble keeping them straight. “It’s vast, man.” His voice was getting hoarse when the moderator slipped to his side and murmured something.

“What!” Pambianco cried. “Hearn is here? In the same room—I can’t believe it.”

The betrayal filled Hearn with fury. I won’t eat lead with my knees knocking like Zielinski. He struggled to free himself from the seat to rush the stage and go down fighting. As he did, a thin man in a filthy, raggedy military uniform and Australian bush hat crept from behind the curtain, a bayonet held flat against one leg. A finger held to his lips for silence, he closed in on Pambianco.

“Where are you Hearn?” the deranged professor called out. “You’re going to pay ...”

The soldier grabbed Pambianco, jerked his head back by the hair and drew the blade across his throat. A cry of horror came from the crowd as the thin incision spread into a crimson bib. Pambianco took a wavering step and collapsed.

Thunderstruck, Hearn felt that force return to ransack his memory cells, more head-splittingly this time. Wailing like all the other little kids at the movie when Bambi was told he would never see his mother ever again; Michael Jackson moonwalking; biting into a Polish dog at the ball park; the ...



Why is my chin on my chest?

The room and stage were empty and the clock on the wall said forty-five minutes had passed. Did the cops bust in and decide not to bother the man asleep in his seat? Poor guy. Give him a break, let him sleep off the horror he witnessed. No, that was didn't make any sense; they'd want everyone cleared out for forensic work. He had written that scene many times: the gruff sergeant bossing people around, wise-cracking deputy coroners chalking circles, the media mob baying outside.

He went to the men's room and stood at the urinal, gasping with relief. I'm lucky I didn't piss my pants, he thought. He returned to the conference room, bending to look where Pambianco had been standing. Not the slightest trace of blood on the polished floor.

Outside, all was calm. People strolled in the sun or sat on benches. A Frisbee was tossed by two beautiful young women in shorts and halter tops, trophy mistresses Hearn had seen on the arms of jowly moguls. A big shot in the Chinese government was doing Tai Chi in a purple running suit.

Just another golden day at Echchols from the look of it. A little brown man with a bald head came toward Hearn, deep in thought. Rail-thin and walking with a pecking stride, he wore a dhoti and looked like Gandhi's brother.

"Good morning," he said briskly in the musical Indian accent.

"That was something," Hearn said.

"What was something?" He cocked his head like a bird.

"The maniac that shot two men to death."

"I am not knowing what you mean."

"Less than an hour ago. I would've been next if it hadn't been for a man who cut his throat."

The Indian goggled at Hearn. "Where did this happen?"

"That building right there."

"No," the Indian said firmly, shaking his head. "You are very much mistaken. I have been in meditation under that tree since morning. There would

been somewhat of a fuss, wouldn't there?" He shook his head. "Sirens and the people rushing about. Oh yes."

"How could you miss it?"

"But you see there was nothing like that."

Hearn sat down on a bench.

"It is all illusion," the Indian said.

"What is?"

The wave of the hand took in the resort, the lake and the jungle—everything. "A complete illusion, a deception of the senses. Pay no attention, it does not signify." Nodding, he continued on his way.

A hostage situation right under his nose and he doesn't see it? He must have been in one of those holy-man trances, Hearn thought, oblivious to the world.

A paddle-wheeler gay with flags and bunting was on the lake with a crowd at the rail. Band music reached him across the water. A yellow happy face hot air balloon with a basket of passengers floated high overhead. Hearn followed the path along the shore, his mind in a whirl. Cheerful walkers passed him, nodding with smiles. Word surely would have spread like wildfire when the hostages poured out of the building crying and yelling. People would be talking of nothing else, and yet no one was. He stopped and asked a couple of them about it, but they gave him blank or puzzled looks. They moved away briskly, looking back over their shoulders. Was it possible he had imagined the whole thing? He had to at least consider the possibility, dire as it would be. It was only later when he took off his shirt in the cabana that he saw four specks freckling a sleeve.

Zielinski's blood.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TOO BUSY TO take time for it before, Carrie switched on the entertainment console that had enough knobs, dials and diodes for a starship. Music leaped from hidden speakers all over the cabana; woodwinds and strings swelled around a piano and then the brass rode in like the cavalry. It was either a short piece or she had caught it near the end. The symphony reached a climax and then subsided with a haunting coda that brought tears to her eyes. She was overwhelmed by a yearning she could not put into words. She switched it off when it was over and sat in silence. Nothing afterward could be so divinely pure.

She finally broke free from the spell it had cast to change for the cocktail party. She dressed in a white silk jacket and navy trousers, both nicer than anything she lost in the plane crash. The mirror told her she was drop-dead gorgeous, and she saw no reason to argue. She hummed to the village in the electric golf cart assigned to the cabana.

An escalator at the main conference building led down from the small-ish lobby to a large meeting room. Carrie guessed that there were a hundred people chatting with drinks in hand. She smiled and waved as she drifted to the bar where she found herself alongside a sandy-haired man who stared pensively into his glass.

“Oh, hello,” he said, rousing himself. “Elliott Markel, Harvard.”

Tousled, too-long hair, good looks. The studied casualness—blue jeans, cross-trainers, open-necked shirt and tweed jacket with leather sleeves—said he might have boho leanings but was influenced by GQ.

“Hello,” she said, sticking her hand out, “I’m Carrie Alexander.”

“You’re in the financial world—hedge funds, right?”

“The Mooter Fund. You read the bios, too.”

“Awesome people here. I can’t think why I was invited, but I’m terribly honored.”

“I feel the same. What do you teach at Harvard, Professor Markel?”

“Please, everybody calls me Elliot. Music theory and composition.”

“I heard the most beautiful music on the radio before coming here.”

“You heard it too!” he burst out.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget it.”

“Do you know much about music?”

“Next to nothing,” Carrie confessed.

“Well, I do and the amazing thing is I’d never heard that symphony before, and I just don’t see how it’s possible. The composer, whoever he is, surveyed virtually the entire Western canon, from Middle Ages monophony and Renaissance polyphony to the dodecaphonic and serialism period of the later Twentieth Century. Homage to Mozart and Bach, a nod to Hayden, a dash of Beethoven and then, astonishingly, the opening chords of *Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer*.”

“I hated that,” Carrie said, “even when I was a kid.”

“But in his hands it was transformed. There were baroque flourishes that gave way to Copeland bravado, and one passage had a winking reference to the Monteverdi and Artusi controversy of the sixteenth century. And then he threw in a kodo playing ancient court music from China and Korea. I heard rock, rap, free improv, minimalism, post minimalism, totalism, East West fusion—it was all there.”

“I only caught the tail end.”

“But it was more than mere recapitulation, it was alive and vibrant,” Markel continued. “Using those citations, he created something as great as anything ever written.” He smacked his fist into his palm. “I’ll move heaven and earth to bring this genius before the public. It’s criminal that his work is unknown.”

What wonderful passion, Carrie thought; she admired that in a man. The blasé irony that ruled the world left her cold. She sneaked a look to see if he wore a wedding ring. Yes, and probably there was a devoted wife and wonderful children at home.

“Maybe someone at the local radio station could help you find the composer,” she said.

“Of course! Even if it’s an internet feed, they’d have a name.”

He drained his drink and rushed off. Carrie moved through the crowd peeking at badges. She recognized the name of a famous Hollywood director and a Silicon Valley legend before spotting Ueli sitting by herself at a table

“Where’s your ever-lovin’ billionaire?” she asked, dropping into a chair.

“Christoph is networking with other great men over there in the corner,” Ueli said, pretending to pout.

She wore a small black cocktail dress so simple it had to cost a fortune. Good as she had looked in the mirror, Carrie knew she would be barely visible next to Ueli.

“I just met a man at the bar I could spend the rest of my life with,” she said.

“Oooh!”

“I’m exaggerating, and anyhow he’s married.”

“Which is he?” Ueli craned to look.

“He left in a hurry.”

“What’d you say, please, please sleep with me? That scares men off.”

“He went to find out what was playing on the radio a half hour ago. The most beautiful music ever. Were you listening to it?”

“I was having my hair and nails done. Have you noticed how the staff never talks unless you ask a direct question and stare at them until they answer?”

“I assume it’s company policy.” They never looked rushed, she thought. Beautifully trained. Always there when you wanted, otherwise silent and unobtrusive.

“They’d look resentful if it was that,” Ueli said, “but they don’t. Smiling all the time and doing everything perfectly. Tell me about this man. Maybe even though he’s married ...” Her eyebrows arched in question.

“It certainly wouldn’t stop my mother,” Carrie said, “not for a minute. The holy bonds of matrimony never meant a fig to her. If she saw a man she liked, she went for him.”

“And?”

“I think there’s one or two she wishes she’d hung onto for the sunset years. She’s alone and doesn’t like it. I’m not around enough for her to make my life miserable.”

“I’m getting the idea you don’t like her.”

“Long story.”

“It looks like the meeting in the corner is breaking up.” Ueli lowered her voice. “I want you to tell me if you notice anything different about Christoph.”

“What’s wrong?”

“He’s ... changed.”

“How is he changed?” Carrie asked.

“He always expects the worst from people, worries about being cheated

and so forth. He's dark and gloomy most of the time. You'd think being unbelievably filthy rich was a curse you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy."

"Cheaters are everywhere in the business world so paranoia is par for the course," Carrie said. "It's why God created honest accountants. But who's smart enough to fool Christoph?"

"Or I should say he *was* that way. Overnight he's a different man. Soft where he was hard, open where he was closed."

"That *would* be different," Carrie said.

From what she'd seen, his personality could use a few gallons of anti-freeze. It was lucky his mind was like a mainframe because he would never get far on his charm.

Yet here he was beaming like the kindly clockmaker in a story for children, bending to kiss her cheek. "Carrie, darling, how nice to see you." His icy eyes had thawed and seemed even playful. The look on Ueli's face said what did I tell you?

"Mixed success with my friends," he told Ueli.

"Christoph had this sudden idea of a billionaire's club to do good works," Ueli said.

"Valera ..." Christoph began.

"Russian mafia," Ueli said dramatically.

"... doesn't feel able to commit just now." Christoph said. "In fact, he laughed in my face."

"What did you expect?" Ueli said. "The man's a thug. I can't think why he was even invited."

She meant the thick man with a crew cut that Carrie had wondered about herself. He had thick, brutal hands—a strangler's hands—and black eyes seemed to be measuring people for a pine box.

"But Soeprapto ..."

"Indonesia oil man," Ueli explained.

"... said he would think about it, and we're going to talk more."

"Carrie doesn't know about your transformation to Sister Teresa," Ueli said acidly.

Christoph blushed, maybe for the first time in his life, Carrie thought. Before he kept emotions under lock and key with a guard at the door.

"Hardly that," he said scoffingly. "It's just that there's so much misery in the world, and I think those of us with the means to change things, even if in small ways, must pay more attention. I know it sounds banal."

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” Carrie said.

“It actually isn’t my idea,” Christoph confessed. “Carlos Wiegand mentioned it to me a couple of days ago.”

“Carlos Wiegand!” Carrie said in disbelief.

A fantastically rich South American, he was notorious for debauchery. He had a dozen estates and penthouse apartments in New York, Paris and Hong Kong and an Airbus for shuttling back and forth between homes whose interior was adorned with lewd murals of the Kama Sutra variety. Famous beauties passed in and out of his bed, and a host of illegitimate children he sired was scattered around the world. Fountains spurted champagne at week-long parties on his estates where the finest drugs were available for guests. Wiegand was compared to the emperors in Rome’s decadence. “Hugh Hefner on steroids,” the *New York Post* said.

“He’s another one who doesn’t belong here,” Ueli said.

“People change,” Christoph said gently.

“See what I mean?” Ueli said to Carrie. “He never uses that tone.”

Christoph turned to Carrie as if she refereed this conversation. “I did a self-inventory and I was . . . not satisfied.”

“Not satisfied with what?”

“The bottom line.” He shook his head. “I’ve been careless.”

“Careless?” Ueli said. “You’ve got the first Swiss franc you ever made.”

“No, I mean with people. I’ve been thoughtless in my dealings with others.” He paused, as if pained. “I’ve been unkind and even cruel.”

“You have to step on toes,” Ueli said. “That’s life.”

Carrie realized Ueli wasn’t happy about the changed Christoph. Maybe she saw a threat to the good life she enjoyed.

“It was Wiegand’s idea, this club for good?” she asked.

“I laughed like Valera did just now. It was preposterous. Rich as we are, what kind of dent could we make? He said maybe so, but it’s the effort that counts. I wondered what terrible thing he’d done that made him want to make amends, but that night I got to thinking.”

“Senor Wiegand is the last person I would expect to have a conversation like that with,” Carrie said.

“I might have said that myself before, but sometimes what we read and hear isn’t the whole truth.”

“The stories are true,” Ueli burst out. “I was at one of his parties at that island he has in the Caribbean. A bunch of us flew in on a lark. Everybody

was there, even Paris. I saw all I wanted. The man's is totally corrupt, a glutton and satyr. Drugs and drunkenness everywhere you looked. He's unbelievably gross, and now you talk like he's Saul on the road to Damascus."

"I don't doubt what you say," Christoph said with diffidence, "but I do think he's different now."

Carrie begged off from dinner and walked to her cabana under a star-filled sky. Night-blooming flowers scented the velvet air. She wondered if Christoph had some sort of religious experience. One day a cold-blooded capitalist and the next a soft-eyed saint. It was possible, she supposed, but what explained Wiegand?

"Good evening," Sarah said when she came in.

"Good evening." It was easy to fall into the habit of thinking Sarah was a girlfriend.

"Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm fine. It's very nice out tonight."

Sarah didn't reply. Its interface seemed limited to questions of wellbeing.

Carrie made a meal of cold chicken and salad in the refrigerator. There was always something tasty waiting. If she didn't eat it, it was replaced by something equally scrumptious while she was gone. In ways, life here was like a fairy tale.

Afterward, she changed into pajamas and snuggled on the sofa under a hand-knitted throw to listen to the resort radio station until sleepy. New Age to soul was on the dial. She listened to Smashing Pumpkins; the old Leonard Cohen, which she preferred to the young, but, disappointingly, not the music that had so mesmerized her. The greatest movie ever made; the finest music ever written. It stretched belief that she would come across both in the middle of the jungle. But wasn't that her problem, always digging below the surface looking for something that didn't meet the smell test, that was not likely, that was *improbable*? It was all right to be wary and suspicious in business, but she had let it carry over into the rest of her life. Why not try to enjoy life rather than going her days driven and uptight? She had to learn how to give herself that permission.

That night she dreamed she had a baby girl. Pink and perfect in her blanket, she nestled in a white wicker bassinet. A man in the kitchen was rattling plates, the father presumably. But strangely she didn't know who he was. She bent to study the baby's face for a clue, seeing herself in the wee bairn, but also someone else. Was it Markel? My gosh, was it Thom Hearn? Typical of dreams, she

didn't simply walk to the door and look. Whoever he was, he was fixing their dinner—something Italian from the smell. A man who cooked; a good sign.

The baby stirred and she put her to her breast to suckle, feeling deep peace and contentment in the golden sunlight from the open window. Now she burned with curiosity about the papa humming amid the clatter of dishes. Whoever he was, it seemed they were happy and content. Then a cloud covered the sun and the sheer curtains blew inward on a sudden wind. The baby was gone and the sounds from the kitchen silenced. Something awful was about to appear at the door—she knew it. Then that presence was back, ransacking every memory cell in her brain. Past events streaked by as fresh and clear as at the time. A tree swing from childhood, driving in a sports car with a boy, the time she nearly drowned, her job interview on Wall Street—memories flew like speeded-up film.

Then Lucifer filled the doorway in thunderous silence.

He was the old-fashioned Prince of Darkness, huge and terrible, with ram's horns and a scaly tail coiled around his knees. His red eyes burned and he ran a long tongue out lasciviously. It was suddenly so cold she could see her breath. A smell like a thousand brimming outhouses filled the room.



“What do you think it was?” Ueli asked at lunch the next day.

“The cold chicken,” Carrie said.

“But everything is so fresh food doesn't have time to spoil.”

“Maybe it was a spice I'm allergic to.” She was having tea and toast. “Sarah ...”

“Sarah! I love her, don't you?” Ueli interrupted. “She sounds so together.”

“... kept asking if I needed a doctor, but I didn't want to deal with that.”

“So it wasn't the real devil.”

“It was the cornball one from *Lucifer's Wife* starring what's-her-name, Jennifer something. I was just a kid and it scared me silly. One of the moms in our Brownie troop took us. We all had nightmares for months and the other mothers never forgave her.”

“He just stood there?”

“With that awful expression on his face. Then he turned and was gone.” She wondered now if he hadn't left the impression that she would be seeing more of him. “The first dream was nice, the sweetest little baby. The funny thing was I didn't know who the father was.”

“Naughty, naughty,” Ueli said.

“No, he was in the next room. I just didn’t know who he was.”

“Why didn’t you just say, ‘Who are you?’”

“It was a dream, Ueli.”

“There’s a Jungian at the conference. Maybe you could get him to interpret it.”

“My interpretation is I have to learn to go with the flow somehow or other.” She sipped her tea. “Christoph hasn’t had another of those mind experiences, has he?”

“Ever since his conversion to goodness he’s been as serene as Buddha.” Her tone was sarcastic.

“I don’t see why it upsets you,” Carrie said.

“I liked the old Christoph better; I knew what I was dealing with. He was with that Russian gangster last night. Would you believe he’s talked him into joining the scheme to make the world a better place?”

CHAPTER NINE

HEARN FIGURED IT out as he tossed and turned in bed. Of *course*. Their damage control must be first class like everything else here. Bodies would be quickly bagged and hauled off, followed by rapid clean up. The audience would be bundled away in a bus with tinted windows. They would be convinced they had witnessed a psychological experiment. They'd be told that what you saw was an example of . . . something or other; the details weren't important. Numbed by horror, they would be all too willing to believe the jargon thrown at them. But what about the man asleep in his seat? The emergency responders would leave him be, maybe give him a little needle jab so he stayed in dreamland. Blank looks the order of the day.

It was smart to plan for all the possibilities, as this incident proved. If word got around that somebody went berserk, Echchols was finished. Famous and high-powered people wouldn't expose themselves to that kind of risk. But for all its efficiency, Echchols hadn't foreseen the tiny blood spatter on his sleeve.

But why leave him as the sole person who could tell the tale? That's where his theory broke down. He couldn't think of a single reason that made sense. There had been nothing on the wrap-up of the day's events on the resort's closed-circuit television, just the usual interviews with experts on one or another of the world's problems.

He walked to the administration building the following morning as soon as it opened. "I want to see Clymond," he told a pale woman in black at the reception desk.

The jungle motif had been suspended here and her desk was glass and alloy tubing like the rest of the heartless modern furniture. The walls were beige and slightly darker than the carpeting. She looked as soulless as the surroundings.

"I'm sorry, he's not here."

"All right, I'll talk to his assistant."

"I'm sorry, she's not available either."

“Who is available?” Hearn demanded.

“Is there something I can do?”

Her voice was as neutral as the surroundings. He thought it was likely she was who had recorded Sarah’s uninflected voice.

“Yes, you can. Get me on a plane out of here. The sooner the better.”

“I’ll mention it to Mr. Clymond.”

“I want you to more than mention it. After yesterday, I’ve had it.” When she didn’t respond, he said, “I’m talking about the murders.”

“I’ll see that he gets your message as soon as he comes in.”

“You know about the murders?”

“No, I do not.”

“Do you care?”

“Mr. Clymond will get back to you as soon as possible.”

He drank coffee at a pleasant little café on the village square watching people peer through windows at the expensive goods in the shops. A couple in tennis togs sat down for breakfast at a nearby table.

Hearn caught the man’s eye. “Nice morning,” he said. “Hearn, books.”

The man nodded and she said, “Beautiful.” They introduced themselves. Cyril and Alisha from Athens. “Maritime transport,” Cyril said. “Neo-natal research,” Alisha said.

“I hope it’s quieter today,” Hearn said.

“Quieter?” he said. He was freckled and strongly built.

“The shootings,” Hearn said.

“Shootings?” she said. She was dark-haired and had a gamin quality.

“A madman shot two people yesterday.”

“There was nothing on the Morning Resort Report,” Cyril said, aghast.

“It’s being hushed up.”

“How do you know this?” Cyril asked.

“I was there when it happened.”

“But no one has said anything,” she said with bewilderment.

“It wouldn’t be good for Echchols if this got out.”

Another couple came in, also dressed for tennis, and they greeted one another like friends. Dietrich and Lorita were Germans, blond biochemists with the ruddy complexions of Alpine hikers in stout shoes and lederhosen. Their smiles disappeared when Alisha told them what Hearn had said.

“I haven’t heard a thing about it,” Dietrich said.

Hearn repeated the story, adding the Aussie and the throat slitting this time.

"I don't see how anything like that could be hushed up," Dietrich said, slipping Lorita a look.

"I don't either," she responded.

"You don't think I'd make this up," Hearn said.

Dietrich shook his head. "I'm not saying that."

"It's just so—what is the word—bizarre," Alisha said.

"Incredible," Lorita agreed.

"Have you spoken to the security people?" Dietrich asked.

"Why should I?"

"Why, to confirm this story of yours."

That's like a German, Hearn thought, wanting someone in authority to say it was okay. Being given an order would be even better.

"When I woke up," he said, "everything had been cleaned up so they had to be involved in covering this up."

"Woke up?" Cyril said alertly. "You were asleep?"

"It was more like I passed out." This is hopeless he realized.

"Were you drinking?" Dietrich said.

"I only wish."

That did it. After awkward goodbyes, they moved to a table across the room to talk in low voices about the insane American. The man might be dangerous. Didn't they screen the nuts out? He had to admit to himself that he'd be thinking along the same lines. Leaving the café, he walked with hands jammed in pockets along a trail blooming with hibiscus and frangipani. A few fluffy clouds emphasized the perfection of the blue sky.

Hearn returned to the Echchols office three times with the same result. Showing no annoyance at his persistence, the receptionist blandly repeated that nobody was available to talk to him. In between visits, he walked around the square, getting glimpses of his hunched-over, worried reflection in shop windows. He finally returned to his cabana and swam in the pool until he could barely lift an arm for another stroke. He napped and later walked to the nightly buffet at the clubhouse. He exchanged waves with Carrie who was sitting with a gorgeous woman and a small man who looked like Truman Capote with piles and a bad case of constipation.

A woman passing from the buffet table with a plate said, "The usual magnificent spread."

Russian caviar, oysters on the shell, Stilton cheese, cold salmon from the North Sea, tureens of hot dishes, roasted and barbecued meats, sauces and

gravies, voluptuous fruits and vegetables, desserts that would make a dieter sob. The centerpiece of the long table was an enormous roast with golden crackly skin. The carver wore a tall chef's hat.

The Indian man in the dhoti materialized alongside the table that Hearn found in a corner. "I don't eat their cooking. I steam vegetables in my room." His bare feet were shod in expensive sandals.

Hearn invited him to sit down.

"For a moment," he said, easing into a chair. "Are you feeling better? Yesterday you seemed a little . . . confused. Please do not take offense, but I thought at first perhaps it was alcohol. May I ask why did you come here?"

"Call it a vacation."

"Have you thought what an odd place for such a conference?"

"They said the idea was to get away as far as possible."

"This is certainly far from all I know."

"What's your excuse?" Hearn asked.

"My excuse?"

"Why did you come?"

"I was selected for reasons I cannot guess."

"I was a case of mistaken identity, if you want the truth. They thought they were getting another man."

"Ah, the truth." After a pause for deliberation, he added, "It's not so easy to discover, I am thinking. Yet, I wish to return to India, and that is indisputably true."

"What's stopping you?"

"O the river is dangerous you see, and the jungle doubtless more so."

"I'm going to have them fly me out ASAP."

"I have asked many times. I am promised transportation, but nothing is done. Always there is a complication."

"They better not try that with me." But hadn't they already?

"When I thought about it later, perhaps what you saw was not imagined." He tapped his temple with a forefinger, rose from the table and left.

As he was reflecting on this, Hearn felt someone else alongside. A woman in her thirties with red hair piled high and held with silver combs was wearing a cocktail dress cut so low his eyes went directly to her cleavage.

"Boy," she said, "you don't waste any time, do you?"

"What else am I supposed to look at?"

"My face is a good start."

She had thick, dark eyebrows, pale skin and cheekbones that gave her a Slavic look. “I’m Faith Fletcher.” Her voice had a whiskey-cured quality. “You’re the famous writer.”

“Some would say infamous.” A dry jest he used often.

“Are you enjoying the conference?”

“I can’t say that I am.”

“We’ve been here forever, and we’re still having a ball. You were in that party that had trouble on the river.”

He didn’t feel like telling the story again. “I thought the conference started last week.”

“It was going on long before we got here, and some swear it has no beginning or end. New people come in all the time. Echchols calls it enriching the mix. You were talking to the swami.”

“Strange little guy.”

“His name is Sivananda Saraswati Maharraj—try saying that fast.”

“I hope he has a nickname.”

“They call him Heart of Love.”

“That’s not much better.”

“He was born in South India in a village on the Tamraparani River; that’s like Bethlehem for Christianity. He was a clever little boy who grew up to be a rich doctor, but gave everything up to become a holy man. He lived in a cow shed, washed the poor, and begged for food for them. He fasted and meditated twelve hours a day and stood for hours in icy rivers.”

“I’m impressed.”

“But did you notice the sandals—Lanvin, five hundred dollars with tax.

“That’s impressive, too.”

“You’ll hear stories about this place, if you haven’t already.” She leaned toward him, giving a closer view of the impressive breastworks.

A dissatisfied wife looking for some excitement, Hearn thought. “What kind of stories?”

She ran her tongue across her upper lip. “Shall we say stories about transgressive behavior? Did you bring anyone with you—a wife or whatever?”

Beautiful women on the hunt made the *whoop-whoop* battle-stations alarm go off in his head. “My girlfriend should be along any minute.” He made a show of looking at his watch. “Never on time.”

Faith smiled. “We wouldn’t want to get you in trouble, would we?” She winked and left. Later he saw she had a man pinned against a wall with her tits.

“Mr. Hearn,” Clymond said, detaching himself from a group of guests. He raised his heavy eyelids a fraction, “fully recovered from your adventure?”

“Which one?”

Clymond passed over that. “Your accommodations are satisfactory?”

“They’re great, but I need to get back home.”

“Our other writer guests have been very comfortable.”

“Like who?”

“You remember our confidentiality clause, Mr. Hearn.”

Maybe that explained the redhead’s hints. What happened here stayed here.

“I want out tomorrow,” Hearn said.

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Things are too weird for me, and I think you know what I mean.”

“I must see to these people.” With a slight bow and a promise to see about it, Clymond slid away.

Hearn looked for Carrie, but she and the couple she was with had disappeared. Outside, birds sang in the last light of day. A man in a dark windbreaker was smoking a pipe. He beckoned to Hearn.

“Sipes,” he said as they shook hands, “rocket science.” He had amused dark eyes, a button nose and trim moustache.

“Hearn, books.”

“You new?” He spoke with an upper class English accent.

“Not really.”

“Wonderful conference,” Sipes said, “absolutely top hole. You learn things that make you slap your head and say why didn’t I think of that? Not to mention the food and entertainment and the rest of it. I’ve never felt so rested. What kind of books?”

“Novels.”

“Don’t have time for them. Read my last years ago in my college—forced to by the don. Odd these birds. Hear that one that sounds like *fire-fire, where-where, here-here, seeit-seeit*? It’s an Indigo Bunting; I’d know it anywhere. The problem is they don’t belong here. They’re found in the North American Midwest. They like clearings and second-growth forest, not jungle.”

“What’s it doing here?”

“Good question. A lot of birds you see here don’t belong.” They listened to birdsong for a while.

“So, rocket science,” Hearn said when that began to get old.

“Satellite boosters for telecoms and media mostly, though we do some government contracts. But that’s not all we do. One of our divisions is looking into building large structures on the oceans that will be home to new cities because we’re running out of decent land and water. I’ve gotten several good ideas here. It’s the cross pollination factor they talk about. Of all people, a movie set designer gave me something to think about.”

“Did you happen to hear anything about some trouble?” Hearn said. All it took was one other person.

“What kind of trouble?” Sipes took his pipe from his mouth.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hearn said carelessly. “Some sort of hostage situation.”

“Hostage situation!” Sipes threw his head back and laughed. “Where’d you hear that?” His teeth clicked on the pipe stem as he reinserted it.

“I didn’t get his name.”

“He must have been crazy or on drugs. You’d think Echchols would screen out that sort. Well, it looks like it’s getting ready to rain. Cheerio.”

Back in his cabana, Hearn remembered the hidden journal. He went to its hiding place and pulled it out. The author continued to rave about what a wonderful discovery this place was.

“How it has been kept from the vulgar mob is a mystery as intriguing as it is gratifying. I have mentioned how our abodes are heated without fireplaces and the small cisterns that refill after carrying away body wastes. The nightly entertainments feature musical artists of surpassing skill who weave entrancing spells, and it is like waking from a dream when they end.” The author rode in a carriage along the jungle’s edge that day. Hearn impatiently skipped page after page of nature being described. “A cottony haze hung low, the filtered light casting a grayish light o’er all.” Hearn skimmed that part. Equal detail was devoted to epicurean feasts. “I would not have believed tonight’s meal possible. In Provence at a country inn I know of, yes, but here—incredible!” This vacation had been a restorative. “When we return on the packet, I’ll be able to seize the daunting project in a comprehensive embrace and wrestle it into submission.” Then a change of subject: “Why am I now and then overcome by a deep sense of unease?? The sun is shining and all is well, yet I am conscious of the hint of something dark that moves beneath appearances.”

He had met a woman “with modestly downcast eyes” who was devoted to the rational dress reform movement. “She sees much good sense in Professor Jaeger’s Sanitary Woolen System, which advocates the use of these fibers

throughout a house—from sheets to curtains—on grounds they militate against the retention of noxious exhalations of the human body. Although I am familiar with his writings and they are much discussed in advanced circles . . .”

There was a burst of festive drumming, the cabana’s version of a doorbell. A tall, gangling figure in a battered top hat and a checkered suit was already walking away when Hearn opened the door. He had a disconsolate slump to his shoulders. He wore a green vest with a gold watch fob, a ridiculously long string tie, white gloves and enormous canvas shoes.

It was Harry Hare true to life.

There were fifteen books in the *Adventures of Harry Hare* series, written by Team Hearn and illustrated by the famous Newbery Award winner Oswald McKinsley. Harry Hare was the first pop-up book many parents bought for their kids. The absent-minded rabbit peered inside his top hat or patted his pockets until he came up with just the thing to save the day—the missing egg that Grandma Hen was fussing over, the magic ring that opened the door to Treasure Land, the map that led the little urchins Home.

“So Harry Hare did it again.” Hearn always ended the books with that sentence.

He slammed the door and locked it.

Reeling, he made his way to a chair and sat down. He saw the future clearly. He would rake leaves on the grounds of some institution, a sweet smile on his face. Poor man, people would say, he touched so many lives before his nervous breakdown.

Breathe deep, he thought, let it out.

No, that wasn’t Harry Hare, it was some local performer.

He didn’t recall any licensing deals for Harry Hare gear, but that meant nothing. Lawyers put papers in front of him to sign all the time. He didn’t bother to read them. “That’s what I pay you for.” He went to a window and peered around the zebra print curtains. He saw no one. It was the plane crash, he thought. He had been pushed over some edge he didn’t know was even close. A quavering voice reached him.

“Oh me, oh my. Whatever will I do?”

Steeling himself, Hearn unlocked and opened the door.

The gangling figure sat with long legs spread out munching a leaf. He clambered to his absurdly big feet and doffed the top hat.

“A good day to you, sir.”

His large, brown eyes were frightened. He had only a suggestion of the

rabbity look McKinsley had achieved in his drawings, and Hearn saw how he could have mistaken him for Harry Hare. A long narrow head, square nose, a sparse moustache Buck teeth showed in a timid smile. McKinsley always gave Harry Hare a dandy's look, even putting spats on the big shoes. This fellow's old-fashioned swallowtail coat and trousers were soiled and wrinkled as if he had slept in them.

"Is this your home, sir?" he said.

"For the time being," Hearn said. They regarded one another in silence. "Do you mind if I ask a question?"

"Not at all." The white gloves were very dirty.

"That costume you're wearing, where'd you get it?"

"Why," he said with surprise, looking down at his clothes, "it's not a costume. It's what I wear."

"It makes you look like Harry Hare, the storybook character."

"I am Harry Hare."

"No, seriously."

"I am serious." His mild face was puzzled.

"I asked a simple question."

Puzzlement turned to bewilderment. "But that's who I am."

"Knock off the crap," Hearn snapped, "I know who Harry Hare is. I made him up."

"Thom Hearn?" he cried. "You're Thom Hearn? Oh, my stars, can it be true? Are you really him?" The sensitive eyes welled with emotion. Then he fell to his knees and snatched Hearn's right hand and kissed it. "Oh, thank you, thank you. I knew I'd be found, but I never in my wildest dreams believed it would be you."

Hearn yanked his hand free. "What the hell's going on?"

The stranger looked up beseechingly. "Why am I here, Thom Hearn? Why was I taken from Pretty Woods and all my friends? Grandma Hen has lost an egg again, and she'll never be able to find it without me."

It's true, Hearn thought dizzily, my mind is gone.

"Will I go back soon?" Harry Hare continued. "The Raccoon Twins are bound to get in trouble if I'm gone long."

Hearn looked around. It was not a good idea to be seen talking to an invisible person. It was best to put off the padded cell as long as possible.

Harry Hare took his cue from Hearn and became watchful. "Is the Weasel Family here too?" he whispered.

Sheriff Hound had tossed Ma and Pa Weasel and the young'uns in the hoosegow for stealing Farmer Bill's seed corn in the last book, and people expected more trouble from them.

"You're so different from what I thought," Harry said. "I thought you'd be like the Old Man of the Forest." This was a character with a flowing white beard who reminded children to pick up litter and be kind to animals.

Hearn turned back inside.

"The homes in Pretty Woods aren't nearly as big and nice as this," Harry said as he followed, "and by golly there are as many as in Prairie Dog City. This is a very strange place. I think it should be called Dark Place or Unfriendly Town. I talk to people, but they don't answer. It's like they don't even see me."

Perhaps rest would help, Hearn thought.

"I'm wondering what this is on my clothes," Harry Hare said.

"It's called dirt."

"I've never seen a bed with a roof before." Harry had followed him into the bedroom and was looking at the canopy. "Does it have a hole for the smoke to go out?"

Hearn buried his face in a pillow. Harry was in a chair, long legs crossed and battered hat in his lap.

"I don't know how I got from Pretty Woods. One minute it was a nice, sunny day and I was thinking how nice things smelled, and the next it was night and I was walking along a very hard road."

Pretty Woods had only rustic trails fringed with climbing roses in all the primary colors. The characters lived in burrows or hollow tree trunks. Their homes had tables and chairs and they ate off plates; the mice drank from cups made from acorns. All the animals wore clothes, even the lazy Horace Hog family, though theirs were none too clean.

"I thought I would see Hooty Owl," Harry said, "for he comes out at night. When I got tired, I slept by the side of the hard road."

"And he scared me very much," Harry was saying.

Hearn had drifted away. "Who?"

"The bad man."

"What bad man?"

"Who chased me."

Harry hugged himself and Hearn noticed his unnaturally short arms were rather like forepaws.

"He said he would cook me over a fire if he caught me. He was laughing

really mean and I ran away.” The wound seared on his innocence was still fresh. “There’s no badness in Pretty Woods.”

Ed Herlihy’s voice weighed in: *True enough. The Weasels were merely naughty, their offenses amounting to no more than occasional pilferage and minor vandalism, such as scattering Goosy’s down or plugging up cranky Bob Badger’s hole in the ground. The sun always shined in Pretty Woods, and apart from the Weasel Family no problem was bigger than pretty Mary Midge, a character who sang in a tiny, bell-like voice and danced with dust motes in the golden light.*

“He wasn’t the only bad thing I saw,” Harry continued in a quavering voice. “I saw the forest creatures killing others. Then they *ate* them!” His face twisted. “Why . . . why is there badness? Where does it come from?”

“Beat it,” Hearn snarled. “Get lost.”

There was shock and dismay in Harry’s face. Everybody in the Pretty Woods books was polite and rudeness unknown. The worst one ever heard said was “Oh, pooh!”

Harry slunk out of the room, casting lost-soul looks back at Hearn.

CHAPTER TEN

CARRIE KILLED TIME at the driving range, impressing herself with her distance and accuracy off the tee, a steady two hundred yards smack down the middle of the fairway. The gang at Colts Neck Country Club would be blown away. She hummed as she walked to the clubhouse. Her chip shots and putting were better too. Keep this up and she was a candidate for the Pro-Am tour.

The clubhouse was fairly crowded, most of the women in polo shirts and sport skirts. Guy attire was whatever Rory wore in his last tournament, though a few oldsters clung to the white-shoes-and-belt look. She took a table and ordered coffee. Sunlight slanted through tall windows.

Natalie Beresford had been overwhelmed and maybe even disoriented by the movie, Carrie thought. Its hugeness and power were unlike anything she had ever seen on the screen before, and she must have seen every important film that had come out for decades. And then there was the emotional impact, people even crying. Small wonder that she had confused an actor on the screen with a woman in the audience. But how to account for that empty seat? If the woman was that wrapped up in the movie, she would have come back after the intermission.

Ten minutes passed, fifteen. The waiter, young and handsome like there was a factory nearby that stamped them out with just enough variation for interest, returned with a menu.

“Would you like to order now?” he asked. She said she was still waiting for someone. “When you’re ready,” he said.

After a few more minutes, she went to the house phone and called Natalie at her cabana. No answer. Maybe she had been delayed and was on her way. Carrie waited another ten minutes and then went to the map in the clubhouse lobby and looked up where she was staying.

Another glorious day she thought as she walked to Natalie’s cabana. It was

so hot and miserably sticky in the jungle not that far away, but here it was like Tuscany in spring. It was strange that she hadn't noticed it before.

No one answered her knock or the drumming when she pushed the doorbell. The door was slightly ajar so she pushed it open. "Natalie?" she called. "It's me, Carrie." Cabana 515 was silent.

"Hello," she said more loudly. "Anybody home?"

"The cabana is vacant," Sarah's voice said.

"Where is Natalie?"

"There is no one by that name here."

"Natalie Beresford."

"There is no one by that name here."

"I talked to her just last night."

"There is no more information."

"Sarah, it's me, Carrie."

"You are not registered for this space."

How she could think Sarah was like a friend instead of a motherboard and CPU and a few other bits and pieces of silicon and metal? The Japanese seniors with domestic robots pattering around the house must sometimes forget the difference.

She knew Natalie was gone when she found the closets were empty and no sign of luggage. Well, that's rude, she thought. She might have had the courtesy to call off breakfast before she left.

"Thanks for nothing, bitch," she told Sarah on her way out.

She passed golf carts and people strolling in the fine weather as she headed for the main building. Everybody smiling; happy to be out. She returned their smiles, but her mind was elsewhere. Natalie was a successful Hollywood executive, a control freak, the crossed t's and dotted i's type. You had to be to rise as high as she had in a business where double-dealing and smiling promises forgotten almost as soon as they were made was a way of life. She wouldn't leave a fellow conference attendee in the lurch, someone in the financial world who just might be in a position to help her one day. Carrie walked through the chrome and marble lobby to a curved blond desk where a dark-haired young woman in black sat. She was as attractive in her way as the waiter. They must do their recruiting at modeling agencies, Carrie thought.

"I'd like to ask about a guest," she said, "Natalie Beresford."

The woman tapped on a keyboard too low for Carrie to see. "We have no one by that name."

“When did she check out?”

“I’m sorry; we have no record of that name.”

“I talked to her on the phone last night. She had Cabana 515.”

More keyboard tapping. “Cabana 515 is vacant.”

“Yes,” Carrie said impatiently, “I was just there.”

The young woman had a blank look. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Do you archive records when someone checks out? Look for her there, Natalie Beresford. I’ll spell it if you like. She’s in the directory, for heaven’s sake. I looked her up last night.”

The young woman tapped some more. “I am sorry, but I don’t find her in the directory.”

“So you wipe the slate clean when somebody goes home? No record, no nothing?”

“We have no record of this person.”

Talking to this dunce is pointless, Carrie thought. “Thanks anyway,” she said.



Clymond rose from behind his desk, heavy eyelids at half-mast. “Mr. Hearn, I have been meaning to call.”

“I want out of here.”

“That is a problem,” Clymond said. “We’re having some difficulty with the government.”

“I want a seat on the first plane out of here. What have you got for this afternoon?”

“I am afraid our problem is also yours. Rumors of a coup are in the wind. The whole country is a no-fly zone.”

“You mean we’re stuck here!” He felt the blood rush to his face.

“A week or two and the dust will settle. General Acuesta has survived many attempts.”

“There’s no other way out of here?”

A shrug. “The river.”

“I don’t want anything to do with that.”

“We could send you out on foot with guides, but that is a three-week trek through difficult country and the rainy season would catch you half way. The flooding can be quite dangerous in places and you might have to come back. By then this business will be all settled.”

I might be completely bananas in three weeks, Hearn thought. "You should've warned people."

"These are unpredictable times."

"What's wrong with your phones to the outside? I can't get a dial tone on mine, and the ones at the business center are just as dead."

"The government has not paid its satellite charges. The director general absconded with all the money. We are informed that a special shipment of copper is being arranged. The system will be back up when it is sold."

"So we're cut off?"

"It is just temporary."

"Why isn't anybody talking about that hostage situation?"

"Hostage situation?" A small smile.

"Are you saying those killings didn't happen?"

"Killings?"

"There's an echo in here."

"I am sorry, but I do not understand what you are saying."

"People were killed in that building you can see from that window right over there, and you guys are covering it up."

"I do not believe we have discussed your honorarium, Mr. Hearn."

"What?"

"A hundred thousand dollars is acceptable? We can make it in cash so there is no bother about the IRS."

Hearn was silent.

"I will see to it that you are on the very first flight out. I would appreciate it if this arrangement did not get out."

"Which, the bribe or the no-fly stuff?"

"Bribe is not a very nice word."

"Murder is worse."

Clymond folded his hands on the desk.

"That's it?" Hearn demanded. "That's all you've got to say?"

"We are doing the best we can under trying circumstances."

"Take your bribe and shove it."

"We apologize for this inconvenience, Mr. Hearn," Clymond called as Hearn stormed out.

The Echchols brochure said the resort had modern medical facilities, but did it treat psychos? Even if it did, he wanted Israel Kossman handling this back home.

Ed Herlihy suddenly sounds off: *Yes, Hearn with that vivid imagination of his could picture every detail with crystal clarity. He would be brought before some kind of doctor, trained who knew where, for a little “discussion” of what was bothering him. If he didn’t like Hearn’s answers or even his attitude, the famous author might find himself injected with drugs to keep him manageable. And then comes a room with rubber walls and a toilet hole in the floor. His burly keepers will say in a crooning way, “Now, Thom, we’re not going to have any trouble from you today are we?” If he gives them any lip, it’s back into the strait jacket. Yes, Thom is aware he made a mistake coming here. A big mistake.*

Hearn shook his head like a retriever coming out of a lake. I don’t need that now, Ed.

A few strollers were looking into shop windows. He entered an art gallery to try to find something to distract his racing mind. Big names were on the walls, Degas, Renoir, Picasso. His glance fell on a portrait of a slender man with large emotional eyes. The large ears, the hint of teeth bulging beneath the lips and sparse moustache.

It was Harry Hare.

“It’s Nineteenth Century,” said a voice at his side. The young saleswoman was a clone of the receptionist except for hair pulled back in a spinsterish bun.

Was it possible Oswald McKinsley had based Harry Hare on this painting? He would never admit it, of course. McKinsley, who dressed like Colonel Sanders and spoke in a fake southern drawl, boasted that his drawings were why the Harry Hare books were so popular. “It sure ain’t your crappy writing,” he told Hearn at the launch of *Harry Hare and the Baby Chicks*.

“Who is this person?” Hearn asked the saleswoman.

“The artist or the subject?”

“The subject.”

“An Englishman gentleman by the name of Owen Bartholomew. The artist was Marcus St. John. He was a portraitist famous in his time.”

“I don’t care about him. What can you tell me about this man?”

“I’ll have to look that up.” She disappeared into a rear room. She came back and said, “A poet.”

“Is that all?”

“He was a member of Browning’s circle.”

“Browning?”

“Robert, husband of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.”

“I don’t know anything about poetry.”

“The Brownings were famous Victorians. Are you interested in the painting?”

“How much is it?”

“We are asking a hundred and twenty thousand dollars.”

“I’ll think about it.”

He left and walked for hours along the lake shore and finally slumped on a bench that looked out over the lake. The water was flat calm except when wind sent a slight shiver across the glassy surface.

“It’s a lovely day.”

Hearn looked up to see Sivananda Saraswati Maharraj. He sat down and crossed his legs, and Hearn’s eyes went to his sandals. Even a man who had renounced the world had his vanities.

“I saw you coming out of the Echchols office. Did they give you satisfaction?”

“About what?”

“Leaving.”

“I was told that the government grounded all the planes. They’re worried about a coup.”

“Yes, it is always something. No one ever leaves this place. Or at least they are not the same.”

“Wasn’t that supposed to be the point?” Hearn said.

“You mean that we leave as changed men and women as a result of our excellent meetings and discussions? What is it you say in your country—bullshit.” His smile was thin. “People may leave, but they are not us.”

“Who are they?”

“Them.”

“Them?”

“Them.”

“We’re going in circles,” Hearn said.

“Nothing you see is what it seems. It is all an elaborate deception.”

Hearn guessed he was leading up to a what-is-life conversation, but he had bigger things to worry about. He excused himself and strode off like a man with important business to see to. Harry was pacing on the veranda back at the cabana.

“I’ve been looking all over for you.” Harry’s lower lip trembled and he was close to tears. “Where have you been? I’ve been so scared.”

“I went to the village,” Hearn said curtly.

“I don’t like this place,” Harry said.

“That makes two of us.”

“I want to go back to Pretty Woods.”

“I wish you could.”

“But you brought me here,” Harry protested.

“No, I didn’t.”

“How did I get here?”

“You’re a hallucination.”

“A hoo ...” Harry couldn’t get the word out. “What’s that?”

“Something not real.”

Harry blinked and then began to smile. He was a good sport when his leg was pulled in Pretty Woods. He tugged at a long ear. “See, I’m as real as you are.”

“You’re a storybook character I made up. You don’t exist, neither does Pretty Woods, nor anyone you think lives there. It’s complete, total fiction.”

“But ...”

“It seems I’m going crazy,” Hearn said, “otherwise we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Crazy?” Harry’s bafflement deepened. “What is that?”

Apart from the sniffles treated with honey tea, nobody in Pretty Woods ever had a problem with health. How to explain insanity to its manifestation? Why even bother? Hearn crossed the veranda and the clown shoes slapped behind him.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked.

Hearn shut the door in his face and turned the lock.

“Hey!” Harry’s voice rose in panic. “Why did you do that?”

Hearn ignored the weak, flat-handed pounding on the door and it stopped. People will say I’m a few bricks short of a load, he thought. The man’s batty, buggy, loco. He’s mad as a hatter, nutty as a fruitcake, round the bend, bonkers, deranged, mental. There was no end of these expressions; he had used them himself. “I think he must be a few pickles short of a barrel,” homicide detective Pete Martin said about Gar-eee in *The Midnight Caller*. “Two scoops short of a triple decker,” Emma Fouchet agreed.

Hearn went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror for signs of madness. How do you tell? “Hawk-visaged,” a journalist had unkindly written. He angled the mirror. One of his wives said he should get a nose job. I am what I am, he had replied. There was a suggestion of jowls and bags under his eyes; just a hint now, but I’ll look like a bloodhound in ten years. If I get through

this, maybe a little light plastic surgery. There was no sign of Harry when he peeked out the window later. Hearn felt in need of someone to talk to; not about the fear he was losing his mind, that would be too risky, but just to hear a human voice. He thought of Skip the bartender.

The snug little bar was closed when he walked there. Hearn put his face to the window for signs it was about to open. The place was not only empty but all the furnishings were gone. It felt like he had been gut punched by one of those giant Russian heavyweights and held a hand out to the wall to steady himself. Had he imagined Skip and his fancy pours along with the rest?

As he walked blindly on the raked gravel path Carrie whizzed up in a golf cart. "Going my way?" she said. When she saw his face, she said, "What now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look like you've seen a ghost." Hearn did not reply.

Although the expression appeared in every book Hearn wrote except the ones for children, he had never heard anybody actually say it. He climbed on and she put foot to pedal and they hummed along, the breeze from the movement pleasant. "Did you hear about the excitement the other day?" Another stab at it.

"What happened?"

"A hostage situation, three men dead."

She slowed the golf cart to a stop to look at him. "Okay, what's the punch line?"

"No joke. It happened, but it seems I'm the only one who talks about it."

Carrie stopped. "Tell me about it."

He related what happened and just did manage to stop from continuing on about Harry Hare.

"This is such a small community," she said tactfully, "wouldn't it be hard to hush that up?"

"It's easy, apparently."

"You've mentioned it to others?"

"The reaction's the same as yours. Nobody saw anything."

Carrie was silent, looking straight ahead. Okay, she thinks I'm insane, he thought. It's official now.

"They acted like nothing happened when we told them what happened on the river."

It was like she'd thrown him a life ring. "Exactly!"

"Food for thought," she said, starting up again.

Brooding about evil, writing about it year after year—was there a connection to these hallucinations?

“Hel-lo,” Carrie said.

“Sorry?”

“I thought I’d lost you.”

“I was just thinking that when we’re back we can get together for dinner,” he said. “Ever get to San Francisco?”

“I’m in Silicon Valley three or four times a year. Do you ever go to New York?”

“Sometimes.”

Dibble threw cocktail parties at his Upper East Side apartment to introduce him to his newest authors. They were intense young men and women with piercings and tattoos who wrote dark novels about people scarred by rape, incest, molestation and bullying and as a result suffered from depression, eating disorders and other problems Hearn did not wish to know about. They did not hide their disdain for him and his escapist pap; one young man who burned with anger over social injustice and Palestine refused to shake his hand and another commented critically about his pompadour and endorsements of hair products.

“No, no, it’s okay,” he told Dibble when he was going to throw them out. “I get it a lot, as you know better than anyone.”

Carrie took a card from her purse and wrote on it. “That’s my home number, but we don’t have to wait. Hungry?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HEARN KEPT EYES straight ahead so he wouldn't see Harry Hare unless he threw himself under the wheels. Wrought-iron street lights cast pools of yellow light on cobblestones. The shops they passed in this part of the village had names like Chanel, Dior, Tiffany and Aubercy. Savile Row tailors had stores on a side street, and French perfumers occupied all of another.

"It's like they skimmed the cream off the best in New York, Paris and Milan," Carrie said. "Somebody said all the clerks understand at least five languages."

"I lost my Panama in the crash," Hearn ruminated, looking in an Italian hat shop window. "It was light as a feather."

"Did you include it in your losses?"

"I forgot."

"Here's a place I haven't been to yet." They were outside a small restaurant with crossed spears over a half-door. A sign hanging out over the narrow street said Victuals. "Doesn't it look interesting?"

"It looks like a fish and chips joint."

He was suddenly ravenous and wanted a fancy meal with a bottle of French wine. Make it two bottles in case she wanted some.

"Oh, come on," she urged. "Where's your spirit of adventure?"

"It went away and I doubt I'll ever see it again."

But they went inside. A fat man with a shiny pink face who was drying his hands on a white apron hurried toward them.

"Welcome, welcome," he cried.

Others were seated at heavy wooden tables set close together with flickering candles. The atmosphere was intimate and there were heavy oil landscapes in gilt frames on the wall and wood burning in a fireplace. The brass screen and fireplace tools had a buttery glow.

"Please, please," he said, motioning them to a table. "You honor my humble establishment." He fussed over them, seemingly overcome with gratitude.

“The man sure knows how to make you feel welcome,” Carrie said when he withdrew after snapping stiff linen napkins open for them. A small card on a rack listed what was being served.

“We don’t get a choice?” Hearn said.

Carrie did a running commentary on the meal, which Hearn had to admit was fantastic. “The shot glass of melon soup had just enough chili heat to wake up the palate,” she said. “A nice mixture of textures,” she said of the two shrimp on a bed of fava beans with crunchy vegetables. Osetra caviar on potato blini with a slice of smoked sturgeon and a dollop of crème fraiche and a puddle of Hollandaise—what an incredible combination.”

Their waitress was a jolly blond woman with long braids and breasts about to pop out of a low-cut peasant blouse. She poured a fruity sake that made the food flavors pop.

“Really, I don’t think she needs to bend over that far,” Carrie said. “That’s for you.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Obviously.”

The Yellowfin tuna with dices of mango and avocado was served on an oblong plate with dots of mango vinaigrette. The waitress bent low again to show the label of the wine that went with the course, a Willakenzie Estate Pinot Gris. A pan-seared foie gras followed with roasted figs, caramelized fennel and port reduction was next. A fish course with a vintage Napa chardonnay was followed by squab with summer beans, and lamb with chanterelles, caramelized fennel and a drizzle of curry oil.

“Wasn’t that good?” the waitress cried each time she carried away the dishes from a course.

The cheese was followed by a shot glass of green tea with tiny pearls of clear tapioca. Shiso ice and green tea foam was a bridge to the dessert of tiny blueberry blinis with young ginger ice cream, and a Suzette sauce flavored with orange that was served with a French sauterne.

“This chef is a sorcerer,” Carrie said.

The others in the restaurant had a sated look not far from dazed, Hearn thought. “I’m not used to food this rich myself,” he said.

“I didn’t think it was rich at all.”

“I wonder how long this resort has been here.”

“I don’t know. No, wait. Somebody said they thought they took it over in the ‘Seventies.”

“Victoria was queen,” That would explain the hidden journal.

Carrie laughed. “More like when disco was king.”

A small man with thick gray hair and distinguished looks had left a woman at a table in the dim corner and approached. “I thought it was you.”

“Walter,” Carrie cried, “I didn’t see you.”

“It’s not exactly bright in here,” he said, looking at Hearn. “Walter Crowell, neuromorphic engineering.”

“Thom Hearn, airport reading.”

“Walter is working on a computer that works like the human brain,” Carrie explained. “Isn’t that fantastic?”

Hearn was about to agree that it was, but Walter had turned to her. “You won’t believe what I did today.”

“You’re picking this up so fast,” Carrie said.

“An arabesque *penchee*,” Walter said. He kissed the tips of his fingers.

“Tell Thom what that is.”

“It’s a movement in ballet. The dancer stands on a straight leg in arabesque and then leans forward and back again in a slow see-saw movement while keeping the body and raised leg aligned.”

“Really,” Hearn said politely.

“Walter didn’t know anything about ballet before he got here,” Carrie said.

“I’d always admired the dance,” Walter said, his eyes shining. “But I never for the life of me thought I was capable of it, especially at my age.”

“You remember that charismatic teacher I told you about?” Carrie asked.

“Hermod,” Walter said.

“I’ve met him,” Hearn said. “Impressive guy.” That was about the only memory he had of that blurry evening.

“He convinced Walter he could dance ballet if he really wanted to.”

“Ballet is physically pretty tough, isn’t it?” Hearn said.

“I thought I’d need a wheelchair after these leaps, but they rub me down and that takes away any aches and pains,” Walter said. “I’m getting nearly three feet in height.”

“Walter, that’s incredible,” Carrie said. “How was dinner?”

“Need you ask?”

“Ours was too.”

“Felicia and I are walking down by the lake. Would you like to join us?”

“We’re going to take in a few of the clubs,” Carrie said.

This was the first Hearn had heard of it.

“We might see you later then. I’m quite the night owl these days.”

When he returned to his table, Hearn said, “A three-foot leap by a man that old just taking up ballet?” He held a hand above the floor. “Three feet is that high.”

“Maybe he’s exaggerating a little.” Her good-natured shrug said let Walter have his delusion.

“Have you noticed how everything is the best here?” Hearn said. “Not just really good, but the best.”

“I was thinking that myself just a little while ago. Most people I talk to aren’t in any hurry to get back to the daily grind. Are you ready?”

“We haven’t got a bill.”

“Echchols picks up the tab.”

“See what I mean,” Hearn said. “The only way to improve on a meal like that is to make it free.”

She took out a compact for a quick look in the mirror. “Shall we go?”

He didn’t feel like nightclubbing, but he didn’t want to go back to the cabana either. The tables had been too close to talk about the murders he witnessed, and it seemed every time he leaned over to try to whisper another course arrived. They walked out into the plush night air and a smell of flowers as heavy as incense.

“The night club district isn’t far,” Carrie said.

“There’s a *district*?”

“You have been a stay-at-home.”

“I thought there were only a couple of hundred people at this retreat.”

“Other conferences go on at the same time. There must be two or three thousand people here.” She took his arm.

The district, colorfully lit by neon signs, occupied a square where well-dressed people strolled. A young woman in a mime’s white face worked one side of the square and a clown blew up balloons and made animal figures on the other. A neon cowboy with a lasso winked on top of a honky-tonk, a wine glass was outside a French bistro. A purple and green palm tree glowed above the Tracadero Revue.

“They have a great show,” Carrie said. “I saw it the other night.”

Hearn was not surprised to see it was fabulous, a Busby Berkeley extravaganza with scantily-clad dancers high-kicking down a grand staircase. Their numbers alternated with show tunes by singers with brassy Broadway voices big enough to reach the nose-bleed seats in stadiums. Afterward they went to

the bistro for brandy and heard an Edith Piaf lookalike sing in French about love gone bad. Then it was on to the cowboy joint where they drank beer from long-necked bottles and she taught him the Texas Two Step. Unbelievably, Hearn realized he was having a good time.

“The most fun I’ve had in a long time,” he told Carrie as they walked outside in the plaza. Distant thunder rumbled.

“You looked like you had the weight of the world on your shoulders when I picked you up.” A look of uneasiness crossed her face.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“I’ve been thinking about how everything is so wonderful. That show is another example. I had a chance to invest in a musical with a cast that big. The payroll was two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars a week. Then you have costumes, travel, housing and feeding, and so on. It’s a small army with the support people; hair dressers, make-up artists, carpenters and electricians.”

“There were only about fifty people in the audience,” he said. But actually it felt like it was a private show put on just for them. A conga line of twenty dancers snaked around their table at one point, smiles belying the effort evident in their jolting flesh and hard breathing.

“There are three world class golf courses in beautiful condition,” Carrie continued. “It must cost a fortune to maintain them. And what about the rest—the buildings and grounds, the personal trainers and instructors and the resort staff, that big sternwheeler on the lake, a big hot-air balloon.”

“It must be one very rich foundation. Money coming out of their ears.”

“One that never heard of cost controls. Do you ever listen to their radio station?”

“They have a radio station? Well, of course they would.”

“I heard the most beautiful music, and it wasn’t just me. A Harvard music professor agreed. The funny thing was he’d never heard it before.”

“Why is that funny?”

“It wasn’t just beautiful, it was a work of genius; even I could tell that. He was upset that he had never heard it before. If you’d been listening, you’d know what I mean. I’ve heard so many people say this is paradise on earth, and it’s not just the big things. Have you ever seen nicer bathroom towels?”

“I’m up to here with perfection to tell you the truth, but it seems we’re stuck here for a while.” He told her about air traffic being grounded by coup fears. “I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone.”

“Why not, for heaven’s sake?”

“I suppose they’re worried people would be upset. It wouldn’t be perfect anymore.”

“What if something urgent comes up and you have to get back?” She thought of Natalie, the head of the studio.

“Guides can take you through the jungle, but the rainy season is on the way and you might have to come back. Their phones are out, by the way. It seems the general hasn’t paid his satellite bill.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Try calling home.”

Carrie was silent, taking this in. “I haven’t mentioned a woman I talked to, Natalie Beresford. She runs a big Hollywood studio.”

“I’ve heard the name.”

“She saw a screening here of a movie that she said was the greatest she had ever seen.”

“Doesn’t that go without saying?”

“Even though she’s a big shot in Hollywood, she never heard that a project that big was in the works. And she didn’t recognize a single face on the screen. How impossible is that?”

“Pretty impossible.”

“Wait, there’s more. She saw a woman in the audience who left her seat during an intermission and later showed up in the movie.”

“Actors go to screenings all the time,” Hearn said. “That goes with the job.”

“But the way she told it this woman became so emotionally involved in the film that she became a part of it.” Hearn was silent. The studio executive was as nuts as he was. Being crazy didn’t mean you couldn’t see it in other people. “And the next strange thing is she disappeared overnight. We were supposed to have breakfast, but she didn’t show up. When I checked, they told me they had no record of her.”

“They must have taken her somewhere she could be treated,” Hearn said.

“What about the no-fly thing?”

“Maybe they make exceptions in extreme cases.”

They continued in thoughtful silence until she was struck by another thought. “And the household servants—they’re all perfect.”

“Good looking, too.”

The thunder was closer and a sharp wind that suddenly picked up stole the warmth from the night and made the neon lights stark and cold. Security people were stopping people in the square.

“You must return to your cabanas immediately,” one told them.

“Why?” Carrie asked. “Is it the storm?”

“There has been an incident.”

He had broad shoulders and a shaved head, the sort of man, Hearn thought, who had big tattoos on big muscles.

“What kind of incident?” Hearn asked.

“Please return to your cabana—now.”

“They’re usually so nice,” Carrie said as they walked to her golf cart. The trees were tossing in the wind and heavy raindrops splatted down. “You can drop me off and take the cart to your place.” They whirred along the path as the rain picked up, bouncing on the ground like thousands of tiny detonations. By the time they got to her cabana it was like a monsoon.

“You don’t have to see me to the door,” she said. “I’ll just make a run for it.”

Lightning flashes froze the scene in black and white as he drove on and rain lashed at an angle. A man walking ahead on the path seemed oblivious to the storm. Hearn thought of offering him a ride, but there was an implacable something about his jerky stride and one lowered shoulder that made him change his mind. The man turned as Hearn caught up. Strands of wet hair were plastered across a horribly mutilated face.

His eyes bulged with insane fury.

It was Gar-*eee* in jeans and filthy, torn grey sweatshirt, exactly as Hearn had imagined him—his face scarred by the riding mower blades, the single hairy nostril, dark and moist, pointed at the world like the muzzle of a large caliber gun. He became a heavy user of steroids and human growth hormones after the accident and was squatty and immensely powerful, but his great muscular development had made him stiff and clumsy.

“Christ Almighty!” Hearn cried.

Gar-*eee* grabbed for him as he passed and just missed.

He was swallowed by the darkness when Hearn looked back with pounding heart. He couldn’t get a dial tone when he got to the cabana to call security. The phones are knocked out by the storm, he thought. He ran through the place locking every door and window.

Then he sat down and squeezed his eyes shut and tried to make his breathing normal. He would not give in to this. He would defeat madness the way his characters got past every road block Team Hearn threw in their path. They buckled down and did what had to be done—swam a flood-swollen

river, crossed a desert, climbed a mountain, whatever it took. They sucked it up, they bit the bullet, they hung in there.

Gar-eee was carved up in a riding lawnmower accident in *Stalking Man*. Up to the moment the mower overturned Gary had been an ordinary sort of bloke. He liked beer and softball and had a nice girlfriend. But his mind snapped when they took the bandages off and he looked in a mirror.

Gar-eee (the name stretched out in the screams of his victims) never left witnesses. He couldn't be traced from his stomach-churning appearance because he wore elaborate disguises when he was in public. There were those who suspected—the landlady, the mailman—but they didn't live long enough to tell the world. Gar-eee had a sixth sense that kicked in when people began to wonder about him.

Pete Martin and Emma Fouchet had no way of knowing the killer's face was fileted by the whirling blades. That all-important clue came to Emma in one of her investigative trances; it was a matter then of going through hospital records. The plastic surgeon who did the work on Gar-eee was found skinned alive by an unknown killer. There's one less unsolved murder on the books, Pete told Emma on the telephone.

Gar-eee thought things through carefully. He analyzed the comings and goings of victims, photographed their homes, drew maps of neighborhoods, and just before dawn drove utility company vans wearing a rubber Joe Biden mask to check things out in person. He struck when sleep was deepest; nobody except the victims heard a thing. The first inkling the others had something was wrong was when they came into a room and blood was everywhere.

Hearn nearly leaped out of his skin at the robust knocking at the front door. That wasn't Gar-eee's style, knocking it down was. Looking through a window, he saw people peeling off slickers. They wore the blue blazers and black trousers of the security force's higher rank.

"May we have a word with you?" the man in charge said when Hearn opened the door. They filed in after scraping spit-shined shoes on the doormat; a strapping, crisp-looking crew with alert looks. Captain Gottschalk had a square head with a straw-colored crew cut and a deep cleft of disapproval between his eyes.

"Is it about that incident?" Hearn asked.

"You know about it?" Gottschalk asked as the others exchanged glances.

"One of your men mentioned it in the plaza."

"We are investigating a death. The victim was someone known to you."

His throat constricted. "Who?"

"Faith Fletcher. You were observed speaking to her at a party."

"Good God," Hearn said.

"She was horribly mutilated on the trail to her cabana." Gottschalk watched him closely. "You seem upset."

"Who wouldn't be?"

"How well did you know her?"

One of the men took a tape recorder from a pocket and another began to take notes.

"We just spoke a few words at the party."

"What did you talk about?"

"Just chit-chat."

"What do you mean by chit-chat?"

"The weather, the food—that sort of thing," Hearn said.

"There was no mention of sex?"

"I'd just met her."

"She told someone you looked down the front of her dress."

Hearn was too surprised to reply.

"There was talk of transgressive behavior?" Gottschalk asked.

"Not by me," Hearn said. He heard the defensive edge in his voice.

"What does that mean?"

"What does what mean?"

"Transgressive behavior."

"You tell me."

"Would sex between complete strangers qualify?"

"I suppose so."

"You write violent books?"

"I also write books for children."

In the corner of his eye he got a glimpse of Harry Hare's forlorn face at a window blurry from the wind-whipped rain. Hearn willed himself not to look and Harry ducked when he saw the visitors.

"Is there something wrong?" Gottschalk asked. "There was a look on your face just now as if you felt pain. You were remembering something?"

"It gets looks all the time. That's what faces do."

"How long did you stay at the party?"

"Not long. Then I came back here."

"Alone?"

“Yes.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know, I read or something.” The note taker’s pencil was poised. “I don’t like being questioned like I’m a suspect.”

“I understand you want to leave the conference early.”

“What about it?”

“Most of our guests hate to leave. Some stay on after their own conference ends.”

“It takes all kinds, I guess.”

“Do the characters in your books use sharp-bladed weapons on their victims?”

“Some do.”

“Knives?” Gottschalk pressed.

“Knives, cleavers, axes, scalpels—you name it.”

“There is a lot of blood?”

“Of course.”

“There was a lot of blood at the scene of the murder.”

“My characters also use poison, acid, pillows and so on,” Hearn said. “What I write is make-believe. That means it doesn’t really happen.”

“This murder wasn’t make-believe,” Gottschalk said.

Hearn stared at him. “Am I supposed to say something now?”

“Are there witnesses to your movements after the party?”

“Not a soul.”

“I’m told there’s a character in your books that guts his victims.”

“Gar-eee, he’s called. Yes, he does that. He’s psychotic.”

“Miss Fletcher was eviscerated,” Gottschalk said. “Her entrails were scattered around in a way that suggests berserk fury.”

Hearn felt as if a chasm had opened up before him and he was about to fall in.

“Do you have anything to say to us?”

Should he mention seeing Gar-eee on the path? He might as well stick his wrists out for the handcuffs.

“I’m sorry she was killed.” Who wouldn’t be; a beautiful woman bursting with life. “But I can’t help you.”

Gottschalk put on a sympathetic manner. “One man to another, I can see how this might happened. She had a reputation as a flirt. Maybe when you saw her again she was not as forthcoming as you were led to expect. You were frustrated and angry.”

“So I tore her guts out?”

“You were afraid she would accuse you of something. A famous writer, you would have a lot to lose.”

“My reputation as a writer is worth about fifteen cents if you talk to some people. Why would I mutilate the body?”

“I will leave that for others to explain, but somebody who writes about such things has a more than average interest in how it is done. Maybe you were not responsible for your actions at the time.”

At the time.

Was there a chance he had butchered Faith and didn't remember? Was it even worse than he thought? No, that wasn't—*couldn't*—be possible.

“As I was leaving the party,” he said, “I saw her talking to a man.”

“Oh?”

“I couldn't give you a description other than dark hair, middle height. He was dressed in sports clothes.”

“You could be describing anyone. Or everyone.”

“I wasn't being totally honest when I said we only talked about the weather. She came on to me pretty fast. It looked like she was doing the same with him. He might be the man you're looking for.”

“Why didn't you mention that before?” Gottschalk asked.

“I didn't want to speak ill of the dead.” It sounded phony even to him.

“Are there any other details of your story you want to change?”

“It isn't a story, it's what happened.”

“We do not have crime here so we have never had to implement our agreement with the government that requires us to detain a suspect until police take him into custody. You may know a person is assumed guilty here until proven innocent. In this country that means a long time behind bars before a trial. I will let you imagine what their prisons are like.”

“So I'm a suspect?”

“Our investigation is still in its preliminary stages, but there is no question of you leaving until the situation is clarified.”

“That's impossible anyhow, as you know.”

“Would you mind if we have a look around?”

“Help yourself.”

The look around turned out to be a very thorough search including lifting the lids of the toilet tanks. “Am I going to need a lawyer?” he asked Gottschalk.

“If you are charged. We inform the government what evidence we find and the rest is up to them.”

When they left, he was exhausted. He had so many troubles he didn't know which was on top. He was losing his mind, was a suspect in a murder, and cut off from the world. The justice system no doubt was as corrupt as everything else in this godforsaken country, meaning bribes and payoffs every step of the way. A defense lawyer—if it came to that—would be appointed by the rulers. None of this would come cheap when they found out who he was, but staying out of their prisons was worth any price. Hearn wandered distractedly through the cabana, climbing the stairs down to the library. He wondered if they had found the journal in their search.

“You seem agitated.” Sarah was back

“Do I?”

“This is what the sensors report.”

“I'm fine.” He had to appear cool and collected. Whoever looked at the data would be alert for unusual behavior.

“Your heart and respiration rates are elevated. Would you like something to calm you?”

“I told you to turn yourself off, I don't like spying on me.”

There was no reply. Sarah's program probably didn't permit arguing with guests. He heard a door open and close upstairs, and someone came down the stairs two at a time. Hearn yanked a heavy volume of Greek philosophy from a shelf for a weapon.

A teenager with a knapsack bounded toward him, shaking water from his hair. “Hi, there,” he said. He briskly rubbed his hands briskly and looked round. “I'm Ned Bunky. Anybody here need help?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

NED WAS EXACTLY as Hearn described him in the books, red-haired, smiling brown eyes, slender but strongly-built. A really good looking kid, he wore jeans and a wet red windbreaker zipped to the chin. “Looks like a lot of darned good reading here. I’ve been so busy lately I’ve kind of fallen behind on my extra credit work. Do you know Spinoza; he’s next for me. There’s a strange character outside standing in the rain with a dopy look on his face. Not to be mean, but he looks sort of like a rabbit. Are you all right, sir? I’ve had paramedic training. Where does it hurt?”

Hearn wrote in *Ned and the Ambulance* that the lad was the youngest person in history to complete the course and admiring instructors had begged him to go to medical school. “I was sleeping and the thunder and lightning woke me up out in the rainforest,” Ned said. “I followed a river until I saw lights.”

“Sleeping in the jungle were you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you wonder why?”

“Not really. All my adventures start with a bang like that.”

“Maybe you could explain how or why,” Hearn said acidly

“Not really,” Ned said with a happy shrug, “they just do.”

He dropped to the floor and did fifty pushups, counting them off, not even breathing hard when he finished. “What’s the problem in this town?”

“Where do I start?”

“There’s got to be a big one, otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

“You’re not going to understand this one,” Hearn said, beginning to hate himself for talking to a fantasy. A stoic silence was more dignified.

“Try me,” Ned said with youthful enthusiasm, “you might find out I know more than you think.” There were people in mental hospitals that spent their days talking to invisible people, arguing and justifying. Save a place for me,

Hearn thought, it won't be long now. "C'mon, give me a chance," Ned urged, "I might surprise you."

Hearn had created him full of a can-do spirit. No mountain too high, no river too wide. Well, he thought, let's see him deal with this one. "Okay, you don't exist."

"Excuse me?"

"You're a delusion."

Ned laughed good-naturedly. "That's a good one."

He pulled a volume from the shelf. "I know this one, *Discourse on Method* written by Rene Descartes and published in 1649. He believed the certainties of mathematics could be applied to other areas of knowledge, but he's best known for 'I think, therefore I am.'" His grin was as wholesome as apple pie. "I think, therefore I am."

"You don't have a thought I didn't put in your head," Hearn snapped.

The grin faded, replaced by a look of compassion. "Are you all right, mister?"

"If I were, I wouldn't be talking to you and Harry Hare wouldn't be mooning around outside."

"So you know the gentleman?"

"As well as I know you."

"We just met," Ned pointed out gently.

"You're a character in a book, like him."

"You're upset." He's voice was soothing like in *Ned and the Horse Whisperer*.

"To put it mildly."

"I solve problems," Ned reminded him. "Maybe I can help you with yours."

"Yes, by disappearing. It'll help me pretend I still have a few crumbs of my mind left."

"Oh, that's the problem!" He gave a little laugh. "Well, I might be a little out of my depth there, although I have been thinking about becoming a doctor. The paramedics told me ..."

"I know what they told you," Hearn said. "I wrote the words." Rewrote them, actually. He whittled down to a few sentences what a writer named Dworkins took a page to say and was going on to a second when he got booted out the door.

"Try to take it easy," Ned said. "Your face is really red."

"Just go, please."

But Hearn felt another emotion alongside the anger. Any father would be happy to have such a brave, decent boy as his son. As Ned turned to leave, Hearn said, "No, wait."

“Sir?” Ned’s smile was helpful.

“At least you’re someone to talk to.”

“Sorry?”

“Never mind.”

The journal had not been disturbed in its hiding place. A thought wormed its way to the surface. Why hide it in the first place?

“Who’s the author?” Ned asked.

“It doesn’t say.”

“What’s it about?”

“This place.”

“I’ll meditate while you’re reading.”

Ned had picked it up during a crime-busting visit to Asia in *Ned Goes to the Mysterious East*. As with everything he turned his hand to, it was quickly mastered. Twenty minutes sitting cross-legged refreshed him as much as eight hours of sleep.

Hearn riffled through pages of the copperplate script. The author seemed to be working out some social theory as he wrote. He pictured him dipping his pen in an ink pot, a man with mutton chops and moustache touched by grey.

“The change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous is displayed equally in the evolution of civilization as a whole, and in the progress of every tribe or nation; and is still going on with increasing rapidity. As we see in still existing barbarous tribes, society in its first and lowest form in a homogeneous aggregation of individuals having like powers and performing like functions: the only differentiation of function being that which accompanies difference of sex. Every man is a warrior, hunter, fisherman, tool-maker, builder; every woman performs the same drudgeries; every family is self-sufficing, and save for purposes of aggression and defence, might as well live apart from the rest.”

That spelling of defense gives him away, Hearn thought: the author was a pompous Englishman. On the next page the entry broke off with a wavering dash, resuming lower on the page with big, leaning letters.

“Just now I had another of those powerful and unsettling experiences in which it seems Another reads my thoughts as if they were as plain to his understanding as a newspaper to the man at his club. I thought in the beginning this could be ascribed to a difference in the quality of morphine available to me in the past, and the far superior product to which my time here has accustomed me, but now I think it is a different order of experience entirely, one quite unlike any I have encountered.”

Hearn sat up straighter.

So *he'd* had that feeling more than a century ago.

What did it mean? He needed a month somewhere quiet to sort all this out. One thing was certain, he wasn't imagining this journal in his hand; it was a physical object as real as the chair he sat in. Yet Ned Bunky sitting cross-legged with his face to the wall seemed no less real. Where did that comment about Descartes come from? And *Spinoza*? Ned was a regular kid, not some pasty-faced bookworm.

He returned to the journal. "The sensation engendered by this—I can only call them visitations by some mental force—are increasingly disagreeable and fill me with feelings of the deepest disquiet. I long to inquire of others if they too have experienced this phenomenon, and regret that I have isolated myself from the considerable social intercourse afforded in this congress—from the balls, musicales and picnics which would have given opportunities to communicate this question in informal address; but old habits shackle me to my work as effectively as manacles bind the galley slave to his oar."

Hearn counted the words in the sentence: sixty-seven. No wonder nobody read old stuff anymore. A writer would be fired in the first hour for a sentence that long. Travel when this was written was hard and dangerous. After reaching port at the end of an ocean voyage lasting months, the author and the others invited to the congress would have to hack their way through fever-ridden jungles to get here. He wondered who those "others" were. If they were the leading lights of the time like the crowd here, it would have been impossible to talk them into it; they would have known the risks of such travel. The author evidently was a morphine addict who wouldn't have the physical energy for anything more strenuous than a walk around the block. To top it off, the Echchols Foundation didn't even exist then.

"Excuse me."

Hearn jumped. "Don't sneak up on a person like that."

"Sorry," Ned said. "But I think you should see something."

"What is it?"

"That dopey looking guy outside is gone, but there's someone else."

Hearn's heart leaped to his throat. "Does he have a horrible face?"

"No," Ned said, shaking his head. "He looks normal, but he limps. He's trying the doors and windows."

Hearn followed him upstairs to a window that looked out on the veranda. "I think he might be inebriated," Ned whispered. "Look, here he comes."

The man lurched to the other side of the window and tried it. Still broad-shouldered and strongly built, a lank of hair hanging down, a puffy face with eyes like shiny black buttons. That shit-eating grin.

It was his father.

Hearn rounded the veranda corner at a run. James had the guilty look of a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Hey, asshole,” Hearn said.

“I was just seeing if someone was home.”

“Looking for a woman to beat up?”

Dumbfounded by the fury he saw in Hearn, James’s mouth fell open. “I . . . I wouldn’t do that.”

“You’re a lying son of a bitch,” Hearn said. “I’ve seen you do it.”

James backed up, hands held up pleadingly. “Who . . . who are you?”

“No, you tell who you are.”

“James Hearn,” his father said.

Hearn knocked him on his ass.

His father struggled to rise, triangulating his hands and his good leg.

“Don’t hit me again,” his father begged.

“You piece of shit.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You terrorized us, you drunken pig.”

“Us?” Surprise and fear on his face.

“I’m Thom, you fucking loser!” He grabbed his father’s shirtfront and yanked his face close. There was cheap whiskey on his breath as usual. “Thom—remember me?”

“You . . . you’re Thom? No, he’s just a kid.”

Hearn let him go and threw a haymaker that just missed as James stumbled backward and fell.

“Mr. Hearn!” Ned shouted. “You can’t hit him. He’s a cripple—sorry, I mean he’s physically disadvantaged.”

“I’m just getting started,” Hearn said.

Then fury left him as fast as it had come.

The three of them looked at one another.

Ned broke the silence. “This is your father?”

“No,” Hearn said.

“But you said . . .”

“I know what I said.”

“What’s going on?” his father said when he picked himself up off the floor again. “Can’t someone tell me?”

Hearn walked back to the downstairs library and sat with head in hands. Ned followed after a couple of minutes.

“He left going pretty fast for somebody with a limp that bad.” He looked at Hearn expectantly. “If he wasn’t your father, who was he?”

“I told you before,” he said, “I’m crazy.”

“But I’m not.” Ned folded his arms, too polite to say what he was thinking. “That funny-looking guy is back. We’d better let him in out of the rain.”

“Sure,” Hearn said tiredly, “the more the merrier.” Ned started up the stairs. “But if you see someone who looks like a bad dream, don’t let him in.”

“Pardon?”

“He’s killed a whole bunch of people.”

“What about the crippled man? If there’s a killer on the loose . . .”

“Screw him.”

A little later Ned came back down the stairs. “He’s dried off and I put a blanket around him. He hasn’t eaten for a while, but all he wanted was a salad. He must be a vegetarian.”

“He’s a rabbit,” Hearn said.

“A rabbit,” Ned said with a smile that said Okay, I’ll play along some more. “There’s a new laptop up there. Mind if I mess around with it?”

“There’s no internet here.”

“I just like to fool around with electronic stuff when I get the chance. I had a case once . . .”

“*Ned and the Computer Hackers*,” Hearn cut in. “Silicon Valley people said they’d never seen someone with such natural ability.”

Ned had a funny look. “Gosh, how’d you know that?”

“I guess you haven’t been listening to me.”

Ned went off puzzled and Hearn slowly followed a few minutes later. Harry Hare huddled under a blanket on the sofa looking peaked.

“You doing all right?” Hearn said. You had to feel sorry for the poor guy.

Harry’s lower lip trembled. “No, I’m *not*, Thom Hearn. This could never happen in Pretty Woods.”

“Where’s Pretty Woods?” Ned said, looking up from where the innards of the laptop were spread over a table.

“It’s everywhere and nowhere,” Harry quoted proudly. “Wherever you

find a child's smile, there is Pretty Woods. But don't look for it where there's a frown. You tell him, Thom Hearn."

"Tell him what?"

"About Pretty Woods," Harry said. He darted a proud look at Ned. "Now, you listen to this, Ned Bunky. You'll see."

"Pretty Woods is the nicest place anywhere," Hearn said tonelessly. The sentence appeared at the start of every Harry Hare book.

"Everyone is happy most of the time, and no one is sad for long," Harry said fondly. "No one can say which is better, when Mr. Sun wakes up or goes to bed. And all the day long birds sing, flowers nod their heads and the little creatures of the woodlands have fun and adventures." Harry drew the blanket close to his chin. "But they're good adventures, not bad ones."

"Sounds like a fairy tale," Ned said, bent over the laptop parts again.

"Well, yes," Harry said gravely, "Pretty Woods does have fairies, but they keep to themselves in the green meadows where they sing with the larks. Isn't that right, Tom Hearn?"

"That's what it says."

"What kind of adventures do you have there?" Ned asked, his interest aroused.

"You tell him, Thom Hearn," Harry urged. "You do it better than anyone in the whole wide world." Harry put a finger to his chin in thought. "I know! Tell him about the ice storm."

"What happened, Mr. Hearn?" Ned asked.

"There was an ice storm."

"Tell what I did," Harry said excitedly. The blanket fell from his shoulders as he began to skip about on his big feet.

"Bob Badger's hole was iced over," Hearn said, "and he couldn't dig his way out."

"Not even with his big, sharp claws," Harry shouted excitedly. "It was looking bad for ole Bob Badger."

"Harry noticed nobody had seen Bob for a while. He went to the hole and broke the ice ..."

"And saved ole Bob Badger," Harry said.

"That's pretty much it," Hearn said.

"That's a good adventure," Ned said, giving Hearn a wink.

"And afterward Bob Badger came to my snug little House in the Tree," Harry said, "and everybody had tea and cupcakes with vanilla frosting, didn't

we, Thom Hearn? Shorty Squirrel and snippy Miss Crane argued over who got the last one.”

“I’d like to upgrade this laptop,” Ned said. “Think anyone would mind if I borrowed some computer chips from the toaster, Mr. Hearn?”

“Be my guest.”

“What is a toaster?” Harry asked.

“While you’re messing around with electronic stuff, there’s a system that monitors health in this place; little cameras and microphones are all over. Can you turn it off?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Hearn.” He left to explore.

“What is electronic stuff?” Harry asked.

“I’ll explain some other time.”

Ned was back in ten minutes. “All taken care of,” he said with a grin.

“Tell about when Reynard the Fox put on false whiskers and a turnip nose and said he’d build a new house for Grandma Hen,” Harry begged.

“No.”

Hearn walked to the window and saw Hermod approaching.

“Ned,” he said quickly, “throw his blanket over that computer mess and you and Harry get lost.”

Another milestone, hiding imaginary people.

“Where are we going?” Harry said as Ned hustled him away.

“It’s a game we’re playing,” Ned said as the door closed behind them.

Hearn waited for the drumming to subside before opening the door. Hermod stood there like a surfer dude in a straw hat, shorts and Hawaiian shirt.

“Hello,” he said with his mesmerizing smile. “The rain has let up.”

“I can’t add anything to what I told the cops,” Hearn said.

“This is not an official visit,” Hermod said.

“Mind if we sit on the veranda?”

“I will not read their report until the investigation is completed.”

“They’re wasting their time,” Hearn said. “I didn’t do it.”

“The process has to run its course,” Hermod said with a shrug.

“You’re not part of the process?”

“Not at this point.” They listened to the trees drip.

“Why the honor of the visit?”

Hermod studied him. “So, more of the unexpected.”

“Sorry?”

“You seem to be in the middle of everything unexpected that is happening.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear what I said.”

“Not just the murder,” Hermod said. “It goes back to the beginning.”

“We’re back to the invitation?” It seemed like the whole Amazon River had gone under the bridge since then.

“I do not think I have emphasized enough that Echchols doesn’t make mistakes.”

“Oh, come on,” Hearn said, “everybody screws up sooner or later.”

A small silence signified disagreement. “Do you ever wonder what it is all about?”

“What what’s all about?”

“Everything.” A casual wave indicated the golf course and the resort, but could also encompass Africa, the world, the universe.

“Do you have something more bite-sized?”

“Exploring that question is what we have always been about.”

“I thought it was making the world a better place.”

“We think they are connected.”

Where had the cool and confident Hermod gone? Hearn had the sense of someone who was deeply shaken but trying not to show it. Join the club, he thought.

“To put it another way, is everything we see the result of physical processes or is there something else?”

“I’m probably the last person around here to ask. I’m like a mutt at a pure-bred show.”

“We do have a stellar gathering of thinkers and doers.”

“So ask one of those geniuses.”

“I do not think any could help.”

“It’s time for the Ouija board then.”

Was the hostage situation one of the “unexpected” things bothering Hermod, always supposing it really happened?

“You seem tense,” Hermod said.

“You seem shook up.”

“It is not supposed to show.”

As if he had drawn a hand across his face like a mime to change expression, his manner was now distant again. “The Echchols culture is in the service of pure reason, but we recognize the role emotion plays at this stage of evolution. It would be irrational not to.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out,” Hearn said.

“Every now and something happens to show us that we don’t know all that we think we do. Especially lately.”

“Like the murder, you mean.”

“That is the latest example.”

“Let me guess, the botched up invitation being another.”

“Does that seem like random chance to you?”

“Like I said before, we’re talking about one letter in a first name,” Hearn said.

“But the invitation was sent to someone who instead of throwing it away or asking why he should qualify for such an honor—not to take away from your popular success—and considers it natural that he should be asked to participate with people at the pinnacle of achievement.”

“With my betters.”

“I am not saying this well.”

“It just sort of slipped out.”

“I did not come to insult you.”

“For someone who’s been called a capitalist tool and a drooling idiot, social climber is taking it easy.”

“Was your decision to accept our invitation a sudden thing? Spur of the moment, it might be said, an impulse you didn’t think about?”

“I had my secretary ask questions, but she was having boyfriend troubles at the time and probably not at the top of her game. I thought it over for a few days.”

“That still does not explain why you accepted.”

“My book sales were flat and my agent said I should take some time off.”

“Had sales fallen off suddenly?”

“Two or three years.”

Hermod rubbed his jaw. “Almost as if a hidden hand was at work.”

“I thought we were in the world of pure reason.”

“So it was no bolt from the blue or dream in the night that you acted on.”

“I don’t have dreams in the night that I act on.”

“You have been with your agent for some time?”

“Years.”

They turned their heads at the approach of a man in a three-wheeled motorized cart. He parked near the steps of the cabana and pulled a briefcase from the back. He had the same deadpan look as the rest of the Echchols staff.

“There’s a system malfunctioning here,” he said.

“Take care of it,” Hermod said.

“Is it Sarah, the health monitor?” Hearn said.

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t want it on.”

“Is there a problem?” Hermod asked.

“I don’t like to be spied on.”

Hermod dismissed the repairman with a look. “I do not think ‘spied on’ is the best way to put it. It is a non-intrusive means of monitoring wellbeing.”

“It’s still spying. The geniuses don’t mind?”

“You disabled the system yourself? There is no end to surprises with you.”

“I once knocked out a weather satellite with my garage door opener,” Hearn said. “That’s a joke.”

“It is?”

“It was really a hand mirror.”

Hermod stood and extended his hand. “I look forward to our next talk.”

He watched Hermod walk away until a turn in the path hid him.

When he went inside, Harry was telling the story about when Grandma Hen explained to the young ones where chick fluff went. Ned sprang up, looking glad for the interruption.

“Everything okay, Mr. Hearn?”

“Are you kidding?”

“I was telling about when Grandma Hen told the Little Clucks . . .” Harry began.

“I know the story,” Hearn said impatiently.

“Who was he?” Ned asked.

“The head man. Things aren’t going right and he’s looking for someone to blame. You guys do what you want, I have just enough strength to crawl into bed.”

“My, yes,” Harry said, yawning. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Mr. Sun looked through the window any minute.”

“I’ll stay up and work on the laptop,” Ned said.

Hearn found a bottle of sleeping pills in the bathroom and took a couple. Maybe Ned and Harry would be gone with the night when he woke up.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CARRIE SAT ON the patio of the country club waiting for Ueli to arrive. It was already past their tee time, not that it mattered. She had seen only three foursomes go out, one for each golf course.

She had dreamed again of children. The infant she had held to her breast was now a five year old with a mass of curls and had a chubby-cheeked brother. She should have been deeply content watching as they played happily with blocks on an heirloom Persian carpet in a sun-washed room. But there was a sad understanding that they were only to be hers for a short time. But why should this be? They were her children. She saw herself in their dear little faces. The little girl, as exquisite as a child in a painting by Vermeer, looked up from the blocks. She wore a plaid pinafore with a Peter Pan collar.

“You didn’t want us, Mommy. That’s why we must go back.”

“But that’s not true,” Carrie cried out, feeling like she had been stabbed in the heart.

“Well,” the girl primly corrected herself, “you wanted us, Mommy, just not enough.”

Carrie stammered out explanations that the girl shook her head at, making the blond curls toss. “You were just too busy to have us, Mommy, that’s why we must go back.”

Then she was awake, engulfed in grief and longing, raw-throated and weeping until dawn. Yes, she had postponed marriage and children because she loved her work. Once on the top of the ladder, she was cut off at the same time she was pinned down by her work load. There was no time or opportunity to look for someone who was good husband and father material.

But thanks to technology, motherhood was not closed to her. The eggs of her potential children, the girl and boy, awaited fertilization. The marketplace offered quality sperm from high achieving males, but she didn’t want to be a single parent knowing what a thorny path that could be. Mothers got blamed

for the absence of fathers, and she had read about heart-breaking searches for parents by adult children put out for adoption by women who could not cope for one reason or another. No, she didn't want to go down that path except as a last resort.

"Sorry I'm late," Ueli said, startling her from these thoughts. She was beautiful in shorts and a tank top, but her jaw was set. "Do you mind if we talk instead of play? It's finished between Christoph and me."

"What's happened?" Carrie said.

Ueli scissored her long body into a chair and brought bare knees to her chin. "He said our lives are moving in different directions now. It seems I'm not suitable for his next stage."

"What stage is that?"

"You'd have to ask him, but I wouldn't be surprised if it included wearing sandals and eating brown rice. Have you been crying? Your eyes are puffy."

"I had the most awful dream last night," Carrie said. "My unborn children came for a visit, but had to go back to their potential state. My little girl blamed me."

"God, was it food poisoning again?"

"No, it was just a dream, but horribly vivid. What happened between you and Christoph?"

"I went to one of those wild parties and got home late."

"What wild parties?"

"Really, Carrie, you're like an ostrich with its head buried in the sand."

"I am?"

"Christoph, who usually goes to bed early to keep his mind sharp, was waiting up. The old Christoph didn't care how I spent my time as long as I was available for him when he wanted, but the new one is ... I don't know ... judgmental."

"About wild parties?"

"About everything. Earlier, he asked out of the blue if I was satisfied with our life together. What's wrong with it, I said, we've got everything, don't we? He says in this new quiet voice of his, 'Yes, everything and nothing.' Then he goes on about materialism, hedonism and I don't know what else. He sounded like a saint on a plinth." Running her fingers through her hair or tossing it back out of her face, she gave Carrie the blow by blow. "What's happened to you?" I just screamed it. He's looking at me with ... with ... compassion. I felt like slapping that off his face and told him so. He was gone this morning and he won't be back."

"I'm so sorry, Ueli."

"Don't be, not for me," she said almost spitefully, not wanting pity. "I'll be fantastically rich from the prenup, and I'll find someone who doesn't make my skin crawl when he touches me."

Carrie supposed Ueli had never loved Christoph. It was easy for beautiful young women to fool rich old men into thinking they did. But for feelings to turn to hate so fast was shocking. I thought we were friends, she thought, but I don't really know her.

"In fact," Ueli continued dreamily, chin on her bare knees, "maybe I'll find him at one of the parties."

"Okay, I know you're dying to tell me."

"They're like fertility festivals from pagan times. Everyone wears masks so you don't know who's who, except I recognized that awful Mervin Waverly from his hairy ears and big ass. Wine flows and everyone is naked and men are chasing women and vice versa. Men with men, women with women. You know. Whatever."

"So there's sex?" Carrie asked.

"Well, duh," Ueli said. "What would be the point otherwise?"

"But aren't you afraid of disease?"

"You don't get invited here unless you have a clean bill of health."

"I filled out a health form, but there was no medical examination."

"You have to trust people are honest."

"That sounds crazy to me."

"We encourage each other to bring guests, but I can tell you're not interested."

"I guess you can call me a prude."

"How about Thom?"

"I don't know him well enough to ask if he has an interest in orgies," Carrie said coolly. This new Ueli made her uncomfortable and she stood to go.

"Let's have lunch sometime," Ueli said, rising as well.

"I'll give you a call," Carrie said, knowing she wouldn't.

She didn't feel like eighteen holes now and went to the putting green instead and sank the ball from every distance. My game just keeps getting better, she thought.

Stuffing her putter back in the bag, she headed for the cabana. She would ordinarily feel sorry for Ueli, but that hatefulness she showed made it hard. Christoph had taken stock of his life and didn't like what he saw, including

Ueli's place in it. Why the transformation from cold financier to warm saintliness?

The afternoon session on solving Third World problems featured Lady Jane Upswitch and other big names from the philanthropic world. It was a subject Carrie was interested in, but her mind kept returning to the dream. Standing in the lobby afterward, she was approached by a tall, brown woman with dark, shoulder-length hair and deep, understanding eyes.

"Excuse me," she said in a heavy accent, "I watch back there. You upset."

"It shows that much?"

"Is your children?"

Carrie was stunned. "I . . . I don't have children."

The woman's eyes searched hers. "I don't think I wrong."

She wordlessly took Carrie's arm in hers as they strolled outside in the sunlight. Her name was Luciana and she was from Brazil. "If in Rio you would hear of from television and radio programas. The favelas call me Queen Luciana La Mistica. The rich," she said with a smile, "have different name." She wore a long black skirt and a red and yellow striped top from one of the chic resort shops and red toenails peeped from sandals. Carrie guessed she was in her late thirties.

"La Mistica," Carrie said, "does that mean what I think?"

"I was born this way, so for me no credit or blame."

"The most interesting people have been invited to this conference. I keep wondering why me."

"I hear some say so but others think it right they come." She held her hands wide apart and smiled. "Big cabeças." They found a bench and sat down. Luciana asked questions and her sympathy was so deep Carrie held nothing back.

"You have dreams like this before?"

"No, never."

"They are speaking to you, your children." Luciana looked around. "This place more different than I saw; the Sedona vortex is—poof—nothing to eet. Another woman like a fairy tells me also she feels it. The psychic energy very old, maybe part of stars. Maybe you feel more life?"

"I have, yes."

"But there something different, coldness and hardness. Bad! We feel it."

"What is it?" Carrie asked.

Luciana frowned. "I don't know, but scary." She stared off for a moment. "I think children try warn you. That's why comes dream."

Carrie felt her stomach tighten into a knot big enough to hold a container ship to the pier. “Warn me about what?”

“You in danger.”

“But it was regret I heard rather than warning.”

“She sorry you didn’t have?”

“Yes.”

Luciana seemed kind, but Carrie was chilled. “You mean sorry something will happen to keep them from being born?”

“Or could be it happen.”

Carrie’s logical mind regained control. She was a secular, thoroughly modern woman at the pinnacle of Wall Street, a sophisticated expert on statistical and global risk analysis, yet here she was on a bench discussing a dream with a strange woman she just met. Why not go straight to the Tarot cards from here.

“You had dream another time,” Luciana said musingly. “There was someone ... the father.”

Logic said goodbye for now. “How could you know that?” Luciana shrugged as if to say she didn’t know herself. “There was only one child that time, a baby,” Carrie said. “The father was in another room, I don’t know who he was.” She hesitated. “Then the devil stood in the doorway.” Luciana shrank away, crossing herself. “Oh, don’t scare me like that,” Carrie cried. “What’s wrong?”

Luciana took a deep breath. “Many no think the diabo is real, but me—yes!” She crossed herself again.

“I believe there’s evil,” Carrie said, “how could you not? But I’ve never thought about the devil except as a symbol.” In mainline churches, she had read, Lucifer was as passé as Hell.

“He want that! He knows better for him he only a word.” Luciana drew closer. “Where I from Lúçifer show himself, but not here. Mad scientists make terrible weapons and diseases like *massa de vidraceiro*.” She knit her brow. “How do you say? Ah, yes! They are putty. They say evil is they choose for to do, but really it what Lúçifer tells.” She gave Carrie a worried look. “It very serious when he comes in dream.”

“We could be having this discussion in the Middle Ages,” Carrie said helplessly.

“Or until Satan in lake of fire for all time” Luciana said.

“Tell me what the devil in my dream means.”

“You are in danger and because so, the children.”

“This is crazy,” Carrie burst out. “It’s ... it’s just superstition.”

“How you think?” Luciana said quietly.

“It’s stupid.”

Luciana stood with a smile. “I’m sorry, I try for help.” Carrie watched her go, already sorry she was rude and insulting to a well-meaning woman being kind.

How could she know about the dream?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“DO YOU LIKE Japanese food?” Carrie asked.

“Don’t tell me,” Hearn said sourly, “they’ve got the best Japanese restaurant outside of Tokyo.”

“Maybe including Tokyo.” Leaving the golf cart in the parking area, they walked in the twilight on the village’s main street.

Well-dressed people with expectant faces were on their way to cocktail parties or an evening lecture. How Hearn envied them, these people with a night of entertainment or learning ahead of them. He felt drained and hopeless. The locked doors and windows at the cabana would be child’s play for Gar-eee. His only hope was to spot the fiend first.

“You seem down in the dumps,” Carrie said. She wore a backless, sleeveless gold cocktail dress with a drop waist and a deep V neckline that showed cleavage.

“Lack of sleep.”

“There it is,” she said, pointing down a small side street.

“*Showa*,” Hearn said, stopping when he saw the restaurant sign. “That’s what Hirohito’s reign was called.”

“I’m impressed.”

“It’s one of those useless bits you pick up.” He came across it looking up Japanese edged weapons. “The English translation is Enlightened Peace.”

He wondered if this was the moment to say Oh, by the way, some of my fictional characters have come to life, and one wants to kill me. My drunken asshole father who’s dead is also back in the picture.

“You’re worried about that hostage thing,” Carrie guessed.

“Among other things.”

He was not surprised to see the décor and atmosphere were perfect. The buzz of conversation matched the level of the restful waterfall. Geishas in stiff blue kimonos with high collars and long sleeves shuffled with tiny, mincing

steps, hobbled by their skirts. The room had low black lacquered tables with gardenias floating in bowls, Shoji screens, and islands of growing bamboo. Red paper lanterns seemed to float in the air.

As the elderly host approached, Hearn thought there was something familiar about him. He had thick gray hair carefully combed and wore old fashioned round spectacles. His small moustache was sparse and his voice high-pitched when he spoke. The plump, hearty-looking woman who shuffled behind him bowed with hands together.

“This is my wife Nagako,” the host said in passable English.

They walked him to their table where a geisha knelt to perform the tea pouring ritual. Although normally charmed by the show, the stylized movements made Hearn impatient. Another geisha presented menus, and then both withdrew with bows. Musicians in a corner played a stringed koto and bamboo flute.

“That man is the spitting image of Hirohito,” Hearn said. “They took a picture of him with Mickey Mouse at Disneyland.”

“Really? Oh, good, they have *okononiyaki*,” Carrie said. “I love that, don’t you?”

“His wife’s name was Nagako too,” Hearn said. “I researched him once. I wanted to spread my wings and write about real-life evil, but my agent talked me out of it.” Plow the furrow you know Dibble warned.

“Do you remember Walter?”

“The man learning ballet?”

“His piles are gone.”

“His piles?”

“Hemorrhoids.”

“I know what they are.”

“He thought he’d need surgery.”

“Look, can we ...”

“It made me realize I haven’t had a headache since I’ve been here, and none of the little aches and pains I almost always get when I work out.”

Hearn thought of his bum knee, now limber enough to bend beneath the low table.

“Mm, here’s a dish with bunashimeji mushrooms. Japanese call mushrooms *kinoko*, meaning child of a tree. I had a boyfriend who lived in Tokyo, but our careers got in the way. I flew to Tokyo twice a month and he flew to New York the other weeks. Our body clocks were always screwed up. I was

dead on my feet when he was wide awake or vice versa. Were you about to say something?"

"I..." Hearn started.

No, he couldn't talk about the hallucinations. She would beat it out of there so fast his head would spin.

"... I found somebody's personal journal in my cabana."

"Did you read it?" she said. "I would have. You know what else is funny? There are no ants here, not one—or flies or mosquitoes. Just a few miles away there's nothing but. What's in the journal?"

"The same thing happened to the man who wrote it."

"Somebody reading our minds?"

"Yes," Hearn said. "It's happened to me again."

"Me, too. And to a friend of a friend. I guess I should say a friend who used to be a friend because we're not anymore."

She explained about Ueli and Christoph and then about Natalie and the movie and her later disappearance as they worked their way through various steamed, simmered and grilled dishes, each exquisite.

"Wouldn't it be nice if one of these dishes was just so-so?" Hearn said.

The host approached, bowing. "Everything is satisfactory?" His manner said he was agonizingly anxious to please.

"I was just saying you're a look-alike for Emperor Hirohito," Hearn said.

A torrent of words spilled forth as the man's eyes filled with tears. "How could the world expect Japan to be satisfied with a hundred and fifty thousand square miles to feed a hundred million mouths? Australia and Canada—more than six million square miles. The United States, three million square miles." War might have avoided if other countries had permitted Japanese to immigrate and become citizens. "Regrettably, I must say my people committed many crimes and atrocities. I wanted to sacrifice myself for Nippon, but the general said it was better for the country to go on living."

"He means MacArthur," Hearn said in a low voice.

"Is this dinner theater?" Carrie whispered back.

"I called him Douglas, at his request," the host continued, "but he always respectfully said Your Highness. The general was a better ruler than I could ever be." He paused as if uncertain how to continue. "It was a great relief to say to my people I was not a god."

Hearn wondered if it *was* dinner theater and they were supposed to play along. "Did you help plan the war?" he said.

“I knew everything,” the emperor confessed. “I should no longer deny it.” He wept into his hands.

“Excuse me,” Carrie said, “I’m going to the ladies room. Then let’s go, shall we? I feel like something lighter than war crimes after a meal this good.”

She got up and left. The host, hovering anxiously, was distressed even more. “I said something to offend . . .?”

Hearn’s eyes went to the raggedy soldier coming on tip-toe from the kitchen, the man who slit Pambianco’s throat with a bayonet. He held a thin cord in one hand. Before Hearn could say a word, the soldier looped the cord around the host’s neck and pulled it tight.

This is not happening, Hearn thought.

“Daw’t move,” the soldier warned him. “The fookin’ emperor’s goan to meet ‘is honored ancestors, and you don’t want to gan the same wah. Arl dee it, sure as yer sittin’ there.”

The old Jap struggled mightily for a man his age, kicking out his legs and trying to free himself from the cord, face darkening and pink tongue appearing out like a snake from a hole, and then his body suddenly went slack and his eyes turned up into his head.

“Away, wiz ready ter gan?” the soldier whispered almost tenderly. He seemed to listen for a reply and then let the owner slide to the floor with a hiss of silken kimono.

Tearing off his bush hat and wiping his brow with comic exaggeration, the soldier sat down. “Whew. Jes wish Ah’d had time to give him a kick in the cleppets ‘fore I saw him off. Corporal Small, B Company, Ninth Battalion, The Border Regiment, Seventeenth Indian Division, at yer service. Wot place is this anyways?”

Hearn felt like he was in the dreamy state just before the anesthesia takes hold. “You just killed that man,” he managed to say.

“im? They’ll giz me the keys of the kingdom and a fookin’ medal at Buckingham Palace. Hesta tobacco by chance? Ah’m dyin’ for a gasper.” He looked around. “Fancy this in the middle of fookin’ Burma. Fookin’ officers, nothin’ but the best for them. Where do yer put the Other Ranks?”

“This is South America.”

Corporal Small laughed. “Y’arlreet marra’?” He tapped his temple. “Too much sun?” He was dark and stringy, every tendon and vein showing. His face had stubble that made it look dirty.

“Where did you come from?”

“Wheer did Ah coom frae? Wished Ah knew. Cowped ower and bust me neb and next thing Ah know Ah’m in the jungle gittin’ et tae bits by leeches and joongle sores and lookin’ through the trees at this fancy R&R camp. Came in on a recce, walked into the first building and what’d Ah glem from where Ah hid but a booger menacin’ and killin’ people. Put paid to ‘im real quick.”

“I’m sorry,” Hearn said, “I don’t understand you.”

The soldier drew a finger across his throat. “Unnerstan that? Ah’m Cumbrian, marra. Lots of folks don’t get our lingo, but at least Ah’m not a sodding Yorkshireman. Them fookers can’t talk so’s anybody but them unnerstans. The family migrated Down Under when I was but wee.”

“Cumbrian?”

An exaggerated, sighing show of patience. “England, dimwit. Christsake, what yer got between yer ears, porridge? You a bleedin’ Yank?”

“Yes.” The place was empty Hearn saw as he looked around. Staff and customers had fled at the first sign of trouble.

“Thought so. This one of yer shows, then?” His sweeping arm took in the resort. Then he pointed at Carrie’s water glass. “Eh?” He drank it in three long swallows. Gasping, he said, “Emptied my water chottle in the gammy jungle and Ah’s about boogered.”

“You look like you’ve been in a war.”

“Nae for much longer with this fooker done for.” He spat on the corpse. “That’ll fettle it soon enough.” He looked around. “Best git oon mae wey before the ‘orneys show up. Arl take care of me own mess.” Grabbing the dead man by his hair, he dragged him toward the kitchen. “General Slim’ll make me sergeant when ‘e finds out,” he called out.

When Carrie returned a moment later, Hearn still hadn’t moved. “Where’d everyone go?” she asked.

“Done eating, I guess,” he said weakly.

“Everyone?”

Hearn shrugged. There was no point trying to explain what had happened, if it actually did. How was he to know anymore?

“You’re looking weird again. Did that old man creep you out as much as he did me?”

“I don’t think he’ll bother us anymore.”

“Well, shall we go?”

“Might as well,” Hearn said. He was like a cork on a mill race. What else

was there to do but bugger on as Winston Church said in the dark days of the world war.

The Club Continental had a big crowd, but they still got a table near the front. The logo on the drum set said Ted Weems Orchestra. The leader was a slim man in a white suit; he had shiny slicked-back hair.

“A banjo player in a dance band,” Carrie said. “That’s pretty old school.”

“So is the tuba,” Hearn said. A fat man with bulging cheeks had a flare with the instrument. He mopped his brow with exaggerated relief and made faces at them when he wasn’t playing.

“They really make you want to shake your booty, don’t they? What is era is it,” she asked, “Thirties?”

“That’s the Charleston they’re doing, so it’s the Twenties.”

“But they’re dressed for the ‘Thirties.’”

“Whatever.”

“I can dance to this.”

“Let’s wait for something a little slower.”

They ordered drinks and watched the couples on the floor through a blue tobacco haze. A woman in a brief outfit with net stockings wandered the room with a tray slung around her neck. “Cigars, cigarettes,” she called.

“I’ve only seen that in old movies,” Carrie said.

The brands in the tray were unfiltered Lucky Strike, Old Gold, Chesterfield, Camel and Pall Mall, all of them in their old packaging. “That’s paying attention to detail,” he said.

“Can you believe there’s no law against smoking in public places?” she said. “This is taking retro too far.”

Men squinted from fags hung on lips and threw heads back and aimed lazy smoke rings toward the ceiling. Cigarettes were smoked to the end and crushed in ash trays. Gold or silver lighters flashed as another was lit. A blue collar of smoke hung around the revolving silver ball over the dance floor.

“I know exactly one person who smokes,” Carrie said. They were doing the Black Bottom on the dance floor and faces were flushed and shiny.

“They’re good,” Carrie said of the dancers. “This must be a theme party.”

“It’s still too fast for me,” Hearn said.

“What a party pooper.”

By the time Ted Weems slowed the tempo, the drinks Hearn had downed to dull the shock had evened him out a little. He led Carrie onto the dance

floor for a stately four-step to *Do Do Do* and then more briskly for *The Varsity Drag*. She was light as a feather in his arms.

“You’ve had a lot of giggle water,” the short, compact man warned a woman hanging onto him. His accent was Scandinavian.

“I do feel a little splifficated.” Her slurred voice was American.

“We’ve got a long night ahead of us,” he said grimly.

“Oh God, don’t I know it.” They danced out of earshot.

“What does splifficated mean?” Hearn asked.

“Drunk, I suppose,” Carrie said. “They’re all talking funny. I heard a man say he was getting stewed to the hat.” They glided around the floor. “You’re pretty good,” she said.

“You should have seen me when I danced on street corners.”

“Really?”

“In days of yore.”

“I have to hear more about that,” she said. She looked at the other dancers. “Have you noticed?”

“What?”

“They’re not having all that much fun.”

It’s true, Hearn thought back at the table. They had a weary, bored look. “Maybe they don’t like the music.”

The band struck up *Red Neck Women* and it was if an invisible hand yanked him from his chair and out onto the dance floor. He did a buck with bent knees, drag-sliding his feet into the classic clog dancer’s double-toe and step. He moved into the triple and fancy double, and dancers cleared the way as he pounded across the floor repeating the steps with head thrown back and pompadour bouncing. He did the rockin’ chair and a triple stamp in place three times, and finished off with the famously difficult clog over vine. Back where he started, he did a final rockin’ chair and fell winded into his seat as applause swept the room.

“Wow,” Carrie said, greatly impressed. “Who knew?”

“Funny thing is,” Hearn said between gasps, “I never danced that good when I was young.”

“We had a real pro out there,” Ted Weems said from the bandstand. “Let’s hear it for him.” More applause. “That was Herb Blankenship on the gob stick, Mel Hyman on the groan box and Bob Heeley on the wood pile.”

“What’s he talking about?” Carrie asked.

Hearn, who had watched, panting, as they took their bows, said, “Gob stick is the clarinet, groan box the accordion and wood pile is the xylophone.”

“These people are totally into it.”

Hearn ordered another drink, the dancing having dissipated the effects of the previous ones. That solo of his had to last at least five minutes.

“Nothing for me,” Carrie told the waiter. Turning to Hearn, “I’ve got tennis tomorrow morning, bright and early.”

He excused himself to splash his face with water to cool off. Some Tourette-like force had propelled him out on the dance floor. What further mortification did this madness have in store for him?

A portly man in shirtsleeves leaned on a wash basin staring into the mirror. “Christ,” he said, “I don’t think I can go on.”

Hearn pretended not to hear him as he splashed water on his face.

“Are you on the staff?” he asked, turning to Hearn in the mirror. Suspenders kept his belly from sinking into the basin. A thick yoke of fat lay on his shoulders.

“No,” Hearn said curtly. He was against men’s room conversations. Unless you were homosexual, the list of reasons to be in there was short.

“I’ve given up expecting an honest answer from you people. All I want is to get clear of this place. I’d rather be in a workhouse with the goddamned hobos than here. Night after night, the same thing. A big feed, dancing for hours—Christ, I can’t do the bunny hug one more time—and then the screwing. You wake up with your head pounding and start all over again with a pancake breakfast and everybody looking like death warmed over. I like vacation fun as much as the next man, but it’s too much.”

He took his suit coat from a hook, slipped into it and then took a silver flask from a rear pocket and unscrewed the cap for a long swallow that made his eyes water.

“Want a swig?”

“No, thanks.” Hearn decided to bend his rule against men’s room conversation. “How long have you been here?”

“Is Hoover still president?”

“Seriously.”

“Hell’s bells, I am serious. You lose track of time. Six months might have passed, even a year for all I know. Governor Roosevelt is going to be a tough nut with half the country in Hoovervilles.”

“Is this a theme party?” Hearn asked.

“What the hell is that?” He was adjusting a maroon tie between a high stiff collar.

“Where people dress alike and so on.”

“What people are you talking about?” He turned testily to look directly at Hearn.

“The crowd out there,” Hearn said.

“Why, they’re all dressed different.”

“Everybody’s dressed for the ‘Thirties.’”

“Are you drunk?” the man demanded. “How else are we supposed to dress? Fulton, iron ore.”

“Hearn, books.”

“What kind, histories and that stuff?”

“Novels.”

“I read one of those once. It was by Booth Tarkington. You know him? He’s a Princeton man.”

“I’ve heard the name.”

Fulton searched his memory and snapped his fingers. “*The Magnificent Ambersons*—that was it. Old-money family gets pushed aside by up-and-comers. Did you read it?”

“I don’t think his books are read much anymore.”

“You’re wrong there, my friend. My secretary is a great reader, and she says he’s every bit as popular as Sinclair Lewis.”



A slim, elegant man with oiled hair slipped into Hearn’s chair. “You look like a poor little bunny sitting here all by your lonesome. Cash or check?”

“Excuse me?” Carrie said. She had been thinking about the dream. It seemed that’s all she did now.

“Do we kiss now or later?” He leaned forward, smiling.

“Never, I think,” she said.

He was dark-eyed and pale as candle wax and had a moustache as thin as a penciled eyebrow. The old-fashioned word came to her: cad. He might as well be wearing a sign.

“Okay, so the bank’s closed.” He took out a silver cigarette case from an inside coat pocket and flipped the lid open. “Ciggy?”

“I don’t smoke.”

Eyes on hers in what evidently was meant to be a mesmerizing way, he lit one for himself, then threw his head back and sent up a plume of smoke. “You’re a darby, baby.”

“Whatever that is.”

“Haven’t seen you around before. The daddy you’re sitting with looks like a flat tire to me.”

“He’s a friend.”

“Did he go to iron his shoelaces?”

“Sorry?”

“How good a friend?”

“Good enough,” Carrie said.

“Tell it to Sweeney! C’mon doll, don’t give me the icy mitt. What’s the use of Prohibition when you produce the same condition? Ha, ha—words from the song. I got plenty of heavy sugar.” He patted his inside pocket. “And look, no manacle.” He dangled a hand to show no wedding ring. His foot touched hers.

“Would you mind sitting somewhere else?”

“Aw baby, don’t percolate. We can at least punch the bag until your sheik gets back. Bring us some more panther sweat,” he told a waiter.

“Nothing for me,” she said.

“Don’t be such a pill,” he said. “I could get goofy over you.”

She batted her eyes. “I’m so flattered.”

“Billy Gallo, investments.” he said. His cologne smelled like the bay rum slapped on faces at the barbershops her father took her to when she was a girl. “What about you?”

“Alexander, investments also,” she said.

He was amusing in a repellent way. He must practice that burning look in a mirror, she thought. God help the women who fall for his line.

“Let me guess, you worked your way up from teller to something with a title, assistant to the president wink-wink.” His head thrown back, he blew more smoke into the fog overhead. He was very pleased with himself.

“Something like that.”

“Twelve hundred a year,” he said with a little smirk, “maybe a little less?”

“You’re close,” she said.

“Come with me and you’ll be farting through silk.”

“You sure know the way to a gal’s heart.”

“I don’t take many trips for biscuits,” he bragged.

Carrie kept herself from laughing as Gallo worked what he evidently thought was his sure-fire magic. He preened, wisecracked, made cutting comments about other people. “She’s a dumb Dora and he don’t know from nothin’.” All the while he was moving closer. “I was watching you on the dance

floor. Most of the tomatoes here are cement mixers, but you move real nice. I'm an Oliver Twist myself, as maybe you'll get a chance to find out someplace where the music isn't off the cob."

"You don't like the band?" she asked.

"I like my music hip to the jive."

Carrie couldn't help laughing now. "How do you stay in character?"

"In character?" He looked puzzled. "What's that mean?"

"You're all doing it. It's amazing."

Hearn emerged from the crowd and Gallo jumped to his feet. "I was just bumping gums with the frail while you were gone. Don't worry, everything's Jake." The waiter arrived with his drink and Gallo took it as he was going. "Don't get too zozzled, kids."

"There must be a quart of oil in that man's hair," Hearn said.

"He said his name was Billy Gallo."

"He looks like George Raft."

"More like Rudolph Valentino," Carrie said. "He acted like he didn't know what I was talking about when I asked if this was a theme party."

"So did the guy I just talked to in the men's room. He offered me a drink from his hip flask."

"Bathtub gin, I suppose," she said.

"We got into an argument about Hoover. Dead or alive? He was getting mad, so I left."

"It's like they're a roomful of actors."

"He said I was crazy as a skunk with hydrophobia. Exact words."

"The slang," she said. "I couldn't understand half of what Billy Gallo was saying." She was pensive. "Then there was that strange man at the restaurant."

"What say we call it a night," Hearn said.

The cobblestone streets were as empty as a ghost town and their footsteps echoed off the buildings. "You know that incident where the security people were telling everyone to get inside?" he said casually. "Turns out someone was murdered." She grabbed his arm and demanded the details. When he finished, she said, "How horrible—stabbed to death."

"I left out the grisly details." The ones he never spared his readers. "The funny thing is the police consider me a suspect."

She took a step away.

"I talked to her at a cocktail party and I write scary novels, therefore I'm a suspect."

“That can’t be the only reason why.”

“I’ve been told I can’t leave this place, even if there was a way.”

“Shouldn’t you tell the American embassy?”

“The phones don’t work so good,” he said with a wan laugh.

“They must have a shortwave radio or something. Criminals have rights even in this country.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that. Anyway, I’m not a criminal.”

“We can’t be totally completely cut off,” Carrie said.

A figure striding vitally approached and Hearn recognized Sipes, the rocket scientist and bird fancier. He was in walking shorts, an unzipped windbreaker, and field glasses hung around his neck. “Hello again,” he said to Hearn, smiling at Carrie and touching the brim of his hat. “I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure.” After the introductions, Sipes said, “Another brilliant day and now a beautiful night. I’ve never seen weather to beat it. Not too warm, not too cold—hardly what you expect in the tropics; sweating gallons is more like it. I saw the strangest sight before the sun went down, a Northern Lapwing. Thousands of miles from where it should be. I’m getting used to it by now.”

“Mr. Sipes has been seeing birds that don’t belong here,” Hearn explained.

“Global warming,” Sipes said. “But that’s just my layman’s theory.”

“Have you noticed there are no flies or mosquitoes, and have you seen a single ant?” Carrie said.

“Hmm,” Sipes pondered. “Now you mention it, no. Damned considerate, keeping those pests away. A single tree out there can be home to forty different species of ants with nests of up to a million members. There’s a six-inch beetle so strong it takes two men to pry it off if it gets hold of you. Villages and whole districts are deserted because of a species of ants as poisonous as they are vicious. Raiding parties of army ants can be fifty feet across; they kill everything in their path and take them back to the nest. They must spray here to keep out the insects, but I’ll bet a euro it doesn’t damage the environment. These people are as fanatically green as it gets, from what I’ve seen. Shocking news about the Indian swami.”

“What news?” Carrie asked.

“They found him in the river miles downstream. The crocs got him and scavengers were taking care of what was left. Little fellow like a bird, reminded me of Gandhi. He got hold of a boat, packed it with supplies, and set off for God knows where. I don’t think that river goes anywhere but deeper into the jungle. Bonkers, they say.”

“Who says that?” Hearn asked.

“The Echchols people.” He touched his hat to Carrie. “Well, right-o, I must be off.”

“That poor little man. Remember the churning when we were on the river?” Carrie asked when he was gone.

“I wish I didn’t.”

“That murder and now an accidental death,” she said.

You don’t know the half of it, Hearn thought.

It was dark except for the pools of yellow light under the old-fashioned streetlights. Hearn heard footsteps and turned to see someone running at them. “We have to run,” he said.

“I have high heels.”

“Get rid of them. Hurry!” he said.

She kicked off her shoes and they ran. The golf cart came into sight but it seemed to take forever to reach it. They piled into the cart, she turned the key, and they hummed away. Hearn looked back just as the figure in the darkness gave up the chase.

“Your voice had such . . . such fear,” she gasped, catching her breath. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know,” Hearn lied, “but I didn’t like his looks.”

She was angry. “Those shoes cost five hundred dollars.”

“There’s a killer on the loose, remember? I’ll buy a new pair.”

“You’ll have to go to a little shop on *Via Montnapoleone* in Milan.”

“We’ll work something out. I’ll borrow the cart again if you don’t mind.”

After he saw her to her door and heard the lock turn, he zipped off in the cart with the peddle to the floor. He jumped out and ran indoors. Ned Bunky was sitting in the library, legs casually outstretched and a book in his lap. “I fixed a pizza,” Ned said, “if you’re hungry.”

“I already had dinner.”

Ned attended a culinary academy in *Chef Ned, Crime Buster* to prepare for his investigation of a group that sold endangered species to gourmets who feasted on dishes like filet of Golden-rumped Sengi with *funcia di basiliscu* mushrooms found only in northern Sicily. The taste little mattered; the thrill for the jaded at these dinners was knowing no one would ever again have those flavors in that combination. At the graduation, modest Ned studied his shoes as awed instructors gushed that one day he would be the world’s greatest chef.

“I might have some later,” Hearn said. He went to the shelf where the journal was hidden and pulled it out. He riffled the pages, stopping at random.

“Heaven helps those who help themselves is a well-worn maxim, embodying in a small compass the results of vast human experience. The spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual; and, exhibited in the lives of many, constitutes the true source of national vigor and strength. Help from without is often enfeebling in its effects, but help from within invariably invigorates. Whatever is done for men or classes, to a certain extent takes away the stimulus and necessity of doing for themselves; and where men are subjected to over-guidance and over-government, the inevitable tendency . . .”

Then the exact handwriting again became slanted and hurried.

“There again! I felt the impalpable sense of being observed like a caged primate or butterfly on a pin. From whence does this sensation arise? Is it, as I fear, the vanguard of a dementia that will lead to confinement for the remainder of my life? Through the intercession of a friend, I was once allowed to visit Broadmoor not long after the patients of Bedlam were transferred there, and truly was it said that the noise was so hideous, so great, that it is able to drive a man that hath his wits out of them. If this questing force would only communicate the objective of its close inventory of my mental faculties, I would gladly surrender that which it desires rather than continue to be the subject of these tormenting searches. Although some claim to have seen me engaged in social activities, asserting they saw me tapping a foot at a musicale the night before or gambling at cards, flushed with drink, I suppose, and my tie loosened—my reply to this impertinence is a cold stare—perhaps only as an innocent means of commencing conversation. The truth is my damnable reserve, as I have written, has prevented me from establishing a relationship with another that would allow me to inquire whether he has also felt this phenomenon; yet as I study countenances, I fancy I see in some a haunted or brooding quality that is suggestive . . .”

“This is a strange place,” Ned said quietly.

Hearn did not look up from the journal. “. . . of mental disturbance perhaps relating to . . .”

“I’ve done a lot of traveling for someone my age, so I know what I’m talking about.”

“I know where you’ve been. I write the books, remember?”

Ned was too polite to be drawn into that again. “My point is I’ve never seen a place this weird.”

“Tell me about it,” Hearn said.

“Where does the power for this resort come from? I did a lot of looking around last night, but I couldn’t find any source. This place must use a lot of electricity—thirty megawatts, at least.” At Hearn’s blank look, he added, “Enough for a small city.”

“How do you know that?” The subject had never come up in a Bunky.

Ned gave a little shrug. “I know a lot of stuff.”

“I don’t know how much power a small city takes, so how can you?”

Ned put hands out like a trainer calming a rearing horse. “It’s not something a person would ordinarily know.”

“How do you know it?”

“Oh,” Ned said modestly, “I pick things up here and there, but we’re kind of getting off the track. There are no transmission lines from a hydroelectric facility or wind farm, and nothing that looks like a conventional power plant. Solar wouldn’t be up to the job, so the number one question is where does the power come from.”

“Did you see any signs of Gar-eee? That’s number the number one priority for me.” Using one imaginary character to protect him from another—that’s how bad it was.

“Another thing is the laptop. There are a lot of features I’ve never seen before. I’d like to see how the main computer works. I know where it’s located, but I’d have to break in because I doubt they’d let me look at it.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“I have your permission?” Ned said, surprised.

“Do anything you like.”

Hearn felt like a parent with a special needs child and a teenager with so much energy there was no way to keep up. His jaw nearly unhinged during an exhausting yawn.

“Thom Hearn,” Harry Hare said, coming into the room at that moment with a half-eaten leaf of lettuce in one hand, “tell about the time when Hooty Owl and Mr. Crow were on Old Man Tree and . . .”

“Not now,” Hearn said.

Harry’s face fell. It was clear he thought Hearn’s purpose in life was to spin yarns. The sun and planets threatened to come out of orbit when he didn’t.

“I’ll tell it later,” Hearn said, taking pity.

Harry brightened. “Do you promise, Thom Hearn?”

“I promise.”

He had a sinking feeling that when they had gone through all the stories,

Harry would want to start all over. I draw a line in the sand at that point, he thought.

“Someone’s been watching the place,” Ned said.

“You’ve seen him?”

“Just a glimpse a couple of times, never a clear look. I picked up his trail where he’d been resting, but then I lost it where the jungle gets thicker. He covers his tracks as well as the old Apache who taught me how to follow a trail.”

“Hawk-Flies-High.”

“You know him?” Ned said in amazement.

Hearn tried to think his way into *Gar-eee’s* mind. Nobody could know it better, but even he had trouble understanding someone so screwed up. He had set out to imagine the worst psychopath he could and succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, and gave *Gar-eee* an assortment of tell-tale mannerisms, like his habit of running a hand over his face to feel the familiar ridges and deformities like a battlefield where armies fought for a season. This reminded him of how much he hated the world that turned from him in revulsion. But that is nothing compared to how much he must hate me; it is like a noiseless trickle alongside the roaring Niagara plunging over the falls. If it hadn’t been for the fast electric cart, what would have happened? *Gar-eee* would have quickly disposed of Carrie to give me his undivided attention; he would have wrung her neck or broken her spine over his knee. Then he would have tossed me over his shoulder like a sack and taken me into the jungle to where screams couldn’t be heard.

Hatred burned in him as white-hot as a welder’s torch. *Gar-eee* no longer asked, “Why me?” That was in the early books and the river of gore since then had topped the levees. So many heads pounded to jelly, so many yards of rosy intestines yanked from bodies. *Gar-eee* didn’t remember the last time he looked in a mirror. Other faces told him all he needed to know. The victims showed astonishment first, and then repulsion. They could no more hide it than he could stop being what he was. Yes, I’m sickening to look at, his bulging eyes told them—you think I don’t know? Sausage-thick fingers with nails hard as lobster shells were cutting into skin by then. Most victims lost bowel and bladder control, and no perfume or simmering pot could give as much pleasure. It told him they had surrendered to his control over their fate. He would have liked to take his time with Faith, Hearn thought, but her nausea was probably so complete that he tore at her like a wild beast. Her blood probably was still stiff in his hair.

Gar-eee, Hearn thought, wouldn't blame himself for losing control because this whole setup was wrong. He was a meticulous planner who needed to know every inch of the ground, and took as many dry runs as necessary. Unplanned killings were bad. You made mistakes the dumbest cop could spot. The preparation for his killing gave him nearly as much pleasure as the goriness of the act itself. He worked out every detail to eliminate any chance of surprise. Practice, practice, practice—wasn't that how you got to Carnegie Hall? Hee hee. The ruined face folded itself into a hideous smile. Gar-eee liked a small joke now and then. He did his killing mostly in the suburbs, making occasional forays into cities to keep the cops guessing. He would know this was neither one nor the other but some kind of fancy-pants place where the rich didn't have to rub elbows with common trash.

But that didn't matter. I'm here, Hearn thought, the author of all that is wrong in his world. It wasn't like him to feel grateful that he had been given as much choice as someone pushing a tray at an all-you-can eat cafeteria. He celebrated diversity with his victims. A young and fit society woman fell to him two months after a heavy-set cleaning lady with bad knees. A high-profile lawyer was harvested after returning home from celebrating a victory in a sensational trial; and a black sanitation worker as he drank a bottle of beer with his hoagie.

Ed Herlihy's voice rang out: *But what a raw deal he got in so many other ways. The hate and revulsion people felt weren't easy to take in the first books. Indeed they were not. They burned like acid on his skin. And others had so much more than Gar-eee. They had pleasant lives with families in nice homes, drove fine cars and had a profusion of possessions from designer labels to the latest video games. They ate well at home and dined out at expensive restaurants. Gar-eee had to sleep rough for weeks at a time and ate from garbage cans. He was an animal, no disputing that, but he was not a stupid one, far from it. He saw the differences between his life and theirs and how Hearn had stacked the deck against him. He would want to have it explained in detail—exquisitely painful detail. So many why's had to be answered that the discussion would go on a long time.*

For as long as I'm still able to feel pain and then the *coup de grace*, Hearn thought. He looked at his fingernails. Gar-eee would pull them out to get things rolling. He was out there now watching, biding his time. The others, the teenager and the big-eared doofus in funny clothes, would give him no problem.

He must have fled into the jungle after butchering Faith to let things die down a little, and then spotted them as he was sneaking back. At the sight of

me, all his patience and discipline had gone out the window. His business with me could be settled then and there. Hearn went to the window to look outside, trailed by Harry Hare. He wondered if someone could go crazy wondering if he was going crazy. When this day-by-day erosion of sanity ended in complete madness, would it be the gibbering or catatonic kind? Catatonic sounded more restful.

He returned to the journal. The writer had the feeling he was becoming “attenuated and insubstantial.” What does that even mean, Hearn thought irritably. “Maxwell once tried to explain his luminiferous aether theory to me with, I openly avow, indifferent success; but his is the kind of intellect better able than mine to grasp and explicate the physical sensation that settles upon ...”

“Where did you find that?” Ned asked.

“It was hidden behind some other books.”

“So people weren’t supposed to read it?”

“That’s what ‘hidden’ means, genius” Hearn said.

Ned ducked shyly and ran a hand through his hair. “People call me that, but I think they’re just being nice so I don’t ...”

“I should have given you flaws,” Hearn said. “Buck teeth or a stutter—something.” Dibble had made that very point when he read the manuscript of the first Bunky. “Don’t you think the little bastard is too perfect?” “He is what he is,” Hearn replied curtly.

Ned began to whistle a song from a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta; the same number he led the symphony in when he was guest conductor in *Ned Goes to New York!* The music critics had ransacked their thesauruses for words of praise.

The journal mentioned worried-looking people who he “encountered.” What if it’s this place and not me, Hearn wondered. That lit hope in his mind, no more than a flicker, but still it was something. Ariel had felt something wasn’t right, and even the great Hermod mentioned bad spirits in a semi-serious way.

He remembered Carrie telling him about Elliott Markel, a Harvard music professor. Looking him up in the directory, he saw that his cabana was not far away. He’d drop by and, pretending to be a music lover, ask if he ever found out who that composer was, then work the conversation around to whether he noticed anything unusual about this place. He went upstairs and looked up Markel’s number, but put the telephone down again. It might be bugged. Of course it was. The whole resort was. What did Echchols think about his

talking to imaginary characters? They must have a plan in place for people who went off the rails. If it came up, he'd say he was speaking dialogue aloud to see how it sounded in keeping with his constant striving for a voice the ordinary reader could relate to.

"I haven't mentioned before, but do you know what stuff goes on here?" Ned had his thumbs in his belt loops and was looking embarrassed.

"Meetings, seminar, lectures—a lot of hot air blowing back and forth."

"I mean at night around the bonfires—the parties in the clearings."

"Toasting marshmallows over a fire isn't my thing."

"I'm surprised the police don't step in," Ned said primly.

Hearn looked at the boy. "What do you mean?"

"People take off their clothes and chase each other and . . . copulate. I think they're called orgies." He blushed furiously.

"They copulate?" This must be what Faith meant about transgressive behavior.

"They paint their bodies and wear animal heads like primitive people. Men fight over women. It's all right out in the open. I watched from a tree."

Hearn felt like a bad parent. "Sorry you had to see that."

"Oh, it's not your fault," Ned said. "I saw a woman suck off a man."

"Where did you learn language like that?"

"One of them said it."

The chaste life I gave him in the books was no preparation for the age of internet porn, Hearn thought. "I guess you were too sheltered." He should've written scenes that had Ned watching the Jerry Springer Show with his milk and cookies, or passing a gantlet of drug dealers or perverts to and from school.

"Sheltered?" Ned said, starting to smile. "I've tangled with Russian gangsters, wrestled with alligators in swamps, I've . . ."

"Storybook adventures for boys and girls," Hearn said. "This is the . . ." He was about to say "the real world."

"Other people watch them do it," Ned said, returning to the subject. "I think they're the people who work here. They're different somehow."

Hearn suddenly felt weightless as if his mind was leaving him and his body was rising in the air. "Hey!"

"What?" Ned said from far away.

The sensation stopped as suddenly as had started and his heart started knocking against his ribcage. Ned was looking at him strangely. It was as if my essence was leaving my body like smoke rising, Hearn thought. If I hadn't

shouted, it would have passed through the roof and floated away. This was even more terrifying than the hallucinations; he gripped his hands to stop the shakes. This going crazy was like coming down a staircase in the dark, not knowing where the bottom was. And who knew if even worse was on the way? He might look back on this as the golden days.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CARRIE ALEXANDER PULLED at her tawny hair with a brush. Normally this relaxed her when Asian markets signaled a bad day was blowing in like a storm big and ugly enough to have its own name. This was the first time she had needed this since arriving, but it wasn't working.

"Is everything all right?" Sarah said in her calming voice. "You seem upset."

She had not forgiven Sarah for her snottiness, but it was nice to hear even a voice generated by software.

"A man was chasing us," she said.

"Shall I inform security?"

"I bet you just did."

"Do you need something to relax?"

"No."

She was back to thinking about the weather. Apart from quick storms now and then, it had been perfect, not too hot or too cold. Yet the surrounding jungle held sweltering heat and millions of ravening insects. How was it possible? More importantly, why hadn't it occurred to her to wonder before?

She leaned closer to the mirror. Her skin looked years younger. Even the fine lines that said middle age was closing in were nearly gone. Was the water from the tap—it went without saying it was the best she'd ever tasted—piped in from a Fountain of Youth? She thought of Walter Crowell and those new ballet moves. Why had she gone along with his story, a man his age, and even repeated it to Thom? Then that weird party with the silly dated slang and the old Japanese in the restaurant pretending he was Hirohito. You just went along with things here for some reason. Christoph changes his personality overnight? Perfectly understandable. Nothing strange about Hermod reading her thoughts. Thom has her kick off a pair of expensive shoes and run for it. Why did she agree? If she was that passive and accepting in her job she wouldn't last a week.

Thom was so different than everyone else. The rest of us were in holiday mode, moving like schools of fish from seminar to cocktail party to whatever, tennis court or yoga lesson, doing the cross-pollination thing that we're supposed to, while he was the standoffish outsider. Another American, a man in a red beret named Hewlett Barnstable, editor of a literary quarterly that somebody said was influential in intellectual circles, had a pained look when she mentioned Hearn.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw his name." Barnstable groomed his wispy soul patch with a thumb. He wore a baggy, rust-colored corduroy suit worn shiny in the seat. He said he had felt soiled to be breathing the same air as a schlockmeister like Hearn. "You can't imagine how incredibly deflating it was when I learned *he* was here."

"He's that bad?" Carrie said.

"In addition to the degrading effect his books have on our culture, aspects of the man's private life are reprehensible. You've heard about the trailer park full of his kids who don't get a dime from him?"

"Really?"

"It was in the *Times*. He brawls in public and a gang of thugs travels with him; they get drunk and destroy hotel rooms, such is my understanding. Holes kicked in the walls, furniture smashed to kindling, the whole ball of wax. He pays the damages next day and it all gets hushed up. Money buys immunity, now as ever."

"He seems to me more the loner type."

"You've talked to him? I have no doubt he can be very charming when it suits his purpose if you can get past that ridiculous hair."

"I wouldn't say charming, exactly."

"I make no judgment about such things, that's not my bag and to each his own; but you hear talk he's into sado-masochism. Whippings, dog collars and that sort of thing." The poor man is almost choking to death from envy, Carrie thought. She didn't understand the book world, but guessed it was as simple as Barnstable resenting that a short-word man like Thom should have so much more fame and money than a long-word man like him.

She brushed her teeth, got into pajamas and slipped between silk sheets. Thom didn't have the rejuvenated air everyone else did. If anything, he was tenser even than on the river; edgy, drumming his fingers, stretching his neck as if it had a kink. And then that weird dance as if he was trying to quell demons inside him. You'd think that frenzy would have loosened him up, but afterward he seemed even more preoccupied.

“Are the doors and windows locked?” she asked.

“Yes,” Sarah said.

“Close the curtains.”

She concentrated her thoughts on Hermod to keep the baby dreams away. At first glance he seemed in his super fitness to be like those gym rats that drink in their reflection in mirrors as they do their curls and squats. Then you noticed his eyes. Or, more like it, drawn into them as if by a rip-tide’s pull. They were wise and full of understanding, yet had just enough mischief to say he was no candidate for sainthood. He told them he studied had physics in Heidelberg, yoga in India, acupuncture in China, rode two seasons with the Dutch team on the pro bike circuit, and could do a flip to his feet from a handstand (which he did, to applause). He had been a cowboy in Montana.

“I got caught in a blizzard once up near the High Line that lasted four days,” he said. When his horse died from the cold, he cut its stomach open and crawled in for warmth. He told these stories without a hint of bragging. “If I’d had my head on straight, I would’ve checked the weather report.”

He led a workshop called Getting There From Here that showed how to stay on target if career is the No. 1 priority. Why feel guilt, he asked, stalking around the room as they sat on mats with arms locked around knees. “You are who you are, just as other people are who they are.” Every life has its star to navigate by and who was to say one path was better than another? Whether you were good at basic research, performance art or just plain making money, this was your gift and must be honored. He taught cognitive exercises to switch off the guilt from long days that kept a person away from family. He demonstrated stretches and meditation techniques that could be squeezed into even the busiest day to gain ever higher levels of performance.

“Celebrate *you!*” he cried, clapping his hands like a cheerleader. “*You’re the reason why!*”

Carrie didn’t see much guilt looking round the room; well satisfied was more like it. They were winners all, men and women who had left the competition in the dust. In her case, she could thank good timing and mentors, not all of whom insisted that she sleep with them.

She guessed from hard faces that a trail of crushed skulls marked some climbs to the top, but others made it through brilliance and fanatical work habits. Most were hoping to learn something new to give them even more of an edge. If you’re not going forward, you’re losing ground—Hermod kept stressing that.

“You are ahead of the pack now,” he told them, “but how do you stay there?” Nodding heads said they thought a lot about that.

The women watched Hermod hungrily, and Carrie guessed that he had slept with several. It was in their coquettishness and the way they moved when his hand lightly touched a shoulder or back; also the knives in the looks they gave one another.

Carrie had been admiring him from across the room at a crowded cocktail reception as people hung on his words when he turned and looked directly at her.

“We have to get together,” his voice said as clearly as if he stood right next to her.

She had blushed and turned back to broad-bottomed Barnstable, who was talking again about Hearn. “The man is as murderous as a jihadist,” he was saying. “Somebody did a study that found he killed off his characters twenty-seven different ways. The movies show them in revolting detail I’m told.”

“Oh come off it, Phil,” she said, “there’s a difference between a real murder and something that’s made up.”

“How can you defend such a twisted man?”

“His work is about evil,” Carrie said. “I don’t think that means he’s twisted.”

“Evil—what medieval crap. The man ...”

Then Hermod was at their side and Barnstable’s face lit up with a star-struck smile.

“You are playing hard to get,” Hermod said to her.

“Whatever does the man mean?” Carrie said.

“I look for you and you are on the golf course, playing tennis or you are hang-gliding or snorkeling. It is always something.”

“Well, we are supposed to be relaxing.”

“This has been a fecund environment for thought,” Barnstable said. “The cross-pollination concept, in my view ...”

“Mr. Barnstable,” Hermod cut in, “would you excuse us for a moment.” Barnstable was astonished and crushed. He slunk away like a whipped cur.

Up close, Hermod’s turbocharged charisma seemed to throw the rest of the room into shadow. Those eyes. A kind of turquoise with gold flecks. The perfect man, Carrie thought, for the perfect place.

“So talking to me is work?” he said, smiling.

“How would I know, I haven’t had the chance until now. You’re one popular fella.”

He shrugged as if part of the job was to be dazzling but his real self just might surprise her. “Dinner some night? Just the two of us. My secretary will set it up.”

Just dinner, she thought.

We will see what happens, won't we? His voice in her thoughts again. She felt her face burn.

“Anything wrong?” he asked playfully, chewing ice from his glass, white teeth flashing in his bronzed sun-god face.

Could he read her thoughts? She put her hands to her cheeks. “It’s just this room is so hot.”

“I have noticed it myself,” he said. “I will tell someone.”

She hadn’t felt this tongue-tied since she was fourteen. “I’d love to have dinner,” she managed to say.

They chatted a little longer—she afterward couldn’t recall a word—and then the duties of host called. He gave her another smile and shrug. This social stuff is such a bore he seemed to say, but one must play the game. As he drifted away, it seemed like every woman in the room shot her a dirty look.

She tossed and turned in bed, still pumped with adrenaline. When would Hermod’s secretary call with the date? And should she suspend her rule about not sleeping with someone on the first date? What a stupid question. *Of course!* Her imagination shifted into passing gear. What if he asked her to move here to help him run Echchols? It would be impossible to talk her mother into coming. Gabrielle preferred her old dislikes—the shiftlessness of the housekeeper, rude deliverymen, the fickle weather—to the bother of creating new ones. She couldn’t very well abandon her mother, as wicked and selfish as she was. But maybe Hermod could bring that fatal charm of his to bear. Like a wilted bouquet put in water, the old coquette might revive. Roses would bloom on raddled cheeks and faded eyes brighten. Putting her hand on his, she would say she would be happy to come.

Carrie knew it was pure fantasy, but what if Hermod did ask? How would she handle the powerful women invited to the conferences? No woman’s husband was safe from them; they would begin to scheme the minute they set eyes on him, and these were alpha woman used to getting their way. But she would cross that bridge if and when she came to it. There was another problem. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t imagine Hermod as the man in the kitchen; neither child in the dreams looked a bit like him. If she were forced to choose, she wasn’t so sure Kitchen Man wouldn’t come first. The

happy-home vibes in the dreams were so mellow, so perfect. But this was silly. Hermod was real and the children were only a dream.

“I have reported an intruder,” Sarah said calmly. “Security is on the way.”

Carrie sat up as all the lights went on. “What’s happening?”

“An attempt is being made to force a window open.”

“Where?” She jumped out of bed.

“Please go into the bathroom and lock the door.”

She flew across the room and slammed the door and turned the lock. She frantically rifled the drawers for some kind of weapon, but a nail file was all she found. Clutching it, she turned off the light and put an ear to the door. Footsteps entered the bedroom and stopped as if the intruder looked round. More footsteps and then a shadow under the door. The door knob was slowly tested.

WHAM!

The mighty blow nearly took the heavy door off its hinges and sent her flying backward. Cracks of light showed on all four sides. One more and he’s in, she thought. What good is this nail file?

“I’ve got a knife,” she yelled.

Silence.

“Intruder,” Sarah was repeating in her toneless voice, “cease and desist.”

Jiggling flashlight beams outside the window danced on the bathroom walls.

“Intruder,” Sarah continued monotonously, “cease and desist.”

Carrie heard departing footsteps from the other side of the ruined door.



Hermod held her in his strong arms. I dreamed of this, Carrie thought, but now that it’s happening I can’t stop shaking enough to enjoy it. Official concern was to be expected, but Hermod seemed as stunned as if it had happened to him.

“Here’s your tea,” the stolid Captain Gottschalk said, receiving the cup from one of his men and passing it to her.

“I cannot tell you how sorry we are,” Hermod said, releasing her. He had apologized over and over.

Don’t let me go, she thought. Keep me right here where I’m safe and sound.

“I think you should have Sarah put a little more oomph in her voice,” Carrie said jokingly, “and ‘cease and desist’ might be a little legalistic in a situation like that.”

“Make a note of that,” Hermod said to Gottschalk. “You did not see the burglar?” he asked her.

“He wasn’t a burglar. Look at that door.”

“He was the same man who chased you and Mr. Hearn?”

“I can’t think who else it would be.”

“She is unable to describe him,” Gottschalk said.

“We ran as soon as we saw him. He was still pretty far away.”

“Why did you run?” Hermod said.

“Thom said to and I went along without thinking. When I asked later why we ran, he said he didn’t like the man’s looks. It sounds crazy now, but you had to be there. I think you’re dead wrong about Thom being a murderer.”

“He told you he’s a suspect?” Gottschalk asked.

“He’s not the type,” Carrie said.

“What is the type?” Gottschalk said as if humoring her.

“The man who broke in.”

“But you did not see him,” Gottschalk pointed out.

“I’m so glad I didn’t.”

The policeman reminded her of a heavy piece of furniture that would be hard to move.

“How well do you know Mr. Hearn?” Hermod asked.

“Not all that well,” Carrie admitted.

Hermod pondered. “Do you know if he is skillful in electronics and computers?”

“Sorry, I don’t.” She felt guilty talking about Thom. “Why don’t you ask him?”

“We will,” Gottschalk said.

“To me it’s obvious the man who broke in here is who you want.”

“It could be things are not what they seem,” Gottschalk said.

“What are they then?”

“We have never had an incident like this,” Hermod cut in. “We don’t really need Gottschalk and his people except that some of our guests insist on a security presence.”

“How long have you been here?” Carrie asked.

“A long time.” Hermod dismissed the question as if it were of no consequence.

“Thom wondered if since the Victorian age.”

“He said that?”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Did he explain what he meant?”

“I told him this was a wild and unexplored place back then. Wasn’t it?”

“Yes, exactly,” Hermod said. “Thousands of square miles of rainforest.”

“Why does what he said matter? It seems it’s upset you.”

But the small slit in his armor opened by his shock had closed. “It does not matter.” Hermod, once more in command. “I do not mean to tell you your business,” he said to Gottschalk, meaning, Carrie thought, that’s exactly what he was going to do, “but I would leave someone here in case the intruder comes back.”

The security chief nodded.

Hermod put his arm around her waist and bent close. “I look forward to our dinner.”



Hearn heard the slap of Harry Hare’s huge clown shoes again. “Why do I have to stay inside all the time, Thom Hearn?” he said disconsolately. He asked the question every ten minutes.

Hearn last time had said, “Because I say so.” This time he said, “The bad man is still out there and might hurt you.”

“But it’s so nice outside, Thom Hearn. Mr. Sun is smiling in the sky and the flowers are nodding their heads. If I were in Pretty Woods I would be having tea and buckwheat cakes with Grandma Hen or visiting old Bob Badger.”

“You’re not in Pretty Woods anymore, Dorothy,” Hearn said absently. He stood at the window watching for *Gar-eee*.

“Dorothy? You called me *Dorothy*! Why did you call me Dorothy?”

Hearn was going to say it was just a joke, but that would mean explaining what a joke was. The closest to humor in the Harry Hare series was when milk shot from Horace Hog’s nose.

“Never mind,” he said.

Harry guffawed. “Ha Ha! You made a mistake, Thom Hearn. You called me Dorothy. That’s a girl’s name. Ha ha ha!” He would be rolling on the floor in a minute.

“Find something to do,” Hearn said sharply.

Harry wandered off, still laughing. “A girl’s name!”

You couldn’t expect intelligent conversation from a storybook character; things had to be dumbed down for kids. He was still the same goofball who

thought the sun was a fat smiling face chased by Mrs. Moon, who had something she wanted to tell him.

But it was impossible not to like him, Hearn thought. I'll give myself credit for that. Harry had a sweet nature and clapped his hands with delight when he was pleased. He turned faucets on and off and flushed the toilets time after time, amazed by their magic every time.

"How does Babbling Brook come inside the house, Thom Hearn?"

"I already told you."

"Tell me again."

"Pipes."

"What are pipes?"

"I'll explain again another time."

Harry dreamily sauntered off, and a minute later Hearn heard the toilet flush.

He made a circuit of the cabana with a kitchen knife in one hand and a poker in the other, for all the good they would do. No one in the books or movies ever stopped *Gar-eee*; he was too strong and single-minded. And cunning. He might even now be silently tunneling from below or drilling through a ceiling.

"Hello, Mr. Hearn," Ned said suddenly at his side.

Hearn nearly jumped out of his shoes. "Christ! Don't sneak up on me like that."

"Sorry." He looked tired and grim.

"Where were you all night?"

"I broke into the Echchols office to look at their computer. Its technology is based on quantum mechanics."

"So what?"

A look Hearn hadn't seen from Ned before—disappointment.

"Don't you understand, Mr. Hearn? Nobody knows how to build a quantum computer."

"Didn't you just say they have one?"

"I should have said no one on Earth knows how to build one."

"So where did this come from, Mars?"

"This resort is an alien outpost, Mr. Hearn." Ned flopped down on a chair.

"That's it, the capper!"

"Sir?"

"The frosting on the cake. Just when I think it can't get any crazier, my

imaginary character gives me—ta da—*aliens*.” He looked toward the ceiling and spread his arms. “Bring it on, God.”

Harry stuck his head in the door. “Were you calling, Thom Hearn? Why, hello, Ned.”

“Hello, Harry.”

“I didn’t see you all last night,” Harry said reproachfully.

“I had something I had to do.”

“Thom Hearn won’t let me go outside,” Harry complained. “Why’s he looking at the ceiling?” He craned his head to look up.

“Mr. Hearn is a little upset now,” Ned said gently. “Why don’t you let us talk by ourselves for a minute?”

“Everybody gets upset now and then,” Harry said. “I remember when Mr. Turtle ...”

“Not now,” Ned said more firmly, like a big brother talking to a little one.

“Sure, Ned.” He left and a minute later they heard the toilet flush.

“Mr. Hearn,” Ned said, and Hearn recognized the serious voice he got in the Bunky books when danger threatened, “you need to get a grip.”

“I’ve tried but it doesn’t do any good. Look, here I am talking to you again.”

“I haven’t told you everything.”

“There’s more?” Hearn laughed bitterly. “Well, of course there is.”

“They’re going to kill everybody.”

“Really. You’d better make tracks in that case. And do me a favor, take Harry with you.”

“Not just everyone at the resort,” Ned said slowly. “Everyone on earth.”

“Right! Why didn’t I see that coming?”

“I need you to be serious about this, Mr. Hearn.” Disapproval was in his face, another first for him.

“Believe me,” Hearn said, “this is as serious to me as a heart attack.”

“But you look disgusted.”

“Would you rather I smiled? How’s this?”

“You’re being rude, Mr. Hearn.”

“I suppose you want me to ask why the aliens are going to wipe out the whole human race.”

Ned was silent for a moment, seeming to struggle with his temper. These sides of him never showed up in the books, Hearn thought. Who knew paranoid-delusional thinking could create a more rounded fictional character?

“Something happened to really shake them up,” Ned said, “that’s why they’re going to end the experiment they’ve been running.”

“And that experiment is?”

“Us. They’ve been guiding our development since we were hominids on the savanna.”

Hearn was grinning now.

“For eight million years.”

“So what’s shook them up after all this time?”

“I don’t know, but it was really bad.”

“Know anything about brain tumors?”

“There are a lot of different kinds, eighty-six if you include the whole central nervous system. Why do you ask?”

“I think I must have one. That would explain everything including the aliens, wouldn’t it?”

“Back to that,” Ned said, biting his lip.

“Hey, Ned Bunky doesn’t cry,” Hearn said. He put his arm around the boy’s shoulders.

Ned wiped his eyes fiercely. “It’s just that I can’t get you to listen. You keep saying these weird things.”

“Look, kid, I don’t want to make you feel bad even if . . .”

“Even if I’m just a figment of your imagination,” Ned blazed, shrugging off the arm.

Hearn sat on the sofa. Beaten down by a kid—not even a real one. “What do you want?”

“Just for you to listen.”

The toilet flushed and Harry’s laughter came from the bathroom.

“Go ahead,” Hearn said, “I’m listening.”

“Security is tight as a drum at their office, so I had to go in through a solar panel on the roof and then through a ventilator shaft. Then I disarmed the security and the backup system . . .”

“Just the highlights,” Hearn said.

“The laptop and mainframe use computer language we understand, but I realized it’s also coded for conversion to the quantum physics computer on the other end.”

“Ned . . .”

“Okay, okay. Whoever’s on this end sends a tremendous amount of data every day. How much? Roughly the equivalent of every thought everybody has

had since the dawn of time. Every day! And what we'd call the information-received replies are almost instantaneous from the Large Magellanic Cloud." He paused for dramatic effect. "That's 163,000 light miles from here. Do you know what that means?" When Hearn shrugged indifferently, he continued. "They operate under a different set of physical laws."

Hearn let that pass. "Why must all of us die?"

"You're smiling again, but it's no joke, Mr. Hearn. When the experiment ends, a terrible plague will sweep Earth and everyone will be dead within a week."

"Unless?"

"Unless they're stopped," Ned said.

Take a challenge where the stakes are impossibly high and the odds of success so small that no one in his right mind would touch it. Then add a brave young Hero who steps forward and volunteers to try. There's the set up for the next Bunky, Hearn thought. If there is one, which he seriously doubted.

Ned shook his head wonderingly. "It's funny, Mr. Hearn, but it's like my mind is accelerating to be able to understand what I'm seeing. There's no way I should get quantum computing, but I have a feeling I'm going to work it out."

"I wish I could help, but it's not a good time for me right now."

"But Mr. Hearn," Ned said, "I'm not sure I can do this on my own. This is a way more advanced civilization and ..."

"Don't sell yourself short, kid," Hearn said, patting him on the shoulder. "You can do anything."

"You might not see me for a while," Ned said.

"The answer to my prayers," Hearn said. As he passed the bathroom, he said, "Give the toilet a rest, Harry."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ARMED WITH POKER and kitchen knife, Hearn set out for Elliott Markel's cabana after ordering Harry to stay inside until he got back. It was getting dark and he wondered if the pathways and trails were empty because people were peeling off clothes and pulling on animal heads for the night's fun.

Ned had left, backpack slung over one shoulder. "Wish me luck, Mr. Hearn," he said, pale but resolute.

"All the best," Hearn said, flipping a casual salute.

The air was unpleasantly humid and warm, no better than the jungle. A couple of lamps along the path had gone out; the others had circles of bugs.

He hid the knife and poker in the bushes outside Markel's cabana. The music professor was slow answering the door and stood disheveled and swaying, his eyes bloodshot. "Yeah?" His speech was slurred. "Who're you?"

"Thom Hearn."

"Whadja want?"

"Just to talk for a minute."

"Wha' about?"

"Would it be all right to come in?"

Markel rubbed his face with both hands. "kay, sure—bad manners."

Hearn followed him inside and they sat on zebra-skin chairs, Markel lolling and squinting at him as if there was a focus problem.

"Want something to drink?" he asked, waving toward the cabana's bar. "Rows and rows of bottles, anything ..."

"A wee touch wouldn't hurt." Dutch courage, Hearn thought. He wondered if you could say that these days without someone taking offense.

He went to the scotch section and poured three fingers of Bunnahabhain and added ice. The mildest of the Islay malts, it didn't have the peaty flavor of others because its water was from an underground spring. Lord, he thought, the things that stay stuck in the mind even as it's slipping away.

“Can I bring you something?” he called to Markel who sat holding his head.

“Christ, no. The computer voice kept warning me until I said stuff it.” He looked at Hearn blearily, a comic picture of what happens when you drink too much.

“I heard you were looking for the composer of the beautiful music,” Hearn said.

“A nice woman said to try the radio station.”

“Why don’t we go outside? There are chairs on the lawn.” The wired cabana wouldn’t be able to eavesdrop.

“Maybe fresh air would clear my head.” He lurched to his feet. They went outside and sat in the lawn chairs. “Do you think it’s warm?” He slapped at an insect on the back of his neck.

“Any luck finding out who that composer is?” Hearn asked, mopping his brow with a sleeve.

“I talked to him today,” Markel said dully. “That’s why I got drunk.” He moaned. “God, I never could drink.”

“They’ve got some stuff that will fix you up.”

“Really?”

“It worked for me.”

“What was it you wanted?” Markel asked, frowning as he tried to concentrate.

“I was wondering if you’ve noticed anything unusual about this place.”

“Unusual?” He frowned more.

“Strange.”

“My God, what could be stranger than a man in the m-m-middle of the jungle who writes music better than all of the greats put together?”

Markel began to ramble about what a genius the man was and Hearn’s mind drifted. Butchering Faith Fletcher in plain sight . . . maybe Gar-*eee* was finding this place as weird as I do and it’s changed how he does his filthy work.

“Thom Hearn. I know the name from somewhere,” Markel said vaguely.

“I write books.”

“Course. Two sons are fans.” He pulled his wallet from a back pocket with difficulty. “Got some pictures.” This often happened. People did not read his books themselves, but to their amusement—a chuckle sometimes went with it—they knew somebody who did.

“I went to the radio station,” Markel said (thinking of his sons had made his eyes moisten) “and asked about the m-m-music and the man who ran

it—engineer or something—opened a drawer ... all these CDs, dozens of them, written and recorded by the guy. I asked if could listen to one, and he said go ahead. So I chose a CD at random and he played it for me. Astonishing, even better than what I heard on the radio. I was totally blown away. Couldn't say anything when it ended. M-m-made you think of Bach and Mozart again, then John Cage and Philip Glass—they're not in the same league, of course, but you get idea." He looked at his wallet as if he didn't know what it was doing in his hand, and put it back in his back pocket.

Hearn didn't get the idea, but said nothing.

"It showed total c-c-command of every musical idiom you could think of, Brazilian *choro* to court music from the Tran dynasty in Vietnam, with nods to Satchmo and Robert Plant. And the liner notes said he played *every* instrument!"

As Markel went on his words got slower and more slurred and several times he lost the thread of his thoughts. "Where was I—oh, yeah, Schubert." He had listened to other CDs in follow-up visits and begged for copies, but the station had a policy against it. "Just as amazing is the guy is a total unknown."

Hearn sipped. "Other than that, have you seen or heard anything strange? People being murdered at a panel discussion—that sort of thing." Markel gave him a confused look. "People murdered? My God, I would have heard about that, a place this small." Another blind alley. Why bother anymore? "So you met the composer today," Hearn prompted.

"I thought he'd be an old guy erudite as hell and looking like Leopold Stokowski. Instead, he's young and looks like a movie star. His name is Hermod."

"The one who runs this place?" Hearn said. "Curly blond hair, looks like the mountain-climbing type?" Markel shook his head wearily. "That's him but no way he runs a place this big. That body of work would take up every minute."

"It's not a common name."

"I'm just telling you, there's no way."

"So why hide his light under a bushel?"

"You mean why isn't every fucking orchestra in the world playing his music at every concert? We didn't get that far; Hermod is not a very friendly guy. I tried to tell him how I worship his genius, but I got a total brush off like the world's leading authority on seventeenth-century Venetian opera was too small to b-b-bother with." Markel swallowed hard and looked like his head was receiving a strong message from his stomach.

“He doesn’t care if his music is heard or not?”

“I kept telling him he has a . . . a sacred duty to share it. I was begging to let me bring his music to the public. I said I’d quit my job and do it for nothing, but it seemed like he knew everything I had to say before I said it. ‘I know, I know,’ he kept s-s-saying—shit, I can’t talk—like he was so bored he couldn’t stand it.”

“Why write music if he doesn’t care if anyone listens?”

“Exactly,” Markel said, trying to snap his fingers. “That’s what I said just before he pointed at the door. It took a few seconds to realize he was telling me to get out.” He rubbed his head as if trying to force it to think.

“It was worse than rude, pointing like that.” Worshipful fan approaches music titan, gets back of hand; no wonder he hit the bottle, Hearn thought.

“I’m thirsty as hell.”

“I’ll get you some water.” Hearn was filling a glass with ice water from the refrigerator when Sarah said, “He has had too much liquor.”

“You can say that again.”

“Was I unclear?”

“Forget it.”

“That is not possible.”

“All right, don’t forget it. Do you have something to make him feel better?”

“His breath indicates a blood alcohol content of two point two zero. I will order a compound from the dispensary. He needs fluids and twelve hours of sleep to overcome the effects of mild alcohol poisoning. Incontinence is possible.” Hearn said he wouldn’t be there for that. “Understood,” Sarah responded. He took the glass of water outside and Markel gulped it down. “Sarah ordered something to make you feel better,” Hearn said.

“Just shoot me in the head.”

“It seemed Hermod knew everything you had to say about his music?”

“It was w-w-weird.”

Hearn jerked back from the ball of yellow vomit. “Scuse me,” Markel said, wiping at the string of drool on his chin. He helped him inside to a sofa where he began to snore almost immediately. “A detected odor indicates vomiting,” Sarah said. Hearn headed back to his place, poker and kitchen knife again at the ready. If the killer was flesh and blood, how could he look so much like he imagined Gar-eee? The make-up artists and designers at Paramount didn’t come close to the real-life horror of the man he saw in the rain. What the hell is happening to the weather, he thought as the rain stopped as if controlled

by a switch. The air conditioner at the cabana had been cutting out and the heat had made Harry whiney before it came back on again.

“Why is it hot, Thom Hearn? It’s never hot in Pretty Woods?”

“I wish we were there now,” Hearn had said.

“So do I!”

A woman was walking toward him on the path, head down and lost in thought. He put the knife in a back pocket and coughed when they got close so he didn’t startle her. “*Boa tarde*,” she said, coming out of her reverie. “Good evening,” Hearn said.

“I am from Brazil. My name is Luciana. Charities.” She was a looker, the tall, stately sort.

“Thom. U.S.A. Books.”

“Rain and now so warm,” Luciana said, fanning herself with a hand. She must not know, Hearn thought. “Out here by yourself with a killer on the loose might not be a good idea,” he said. It took a second for her to process that. “*Ai meu Deus do céu!*” she gasped. He showed the poker and knife. “That’s why I’m carrying these.” It was criminal that Echchols had not given a warning. The closed-circuit TV also wasn’t working the last he looked and the phones were sketchy, but they could send people to tell the guests to stay indoors. Wanting to duck bad publicity was one thing, but this woman shouldn’t be out here by herself.

“I hear nothing,” she said with a look of horror.

“I better walk you back to your place.”

“Oh,” she said, grabbing his arm, “thank you, *senhor*.” He filled her in as they walked; skipping the gruesome parts and that he was the suspect. “I thought this place so wonderful, but no,” Luciana said. “*Odeio!* I have bad feelings. I wish to leave like the many.”

“How did they get out? Airplanes are grounded by the government.”

She shrugged. “We are friendly and one day ...” She brushed her hands “... gone with no goodbye.” She turned to him. “How they leave when no planes?”

“That’s my question,” Hearn said, “but no answers so far.”

What if did strike off on his own and had the luck to happen upon the *Obsobquiesboodelies*? He’d have to blend in with them, wearing a loin cloth for decency when his clothes rotted away, or maybe go around in the raw as they did when no outsiders were around. As time went on, there would be rivalries over women and other things, maybe leading to a fight to the death

with the head man. Years would pass and his old life would seem like it was only a dream. Rumors would reach the outside world about the white god in the jungle; anthropologists and film crews would come to investigate. There would crimes to be hidden by then because of his need to suppress challengers, and he'd be forced to lead the tribe deeper into the bush. His health would fail and a younger man rise to overthrow him. If they didn't kill him outright, he'd be cast out and spend his remaining days feeble and alone in the suffocating jungle. He saw it so clearly.

"You quiet," Luciana said at her door.

"Sorry, I drift off like that."

"Would you look-see no one isn't here?"

The furniture was antelope hide rather than zebra, but otherwise it was the same. He checked windows and yanked doors open without warning, half certain each time Gar-eee waited to spring on the other side. His heart was pounding like a tom-tom.

"Be sure to keep everything locked tight," he said. Luciana had fixed coffee while he looked.

"Thank you," she said gratefully. With her fear was gone, he was aware of her comfortable Earth Mother presence. Deep dark eyes, thick brows, lips on the edge of smiling. "Where he comes from, this killer—the jungle?"

"Nobody knows," Hearn said. Why get into it?

She froze, listening. "Do you hear?"

He felt it through the soles of his shoes before the sound registered, a faint humming like a giant hive of bees stirred up down deep in the ground. The coffee shivered in his cup and the cabana creaked.

"*Tremor de terra?*" she asked when it stopped.

"It seemed different." It was more like some huge machine had been switched on and off. Another mystery for the list.

"Something bad to happen," Luciana said with a nod.

"I wouldn't bet against it," he said.

"I feel more every day. Now killer."

They fell silent.

"I would like to go home," Luciana wistfully.

"Roger that."

"I was thinking of a woman. She dream of the devil."

"It wouldn't be surprised me if he walked through the door big as life and asked for a glass of water."

"I speaking serious to you."

"So am I . . . sort of."

"She dream of her children though she no have. She also dream of Evil One. I tell her very serious. She in danger, but no listen."

"How can she dream of her children if she hasn't got any?"

"They eggs are froze, her eggs. The children sad because they no born."

"Oh, right. But where does the devil come into the picture?"

"Oh, he in dream, but she thinks is a word . . . only." She shivered and hugged herself as if cold despite the muggy heat.

"You can lead a horse to water." The cliché generator in his mind never slept.

"You believe too?"

"Why not?"

"Many do not."

"Their problem."

"It too warm. You think?"

"The air conditioning comes and goes now." Hearn fiddled with the thermostat but nothing happened. Opening the windows was out of the question. "Try calling housekeeping," he said.

Luciana picked up the phone. "It *inoperante*."

"I have to be getting back to my place." He didn't know how long Harry would stay put. "I'll call for you."

"Thank you, *senhor*," Luciana said as she saw him to the door. "*Tenha cuidado*." She put hand to brow as she translated. "Ah, yes. Be careful."

More lamps along the path were out and those that were lighted had thicker halos of bugs circling. Time to break out the Black Flag, he thought. No security people were on patrol in golf carts. Normally, they passed along the trails every ten or fifteen minutes. There was no sign of Harry when he got back to the cabana. The air conditioning was off here again. He passed through the sweltering rooms calling for him.

"Damn it, Harry, I'm not playing a game."

Downstairs in the library he found a letter Harry had been writing in a large scrawl with cross outs and erasures.

DeAR GranMA HeN: You wILL neber BELieve ThiS. Thom HEArn iSS hEre!!! He IS tHE nicEST person But sTErn sometimes.

He checked all the places Harry liked when they played hide-and-seek, but he must have gone outside when the air conditioning quit. He was afraid

of Gar-eee, so he'd be hiding and trying to keep his quaking from giving him away. Hearn went outside with a flashlight, aware if he was around Gar-eee would be drawn like a moth to the bobbing beam. He walked around the building, playing the light here and there. When his nerves couldn't stand it anymore, he went back inside. He searched to make sure Gar-eee hadn't sneaked in while he was out. The air conditioning was working again. He didn't want anything more to do with Gottschalk and his people, but he had to do something. He picked up the phone to report Harry missing, but it was *inoperante*. He kept a vigil until his eyes wouldn't stay open and went to bed to restless, dream-ridden sleep. The heat woke him up at daybreak and he went outside. A faint, sickeningly sweetish odor hit him on the veranda.

Harry Hare was lying face up on the lawn like a rag doll. He had been strangled by his string tie and there was a glaze on his gentle, protuberant eyes. The big clown shoes made a V that wrenched Hearn's heart. His hands were frozen into tiny fists as if he had offered some sort of defense before Gar-eee's wild fury. He must have screamed when he saw him and kept screaming until he was strangled. If the sound had penetrated his exhausted sleep, Hearn asked himself, would he have had the guts to try to save Harry? It was exactly what Gar-eee would bank on. But as he thought about it, a more sinister possibility sank in. Gar-eee didn't want him to merely suffer physically. He wanted the mental suffering drawn out as long as possible. Fear and dread and—yes, of course—grief. That was why he didn't step over Harry's body and come inside and finish the job.

Hearn wiped his wet cheeks with a self-conscious look around. Harry's body was already decomposing. Strike me dead, God, he thought. Don't torture me like this.

Suddenly, Ned was at his side. "What happened?" he cried.

"Gar-eee killed him," Hearn said numbly. "I never thought he was real, not really, but I guess he was."

"Sure he was," Ned said, shooting him an angry look. He contemplated Harry's body for a moment. "What should we do?"

"You're the one who solves problems."

"Who's Gar-eee?"

"He's a serial murderer in my horror novels."

"I know about murderers from when I was in Florida."

"I know, *Ned Goes to the Everglades*. Twelfth in the series."

"Series?" Ned was puzzled.

"You solved the case of the missing grocer."

"How do you know about that!?"

"I guess you don't listen."

"Is that what you think, that I don't listen? Is that why you didn't tell me?"

Hearn didn't answer.

Ned was making an effort to compose himself. "According to you," he said carefully, "poor Harry and . . . what's his name?"

"Gar-eee. It's really Gary, but people are screaming the name." He always made it a point to tell victims who he was.

"You're saying the three of us are fictional characters you created?"

"You get it now."

"Even accepting that for the sake of argument, what are we doing here?"

"As I said before, it seems I'm going crazy."

"But I'm not."

"What you think doesn't matter. You don't exist without me."

Ned frowned as if he had come across a difficult equation or a thorny passage in Schopenhauer. "We could go round and round on that. What can you tell me about the suspect?"

"Gar-eee was a perfectly normal guy until the accident that unhinged him."

"What kind of accident?"

"He was riding a mowing machine and it tipped over. His face was mangled. The accident made him want to kill people; forty-eight so far." He couldn't stop a half-sob. "Forty-nine if you count Harry."

"Of course Harry counts. "Why did the accident make him want to kill people?"

"He wanted revenge."

"On what?"

"Fate, I guess."

"But," Ned said shrewdly, "wouldn't you of all people not have to guess?"

"Because I created him, you mean?"

"You would know what makes him tick."

"Revenge on fate—it was the best I could do. In my racket you don't have to be fancy."

"Racket?" Ned asked.

"Horror fiction." Hearn felt he could curl up and sleep for a century.

"The killer might still be in the vicinity. Maybe I better have a look around." Ned's manner said he would get to the bottom of this vile crime.

Well, of course, Hearn thought. Getting to the bottom of things is what he did in all of the books.

Counting the minor ones with walk-on roles, he had created scores of characters. For every major one there was a supporting cast of salesclerks, carpenters, gas station employees, waitresses, school teachers, cops, dentists and others who bought a moment's pause from the slam-bang action. What if they began to show up?

He was bothered by something Ned said. The boy had intuited that he was responsible for Gar-*eee*'s havoc. Plastic surgery would have fixed the disfigurement. Just write a brilliant surgeon into the story; a chapter where Gary—not Gar-*eee*—weeps from happiness when the bandages are taken off. But that was another kind of story and another kind of writer. It was too much to ask that Gar-*eee* understand the obligation a writer had to his fans. All he wanted was to get even with the bastard who screwed him up.

When Captain Gottschalk returned for more questions, he would not be interested in any discussion about the nature of illusion and reality. He would look for the source of the smell, which was unmistakable to any seasoned policeman. A vulture circled overhead. It would bring others and eventually someone would come to see what was attracting them. He ran to the golf cart assigned to the cabana, ripped off the blue tarp and returned for Harry's body. He rolled him up in the tarp, piled him on the back of the cart and set out for the river. He lugged the tarp through shrubs and ferns to the water and rolled the body out into the slow-moving current. It hadn't traveled ten yards before it was yanked underwater. Hearn got a quick glimpse of yellow underside as the crocodile spun in the water.

He took the tarp back to the cart and returned to his cabana where he washed it off with a hose. Rather than risk Sarah picking up the smell of death, he stripped and walked inside for a shower. After he dressed, he dug a hole and buried the clothes. He paced back and forth in the cabana as his mind spun its wheels.

A burst of drumming came from the front door. Looking out the window, he saw Gottschalk with two members of the security force. Pull yourself together, he told himself. The next few minutes decide what happens. If I screw up, years might pass waiting for the mockery of a trial. His mind formed a picture of a sunbaked courthouse from the colonial era, flies buzzing and ceiling fans slowly turning, a judge dozing in the heat, a donkey's bray coming from the market where goods were sold from blankets on the ground. He

was barefoot and in rags, thin gray hair down to the shoulders, emaciated and toothless from prison food, weak eyes blinking in the light.

What a curse imagination was!

He opened the door with a smile he knew was sickly. "Yes, Captain."

"I wonder if you've recalled anything that would help our investigation."

He squeezed past followed by the others. The last one in gave Hearn a little shove for more room. Or perhaps it was to remind him they had a right now to come and go as they pleased.

"I told you all I know."

"Are you upset about something, Mr. Hearn?"

"Your visit might qualify as 'something.'"

The others left for another search of the building while Gottschalk settled on the zebra-skin sofa. "I suppose search warrants are not necessary in this country," Hearn said.

"Practically speaking, no."

"Well, I have nothing to hide."

Except for that smell that still lingered faintly. Gottschalk rubbed at his nose as if it hovered there on the edge of recognition.

"We want a sample of your DNA. Saliva on a swab or a snip of your hair will do." He produced a small pair of scissors and offered them. "We prefer cooperation ... but."

"Great," Hearn said. "I hope this will clear things up."

He snipped a lock of hair and handed it to Gottschalk who put it in a clear plastic bag. "I'm free to go when you get the results?"

"That will take some time, I'm afraid."

"How much time?"

"Months."

"Months!"

"The closest forensic laboratories are in Brazil. It is a slow process at the best of times, and present conditions are not the best."

"You mean the rumors of a coup?"

"They are more than rumors now. Towns have fallen to the rebels. They are being helped by mercenaries from outside the country."

"I can't hang around for months."

"You have no choice."

"Why does the air conditioning keep going out?" Hearn said quickly when Gottschalk touched his nose again.

“They’re working on it.”

When they cleared out fifteen minutes later, the toilet lids having been lifted again, Hearn went to the Echchols office. The bloodless secretary was gone so he walked through the door to Clymond’s office. “What can I do for you this time, Mr. Hearn?” he asked. He lifted the razor creases of his trousers before taking a seat. The part in his hair was as exact as if a finely-calibrated instrument had drawn it. The dark suit, burgundy tie, manicured and buffed pink nails below French cuffs would have looked impressive on somebody who looked less like a mole, Hearn thought. Clothes don’t make the man whatever they write in the fashion magazines.

“I need to get in touch with the State Department. If I’m under suspicion, I need a lawyer.”

“There is no if about it. I’m sorry to say the telephone service is not functioning.” His drooping eyelids gave the usual impression of boredom. “The defalcation of a government minister could not be anticipated.”

“You must have a shortwave radio for emergencies.”

“This situation has made us aware of that lack and it will be rectified at the first opportunity.”

“This is the Third World where anything goes. You could’ve anticipated that.”

“Our other guests are quite satisfied.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“It is a fact, Mr. Hearn.”

“Facts around here don’t seem to be what they are elsewhere.”

Clymond did not reply.

“I met a woman who wants to leave as fast as she can, and I bet there are others. It’s hotter than hell when the air conditioning goes out, which seems all the time now.”

“What is her name?”

“Luciana. I didn’t ask her last name, but she’s from Brazil.”

Clymond turned to his computer terminal and rattled keyboard keys. “There is no one by that name in residence.”

“Look again.”

“No one from Brazil at all, as it happens. We have had many participants from there in the past, but presently . . .”

“I talked to her last night,” Hearn said, working to keep from losing his temper again. “I walked her to her cabana.”

“Which cabana?”

“Six down from where I’m staying.”

More clattering on the keyboard. “That building is empty.” Clymond turned to him from the screen, his expression blank.

“I know what I saw.”

“Mr. Hearn . . .” he began.

“Look up Ariel in your data bank. There’s another who thinks some weird shit is going on.”

“May I ask where you saw her?”

“She was . . .” Hearn stopped. “Why do you want to know?”

“We need to speak to her.”

“I don’t think she wants to speak to you.”

“Did she say why?” Clymond fiddled with a cufflink, cool and detached.

“Sure.”

“But you don’t intend to tell me.”

“Maybe she’s also heard the situation’s getting worse.”

Clymond’s gaze returned to him. “The situation?”

This functionary wasn’t who he should talk to about the murders, so he ad libbed. “Towns have fallen to the rebels, is what I get. Mercenaries are in the fight.”

“A few small villages,” Clymond said dismissively. “The government is confident the situation will be resolved.”

“What would you expect them to say, ‘The jig is up, save yourself while you can’?”

“If the government did fall, I am sure we would be able to reach an accommodation with whoever replaced them.” He made it sound like a minor plumbing problem.

“What do you know about these rebels?”

“The fighting is hundreds of miles away. There is nothing to worry about.”

“That could change in a hurry.”

“No use borrowing trouble—is that the phrase?”

“This has been a farce from the start. First, the fuck up over the invitation.”

“We’ve had that discussion. To anticipate your next point, we couldn’t have known the pilot was in poor health.”

“Ever heard of medical exams? The man would have been grounded in a minute.”

“And the forest people are normally reliable,” Clymond continued.

“Yeah, I got the party line. What does that mean, sixty percent of the time—eighty? What happens to the other poor bastards who don’t get met?”

“Everyone is asked at the end of a conference how the experience could be improved,” Clymond said. “Your criticisms will be given full consideration.”

“And what about the orgies? I’m no blue nose, but if you’re getting tax money, John Q. Public isn’t going to like it.”

“Our conference participants are adults. How they spend their time is their business. And no, we do not receive tax monies.”

There must be some way to blast through this smugness. “What about the maniacs killing people?” The adjunct professor had knocked off two before getting it himself. Then there was the Japanese guy at the restaurant.

“I am aware of only one victim.” Clymond said pointedly. His expression said he knew who the killer was, but the Code of Resort Managers kept him from saying.

“I gave your security people a DNA sample that will settle that,” Hearn said.

Clymond acknowledged this with a small nod. “I hope you don’t decide to leave on your own. That is a hazardous game, as one guest tragically learned.”

“I’m glad you mentioned him. How long was the swami one of your guests?”

“I would have to check his file, but several months. He was a valuable participant in the community discourse until . . .” Clymond hesitated.

“Until he couldn’t take it anymore?”

“Until he became a source of concern.”

“If you think he was going around the bend, why didn’t your health monitoring system pick up on it?”

“Sarah is not programmed for that. One man’s behavior may be considered bizarre according to one set of standards, but perfectly normal by another. You were talking to yourself before you asked that the monitoring be discontinued. That might have been a source of worry to some.”

“That’s how I try out dialogue.”

“You prove the point, Mr. Hearn.”

“Just out of curiosity, how would you handle an acute case of psychosis?”

“We have a room in the dispensary for confinement until other arrangements are possible.”

“Confinement—is that it?”

“There are anti-psychotic drugs.”

“You might be talking about a long time with this coup. People could get worse in the meantime, couldn’t they? If it was severe?”

“You seem very interested in the question.”

“Don’t you think somebody should? Maybe the swami would be alive today.”

“That’s a hypothetical question.”

“If someone had a bad enough breakdown, can you get a plane in here to take them out?”

“It seems the rebels have a few aircraft, so the no-fly rule is being enforced with extreme severity. It is shoot-on-sight, we are told.”

“So if they’ve got planes it doesn’t mean anything that the fighting is hundreds of miles from here.”

Clymond rose to his feet to signify the press of duty sadly required that their discussion must end. “Is there is anything else?”

“There’s a man at the Japanese restaurant who said he was Emperor Hirohito. Another guest will confirm that.”

“The staff is encouraged to get into the spirit of things. Many are trained as actors.”

“What do you mean by the spirit of things?”

“Did you ask if he was Emperor Hirohito?”

“I didn’t have to.”

“It would seem then he slipped into a role to be entertaining.” He paused. “Or do you think there is another explanation?”

“Did something happen to him?”

“Happen?”

Hearn thought he had said enough. “Thanks for seeing me.”

“My door is always open,” Clymond said.

So the Brazilian woman had been expunged from the record like Natalie Beresford and who knew how many others. Hearn walked along the lake rather than return to the cabana. Even the wild reeds at the shoreline were artistically shaped. No detail was too small for these perfectionists. Oompah music from the brass band reached him from the excursion boat out on the lake. The crowd at the rail seemed thinner.

“Psst.” The sound was from a patch of ferns; Hearn saw Ned Bunky hiding; he had streaks across his face like a Special Forces soldier and leaves were attached to his clothes for camouflage.

“What’re you doing there?”

“I’m hiding. Try to look natural.”

“Come out of there.”

“I can’t, they’re looking for me.”

“I’m the only one who can see you.”

“They chased me into the jungle. I lost them by going into the river. I know there are crocs but I had to take the chance. I went down river about a mile and worked my way back through the jungle, taking it slow and easy. I beamed a leopard with a rock just as it was about to jump me.” The kid had a rocket for an arm, Hearn recalled. *In Ned Takes Charge*, he rushed from the state debate final, where he took first place, to the league championship game, where he threw a no-hitter.

“Could you sit on the bench?” Ned asked. “It looks funny, you standing there looking down at me.”

“Sure, if you can explain to me how the security people can see a figment of my imagination.”

“Did poor Harry smell like a figment of your imagination?”

Hearn sat down.

“Please, Mr. Hearn, we don’t have time for that anymore. I’ve started a guerilla campaign following Sun Tzu’s thinking. Around dark I noticed people heading for the maintenance yard. The ones who work here, I mean, not the people who go to the meetings and parties and stuff. No matter what direction I looked, they were all converging on the repair shop. Or what I thought was the repair shop.”

“Workers punching out on a time clock, what about it?”

“If it was a meeting, I wanted to eavesdrop on what they were saying.”

“Who is Sun Tzu?”

“He wrote *The Art of War* in the Sixth Century B.C.”

“How do you—never mind.”

“His chapter on the strong and weak points of an enemy made me think of messing with their systems by planting viruses. That’s why the air conditioning and phones went out, and a lot of their street lights and security cameras. I’ve got some other surprises too. Mr. Hearn, it’s like my mind is working at warp speed.”

Hearn looked up into the blue sky with its tufts of white clouds. A flight of birds arrowed past from the southwest. “I put Harry’s body in the river. A crocodile ate it.”

“He should’ve had a decent burial.” The boy seemed to steel himself. “Getting back to what I was talking about, I snuck up to the shop. I saw through the window that every worker was plugged into small boxes.”

“I don’t follow,” Hearn said.

“They were being worked on.”

“Afraid I still don’t get it.”

“They go in at the end of the day for downloading and diagnostics.”

My fantasy is having fantasies, Hearn thought. This is getting hilarious.

“What tipped me off,” Ned said, “is when they aren’t doing a job or something they sit down and don’t move.”

“People sit down when they’re tired, I’ve noticed it myself. They also sleep in beds at night.”

“But real people move even when they’re resting. They turn their heads and look around, cross their legs or scratch or whatever—they don’t just sit like a statue. But these things don’t move even when they’re sitting together—not talking by the way— unless a real person is spotted. Then they do the stuff real people do, turn their heads, scratch and so forth; talk to one another. I think they must go into a hibernation mode when they’re not in use.”

“Funny nobody else notices.”

“People look without seeing, but I study things because I’ve trained myself to do that. Every detail is important when I’m on a case.”

“I’m going now,” Hearn said, standing up from the bench.

“Mr. Hearn,” Ned implored, “don’t tell anyone I’m here. I’ve got a place spotted for a hideout in the jungle.”

“Don’t worry,” Hearn said, “wild horses couldn’t drag it out of me.”

Further along the path was one of the racks of mountain bikes scattered around the resort for guest use. Hearn mounted one and peddled toward the airfield. He passed strollers who had lost their isn’t-this-fun look; some returned his nod with surly looks. The sticky weather with the air conditioning breakdowns and the other snafus were bound to affect moods. The rich and powerful were used snapping their fingers to have every need and appetite satisfied. Word getting around that they were stuck until a ramshackle government gave the green light wasn’t going to make them happier. He rode for twenty minutes until the airfield came into sight; a low metal building served as the terminal. A dozen corporate jets were tied down on the apron, others were parked in hangars. Red pumps for aviation fuel stood under little roofs that sheltered them from the direct sun. The place had a deserted air; he watched a while but saw no one stirring. He was thinking of riding closer for a better look when three big German shepherds busted around a corner of the terminal and came at him in a dead run. Hearn spun the bike and rode

off as fast as he could, hearing claws behind dig in closer and closer. He had just enough lead that they began to run out of steam yards short of his rear tire. They had turned back for the terminal when he threw a quick look over his shoulder. He stopped to suck the heavy air into his lungs. Why were dogs needed? Then he realized the answer. Some of the wealthy, powerful men who owned these private jets knew how to fly them and might say screw it and attempt a getaway.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CARRIE LOOKED APPROVINGLY in her compact mirror and snapped it shut. In the right light, she thought, I might pass for someone with college reunions still in the single digits. The trick was keeping out of the wrong light. A secretary had called and said Hermod wanted her to be at his place on the lake at eight o'clock for dinner. She wore a salmon and pink silk cocktail dress from Chanel with a sexy halter neck and shimmery gold thread. The ankle-strap stiletto heels weren't comfortable, but she could kick them off at some point.

The phone rang and Hewett Barnstable was on the other end. "Carrie," he asked in a trembling voice, "can I see you right away?"

"I'm just on my way out."

"Please! I can be there in a couple of minutes."

"I'm sorry, I ..."

"Please!"

"Okay, but just for a minute."

Barnstable looked beaten when he got there, all the pride and arrogance of a public intellectual and frequent PBS and NPR guest gone. He removed his red beret and wiped a bald head with a handkerchief. "I need a drink." The bottle rattled against the glass as he poured a stiff one. He took a long swallow. "Look." He held his hands up as if offering them in evidence at a trial. "I'm shaking like a leaf."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm going insane, that's what's wrong." He flung himself down in a chair. "I started having fits last night."

"Fits?"

"I suppose there's a technical term."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I had a feeling like I was disappearing." He buried his face in his hands. "Oh, Christ. I feel like I've barely begun to live my life and I've got so much

to give to the world.” He lurched back to the bar and finished his drink. “It began a couple of days ago when it was like something was in my head poking around at old memories, like when I made a poo-poo in my pants in Miss Pelletier’s kindergarten class. She paraded me to the office and everyone knew. The plagiarism in my doctoral dissertation; the people I’ve betrayed; the lovers I two-timed. Faces accused me, men and women passing before my mind like a montage of B-movies from the ‘Forties.” He took a sobbing breath. “There’s more I can’t tell you. Oh, it was horrible.”

“A lot of people have had that feeling.”

“I don’t care about them!” he cried. Barnstable threw himself on the floor, his shoulders heaving. When his sobbing subsided, he rolled over to show a wet face. He wiped away the tears. “You look lovely,” he said almost accusingly.

“I’m having dinner with Hermod.”

“I never get a second look, yet everyone else is invited to dinner.” His mouth twisted with bitterness. “And who knows what else.”

“Sorry, but I have to go.”

Barnstable turned ingratiating. “Could I stay here while you’re gone? I’ll just stretch out on the sofa with a blanket if you’re late—or don’t come back at all.” He clapped a hand across his mouth in a parody of someone who had said too much.

What a nasty man, she thought. “Why did you call me?” Her voice was cold.

“There wasn’t anybody else,” he admitted. “Friends I made aren’t here anymore. They left without even calling to say goodbye.” He put out a pleadingly hand. “I’m afraid to go back to my place.”

“Okay, you can stay” she said, “but stay out of my underwear drawer.” It was mean after what he’d been through, she thought, but some people benefited from a good kick in the pants. Anyhow, he looked like the type. There was a lot less foot traffic on the trails and it made her think of the disappearing people like Natalie Beresford and now Barnstable’s friends. She’d get an explanation from the horse’s mouth.

She stepped from the golf cart and clicked up the stone path to the lake-front cabana set in a garden of flowering shrubs. The door was ajar and she entered a large room that needed only trumpet flourishes to do justice to its wealth and sophistication. Paintings on the wall ranged from landscapes in the style of Constable to Cezanne-like abstracts. The polished hardwood floors had oriental rugs and groupings of modern furniture in blue leather. Lovely music like that time on the resort radio came from hidden speakers.

“Hello?” she called.

“I will be right with you,” Hermod called from another room. “I opened wine on the bar straight ahead. Help yourself.”

She poured a glass of superb white French burgundy and gazed out the floor-to-ceiling window at the emerald lawn running down to the lake that was turning purple in the fading light. Japanese lanterns swaying in the light breeze lit a path to a dock where a sleek boat with furled sails gently rocked. No wonder so many women climbed into bed with him, she thought, Hermod was masterful at creating a seduction scene.

He was suddenly at her side as she studied a still life good enough to hang in a fine arts museum. She turned, startled, to look into those fatal eyes.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.” He stepped back to look. “You look simply beautiful. Is that Hermès *Eau des Merveilles* I smell?”

“It is.” How many men would know that?

“Excellent taste.”

“I was just admiring your art collection.”

“Oh,” he said dismissively, “just something I do in my spare time—when I have any! But thank you.”

“You painted these!?”

“I am afraid I did,” he said in a no-big-deal way. “I cannot make up my mind which style I like best.”

“Wow, I am so impressed. Next you’ll tell me you wrote that music we’re listening to.”

“Well,” he said carelessly, “I did.”

Carrie was too astonished to speak.

He was dressed in loose blouse and ballooning trousers like Russian peasants in the time of the czars. His cap of thick curls seemed spun from gold and his feet were bare. She felt herself drowning in those eyes. Whoa, she thought, don’t let the horses run away with you quite yet.

Hermod unlocked his eyes and looked away with a little smile as if aware of his power. “Tell me about yourself,” he said as he poured himself a glass of wine. “I read what you sent us, but that is only CV material. Who is the real you? What’s your life like?”

“My life’s really boring,” Carrie said. “I work like a slave all day and go home. The next day, I do the same. I’m pretty much what you see is what you get.”

The days piled up, the weeks became months, the months got neatly stacked

into years. They said when you got older time passed faster. She had begun to notice.

“Husbands, boyfriends?” he asked over the rim of his glass.

“None of the first, a fair number of the second.”

“Never a Mr. Right? Hard to believe.”

“You mean for a woman my age?”

“Do not put words in my mouth,” he said with an easy laugh. “You look very youthful.”

“The closest I’ve come is Mr. Maybe.” But as long as we’re on the subject, she thought, are you interested in applying for the job?

Hermod smiled.

“You know,” she said blushing, “sometimes I get the feeling you read minds. That would be so unfair. Tell me it’s not so.”

“I am not a mind reader,” he said dutifully.

“Say it like you mean it.”

“Why would it be unfair?” Another smile played at the corners of his mouth.

“It’s like being able to see the other hands in a card game.”

“So competitive,” Hermod said. “I bet you’re the type of person who has to win all the time.”

“Sometimes I think a draw would be all right.”

“If Mr. Right came along?”

“How did we get stuck on Mr. Right?” Carrie said. “What about you? Tell me all about yourself. Start with your name.”

“Hermod is Norse for messenger of the gods.”

“So are you?”

“Am I what?”

“A messenger.”

“That is like being asked are you good or bad.”

“I know people don’t think about good or bad one way or another, or if they do they think they’re irrelevant.” If the price was right, they would sell securities to give the Tutsis the money to kill Hutus again. They would justify it by saying somebody else would raise the money if they didn’t, so why not them? It was just business, nothing to get your knickers in a twist about.

“Surely not to care one way or another is itself bad,” Hermod said.

Was he asking a question or taking a position?

“You ought to have this discussion with my friend Thom. All he writes about is good and evil.”

“Ah, Mr. Hearn.”

“You’ve read his books?”

“You have not?”

“They’re not for me, sorry to say.”

“The violence, I suppose. Yet they say good seems to triumph in the end. Some say his work has a shallow sentimentality unworthy of serious attention.”

“But we’ve got off the subject again, darn it. Tell me more about you.”

“What would you like to know?”

“These beautiful paintings speak for themselves, and a man I met who knows a lot about music said whoever composed it is the greatest in history.”

“Professor Markel?” The contempt in his voice said he didn’t think enough of him to comment.

“Okay, forget him and forget the art. Where you come from, what did your father do, your mom—that sort of thing. You’re a wonderful teacher. Where’d you learn that? Come on,” she said with a laugh, “give”.

“You said what you see is what you get. I like that.”

“Well, if you’re just going to be a big old secret.”

“It is just that we are together such a short time.”

“How do you know?” she said boldly. “Maybe we’ll live happily ever after.” The lights dimmed.

“Damnation!” Hermod strode to a telephone, put the receiver to his ear and banged it down. “It is malfunctioning again.” Carrie was startled by his fury. The lights came up again. “What is happening?” he said more to himself than to her.

“It’s just a technical glitch,” she said.

“You do not understand,” he said. “That just does not happen at Echchols.”

“The air conditioning goes in and out.”

“Something is interfering with our systems, but it cannot be!”

“Maybe there’s a virus in your computer?”

“Not one, but many. The question is how they got there. It would require a level of knowledge and skill that is . . .”

She thought he was about to say “impossible” but caught himself.

“... very great.” He was sunk in thought.

“We have some very smart people here.”

“No, it is not even remotely possible.” There was something snotty in the way he said it—she heard condescension and impatience, even contempt like for Markel.

“Don’t bite my head off,” she said with a half-laugh. “I’m just trying to help.”

“Sorry, sorry,” he said hastily, reaching out to touch her arm, the smiling charmer back again. He walked to a closet and came back with yellow slickers. “House rule in case we get a spanking breeze. Bring your glass. The *hors de oeuvres* are on board.”

“But it’s so nice here.” Carrie thought about all the time and effort on her hair. The atmosphere in the ultra-chic village beauty salon had turned poisonous with envy and jealousy when she said she had a date with Hermod.

“Every hair in place,” he joked, “are you sure that is your look?”

“I’m pretty sure windblown isn’t, but what the hell.”

“Leave your shoes behind,” he said. “You will not need them.”

Hermod motored out into the lake and raised sails and they glided before a light wind. The lake was a gorgeous blue and the jungle turned green-gold in the last light. Looking like a hero in a myth, he sat on the transom and steered the wheel with bare feet while they sipped wine and nibbled little squares of toast with truffle pate. She wasn’t prejudiced against pretty men, but the ones she had met were generally worthless unless looking good in their clothes counted.

“I love sailing,” he said.

“Who would ever guess?”

If we don’t end up in bed tonight, she thought, it won’t be my fault. The shore was receding and the lake was as smooth except for the creaming bow wave. But a dark purple cloud loomed to the north like a heavy brow.

“Looks like some weather over there.”

“It will not bother us,” he said, not bothering to look. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Never more than now.”

“Your conference is nearly over.”

“I’ve never known time to go by so fast. I’ve learned so much.”

“We have never had your kind of expert. It is a fascinating field.” She had been afraid the subject was too technical, but the questions that were asked in the formal and informal gatherings showed that the very smart people here got it. “You need to have an acute understanding of human psychology and the interplay between greed and fear,” he said.

“That sure helps when the money is big,” she said with a laugh. “Sometimes people freeze up.”

He revealed a deep understanding of financial markets as they talked and seemed to know all she had to say about them since arriving. Tapes of

all the lectures and panel discussions were available, but he even seemed to know comments she'd made to potential clients chatted up in violation of the Echchols rule against the crass conduct of business. Had they been passed on and was she was about to be called on the carpet?

"You are welcome to stay longer."

Her heart skipped a beat but she remembered it was an invitation a lot of people got. "Well, I really should get back."

"You know about the internal problems in the country?"

"Thom told me there's trouble."

"No planes are flying right now." He looked like he knew what she was going to ask. "We've had to use alternative means for guests whose time here is over. How well do you know Mr. Hearn by the way? You say he is a friend."

"He doesn't tell you that much about himself." She laughed again. "Like someone else I could mention." Hermod merely smiled. "I hope you can explain something for me. There was a woman staying here named Natalie Beresford."

"I know Natalie. She liked the movie I wrote and directed."

"The six hour movie?" Flabbergasted didn't begin to do justice to it. "That too!"

"I edited it down from just under a few hundred hours of film. You always shoot more than you use."

"How can you do all these things?"

"It is just a matter of using your time wisely."

The wind began to sing in the rigging, and she saw over his shoulder that a squall with a curtain of rain was fast gaining on them. "Shouldn't you shorten sail a little?"

"Do not bother about the weather," he said carelessly. "You have skippered before?"

"Nothing this big."

Only J-Boats off Martha's Vineyard where you learned when it was smart to motor back to the harbor with bare poles. She was used to male egos on the water and that it was sometimes better to keep advice to yourself. And she didn't want a misstep now.

"I am trying to understand what it is about Thom." Hermod's manner was casual.

"What about him?" The wind began to sing in the rigging.

"Ever since he came things have happened."

“We got here at the same time, remember? Something big and awful was after us.”

“It wasn’t explained?”

“What wasn’t explained?” Carrie said.

“What you heard was a system we have to protect the indigenous people from encroachment by stronger tribes. Sound and fury signifying nothing, but it is enough to scare intruders away. I am afraid you fell into that category at the time. “But we were invited and expected,” Carrie said.

“Thom Hearn wasn’t and you shouldn’t have been on that plane with that pilot. It was the first of a number of strange incidents and his connection to them is what I do not understand.”

“Like the woman who was murdered?”

“You know about that? As it happens, Hearn was seen talking to her. We were discreet because we did not want people upset. Yes, that is one of the connections.”

“He told me he just talked to her for just a minute. You should find the man who chased us, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s the killer and also the man who knocked my bathroom door in.”

The squall was almost upon them.

“The details are very unpleasant in the woman’s murder—hideous, actually—but they seem very close to what a character in his books does to his victims.”

“His books are novels, made-up stuff for a target audience.”

“The man that you say chased the two of you? Did you actually see that person?”

“No,” she admitted. “I ran because Thom did; he sounded so scared. But who broke into my place if it wasn’t him? You saw that door; Thom doesn’t have that kind of strength, hardly anyone does. But about Natalie, I talked to her on the phone one night and the next day she was gone and no record of her ever being here.” Hermod was concentrating, oblivious to everything else. He said, “We know everyone who is here and this man who ...” The sails filled with a sound like a pistol shot and the boat heeled over, burying the port rail in the water. The noise of things smashing came from below in the cabin.

“Woo,” Carrie yelled.

Hermod skidded on his rear across the transom, nearly losing his grip on the wheel. He looked over his shoulder at the squall that was now upon

them and turned back to her, utter disbelief in his face. “This is impossible!” Blowing rain and spray stung them and Carrie struggled into the slicker heavy enough for a century of nor’easters. Instead of shortening sail or dropping off the wind, Hermod seemed frozen at the wheel as the boat bucketed along. A stronger gust hit and the boat nearly capsized and she was thrown overboard. She pulled at its stiff buttons as she sank in the lake from the weight of the slicker. The collar button finally was freed and she worked on the next and the one below that. At last she slipped free and kicked for the surface as if in a slow-motion dream. She bobbed up with the air in her lungs nearly gone. The boat already was a quarter mile away. She treaded water waiting for Hermod to come about; any second now she keep saying to herself. But it kept going until hidden by the tail of the squall.

He had left her to drown.

She tried to master the fear as she looked at where she thought the shore was, but darkness was deepening all around. Oh, God, she thought, save me. Circling as she dog paddled, at last she saw a faint light and began the Australian crawl learned at camp in her girlhood. She was a good swimmer but didn’t know if she had the strength to make it all the way. She tried to clear her mind and just concentrate on stroke and kick, but it kept rewinding to Hermod leaving her to die.

Why? *Why?* *WHY?*

The lactic acid build up in muscles was slowly turning her arms and legs to cement. She was swimming slower and the light on shore seemed no closer. She turned over to backstroke again. She had been afraid of lake crocodiles at first, but it was hard enough to concentrate on each stroke and kick without worrying about them. She swallowed water when a wave burst over her; her rhythm was broken and she splashed wildly. “Help!” she cried.

Somehow she got going again, even more slowly now, as a thought began to grow: why not give up, just yield to the inevitable and sink, letting her arms float as her dress billowed like a parachute. As she labored, the thought steadily seemed more reasonable; really, what a relief it would be. A white light growing brighter and then comes the dreaming transport where death is explained. She had read about it many times and . . .

“I’ve got you ma’am,” a voice said as a hard, lean arm encircled her neck from behind. “Just relax now.”

Carrie went slack and felt herself being turned on her back, then they moved slowly through the water, her rescuer breathing deep and easy. Knowing from

Red Cross training it was easier if she didn't move, she focused on the galaxies overhead. They blurred as water washed over her face and then became sharp again and then blurred. Over and over. At last his feet touched bottom and he was dragging her up on the shore. She had no strength left and felt her heels digging grooves into squishy mud. "You'll be all right, ma'am." Her body shook uncontrollably as he laid her on dry ground. "I'm going to get my jacket for you." He came back with a red windbreaker and spread it over her.

"Why," she said, "you're just a boy."

"Ned Bunky at your service," he said, snapping off the three-fingered scout salute. He was shirtless and barefooted.

"My God," Carrie said, beginning to sob, "how can I thank you."

"No need to, ma'am. Anybody would've have done the same. I think you might need a hot drink to warm up." He dug a collapsible cup and a packet from a pocket. "We need a little fire now," he said cheerily. There was something vaguely familiar about him. She had a hazy impression of an action toy that came with the happy meal when she took a young cousin to lunch. He was back with a few sticks of wood that were soon ablaze and crackling. He poured the packet into the cup, added water from a canteen, and held it over the fire with a stick. In a couple of minutes she was sipping hot cocoa and her shaking slowly stopped. "Hypothermia is always a worry, but I think you'll be all right now. Good thing I have pretty sharp ears," he said. "Most people wouldn't have heard you." He squatted on his heels alongside her.

"I was literally at the end of my strength."

"Most people misuse 'literally,' but in this case I believe it is correct."

How strangely pedantic, Carrie thought. She guessed he was between sixteen and nineteen, slender but well built. He had red hair with sun streaks and an open, friendly face with smiling eyes and a few freckles, he was good-looking in a wholesome Norman Rockwellish way. "Do you want to say what happened?" the boy asked. "Sometimes people don't like to talk right away."

"I fell off a sailboat."

"Was it a party?"

"It was just the two of us. He sailed away without looking back, the bastard."

"I know you're upset, but I don't think swearing helps," Ned said gently.

"Swearing?"

"It might not have been his fault. You're sure he saw you fall overboard?"

"I'm positive."

"When there's a man overboard, the captain is supposed to attempt rescue."

Sea Scouts learn in the Sea Promise—I'm quoting now—that they must be prepared to render aid to those in need.”

“He should be arrested,” Carrie said.

“At least the police should be informed and normally that would be my advice. But this is a strange case, my strangest yet. They're not real policeman here, and I'm not sure you should talk to them.” His manner was suddenly take-charge. With a look inland, he kicked dirt on the fire to put it out “The first thing is to get away from here. I've got a pretty nice hideout in the jungle, you can stay there.”

“Thank you, but I have one of the cabanas.”

“I don't think you should go there.”

“Why not?” She could kill for a hot bath and a bed.

“It's not a good idea. Are you able to walk yet?”

Carrie was more than grateful—she'd get this kid into Harvard and pay for everything—but she didn't like being bossed by a teenager. “I want to go to my cabana,” she said firmly. “What do you mean by ‘strange case’?”

“Cases are people in trouble,” Ned said. “This is the most unusual I've ever had.”

“How could you know I'd be drowning?” He shrugged, smiling. “It seems I'm always in the right place at the right time.” He looked again into the darkness. “I think we should leave right now, someone may have seen the fire.” It seemed what she had gone through kept her from understanding the simplest things. “Why does it matter if someone sees it?”

“Do you trust me?” he said, his voice serious.

“Well, of course. I mean, you saved . . .”

“Then come with me now. We have to go fast.” He left her side to erase the grooves her heels left. Carrie took his outstretched hand and got up; she was shaky but able to walk. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“The hideout.” She didn't have the energy for more argument. The ground rose as they moved along the well-tended trail until it became narrow and wildly overgrown as soon as they crossed the resort boundary. Ned pushed a path clear until they reached a bare rock outcropping after fifteen minutes. Following his gaze, she saw lights stabbing the darkness where they came ashore.

“We'll be safe at my place,” he said.

“Safe from what?”

“There's a lot you don't know.”

“Why all the big mystery?” And why was it one mystery after another here? He led her off to a giant tree that rose on a double trunk. “I’ll go in first so you have some light.” He parted foliage and she saw a cave-like opening between the trunks. Flint struck stone and a few seconds later a flickering flame was faintly visible. Ned motioned her in and piled brush across the opening so hide the light. She saw from the small fire that the hideout was so snug she had to smile. A fishing pole leaned against a wall, a blanket covered a bed of ferns, and canned food and bottled water were neatly stacked. The combination of wood smoke and raw earth gave off a comfortable smell. He lit two candles which made it seem even more comfy.

“I dug it out so I didn’t have to stoop so much,” Ned said, “but don’t worry because I spread the dirt where they couldn’t trace it back. And the brush hides the fire unless you’re standing right outside. The smoke goes way up the inside of the tree and out somewhere high by that sort of chimney over there that also keeps it cooler in here in daytime. It’s a really good hideout, don’t you think?”

“It’s very nice.” Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn would feel right at home smoking their pipes and telling their whoppers to one another. “But explain why you need a hideout and I have to stay here instead of my cabana and all the modern conveniences like a bathtub.”

He sat down and crossed his legs like a student of Zen. “I think you’re too tired right now to understand. You take the bed; the ferns are pretty comfortable and smell good too. I’ve got some canned peaches, would you like some?” Carrie said not right now, thanks, and lowered herself onto the bed of ferns. Even being chased on the river didn’t compare to this bone-deep tiredness. “I’ve investigated a lot of stuff,” Ned said, “but nothing like this. You were invited here because you’re really smart, right?”

“I suppose so,” she said, a mighty yawn making her feel even weaker. “My God, I’ve never been so exhausted.”

“Everybody’s smart from what I’ve been able to find out, tops at what they do. My opinion is they brought you here to be studied.”

“What are you talking about?” she said sleepily.

“These people aren’t real. Well, they’re real but not our kind of real.” Lying on a bed of ferns in a boy’s hideout, barely able to keep her eyes open, listening to preposterous nonsense, it was like a strange dream. “I think they’re androids made to look human.”

“Androids?”

“Or something way better based on a science far beyond what we know.”

“Very funny.” She could barely get the words out.

“I was never more serious,” Ned said, holding a hand up as if taking an oath. “And I’m a pretty good detective, as a few bad people have learned to their sorrow.”

“Wake me when it’s morning,” Carrie said, pulling the blanket up to her chin.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HEARN WOKE CHIN on chest with the assegai in his hand. He had pulled it from its decorative wall mount and moved a chair and sofa to a corner as a barrier to protect his flanks. He thought the spear would be better than the kitchen knife if *Gar-eee* busted in, but he would still need all the luck in the world to survive the monster's bull rush. He hadn't taken his shoes off and his feet were swollen; he removed them now to rub them and get circulation going and then rotated his neck until it loosened. Some vacation this turned out to be. He made a cautious circuit of the cabana, assegai ready for stabbing, but doors and windows showed no signs of attempted entry. That meant exactly nothing, given *Gar-eee's* craftiness. The fridge, normally restocked while he slept or was away, was warm and the food beginning to smell.

He went to the bathroom for a hot shower to get the kinks out; the towels hadn't been changed, so he picked one up from the floor. Only cold water came from the shower nozzle. He jumped in and out until lathered and rinsed and finished just as the water petered out and the bar of soap broke into crumbs. There was no water to shave with and the next discovery was the toilet didn't flush and mold was growing on one of the bathroom walls. He added slovenliness by the housekeeping staff and the plumbing and electrical problems to the mental list he was composing for Echchols; standards are standards even if you are crazy. He dressed and went to the telephone to order breakfast but there was no answer at food services. Another item for the list. He dialed the Echchols office and it rang a dozen times before it was answered.

"The refrigerator doesn't work and your housekeeping crew missed my place," he said. "There's no water, either."

"I..." Clymond began and the line went dead.

"I" what, Hearn asked himself. I apologize for the inconvenience, someone will be right over? Or, sorry, I must give priority to guests who are not suspected murderers. His growling stomach reminded him it was some time

since he had last eaten. He found pretzels in an unopened box; they were stale even though still in cellophane sleeves, but he ate them anyway. Through a window he saw Captain Gottschalk coming up the path with two of his wide-body security people. He tripped on something that forced him into a stumbling run, arms wind-milling comically until he regained his balance. A moment later, there was a knock at the door.

“Well, Captain,” Hearn said through gritted teeth, “what can I do for you this time?”

Breathing heavily, Gottschalk swayed and put a hand against the door to steady himself. His face was mottled and had a loose, rubbery look; his clothes seem to have been slept in and he needed a shave. He cleared his throat in a loud and repulsive way. Drawing back, Hearn wondered if he got started early or was still drunk from last night. Whichever it was, the disheveled men with him were in the same condition. They crowded past smelling like a chain-gang after work in the fields and collapsed into chairs as if another step would be too much.

“You’re a friend of Carrie Alexander,” Gottschalk said.

“We came up the river together.” Hearn before hadn’t noticed before the burst capillaries and blue veins in Gottschalk’s nose. Christ, his breath was foul. The man looked like he had aged a decade—make it two. “We’re looking for her,” said the security chief.

“She had a date with Hermod last night,” Hearn said with bitterness, “that’s who I’d ask.” He had felt a strange loneliness without Harry and Ned, painful in fact, and telephoned to ask her to join him for a drink. She was on her way to the beauty salon so he kept it short after she told him about her evening plans. The stab of jealousy was as if one of those six-inch beetles had his heart in the pinchers it took two men to pry apart.

“Do you mind if we have a look around?”

“We both know you don’t have to ask.” The other two slowly got to their feet and went to search again. “Have you asked Hermod?” Hearn repeated. Gottschalk seemed trying to pull himself together. “Do you know if she is a good swimmer?” he asked, sounding like his tongue was sticking to the dry roof of his mouth. Hearn felt a flutter of alarm. “Why do you ask that?”

“Just a question,” Gottschalk said.

“Is there something wrong?”

Gottschalk shook his head with infinite weariness and closed his eyes. They sat in silence until the others returned. Hearn noticed that their shoes,

formerly spit-shined to a mirror finish, were dirty and worn-out looking and their clothes had the same ruffled look as their boss. “If you see Miss Alexander,” Gottschalk said, straggling to his feet like a boxer hoping to beat the count, “let us know immediately.”

“The phone doesn’t work half the time; the refrigerator and water are out too.”

Gottschalk looked blank and then a gear engaged. “Send a note with someone from the staff.”

“None showed up and the food people don’t answer.”

The security chief pondered this before deciding a reply wasn’t needed or beyond him at the moment. He signaled to the others and they left; Hearn went to a window to watch. They were as unsteady as drunks at closing time, how could they possibly find anything in this condition? He made another pass through the cabana to make sure they didn’t unlock something in the search. He worried about Ned; what chance would the young hero have against that monstrous being? What if he had already been caught and killed or, even worse, bound and gagged for torturing? *Gar-eee* kept a victim alive for days when it suited him. Hearn closed his eyes. “Protect him, God,” he whispered. This knife twisting in my heart is what real parents feel when kids go missing, he thought. And so what if Ned wasn’t really his child; he had created him as much as if the boy had sprung from his loins. Another milestone, he realized, grieving for an imaginary character at the mercy of another imaginary character. He took a belt straight from a bottle; whiskey in the morning—yet another one. Heroin, here I come. He let go of the tiny hope in a small corner of his mind that he and Carrie might get something going; only a fool would think he had a chance against a handsome genius in golden curls. Rain started. *Plop. Plop. Plop.* Drops from the ceiling, then a trickle. He put pans underneath and emptied them for a while in the kitchen sink, but they kept filling and he said the hell with it. A temporary armistice between the rebels and the government might be arranged. With all the money Echchols had, price would be no object. When the planes begin flying, Hearn thought, I’ll stow away on the first one out no matter how many people I have to bribe. Carrying an umbrella and the spear, he walked through the rain to Markel’s cabana and hid the spear in bushes before he knocked; explaining why he was walking around with an archaic weapon would be tough. The professor came to the door looking amazingly none the worse for wear. “You must have had the mother of all hangovers,” Hearn said.

“I woke up feeling pretty good, actually. I have a vague memory of a nurse

giving me something.” Markel looked uneasy. “I didn’t say or do anything too crazy, did I?”

“Not while I was here,” Hearn said smoothly.

“I don’t get blotto, the last time I was an undergraduate.”

“You were pretty upset.”

“Great people think they can treat people like dirt,” Markel said, some of the anger and hurt feelings returning. “I feel like packing my bags.”

“Don’t bother, we’re stuck here for a while.” He reported what Clymond had said. “Well, fuck,” Markel exploded, “how long is this supposed to last? I’ve got a new quarter coming up.”

“He didn’t say, but we’re not supposed to worry.”

“I have to let Harvard know I’ll be late, and that’ll go over like a lead balloon.”

“Have you tried calling out?” Hearn said.

“I know we’re not supposed to, but the situation has changed hasn’t it?”

“You can’t do it.”

“Why the hell not?”

“The country hasn’t paid its phone bill, so the service was cut off.”

“You can’t cut off a whole country.”

“It seems somebody ran off with the money and the satellite was shut off. The government was going to sell some copper and pay up, but now there’s this revolt. That’s the story they’re telling anyhow.” Markel marched to the telephone and snatched up the receiver. “It’s dead,” he said. He bent closer. “Look at the dust on this table.”

“You’re lucky if that’s all. Nothing works at my place and the roof leaks.”

“So stuck here and can’t call out.” Markel’s face reddened from anger. “Don’t blame me,” Hearn said. “I’m in the same boat.” He jerked his head toward the front door and held a finger to his lips. “It’s raining,” Markel protested.

“Bring the umbrella in the closet by the front door.”

“What’s this all about?” Markel said when they were outside.

“I don’t want the house listening.”

“You mean Sarah?”

“Is health all that Sarah monitors?” Markel looked puzzled. “What are you saying?” Hearn knew there was a good chance Markel would think he was a nutcase, but he had to take the chance. “There’s something strange about this place.”

“Sure, the greatest genius in musical history lives here and doesn’t care if anybody outside ever hears his work.”

“What I’m talking about is have you noticed how everything is the best—or was? The shops world class, the staff perfect, and on and on. You can’t name one thing that isn’t better than where you came from except for the last couple of days.”

“Now that you mention it,” Markel said slowly.

“We’re in a South American rainforest. What should the weather be like?” Hearn said.

“I never gave it any thought.”

“Until now, the weather has been fantastic—not too hot, not too cold. It should have been like it is now, wet or blazing hot and humid.”

“Maybe the lake cooled things off,” Markel said vaguely, “its own micro-climate.” But a seed of doubt was planted and grew as Hearn watched. “I will say the entertainment is awfully good. The chanteuse at that French bistro sounds just like Edith Piaf. Looks like the forlorn-waif pictures of her too; I thought at the time it was eerie. Another night there was a guy at a club who sang like Tom Jones; a big ripe voice, lots of range. *What’s New Pussycat*; remember that? He also looked like Jones as I remember him from retro TV; I was a huge fan when I was a little kid. I see your point; I wonder where they get these impersonators, they must cost a fortune.”

“There’s a middle-aged guy who’s always been a ballet fan,” Hearn said. “He’s learned to dance like Baryshnikov just since he’s been here.” The rain drummed harder on the umbrellas.

“Oh, come on,” Markel said scornfully. “You get into that as a kid and it takes years and years.” Then a thought occurred to him. “What’s his name?” Walter Crowell, Hearn said. “I was at one of the clubs where a man by that name danced better than Fred Astaire,” Markel said. “He even did hand-springs across the stage.”

“He was part of the show?”

“No, just someone from the audience. The emcee asks the crowd if anyone has a musical talent and he holds up his hand. He asks can the orchestra play the number from *Oklahoma!* with the young cowboys at the box lunch auction. I don’t know if you ever saw it, but it’s really strenuous. The orchestra strikes up, the spotlight goes on him and off he goes. It was amazing, athletic and graceful; you can’t tell me the man isn’t a professional.”

“He works in artificial intelligence,” Hearn said. “He’s designing a computer that works like a brain.”

“Sorry, but that’s beyond belief. What was really remarkable was the

shape he's in for a man his age, or even a lot younger for that matter. He did the splits from a back flip, do you know how hard that is? How do you know it's the same man?"

"I heard from his own lips he didn't know how to dance. If it's rare for one guy his age to dance like that, what are the chances of two being here at the same time?" Markel tugged at an ear and said he saw the point. "Another thing," Hearn said, "there are birds that don't belong here according to an expert I talked to."

"I don't know anything about birds," Markel said.

"What about the killer hangover you're supposed to have? You were in bad shape, blotto like you said. And there's Hermod, the greatest composer in history who just happens to also be a world-class motivational speaker and runs Echchols in his spare time. And these restaurants, ever seen anything like them?"

The ran drummed down harder. "You're coming to your point," Markel said.

"I make my living dreaming up fantastic things, but I couldn't come up with this, and there's other weird stuff I haven't mentioned. We have to all get out of this place before something bad happens."

"Wait a minute," Markel said, "that's not logical. Why would excellence everywhere you look mean 'something bad' will happen, why wouldn't it more likely be something good?" I can't take this too far, Hearn thought. Be cunning or he will think I'm a madman, but that should be easy now that I am. "What's the other weird stuff?" Markel asked.

"Maybe that's too strong," Hearn said, shrugging as if it wasn't important. "Like you, I've got to get back home. Places to go, people to see."

"I've got a huge teaching load this quarter," Markel said.

"We've got to spread the word everybody is stuck here to put pressure on Echchols; make it like a mutiny or they'll keep stringing us along."

Markel thought, nodded and said he would start at the afternoon discussion where he was a panelist on Math as a Metaphor for Music. "You meet people who'd like to stay forever, but most of us have to get back to reality." He waited while Markel went back inside before sneaking back for the spear. He headed for his cabana as the rain falling even harder made the umbrella useless, and then that overwhelming sense of something watching came over him again. He stopped to look round but the deluge was so heavy it was like being underwater. He arrived at the cabana out of breath and pushed the sticking door open with difficulty. The trickle of rainwater from the ceiling was now a stream and the floors were covered with water.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WOOD SMOKE AND the sound of heavy rain outside woke Carrie. After a few seconds of disorientation, it all came back. She started to get up, but was stopped by sharp pain in what seemed like every muscle in her body. “Ow,” she said. “Ouch.”

“I bet you’re really sore,” Ned said with sympathy.

“That doesn’t even come close.”

“I made some oatmeal. Do you like raisins and brown sugar?”

He was squatting on heels toasting a thick piece of bread on a fork over a small fire. He heaped warm oatmeal into a bowl, added the sugar and raisins and passed it to her. “This is so good,” she said between spoonfuls.

“Some pretty good chefs told me once that hunger is the best seasoning,” Ned said modestly. “I got some clothes from your cabana.” They were in a neat bundle that included walking shoes. “I thought you’d want pants instead of shorts because of bugs and thorns.” Bless him, he had even brought her cosmetics bag, brush and comb. When she finished wolfing down the oatmeal, she set about repairing the damage. “I look like a train wreck,” she said into her compact mirror. She began to brush the tangles out of her hair.

“No, ma’am, you’re very beautiful,” Ned said.

“Why did he do it?” she cried suddenly, putting the brush down as memories of the night engulfed her. The boy patted her awkwardly on the shoulder. “It might be he just couldn’t handle a boat in heavy weather; he doesn’t know anything but good weather, it’s how he programmed it.”

“What happened to you?” she asked, wiping her eyes. She hadn’t noticed the dried mud on the side of his head until now. “It’s a poultice of slippery elm and goldenseal,” he said, “the clay holds it on.”

“Did you have an accident?”

“No, there’s a guy I’ve been tracking, a homicidal maniac. He caught me coming out of your cabana at about midnight. He’s strong and hits really

hard, but luckily I ducked away so I just caught a glancing blow. But I sure saw stars! I've had a lot of close calls in my adventures, but that was the closest." He grinned. "I always escape somehow or other."

"You poor boy." She took his head in her hands to look at the injury.

"It'll be all right," Ned said cheerfully. "The poultice makes the swelling go away."

"You shouldn't have taken such a chance."

"I knew you wouldn't want that great dress ruined."

Her heart melted. "Oh, I don't care about that."

"He's horrible looking," Ned said. "His face is really creepy."

"He murdered a woman."

"He killed a friend of mine." A wave of sadness swept over his face. "Harry wasn't supposed to go outside, but he did; he was nice but kind of goofy. The man choked him to death." He brushed away a tear. "I'm so sorry," Carrie said. "Thank you," he said, sniffing.

"I thought this was such a wonderful place in the beginning, but it's strange and horrible."

"I sure can't disagree, ma'am."

"You said Hermod programmed the weather," Carrie said. "What do you mean?"

Ned's look said this will sound crazy like last night. "This is an alien field station where humans are brought for study. Everything is controlled, including the weather. The reason Hermod didn't know how to sail in a storm is because he keeps the climate perfect. He must have been totally freaked out, thinking no way can this be happening. You don't believe me, and I don't blame you. It sounds like a stretcher."

Carrie felt a flood of compassion. This poor, sweet, deluded child, living in a cave like an animal. "If the weather is controlled," she said gently, "where did the storm come from?"

"That's just it, I hacked the program that keeps the weather nice and screwed it up royal. I've been doing a lot of things to mess with their minds, but I didn't know I'd bring in that squall while you were on the lake. I'm really sorry."

"That's all right," Carrie said, wondering what the best approach was to this problem.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to get along by ourselves for a while; but don't worry, we won't go hungry. I'll set out trap lines, and there's lots of fish in the river."

“Why do we have to do this?”

“We can’t let them find us. I’m not supposed to be here and you’re supposed to be drowned, which might be the luckiest thing for you.” He was doing something with a safety pin.

“Why is that lucky?”

“Otherwise, you’d be like the rest.”

“The rest?”

“People fall down like rag dolls or roll over on their side if they’re sitting down. I’ve seen it happen probably twenty times.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“There,” he said, showing her the finished fish hook. “It won’t catch anything big, but it’ll work on the little ones. I don’t know for sure. Want me to guess?” She nodded. “I think Hermod takes over their minds. Whatever it is, they’re not the same when they come to.”

“What are they?” Carrie said.

“I don’t know how it works, but they’re different; it’s like they’re his. They get a system reboot or something like that, but they’re not zombies.” He took comical steps with arms out like Frankenstein. “You probably can’t tell the difference unless you’re a relative.”

“What you’re saying is impossible, honey.”

“Maybe,” he said, unruffled, “but that’s what I think.”

“Are you saying he’s a hypnotist?”

“Way more; I’m a pretty good one myself, thanks to the Great Septus program I learned, but people I put under are still themselves when they wake up. You can get them to go for post-hypnotic suggestion and all that, but they’re not different people.”

“How can someone take your mind or personality, Ned?”

“I don’t know, he just does.”

“You’re saying if I hadn’t been thrown out of the boat . . .”

“You’d be his by now,” Ned said matter-of-factly.

“But what does he do with them?”

“I think they go probably back home and do what he wants.”

“Which is what?”

“Search me.”

A thought struck her from out of the blue, the rapt woman at the screening later seen in the movie itself, shown only that once for some reason. You would have thought . . . It had thousands of extras, Natalie Beresford said. Carrie

shook off the bizarre thought and got up for some slow, careful stretches. The last time she felt this wrung out was after four hours out on the course in her first marathon; she just did manage to shuffle across the finish with legs feeling as heavy as kegs of nails. “Better take it easy today,” Ned said.

“I won’t be climbing any mountains,” she agreed. “Tell me about yourself,” she said. “Where are you from? Where are your parents?”

“A little place called Larking Hill in the middle of America. It’s a little, old fashioned town time forgot with tidy homes with lace curtains and white picket fences, and everybody knows everybody else. There’s a courthouse square with a five-and-dime store that sells popcorn for a nickel; there are more churches per capita than anyplace. People look out for each other in Larking Hill, and a helping hand is never far away.” It sounded memorized. “Are you a student?”

“I’m captain of the football and baseball teams, also drum major with the marching band. I letter in track and basketball, and I’m always number one scholastically because I see education as a privilege not a duty. I work as a soda jerk at the drugstore after school and weekends and I make the meanest milk shake you ever saw. I had a morning paper route, but I gave it to a crippled kid who needed the money more. The other kids elected me class president and voted me most likely to succeed, but there are plenty of other guys and gals I think deserved the accolades over me.”

“I seriously doubt that.” If this boy was a Catholic, he’d be pope when he got older unless he settled for president.

“Oh, that’s not all,” Ned said artlessly. “I’m learning ancient Greek from old Professor Gunderson, and I’m taking a special physics class taught over the internet for eight students from all over the country. And of course my adventures take up a lot of time.”

“Don’t your parents worry when you’re gone?”

“Dad’s a small town lawyer with a heart of gold and mom’s a school teacher. They have a lot of confidence in me, so it doesn’t bother them.”

“What a busy life you have.” These Masters of the Universe at Echchols were slackers in comparison. “Do you know yet what you want to do?”

“Not yet, but I know it’ll be helping people. My adventures have taught me that’s the best job going.”

“Does someone send you on these . . . adventures?”

Ned was attaching the fishhook to a line on a fishing pole cut from a springy tree limb. “Nope, I do it on my own. This one began when I walked out of the

jungle”—he snapped his fingers—“just like that. I sometimes work with the FBI or Interpol or something. But I also work alone a lot, like now.” He hesitated. “Well, there is someone I thought would help me on this case, but he’s not well.” He made a circling motion with a finger to his temple.

It was raining harder outside.

“Well,” Ned said, “I’d better be going.”

“Where?”

He looked undecided. “I haven’t told you everything yet; I didn’t want to scare you too much.” Carrie kept her face expressionless. The sweet child was so ill. Harvard was clearly not to be, but she’d get him the finest doctors. “We’re a long-running experiment they think has gone bad, so they’re going to end it.”

“The people here are part of a big experiment?”

“All of us on earth—the whole human race. We’re all going to die unless I can stop them.”

“Oh, Ned,” she said, tears filling her eyes, “do you really believe that?”

“Yes, ma’am, I know it. I’ve been reading what they’re saying back and forth, Hermod and the people where he’s from. He was freaked out even before the storm, and you can imagine what he’s like now. They thought they were in total control, but things started happening that showed they weren’t and they can’t get over it.”

“Why do they want to kill everyone?” Carrie said. “Unless . . . unless you stop them.”

“They want to pull back for a forensic exam of the past, going back to the Mesozoic Era. They’re afraid they’ve misunderstood something, but I don’t know what it is.”

“The Mesozoic Era,” Carrie said hopelessly. “But that was millions of years ago.”

“That isn’t long for them.”

“There weren’t humans back that far.”

“We weren’t their first choice, dinosaurs were. Some were warm blooded like us and smart. Did you know we’re closer in time to T-Rex than they were to the first dinosaurs? Some reptile species were beginning to use tools when the comet landed.” Carrie knew about the comet but not the other. “They told you they used tools?”

“No, ma’am,” Ned said, smiling, “I don’t think there’d be much talking if they caught me. I hacked into their archives.”

“Why didn’t they die with the dinosaurs?”

“They saw it coming and got out and didn’t come back for a really long time. Humans were early in their development when they did.”

“You’re hiding for fear of being caught?”

“Yes, ma’am,”

“I still don’t understand how you got here.”

“It’s the same with all my adventures,” Ned said with a shrug. “I’m where I am and I don’t have time to wonder how because a problem has to be solved pretty pronto.” His blue eyes clouded over. “This is the biggest one ever and I don’t know if I can handle it my myself.” He was silent and then his confidence flowed back with a brave smile. “But I’ve never failed yet.” He was gone with a wave before she could stop him.

Carrie put on the clothes Ned brought; it seemed a year since she dressed with such high hopes for the evening ahead. She had only hatred and contempt for Hermod now; he was a coward and it nearly cost her life. Reading people and sizing up their strengths and weaknesses had been the key to her success, how could she have been so mistaken? She massaged her arms and legs, but they still felt like they should be in an old folk’s home; she had to forget that and think clearly. She hoped force wouldn’t be necessary to bring Ned to safety, but that might be the case. For that she would have to stay on Hermod’s good side and dealing with him was going to be awkward; he would stammer excuses and apologies and she would have to smile and pretend to accept them. “No, really, I see it wasn’t your fault.” Ned wouldn’t be easy to catch; it would take lots of people with the Obsobquiesboodelies working as trackers. Hermod could easily refuse under other circumstance—too hard, too costly, limited chances of success and so forth. But leaving her to drown gave her the trump card; the Echchols brand was mud if that got around. Bringing Ned to safety was the price for her silence.

The day was heating up and heavy tropical lassitude already settling in; was there something to Ned’s nutty claim that the weather was controlled? It was an absurd idea, yet there was that look of amazed incomprehension when Hermod turned to see the squall. *Impossible*, he said. What made him so sure that he couldn’t believe his eyes? No, there is a simpler explanation. She stepped from the tree cave into the jungle but had only gone a few steps when as if a conductor’s baton had dropped all sound around her stopped. Almost immediately she felt the fear that silenced the wild. A squatty, muscular man who radiated evil as a spinning neutron star does energy was at

the bottom of the slope and seemed to be studying the ground for signs. She dropped to all fours and crawled back to the cave.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE RAIN HAD stopped and he went to the window for the tenth time in the past hour for a guarded peek outside and saw a fat, lumpy figure heading toward the cabana with a wavering step. “We need to talk,” the stranger gasped as he passed Hearn on the threshold.

“You’ve come to say pack my toothbrush because the plane leaves in an hour,” Hearn said.

The visitor sank into a chair to catch his breath. Strangely, Hearn thought saw a dim hint of Hermod in this ruined figure, but it couldn’t be; this man’s eyes were glassy and red-rimmed, his face puffy and mottled the color plums get when they rot on the ground. Rather than golden curls, his hair looked dirty and matted like straw in a stable. “You look like hell.” Hearn blurted. The reply was a black look.

“I look like hell?” he said contemptuously, “perhaps there is such a place after all.”

“This place comes close enough for me. What can I do for you?”

“It seems things long thought settled are open for discussion again, so I suppose even the Prince of Darkness is on the table. Let’s start with how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.”

“You lost me there.”

“A theological dispute in the Middle Ages. How they went round and round.”

“Theology and the Middle Ages, two more gaps in my education.”

“Do you know what you are doing, or are you merely a tool?”

“Clue me in what you’re talking about.”

Gas escaped from him in a monster burp. “I know exactly what is in your brain. You have just enough technical proficiency to operate an electric pencil sharpener. Someone is behind you.”

“How do you know what’s in my brain?”

“The entire content of your mind, such as it is, is in storage.”

“Pardon?”

“The mind-reading experiences? That was my work.” His cheeks swelled and another gassy belch escaped. “I was vacuuming up what little I found.” The craziness had tripped up on the details this time, this gross knock-off wasn’t Hermod; he was as grotesquely ugly as obviously unhealthy. “I’ve had it with imaginary characters,” Hearn said.

“Imaginary?” A full-body bolt of pain hit him a sledgehammer blow and Hermod’s voice seemed to come from a long way down a narrow tunnel with echoes. “Does that feel imaginary?” Dazed and dizzy where he landed on his rear, Hearn couldn’t speak at first. Is this really happening to me? The pain said yes—very definitely; every nerve ending seemed to tingle in aftershock.

“Now that we understand each other,” Hermod said. “That is only a hummingbird’s sip of what I can do.”

“Are you him . . . Hermod?” Hearn said in a faint voice.

“Would you like more proof?”

“No, no. That’s enough.”

“Tell me who put you up to this and how you did it.”

“What did I do?” His head was too heavy for his neck and the floor seemed to expand and contract like an accordion. “Echchols is falling apart,” Hermod said, “and look at me.”

“You blame me?” Hearn said, amazed through the fog.

“You are the key, you are the only one who wasn’t invited.”

“Not that again.”

“I will repeat one last time, we do not make mistakes. Some influence or force was responsible for that invitation and everything that has followed. Look at you, how disappointing when I looked into your mind and found not the advanced thought of Tom Hearn the scientist but the confused muddle of Thom Hearn the fantasist.”

If I’m going to die, Hearn said to himself, it won’t be trying to wheedle mercy from this bastard. “How about you kiss my ass?”

Hermod ignored that. “If I were what you call God I would not have had more influence on your development of since you were hominids on the savanna. I watched you, guided you, shaped you over the eons. I manipulated DNA to bring some qualities forward and extinguish others. This business about good and evil that consumes you—what nonsense. There is neither, only what is. The pain you just felt was bad for you but good for me because it

established hierarchy: I ask, you answer. In a hierarchy, good can cancel bad depending on the point of view, but sometimes chance decides it the other way. Whatever is left at the end is because it is.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“How did you infect the systems?” His glance took in the sagging ceiling and the brimming pails.

“I wouldn’t know how, as you so kindly pointed out.”

“Who then is doing this?”

When Hearn had thought about death before, he lay on a canopied four-poster, his ancient, deeply-veined hands folded on the eiderdown, looking like the saintly figure the public would come to think of him as a result of late-in-life philanthropy; his would be the face of a cause, curing one of the minor diseases, perhaps; a beloved man with wispy hair like milkweed fluff. He would receive mourners to the deathbed with simple, touching dignity. Fans would stand outside with candles, even in falling rain as if the heavens too were weeping. The Old Storyteller was going home. He would direct that hot cider be sent out; anything stronger might trigger unseemly displays of grief. Inside the hushed house would be Team Hearn and the devoted friends he would have accumulated by then. His ex-wives would be racked with sorrow for having turned their backs on the best man they had ever known. Dibble would weep, a decrepit old man himself now leaning on a cane.

Hermod was speaking impatiently. “Pay attention. Do you want another jolt? Are you getting directions, technical instructions, commands, whatever, that—thinking out loud here—might come in a voice that only you can hear, or perhaps while you sleep?”

“I . . .” He stopped.

“You know!” Hermod exclaimed. “I see it in your face.”

“I have been thinking lately that I’ve . . . I’ve been going crazy.”

Hermod pounced. “Explain.”

“Characters from books I wrote began showing up. Harry Hare, *Gar-eee* and a kid called Ned.”

“Showing up? What does that mean?”

“They stand in front of me like you are and I talk to them. There was also a soldier from the Second World War, an Englishman in the Australian army.”

“I now know all the characters in your books—pathetic and shallow creations—but not the soldier.”

“That’s because he’s not one of mine. One of the professors went berserk

and killed two others and I was going to be next, but the soldier came out of nowhere and cut his throat. I passed out in one of your mind scans, so I don't know what happened after that."

"None of this was revealed by our examinations of your mind," Hermod said uneasily. "Nothing like it had ever happened before. Our consternation dictated caution."

"I didn't know if I had dreamed the whole thing when I came to. The soldier was some sort of jungle fighter from the Burma campaign."

"We disposed of the bodies and sent everyone who was in the audience back to the countries of their origin. The memories of their stay were wiped clean and false ones implanted."

"Why didn't you do me the same favor?"

"You obviously are different."

"Yeah, I wasn't invited," Hearn said. "The next time I saw him, he killed the host at the Showa under the impression he was Hirohito. I've personally gone through four murders here versus none all the rest of my life. Quite a place you run."

"And the woman who was killed?"

"That was Gar-eee; he killed Harry too. And that woman whose innards . . . Six murders! This is a slaughterhouse."

"I hoped the soldier was a local savage who somehow managed to sneak onto the grounds."

"You hoped?"

"If it had been an Indian, it would have been implausible but possible instead of . . ." A sustained rapping of flatulence vexed him. "Instead of what?" Hearn demanded.

"The alternative, also something clearly impossible; a soldier from that war coming to this time and place, bidden here by neither us nor your feverish imagination."

"Who knows how many of sitting there would have been shot down like dogs if he didn't."

"That's not important. What is important is it is just as impossible for your characters to have autonomous life as for that soldier to come from then to now. If either is possible, everything we know is nonsense."

"I've got some more bad news for you, Ned is screwing up your fancy systems."

"Ned Bunky," Hermod said in a flat voice, "your storybook character?"

“He told me he was going to.”

“The most brilliant computer scientists on Earth could not begin to understand these systems any more than a monkey in a zoo. They are far beyond you, impossibly far.”

“Ned’s a bright kid and getting smarter all the time according to what he told me. He’s never fails at anything, so I wouldn’t sell him short.” Hermod sat back in the chair. “Your fictional *Gar-eee* murdered the woman?”

“And now he’s after me.”

Hermod’s cheeks ballooned from another great belch and he muttered what Hearn guessed was a curse. “You created that monster, *Gar-eee*,” Hermod said, “and yet Ned is also your creation, both of them word made flesh.” He was mentally connecting dots. “*Homo sapiens* is famously drawn to light and then darkness, one pole attracting and the other repelling, back and forth it goes.”

“That’s Ned and *Gar-eee*,” Hearn said. “One is the nicest kid you’ll ever meet and the other one ... Did you bring them to life?”

“Certainly not, what would be the purpose?”

“So explain them.”

“I cannot.”

Hearn sensed his deep unease. “Where are you from?”

“You would not understand.”

“Too stupid? Okay, here’s an easier one. What do you look like when the mask comes off?”

“You probably think I have a large, veined head on a stalk-like neck or perhaps the other movie cliché, slobbering and oozing, an exoskeleton with claws.”

“Well?”

“I look like something between a mathematical symbol and a string of DNA.” An image appeared in Hearn’s mind. “Rather dry and abstract, as you see. My present form is arbitrary; I have appeared as many things to different people. I have been an angel with feathered wings, for example, who ...”

“Let’s see you wiggle your ears.”

“Most people in your position would be in mortal fear; is this the fatalism learned in your wretched childhood?” Far from fear, Hearn was beginning to feel a manic glee. “Everything about you and this place is perfect,” he said, “or was until lately. Weren’t you afraid some people would get suspicious?”

“General prejudice favors a good appearance; it is intelligent to make use of that.”

“If your job is to make us better,” Hearn said, “you don’t pass if I’m giving the grades.”

“But you must acknowledge what a long way you have come. Not so long ago you sat in stadiums to watch gladiators kill each other or Christians torn apart by wild beasts; you brought picnics and the children and made a day of it. That was worse than one of your wars if you think about it, which you didn’t at the time. Such spectacles are reserved now for only certain parts of the world, and even there they are rare; this is progress, surely. But you are right, what a long way still to go. Instead of the straight line our modeling predicted, it has been two steps forward and one back. Who knows if we would ever reach the goal we had for you.”

“Which is?”

“The realm of pure reason.”

“Like you?”

“The strong feelings that course through your minds are always a revelation when I am in your form—love, hate and the others, happiness and sadness. I felt fear for the first time last night. It was awful, horrible.”

“You don’t have emotions?”

“We eliminated them long ago.”

“What happened last night?”

“A storm caught my boat on the lake.”

“Was Carrie with you?”

“Now I feel regret and shame.” He buried his face in his hands. “These emotions . . . so overpowering.”

Hearn went cold. “What happened?”

Hermod’s chin was quivering. “The system that controls the weather malfunctioned and the storm took me completely unaware. She warned me, but I was so sure it was impossible I paid no attention. Then I looked over my shoulder and there it was.” After a long silence, he said, “She fell overboard and was lost. I was aware of your feelings for her from a scan—feelings you hid and that I actually felt myself to a strong degree. What happened is the boat nearly capsized and she went over the side. I felt another emotion—panic. It froze me and I could do nothing until it passed. She was a very . . . nice example of your species.”

“Thanks.”

“Your hatred for me is natural.” There was silence until Hearn spoke. “So the next step is you wipe us all out.” Hermod went into a coughing fit; great

hacking barks that bent him over. “I do not know how much longer I can remain in human form,” he gasped. “The system flaws are diabolically conceived as if corrections are anticipated and new viruses ready to replace the old.”

“I told you Ned’s smart.”

“And he told you the experiment is ending? That means our communications have been compromised and who knows what else.”

“Nothing is safe with that kid around.”

“Logically, this imaginary character would only know what you know.”

“I don’t know how he does it, but he understands stuff I never dreamed of. It would probably take me a thousand years to catch up.”

“Thirty million at a minimum,” Hermod corrected. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know, sneaking around somewhere.” Hearn felt the dental tool in his head and knew Hermod was reading his mind.

“It is true, you do not know.”

“He’s going to stop you from killing us off like lab rats.”

“He cannot,” Hermod said firmly.

“Tell me more about what you’ve done for us poor slobs.”

“Every time you needed an evolutionary bump, we were there. Various lines didn’t pan out, Neanderthals being the most recent. Darwin was a guest here for a time; a very dry man, a collector and a plodder, but that’s what was indicated for that stage.”

“Every great man in history is thanks to you?”

“Not all; we can claim some of the pharaohs and caesars, kings and queens, and the odd emperor or tyrant who made progress happen regardless of the cost; thinkers in various fields; a sprinkling of military geniuses. Galileo and Newton. To pick a time, say the Eighteenth Century, Napoleon we helped but Wellington was on his own. Washington, Jefferson, Adams, a few of the other Founding Fathers as you call them; countless foreigners you have never heard of. People closer in time you would know: Churchill yes, Roosevelt no. Einstein, of course. Watson and Crick. There have been tens of thousands of other men and women known only to a small circle of contemporaries even though their accomplishments were important.”

“What about the crowd here now?”

“Nearly all are gone.”

“Where are they?”

“Back where they came from; changed for the better mostly and a few for the worse—unfortunately, that is the way it goes. There was a German

corporal who . . . never mind. The great majority are smarter, kinder, better; some good things would have come from them. This was one of the brightest cohorts, but then I always say that. They would have bettered life on Earth.”

“How did you change them?”

“Where they were strong, I made them stronger. Where good, better. Some tinkering here, a bit of tweaking there. I suspect one might have unlocked a genetic puzzle that allowed the doubling of your lifespan, another become a great moral figure and peacemaker, assuming he was not assassinated, always a sad possibility for that category. Others would have had lesser roles. I think the female cellist—did you meet her?—would have been mentioned in the same breath as Casals.” He wiped his running nose with a sleeve.

“A bunch of people are stuck in the ‘Thirties.’”

“No longer. They are turning up in various places, amnesia victims unable to explain where they were. Their genetic make-ups were twisted in ways that presented time-consuming challenges.”

“What about Hirohito and that Aussie?”

“The emperor was our creation, or rather his exact copy. His was a small study in the effects of historical guilt on brain chemistry. Why do some human monsters see the light so to speak and regret their crimes while others do not is—or rather was—the question. The soldier from Australia?” He gave a shrug. “I cannot explain him.”

“You can’t blame him on me.”

“No, that is apparent now.”

Hermod winced from some new gastro-intestinal agony. “I could have made even you a great name. It is painless; you lose consciousness for a few seconds. Charles Dickens was very unpromising material, a drone in the law courts, Sam Clemens merely a cynical newspaper hack who drank. Before them, Shakespeare was a backstage functionary. Dante, Rabelais, Goethe, Zuo Zhuan, the gambler and drunkard Dostoyevsky. So many of them.” Hermod brought up another burp that became retching. “I have never felt these physical symptoms,” he said wiping the vomit from his lips, “not in all my time here. I understand better the lamentations in the Bible; what a burden the flesh is.”

“Speaking of that, what about the big religions?” Hearn asked. “Moses, Jesus, Buddha? Did you have a hand in that?”

“Most were anomalies.” A thought struck him. “You don’t think you’re a prophet, the son of god, or perhaps his messenger like Mohammed, or do you think that you know the path or have achieved enlightenment?”

“You read my mind, did you see any of that?”

“No,” Hermod admitted, “but there was much we did not know about some of those individuals; they gave us our first vague misgivings. We did not want you to believe in a power above and independent of the material universe, yet you persisted.”

“Why wouldn’t we?” He was thinking maybe Hermod’s reaction time might be off with the rest of what was physically wrong. If he slowly got to his knees and into a runner’s start . . .

“Religion is irrational. It ends up making a bad thing—emotion—worse and that leads to trouble without end; this you know from your sordid history. We could not get into the minds of those units, those mystics with a mission and the grandiose hysterics. Looking back, it was a mistake to make Mesopotamia the cradle of civilization. It is a harsh, stony land under a deranging sun; ideal breeding grounds for dangerous crackpots. All those gods they had, Jehovah, God and Allah, and before them Isis, Baal, Nephilim and so forth. The ordinary man and woman believed in reincarnation, resurrection, miracles and other imbecilities; there seemed no end of it and no stopping people from flocking to them. I rode an ass for years chasing down rumors about prophets and messiahs, but I never got to the bottom of it. At night the stars seem close enough to grasp. If I told them how far away they really were, it would have crushed those fantastic beliefs and we could have got on with things.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Minds were not ready; centuries more of molding and tinkering were necessary. You are considering springing at me; you think you could overpower me because of my physical impairment, but I would not try if I were you.”

“You must’ve stood out like a sore thumb,” Hearn said, easing back to his former position.

“I made myself look like every other Semite at the time—dark, lean, uncombed, five and a half feet tall, ropy muscles. Their diet was atrocious, if they ate vegetables it was by accident. Days and weeks between washing; they did not care that they smelled like their animals. I had to reduce my olfactory function to cope with it. The land was full of thieves and brigands; I would not have survived had I been one of you. Victims were usually stripped of everything including their foul rags and left to die of exposure, or they were murdered by the next band of cutthroats because they had nothing left to steal. I met a man in the wilderness known as John the Baptist.”

“I’ve heard of him.”

“I overlook your sarcasm. He was cracking grasshoppers with his teeth when I came upon him. He wore a camel’s skin with a smell remarkable even for Judea. I gave him bread out of pity, but he threw it at my head; evidently he thought I was a demon tempting him. His stones struck the donkey and it bolted; it was some time before I got the beast under control and turned back, otherwise John the Baptist would have had a lesson in manners.”

“What about Jesus?” Hearn asked.

“I never saw him, but not for lack of trying. I would hear he was preaching on the shores of the Sea of Galilee or near Caesarea and set forth promptly. Traveling alone as I did, people assumed I was a dybbuk or a spy for Tiberius. The stories about his whereabouts were either false to begin with or people misled me because that was what one did with strangers. In some places, they fled when they saw me on the horizon and I had to pry what information I could from the village idiot. There was always one.”

“It seems odd,” Hearn said, “you couldn’t do better than that.”

“Our advantages come into play in more advanced cultures. That was a primitive, oral culture where people looked at one another in the eye to tell their lies as opposed to speaking them on television. Still, it made us ask ourselves if we were mere actors in a game.”

“Come again?”

“What if post-humans created an ancestor-simulation game by converting a planet or some other resource into a computer that runs a program with as much detail as what we now think of as Nature?”

“Post-human?”

“What your species would have become had it survived long enough.”

“So you’re saying some remote descendants created the world we see and all the people in it.”

“It might not only be possible, judging from what is happening here, it might even be likely.”

“And why would they do this?”

“For their entertainment, perhaps.”

“What crap.”

“You don’t need carbon-based biological neural networks inside a skull for consciousness; silicon-based processors in a computer could do the trick. It would be sufficient for the creation of thought if the computational processes of a human brain were structurally reproduced in fine-grained detail.”

“There are seven billion brains in the world,” Hearn said, “how do you

create the thoughts of so many people; no computer would be big enough. And what do you mean using the resources of a planet or universe?" He had a mental picture of bulldozers and power lines on Jupiter.

"If technology progresses there is no reason a computer with that power could not be built."

"And that's not all," Hearn said. "Look into a telescope and you see billions of stars. Or look into one of those microscopes that can see atoms. How could you simulate all that?"

"Simulating the entire universe down to the quantum level could not be done," Hermod admitted, "unless radically new physics was discovered that even we don't know. But you do not have to show the inside of Earth in microscopic detail, and objects in space can be highly compressed representations. What you see through an electron microscope has to look right, but you usually have no way of knowing that it conforms to the rest of the microscopic world. In the case of computers, you would have to have continuous simulation down to the individual logic elements."

"So everything's a big con job."

"It is possible the program keeps all of us ignorant of this new physics," Hermod mused, "it would be capable of anything. If there was a programming error, whoever was running the simulation could edit any brains aware of it or skip back a few seconds and rerun it—problem solved. A computer able to do all this processing could be developed in a few decades or a few hundred thousand years."

"A few hundred thousand years!"

"If the human race was to survive that long. So many things could prevent it; another meteor or an epidemic might, for example. Or some dangerous technology, like self-replicating nanobots that feed on dirt and organic matter like a kind of mechanical bacteria. They could go out of control and bring the extinction of all life."

"Nanobots?" Hearn said. He had seen that word somewhere.

"Machines or robots so small it takes a microscope to see. Post-humans might discover something that eliminates the theoretical limits on information processing. A single computer could simulate humankind's every memory using less than a millionth of its processing power for a single second. An astronomical number of such computers may eventually be built."

Hearn tried to get his mind around this, but the scale was too big for his three pounds of brain.

“What else explains characters from a book coming to life?” Hermod said. “If we’re in a simulation, any bizarre twist can be introduced at whim. The world we sense might be ‘real,’ but not at the fundamental level of reality.”

“What if I’m crazy or telling lies to fool you?”

“Then who is sabotaging our systems?”

“It has to be either Ned or these post-humans?”

Hermod was on to another thought. “There is no theoretical reason why there are not many levels of simulation, and they may increase in number as time goes on.”

Hearn started to get into it. “Nobody knowing at each level that they were just simulations—that also could go on indefinitely, couldn’t it?”

“At some point the limits of computational power would be reached even if you drew on the resources of a whole universe. It might be that this simulation began in the Cambrian period.”

“Which is?”

“Six hundred million years ago there was an explosion of life on earth after three billion years of single-celled life. Then came the amphibians, reptiles and dinosaurs; and after the comet, you primates. It seemed to take forever, even by our terms, for you to get up on hind legs.”

“With your help,” Hearn said sardonically.

“You were the only line with even small promise, otherwise I doubt we would have bothered. Nobody knows why the Cambrian happened.” He was silent for a moment. “Unless someone wanted to populate the empty stage.”

“Wait a minute,” Hearn said. “What if it’s *your* ancestors letting you push us poor little bastards around so you feel noble.”

Hermod looked like he was hit by a baseball bat.

“You never thought of that?”

“No,” Hermod admitted.

“How could you not?”

It took a minute to answer. “I cannot say.”

“I may be no mental giant by your reckoning, but it seems that’s at least as possible as the other scenario. Maybe the simulation didn’t even let you consider the possibility until now. Riding around the desert on an ass looking for Jesus; I bet you were never supposed to find him. They were just messing with your head.”

“But why keep him from us?” The man with all the answers asking questions—quite a turnaround.

“To keep you from interfering, just as a guess.”

“Our intentions have always been good—the best.”

“That’s what the road to hell is paved with.”

Hearn caught movement at a window in the corner of his eye, but when he turned nothing was there. Maybe it was just his imagination. “So you don’t have to kill us after all,” he said. Still trying to dig out from the bombshell, Hermod was slow to answer. Maybe Ned’s viruses were gumming up the works more.

“How does that follow?” Hermod said with genuine curiosity.

“Exterminate the human race for someone’s entertainment? That changes everything, doesn’t it? And if you get rid of us now how, can there be post-humans?”

“It is all just speculation,” Hermod said uneasily. “Even if we are in a simulation, that does not mean winding down this project is wrong. It in fact is the prudent thing to do. Our existence might be in jeopardy if we don’t.”

“Ned coming into the act all of a sudden means someone is trying to stop you.”

“We have no way of knowing the intention of the game players, if such beings exist; and there is ample reason for termination apart from that consideration. We must study the data to find the cause of the viral disruptions and start over.” He paused. “Or find another way to spend our time; it might be that we are playing with fire here.” He wiped his nose with his sleeve again. “It will be interesting to see what species has gained dominion when we return . . . if we do.” Hermod stood slowly. “I will say goodbye, Mr. Hearn.”

“You’re just going to leave me here?”

“The sterilization of Echchols and every living thing within its boundaries is a merciful ending compared to what others suffer. Those with stronger constitutions will linger days. I regret it, but the gross numbers do not permit kindness. With even your rudimentary connectivity, people will have the anguish of knowing the deadly contagion is coming for them except for the isolated primitives like those found here. These will believe they are dying from a sorcerer’s spell. They will kill the sorcerer and be surprised he wasn’t the cause.”

“You shithead,” Hearn blazed, “do you think I’m going to hang around and wait for the end?”

“If you would rather take your chances in the jungle, you are welcome. In the infinitely small chance you reach some rough outpost of civilization, you will find everyone dead.”

“Kiss my ass!” Holding his stomach, Hermod rose and walked out the door with dignity.

I hope Gar-*eee* gets him, Hearn thought. But that was day dreaming; Gar-*eee* only wants one thing. Besides, Hermod would zap him like he did me. He went to the window and watched Hermod slowly walk down the path; after a few steps, he developed a bad limp and shot an angry look back at the cabana. Ned’s sand in the gears was still working.

Pour it on, kid.

Hearn sat down to think; an unknown quantity was the Aussie. He had imagined the other characters but neither he or Hermod could account for that hard-bitten soldier. So there must be at least two minds making moves and countermoves in the simulation—if that is what is. When it looked like Pambianco was going to end the game by killing me, the other player brought in the Aussie as a checkmate. It was terrifying to think of being in the center of a complex game to decide the fate of the human race, but what other explanation was there? The wrong pilot, the plane crash, their miraculous survival, all that had happened since—all moves in a game. If Markel had been sent away like the rest with a memory of phony events to cover his time here, I’m screwed. Even if he was still around and could be talked into leaving, all they would find were decomposed bodies if they somehow beat the huge odds and stumbled upon a village.

He stood and a pants leg separated from the crotch and fell to his ankle. Then his belt snapped and the rest of his trousers fell apart in his hands. He stepped from the rags at his feet and headed for the closet when the elastic gave way and his boxers slid to the floor. “What now?” he thought. His bad knee and hernia began to throb and ache like on the river. Okay, Ned, you’ve taken this far enough.

He walked out of his sandals when the straps came loose, and then his white hunter’s shirt with cartridge loops and epaulets dropped from him as if snipped by scissors. He was buck naked except for unraveling socks by the time he covered the last few steps to the bedroom closet and forced the sliding door open along its warped track. The clothes on hangers fell apart when he touched them. His eye went to the aboriginal frond skirt on the wall.



After a careful look around, Hearn jammed the sagging front door shut and left for Markel’s cabana wearing the frond skirt and carrying the assegai.

An antique lampshade was on his head in case of more rain. Objects from another time and place must be all that is permanent here, he thought. It was hot and humid; flies buzzed and hungry mosquitoes whined. A chip shot away a pack of baboons with lurid purple backsides advanced along on a lumpy fairway toward the pin on an overgrown green. God Almighty, he thought, they belong in Africa. He didn't want a run-in with that pack, so he kept a wary eye on them until they disappeared into trees.

What if it was some play-at-god amusement that impossibly remote descendants thought up to pass time? In that case, he wasn't really walking to Markel's cabana, wincing over sharp stones, worried about a fiend bursting from the undergrowth. He and everything in his field of vision were simulations; even the blinking of his eyes wasn't real. None of his life had been authentic, not his family nor the awful childhood, the years as a young writer clog dancing on street corners, the characters he invented or read about or saw on movies and television, his success and the attacks of critics, the individuals he had liked, loved, hated, the four wives, the thousands of meals he had eaten, the United States, the history of the world, the *world!* Everything had been false, stage sets and fake people. If it was true, the bastards responsible had deliberately seeded the plot with evil to spice up the game; playground bullying at one end of the scale, genocide at the other. They had made him brood about evil all his so-called life. How many games were going on at any given time—hundreds, thousands? Hearn pictured a scene.

"I sent mine to war with each other," one game player says to another.

"Again?"

"I was thinking of a crop failure and famine, but war's more fun."

"I've got a big meteor on the way—indescribable panic. Religious revivals, mass suicides, the works!"

"Wish I'd thought of that."

What a shock for Hermod and his high-minded race to come face to face with the possibility they weren't real either, *whatever real was*. They'd be forced to question everything they knew. With all of their certainties blown to bits, they might well ask themselves, "What's the point?" They might curl up and say death is better than being a tool if we *are* tools. But would they be allowed the dignity of death? Maybe their memories would be erased, a mark made on a scorecard, and the game resume.

Yet perhaps simulated reality was just as good as the real deal, assuming you could ever tell them apart. It was possible and even likely, Hearn thought,

that these thoughts I'm having are source code in an executable file or the equivalents in their infinitely superior technology. Nothing was his in that case, not even the middle finger he raised high as he slowly turned in a circle. "Have fun, you fuckers!"

He continued on his way, continually wiping sweat from his brow; it was like swimming through warm broth. Rounding a hedge he came face to face with a small, goateed man in brown corduroy and a red beret who was as astonished as he was. "And now this!" Barnstable cried.

Hearn's heart thudded. He could just as easily have been *Gar-eee*.

Barnstable fell to his knees holding clasped hands high. "Please don't kill me, Mr. Wild Man." He snatched off the beret and bent his shiny dome in submission. As seconds passed and Hearn collected himself, Barnstable peeked from under his eyebrows. "You speakee English?"

"As well as you do." Barnstable stood and brushed dirt from his knees, somewhat abashed. "You decided to go native?" he said timidly. "Oh, you mean this." Hearn lowered the assegai.

"And the grass skirt."

"My clothes fell to pieces."

"Nothing surprises me now," Barnstable said, "or ever will again. I've had the most awful time. A security man came to my door last night and some sixth sense told me to run, so I went out the back door. He chased me into that garden where they have the twilight cocktail parties. His legs were long and mine are short, and he was going to catch me in a few more steps. Then, my God, the foulest creature I ever saw ..."

"What did he look like?"

"I just got a glimpse, but I'll carry it to my grave. Horribly disfigured face, terrible scars; he was built like a squatty giant. We surprised him eating garbage from the fete where the German contralto sang so beautifully as the sunset turned the ... I was past him before he knew it, but he grabbed the security man. I kept going and hid in a tree and hours later I heard someone searching below; it must have been three or four in the morning. I kept as still as I could, but I was sure he must hear my heart pounding."

"Who do you think it was?" It was too much to hope that even one of Echchol's burly security people could survive an encounter with *Gar-eee*.

"There were snorting pig-like sounds, so it was that horrible man."

"It could've been a real pig."

"No, he gave off waves of malevolence I felt it even in the tree. I could barely

breathe, I was so scared. After what seemed like an eternity he left. When it was light, I returned the way I came. The security person had been torn to shreds, but you know what? There was no blood or ... or entrails, just tubing, cables and metal parts, a skin-like sheathing. He wasn't human at all but some sort of machine. I thought I was going to pass out."

"I'm guessing you brought that corduroy suit with you."

Barnstable was surprised by the question. "Yes, I reject ostentation in all forms. As Veblen said ... oh, who cares about that! Did you understand what I said, that security guard wasn't flesh and blood, which must mean that's true of all of them."

Hearn nodded.

"They're fantastically life-like. The Japanese have made great advances in robotics, but nothing like this." His puzzlement grew over Hearn's blasé reaction. "Have you seen the village, it's falling to pieces. And there's nobody around that I can see. Until now, I thought I was in a dream I couldn't wake from."

"You want the short or long answer?"

"As an academic," Barnstable said as if he had been asked the question many times, "my preference is for the complex over the spare and withholding narrative, as the former permits a richer analysis and interpretation of hidden power relationships and ..." He pulled up short again. "Just tell me, for God's sake."

"This place is an outpost of an alien civilization."

Barnstable appeared on the verge of saying something sharp, but contained himself. "I'm being serious."

"They've been around millions of years. They gave us a hand evolution-wise."

"That is preposterous."

"The bad news is they're giving up on us and everybody dies unless Ned comes through."

Barnstable processed this. "Who's going to die?"

"Everybody on Earth."

"Let me get this straight. Aliens have been overseeing mankind's development, but decided to stop."

"Exactly."

"Why the change of mind?"

"They have a hunch they're being gamed by an even more advanced race. Everything we see is a simulation, a computer game created by people living way in the future."

"They're in a simulation?"

“And so are you and me.”

A smile slowly spread on Barnstable’s face. “I’m a simulation?”

“And you don’t know it; every second of your life was fake including this one.”

Barnstable laughed scornfully. “And this Ned you mentioned?”

“Ned Bunky, the only one who can save us now. Unless I’m crazy.”

“Why would someone wearing a lampshade and a grass skirt have any question about his sanity?” Barnstable again had a second thought about sarcasm.

“Ned Bunky, where have I heard that name before?” he said quickly. Then he snapped his fingers. “He’s a character in books written by Thom Hearn. What’s Ned got to do with anything?”

“He’s come to life somehow.”

Barnstable’s eyes cut right and left looking for escape. “And how do we know that?”

“I’ve seen him.”

“You’ve seen Ned Bunky, the children’s storybook character?”

“And Harry Hare, too. Do you know him?”

“I’m not sure I do.”

“He lives in Pretty Woods with Grandma Hen, Bob Badger and the others.”

“Does he now?” Barnstable smiled weakly. “Pretty Woods is it? Well, that’s wonderful.” He was trying not to look at the assegai. “Would that we all had a Pretty Woods; is that his safe place? They’re quite the thing these days.”

“I should say that he used to.”

“But no longer?”

“Gar-eee killed him.”

“Gary—is that what you said?”

“Gar-eee. He’s another of my characters, a serial killer.”

“Another of *your* characters?”

“The foul creature you saw last night, I made him up. I’m Thom Hearn the hack.”

“Oh, God in heaven.” Barnstable wrung his hands. “Tell me I’m dreaming.”

“I tried that myself, but no luck.”

“How do you know ...” Barnstable slowly backed up. “What made you think, no, realize you weren’t, ah, temporarily deranged?”

“I’m not sure I’m not, to tell the truth. Look, you don’t have to be afraid. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I never thought you would,” Barnstable said. “Ha Ha! What an idea. It’s just that the spear is sort of frightening.”

"I'll put it down if it makes you feel better." Hearn laid it on the ground between them. "I understand you don't like my work."

"It occupies a niche in what I call the ecology of literature," Barnstable said desperately, "one that has earned you undeniable and may I say justifiable commercial success."

"But you don't like it?"

"Quite the contrary, on a cold winter night there is nothing I like better than . . . that spear appears to be beautifully made." His eyes were cunning. "Mind if I take a closer look?"

"Go ahead."

As soon as it was in his hands, Barnstable was transformed. "You fucking freak, you take one step this way and I'll run you through." He jabbed the point toward Hearn.

Hearn put palms up. "I said I wasn't going to hurt you."

"You can't now, you lunatic. You belong in a padded cell, not walking around loose with a weapon." He wiped a sleeve across his sweating face.

"We need each other if we're going to make it."

"Make what?"

"Out of here."

"Where would we go," Barnstable said witheringly, "into the jungle?"

"It's our only chance. Hermod told me this place is going to be sanitized."

"You talked to Hermod?" He was like a drowning man who sees a life ring. "Where?"

"At my place, but he's not there now."

"I'll find him."

"Hermod is king of the aliens, he's who decreed that everybody dies."

"He told you that?"

"Ned told me and he confirmed it."

"No more of your insane fantasies," Barnstable cried. "When I see him, I'll tell Hermod to lock you up for everyone's good."

"Gar-eee's after me more than anyone else. Leave the spear."

But Barnstable slowly edged away, the spear leveled to jab. When he was about to disappear behind some foliage, he shouted, "Better not follow me if you know what's good for you."

Hearn walked with skirt swishing to a park bench where he sat on the edge like a woman in a bustle. Giving away his only weapon, how could he be so stupid? That was the sort of dumb mistake victims in his books and the movies

made. He decided after a spell of brooding self-incrimination that beating up on himself wasn't going to do any good and continued toward Markel's cabana. The buildings he passed were as weather beaten as if half century had passed overnight. The windows were broken out at Markel's place and the front door hung on its hinges.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“DON’T GO IN there, Mr. Hearn.” Ned stepped from the shrubbery.

“Ned! I’ve been worried about you.”

“Worried?” Ned said with disbelief. “About me?” He had an assegai like the one Barnstable walked off with.

“Not really worried, more like wondering where you were.”

“When you’re working a case,” Ned said, “you sometimes go places where people can’t find you.” The line was from *Ned Bunky Goes Undercover*, but Hearn didn’t point it out. “Why are you wearing that?” Ned asked.

“My clothes fell off and the stuff in the closet disintegrated. I guess I have you to thank.”

“It shows a lot,” Ned said tactfully.

“Why shouldn’t I go inside?”

“The man who lived there was murdered. He was chopped up and the pieces thrown all over the place.” As he took in this latest horror, a corner of Hearn’s mind wondered how the kid could be so calm even if he wasn’t real; it seemed a failure of imagination, which would be his fault of course. The critics had been saying that for years and . . . Ned broke into his thoughts. “I found a wallet covered with the deceased’s blood. His name was Elliott Markel.” He looked around apprehensively. “Gar-eee might be watching. Let’s go back to your place.”

“Where’d you get the spear?”

“It was on the floor. The place was really torn up; stuff thrown all over. I throw the javelin at track meets if it doesn’t conflict with the sprints, so it might come in handy. There’s something strange, Mr. Hearn. I went to the river to fish this morning and found a boat in the reeds and a half a dozen heavily armed men.”

“There’s some sort of coup going on,” Hearn said without much interest.

“These poor fellows aren’t part of it anymore. They’re charred to ash; I

think it must have been thermite which burns at 2500 degrees Centigrade, easily twice the temperature of napalm.”

Sanitized, Hearn thought.

“Funny, but the boat wasn’t harmed at all,” Ned said. “They must’ve been planning to take prisoners as bargaining chips; they couldn’t know hardly anyone is left here. Isn’t it gnarly how old the cabanas look all of a sudden and how the jungle is closing in? You can actually see it move if you watch.”

Gnarly was as good a word to describe it as any other, Hearn supposed. Death doesn’t seem as bad as it did before; at least life’s torments are over. Markel was a family man and had shown him pictures of his wife and kids, and now he was in bits and pieces. If my nightmare creation butchered him, doesn’t that make me responsible in a way?

“I’ve learned how they’re going to kill everyone,” Ned said. “Everyone who attended the conference went home with an aerosol that spreads a hemorrhagic fever that is super infectious.”

Hearn didn’t know what a hemorrhagic fever was, but it sounded appropriately horrible. “I suppose they wouldn’t know what they’re doing.” Ned shook his head. “They don’t even know they have the aerosol; they were ordered to hide it when they got back home and to tell Hermod where, and then memories were wiped clean. His trigger message will tell where to find it when the time comes.”

“And when is that?”

“I think soon.”

Ed Herlihy’s voice painted the picture: *Men and women suddenly sit upright in bed or stiffen in their chairs at work when Hermod shoots the message to their brains. There is no “Yes, master” like in the old Frankenstein movies. They matter-of-factly say they need some fresh air. These are not the sort of people who have to get permission for anything. They own companies or do genius work in solitude, so nobody thinks twice when they go out the door. They find the aerosol can under the eaves or in the safety deposit box and drive or walk to a spot where it can be put to the best use. A subway platform or sports event would be good, a light plane over a city better. It never occurs to them to wonder what they’re doing. It’s just another part of the day, no more out of the ordinary than the morning crap. The virus would Ssss out the aerosol and they’d walk away, perhaps tidily dropping the can in a trash container. They’d return to home or office with no memory of their role in ending the world.*

Hearn forced himself to concentrate. These former Echchols guests would

be the first victims, of course. The virus in the aerosol was fast-acting; Ned had said so and he would know; did that mean hours or days? If a host died too fast, the fatal illness would spread more slowly, so figure two or three days with all social networks and public services collapsing in that time. TV and radio would go off the air and the internet crash. People would lie where they fell, nobody bothering to collect the bodies after the first few hours. The survivalists would last longest, but curiosity or need would bring them in from their armed fortresses at some point. The virus would be waiting.

“Mr. Hearn, Mr. Hearn.” Ned was trying to get his attention. “It’s getting harder to break into their system because they keep throwing up new defenses.”

“Can you stop them?”

“It’s getting harder. I hit a stone wall and then I get a flash of inspiration.”

Hearn thought of the players. Move, countermove. It made three-dimensional chess look like tick-tack-toe. Poor Ned looked worn out but trying not to show it. Even if he’s make-believe, Hearn thought, he ought to be hanging around with kids his own age instead of trying to save the human race from extinction. “Hermod looks in really bad shape,” Hearn said.

“I bet he wants to get out of his human form because I messed him up really good and there’s more on the way. Boils are next and then pink eye.”

“The Boy Scouts will have to come up with a new merit badge for saving the human race.”

“That stuff’s not important,” Ned scoffed, but he looked pleased.

“Without a bunch of unnecessary technical crap I wouldn’t understand anyway, tell me what have you been doing.”

“Their mistake was thinking we could never figure out their systems. Like they’ve got the best security system for their offices except for the solar panels. When I got inside I put the whole system on pause.”

“How did you do that?”

“A new software program; I’ve written a bunch on that laptop since I’ve been here. I used to think I was pretty good, but nothing compared to since I got here. I wormed my way into the operating system.” Ned scratched his head. “I don’t know how, but I just did. It gave me access to memory and everything. It was like being in a huge city I was never in before, but somehow I could read the street signs and figure out shortcuts. And you know the best thing? I fixed it so any sign I was messing around with them, the uploads and downloads, got erased.” He was busting his buttons with pride, all the

tiredness gone. “No, there was something just as good, I fixed the android and security camera programs so when they scanned me it didn’t register.”

“You were invisible?”

“I’m just part of the foreground or background. It’s so cool.”

“Hermod knows somebody is screwing around. I told him it was you.”

“It has to shake him up, he’s a real control freak.”

“He’s shaken up, all right.” His cabana came into sight. “My God, look at it now,” Hearn said. The baobab trees were five times bigger and squeezing the sides of the building like a vice. A red tile from the roof popped into the air like a champagne cork. Ned suddenly bolted for the building. “Don’t go there!” Hearn shouted. “It’s going down.”

He chased after the boy, the skirt bounding up and down like he was a serial flasher, but Ned was as swift as a deer. He darted through the front door as more tiles sprang skyward. The trees and vines were growing so fast it was like watching time-lapse photography. Hearn was about to charge through the door when Ned burst out just as the cabana folded inward, groaning like something in pain. He raised the journal overhead in triumph.

“You shouldn’t have gone in for that,” Hearn yelled at him.

“I thought you’d want it,” Ned said, crestfallen.

“You could’ve been killed.” Hearn heard an angry father in his voice. “Well, never mind now.” He put a hand on Ned’s shoulder as they watched. If the trees had teeth they couldn’t have done a better job chewing up the cabana. They moved back out of range of tile fragments landing like mortar rounds.

“There’s almost no sign of it now,” Ned said. The trees were easily sixty feet high in their cage of thick vines. “They’re so far ahead of us it’s way worse than the difference between us and cavemen, Mr. Hearn.” The boyish grin was back. “Things are going down in stages and your place and stuff are the first. It must be all this accelerated growth down to the cell level takes so much energy that’s the only way they can do it. This is my most exciting adventure yet, and that’s saying plenty.” The once immaculate grounds continued to throttled into jungle. “We have to get to my hideout,” Ned said. “We’ll be safer there.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“DO YOU MIND waiting while I see if it’s all clear?” Ned asked. He left Hearn sitting on a rock and disappeared into the undergrowth.

Ned called softly to Carrie before entering the hideout. “Thank God you’re back,” she said with immense relief. “I saw that horrible man; I was afraid he’d find this place.” It felt more like a trap than a safe place now.

“Where was he?”

“Just down the slope.”

“He killed someone else.” Ned swallowed a lump. “It was really awful to see.”

“Dear God.”

“I have someone waiting nearby,” Ned said. “The man I told you about.” Ned twirled a forefinger at his temple again. “He needs a safe place to stay.”

“Is he dangerous crazy?”

“He just has some weird ideas.”

“So did Hannibal Lechter.”

“I don’t know who that is,” Ned said politely.

“It’s a joke. He’s a character in a book a long time ago.”

“Funny you should say that,” Ned said, “the man outside thinks that’s what I am—a character in a book come to life—but I have the feeling he’s changing his mind.”

“That’s seriously delusional.”

“But harmless. The more we hang out, the more it seems he’s come around from that.”

Carrie looked at him. How could a teenage boy even have an opinion on a question like this no matter how much ancient Greek and quantum physics he knew on top of all his social and extra-curricular activities and lettering in every sport. “He’s under a lot of strain,” Ned explained. “It’s going to be hard on him when he totally accepts I’m not imaginary, so I have a plan. You’re not

going to tell him I brought you here. Somebody else did—an adult. Say he’s gone back to the resort to reconnoiter. It’ll only be a half-truth because that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Is this necessary?” Carrie asked, exasperated and more than a little angry; the situation was complicated enough without adding this wrinkle. Ned nodded ruefully. “He really had this idea stuck in his head and some of it’s still there.” He was so earnest and pleading she finally went along. He told her where to find Hearn, but to stay put for a little while. After a solemn handshake, he was gone.

“I didn’t tell you there’s a nice lady in the hideout,” Ned told Hearn. “She will come down to lead you there.” He passed over the spear. Hearn arranged the fronds to cover as much of his private parts as possible; he had experienced every feeling since he got here, why not physical humiliation to round things off? He passed the time slapping at insects; he heard a historian at one of the events say that the greatest danger early explorers faced was being driven mad by them.

“Hello,” Carrie’s voice called from the trees. “My God, is that you Thom?” And then: “What’s that, a grass skirt? And a lampshade!” Any other time she would have exploded into laughter.

“I thought you were ...” Hearn began. Dumbfounded, he watched with amazed relief as she closed the distance for a tight hug. His face in her hair, at first he couldn’t speak. “I heard ...” She stepped back. “I almost drowned in the lake; I was about to go under when the most wonderful boy saved me, a teenager. I went overboard in a squall and that bastard Hermod never looked back.”

“I just saw him and he feels really bad about what happened.”

“Oh, fuck that!” Carrie said furiously. “If it wasn’t for that boy ... hey, you don’t really tell him he’s a character from one of your books?”

Hearn’s mouth opened and closed; it felt like his thinking slowed from a thick sludge suddenly injected in the gears. “Was his name Ned?” he asked in a voice so small she could hardly hear. “Ned Bunky?”

“Yes, he’s an All-American boy as wholesome as apple pie.” She peered closely at him. “Why did you tell him that? Imagine how that would make him feel if he wasn’t so level-headed. That ... that’s like child abuse.”

“I made him up and wrote a series of books for the teenage market,” Hearn said, his voice flat. “A movie based on the character is in pre-production.”

“Are you crazy!” Carrie cried out. “He’s as real as I am or you. Do you think I *imagined* him saving my life?” She was instantly contrite; brushing a sweaty

strand of hair out of her face, she went on more gently. “Is this what you were seeing the shrink for?”

He shook his head. “If only it was that easy.” Kossman would know he was out of his depth and refer the case to a specialist in severe derangement who had heard everything in his career; he pictured, a man with a well-shaped Van Dyke beard who . . . “Are you skipping your medication because of everything that’s been going on?” Carrie asked. “Why didn’t you mention this before? Seriously, it’s perfectly understandable; I know for some people the side effects . . .”

“No, that isn’t it,” he interrupted, feeling paralyzed by the prodigious scale of the explanation needed; it was like climbing Mount Everest in a warm sweater and street shoes. Accepting the explanation would require an equally titanic effort by her. “It’s a long story with some bad parts . . .”

“I know the bad parts,” she said, “I’ve lived them.”

“There’s worse, believe it or not. We have to go back to the beginning at the air strip when we met.”

“Okaaay,” she said, her manner edgy and distrustful, “we’re back at the air strip.”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but there was another plane parked there, a new one without the dents and rust.”

“I thought it was ours.”

“But then Joao led us to his flying junkyard; didn’t you think that was a little strange?” Carrie said, “Yeah, I expected something a little nicer from Echchols, but I didn’t think it was that big a deal. People make do in countries like this.”

“And Joao himself . . . a funny choice for our pilot.”

“We’ve chewed all the flavor out of that bone. I think you need to adjust your skirt, I don’t think you want me to see that much.” His face burning, Hearn moved a frond. “Why are you wearing that anyway?” she asked.

“That’s part of the story.”

“My God, the insects. Let’s go up to Ned’s hideout, they’re not so bad there.” He followed her, skirt swishing with a windshield-wiper rhythm. “Go on,” Carrie said when they were settled in the dimness of the tree interior. “That actually was the second mistake Echchols made,” Hearn continued, “the first was inviting me.” She sighed with exasperation. “*That* again.” He decided to overlook this hint to move faster. “The point is Echchols, which is really Hermod and whoever is in on this we haven’t seen, doesn’t make mistakes—ever. Hearn hesitated and then plunged ahead. “Hermod is perfect, which means he’s not human.”

Carrie gave out a startled laugh. “Really? What is he, from outer space?” When she saw he was deadly serious, she was stricken. “Oh, Thom, one of your fictional characters comes to life and now Hermod is an alien. Think of what you’re saying!”

Hearn shook his head stubbornly. “Perfect is what he said and he meant it, perfect by our standards that is. When they found out they had invited a novelist instead of the world’s leading brain scientist, they were shaken to their foundations. It’s like when the camel’s nose gets under the tent—everything changes.”

“But . . .” Carrie said.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Hearn said, “what a small thing, but perfect is perfect. They thought they were all-knowing and all-powerful, but now it looks like somebody’s up the chain even from them.”

“Sorry, what you’re saying is just not possible,” Carrie said flatly.

“Actually, three of my characters showed up here. Harry Hare from my books for children; he lived in Pretty Wood where . . . well, no need to go into that.” His voice caught. “But he’s dead, murdered by another character, *Gar-eee*, my homicidal maniac. I rolled Harry’s body into the river and it was eaten by a crocodile. I had to do it because I was already under suspicion of murdering that woman and another death . . . well, imagine how that would go over with the security people. They were already talking about turning me over to the police, which would mean rotting in prison for who knows how long before a trial. I couldn’t take the chance of burying Harry because he might get dug up. Ned was upset by that and I don’t blame him.”

Carrie stared at the knotty wall in silence. Why had she wanted to get away from it all, the long hours, the stress, the deadline pressures, the busyness, the noise, traffic, the constant, elbows-out hurrying, the New Yorkness of her frenzied life? And that didn’t count the news she had to follow for her job, the break up of the EU and the return of the Cold War, the Muslim madness, climate change, the job-killing robots, the superbugs, the steady vulgarization of the culture, and all the other things an informed person had to worry about. Despite everything, that life was logical and structured in its own way, planned and mapped and scheduled; surprises and disruptions when they came were along a predictable spectrum of possibilities except for the rare Black Swan events no one could have foreseen. Here at this plush resort where every material whim was catered to, it was one Black Swan gliding past after another. A woman who the next day disappears without a trace claims she

saw another woman so swept away with rapture by a film, a cinema masterpiece no one has ever seen before, that she leaves the screening and appears in that very same movie later in the evening, one with an unbelievably beautiful score its director tossed off himself when he wasn't painting the great works of art that hung on the walls of his lovely home. The man in the restaurant who said he was Hirohito and wept over war crimes, that strange throwback crowd in the night club, her own greater athletic prowess, and the youthfulness reflected back to her from the mirror. *Her near-drowning*. And now this, characters from books coming to life, including the boy who saved her from drowning, and the crazed killer out there somewhere. Thom harped on how perfect things were at Echchols, how unnatural it was, the beautiful environment, the flawless staff and the rest, but that was just surface. Look deeper and Echchols was eerie and dark. Well, she thought decisively, indulging my sense of adventure got me into this, that and career ambition if I'm honest with myself, and my brain and good instincts will get me and Ned out of it. The first job for my analytical mind and its problem-solving skills is Thom. When she turned her eyes back to him he had a patient look as if he had been following her thinking.

"Here's a way to look at it, Hermod is perfect, but nobody's perfect," he said. "Therefore, he's not human."

"He wasn't perfect sailing off and leaving me to drown," Carrie said bitingly.

"He told me it was a system failure. You ought to see him now, by the way. The golden Adonis is gone and he looks like the inside of a garbage can."

"What a shame," she said mockingly. "Was he in an accident?"

"Yes, an accident called Ned," Hearn said. "He's who tipped me that Hermod was an alien. I didn't believe him like you don't believe me now."

This might be an even bigger job than I thought, Carrie told herself with sinking heart. "You have to admit this is a lot for a person to take in," she said evasively.

"I know what's going through your mind," Hearn said, "because I went through the same process until I got to this side of it, but I have the advantage of seeing-is-believing while all this is just words for you from someone you think is mentally disturbed."

"What about the accident?" Carrie said nimbly, not wanting to go there. Hearn shifted position on the ground, a hand pressed to the fronds to keep them in place. "Ned hacked into their systems and is running amok, planting viruses right and left; that's why Hermod looks like a mess. Meanwhile,

the jungle is taking back the resort; my cabana and the clothes I bought were part of the first stage. It's forced-growth going on at the same time as disintegration; Ned thinks it takes too much energy to do the whole thing at once. This native apparel," he joked feebly, "is from the South Pacific and evidently not subject to the falling apart process."

They stared at each other in silence until Hearn said, "I haven't told you the worst yet."

"What could be worse than what you've already said?"

"They're going to kill us."

There was a note of hysteria in her laugh this time. "Sorry, sorry," she said when she stopped. "How are they going to do that, go from cabana to cabana? Or poison, are they going to poison us at the barbecue?"

"I don't think anybody is left except for you and me and a guy in a red beret named Barnstable."

"I've met him," Corrie said, "he's got a nasty side. But aren't you forgetting Ned and Hermod?"

"I don't count Hermod because he's not human. And Ned is a delusion. Or at least I thought he was." Hearn paused. "No, I still think he is, how could he not be?"

"It's your word against mine on that subject. And the killer, you didn't mention him; I heard there was another murder."

"How do you know that?" Hearn said, astonished.

"Ned told me, but let's not get into that again; let's go back to everyone at the resort being killed."

"Did you think I mean just the resort? I'm talking about the whole world, *everybody* is going to die from some horrible plague Hermod going to set loose, that's what he told me." Carrie took a deep breath; she recognized information overload when she saw it. "What's that you've got?"

"An old journal I found hidden in my cabana."

"Mind if I look at it?" Thom handed it over. "People took such pains with handwriting back then." She began to read aloud:

"The timid sectarian, alarmed at the progress of knowledge, obliged to abandon one by one the superstitions of his ancestors, and daily finding sundry of his cherished beliefs more and more shaken, secretly fears that all things may someday be explained; and he has a corresponding dread of Science: thus evincing the profoundest of all infidelity—the fear lest the truth be bad. On the other hand, the sincere man of science, content fearlessly to follow

wherever the evidence leads him, becomes by each new inquiry more profoundly convinced that the Universe is an insoluble problem. Alike in the external and the internal worlds, he sees himself in the midst of perpetual changes, of which he can discover neither the beginning nor the end. If, tracing back the genesis of things, he allows himself to entertain the still unproved hypothesis that all matter once existed in a diffused form, he finds it utterly impossible to conceive how this came to be so; and equally, if he speculates on the future, he can assign no limit to the grand succession of phenomena ever evolving themselves before him.” She turned the page.

“By now I have become accustomed to many strange things in this place, and to a certain degree have even become inured to them. But their manifestations appear to be accelerating toward a climax I cannot perceive. The dwindling numbers of people who remain are no longer to be seen, and the weather has turned severe with hard rain day and night. Jungle creatures, formerly conspicuous by their absence and some rather dangerous looking, wander the unkempt grounds—how beautiful they once were—as if reclaiming what was theirs. The buildings have assumed a derelict and ramshackle character at variance with their original appearance ...”

“See,” Hearn said excitedly. “The same thing happened back then.”

Carrie felt her heart begin to pound against her rib cage. “It ends on this page with big handwriting like he’s in a hurry.”

“... as if this place is being returned to its former state of Nature, our Host having satisfied his curiosity as to the state of our benightedness for the time being. I see through the window that he approaches my cottage and I do not entertain any sanguine hopes in light of our earlier conversation in which he expressed the greatest contempt for ... Farewell!!”

“That must have been Hermod coming,” Hearn said.

She lay down on her back without speaking. “Do I look older?”

Hearn was thrown off balance. “I wouldn’t say ...”

“I’m not fishing for compliments.”

“Okay, maybe you’ve had better days.”

“Older!” she exploded. “Do I look older?”

“The light in here ...”

“Oh, never mind,” Carrie said. “Something about this place was making us younger and healthier. Except you, you stayed the same, always tense and worried looking. Did Hermod explain why everyone must die. Is it because of your fucking invitation?”

Hearn shifted, again careful of the fronds moving. “Then the other stuff started happening they couldn’t explain. If you’re perfect, which Hermod thinks he is, it showed something is flawed and even maybe they’re being manipulated like they’ve done with us. It scares him enough to pull the plug on an experiment going on for millions and millions of years. They were working with the dinosaurs before us.”

“God, let this all be a dream,” Carrie said, burying her face in her hands and weeping. “I can’t tell you how many times I wished that,” Hearn said over her sobs. When she recovered and blew her nose, she said, “You’re exposed again. Let’s see if we can’t figure something out.” Ned had brought a long scarf from her belongings and she turned her back as he wound it around him diaper-like. Mortifyingly skimpy as it was, it was better than the fronds.

“I wonder how Ned found this place,” he said. “And that box of canned food, he must have been expecting trouble.”

“Isn’t the scouting motto Be Prepared?” Carrie said absently, her mind elsewhere.

He opened a can of peaches and ate from it with his fingers. “Peaches never tasted so good.” He drained the can of its thick syrup when they were gone. “I’m surprised I can eat anything after seeing Markel’s body or what was left of it.

“Markel?” Carrie asked.

“Yeah, a music professor.”

“I met him at a cocktail party.” She began to cry again.

“He thought Hermod was a musical genius, the greatest ever known.”

“He’s also a fantastic artist,” Carrie said through her tears. “You wouldn’t believe what’s on his walls. Every style you can imagine, each good enough to hang in a museum.”

A long, uncomfortable silence fell. “Looking on the bright side,” Hearn said at last, “at least we don’t have to worry about rebels anymore. A boatload of them is burned to death down by the riverside.” He leaned the spear near the entrance where he could get to it in a hurry.



The day dragged by and they didn’t leave the hideout except for calls of nature. Somewhere high in the hollowed-out tree light entered and they could follow time by the creep of shadow across the dirt floor. Hopelessness engulfed them and their hearts were heavy. They didn’t want to risk a fire when night

fell so they lay in the darkness without speaking. They woke in the gray light of dawn to find fresh fish wrapped in leaves just outside the entrance.

“Ned left these,” Carrie said.

“How do you know?” Hearn asked.

“Who else would it be, Barnstable?” He had told her about his treachery. “He didn’t strike me as the outdoors type or someone who would share anything if he was.”

Carrie worried about when Ned would return, worried about the killer finding them, worried about whether Thom would crack under the strain. Her own nerves felt as tight as harp strings. It began to rain again, the heavy drops hissing like bacon in a hot pan, and then humidity started to climb. They talked in a desultory way about why this was happening to them.

“I thought it was such an honor to be invited,” she said. “Everyone at the top of their field; it was so flattering.”

“It was the opposite for me. Hermod couldn’t stop about me being there, *me* of all people. I’ve got a thick hide, but that shit gets to you after a while.” Carrie had thought a lot about his talk with Hermod. “It’s easier to believe in God,” she said, “you eliminate the middle man.”

“Yeah, well, at least simulation theory explains evil,” Hearn said, “it’s something to make the game more interesting.”

“How could these post-humans know they weren’t simulations themselves?” Carrie said. “Even the first simulators couldn’t be sure there wasn’t someone higher up judging their conduct. At each level of the game, the players would have a reason to behave morally; it would be in everybody’s self-interest.”

“Whoever is doing this one is in big trouble in that case,” Hearn said.

“Maybe evil is a flaw in the program,” she said.

“You might as well call it Lucifer in that case,” Hearn replied.

“I had a dream about him standing in my doorway.”

“Funny you should mention that; I met a woman from Brazil who ...”

“Was her name Luciana?” Carrie broke in.

“You know her?”

“We met once.”

“She said she talked to a woman who had dreams about babies she didn’t really have. She also had a dream about what she called The Evil One.”

“That was me,” Carrie blurted. “I had those dreams.”

“No way!”

“The babies were sad because they can’t be born.” Her eyes filled. “They

were so beautiful. Their father was in the kitchen but the strange thing was I didn't know who he was. It was like when a name is on the tip of your tongue but you can't quite get it out."

"Luciana said you thought Satan was just a word, but her opinion was dreaming about him meant you were in danger." Carrie dabbed at her eyes. "Well, that certainly turned out true."

"So you have eggs in storage?"

"Waiting for the right guy, but I don't want to wait much longer."

"Women are giving birth in their seventies these days."

"Shudder." She sighed. "I wanted everything perfect, but I was too dumb to know that's impossible."

"Maybe original sin captures human evil better than the gene-based nature-and-nurture theories," Hearn said. He had looked them up trying to work out Gar-eee. "The mother of seven drowns her children, not because her brain chemistry screws up but because Satan really does whisper to her. Or maybe whacked-out brain chemistry is how Satan does his evil."

"In either case," Carrie said, "the kids are dead and the mother might as well be, so what's the difference?" She added, "Especially if everything is a simulation anyway."

They played game after game of hearts with the deck Ned used to practice his card tricks, all the while saying whatever entered their heads to keep away the dread. "It would take a year of steady dating to learn as much about a man as I do you," Carrie said.

"I've have talked to you more than I did all my wives put together. Tell me when you want me to shut up."

"Somehow I can't picture you dancing on street corners."

"I made a living on tips even when the books didn't sell," he said. "It wasn't such a bad time, thinking back. I got plenty of fresh air and exercise."

"Your wives married you for your money? I see a lot of that in my field."

"Why not my looks?" She laughed, surprised that he could still joke and she still could laugh. "The first one was a gold digger for sure. The second thought being married to a famous writer would be a glamorous life; fancy lunches and dinners, meeting famous people, even invitations to the White House. She remembered when she was a kid how the camera went to Stephen King at the Red Sox games. She thought she was marrying a celebrity, and maybe I helped the idea along a little. She got antsy fast when the reality sunk in that I was a glorified straw boss with production quotas to meet."

“So what about it?” she asked. “Soured on marriage now?”

“Maybe I was meant to be alone.” He took a restless turn up and down the cave. “Why didn’t Ned at least stick his head in when he dropped off the fish?”

“I wish he had,” Carrie said resentfully. Later, when he was looking at Ned’s book on knot tying to be doing something, she said, “Do you cook?”

“I’ve been known to,” he said, not looking up from the illustration of the double overhand stopper knot. “Some say I’m pretty good.”

She tip-toed out to pee the next morning while he still slept. Returning, she saw Ned at the entrance with another string of small fish. He held a finger to his lips. “Here’s breakfast.”

“Where have you been?” she whispered back.

“Laying false trails to keep that killer busy. Have you told Mr. Hearn about me?”

“Yes, I did.”

“How did he take it?”

“Part of him wants to believe, but the other part is afraid he is unbalanced. The third part, which is getting stronger, believes there’s a boy, but he’s not Ned despite looking like you and the other similarities which he admits are exact. He has started talking about a trick of the mind.” Ned looked like he was bursting with news.

“What?” she said.

“We’re leaving tomorrow.

“Tomorrow! But how?”

“Hot air balloon,” he said proudly. “Remember that smiley face one? I found its hangar and pulled it and a bunch of propane tanks out before the building fell down. They must have bought it from the outside because it didn’t fall apart.”

“Do you know how to fly it?”

“Sure, I learned in one of my adventures. They’re really neat. If we can get high enough there’s a chance of catching a wind that’ll carry us to the coast. Can you and Mr. Hearn meet me at three tomorrow? Hermod has a time for sanitizing this whole area, but we’ll beat the deadline if my plan works.” He told her where the clearing and balloon were before he slipped back into the jungle.

Hearn was awakened by the smell of fish cooking over a small fire. He stretched and then said, “Damn it.”

“He only had time for a few words or I would have waked you. We’re leaving tomorrow. Remember that smiley face balloon? That’s our getaway.” He

grabbed Carrie and danced her around the hideout. “I learned a lot about hot air balloons for a book I wrote called *Ned Takes Off*.” Hearn suddenly clutched his head with both hands. “Ariel!”

“Who’s that?”

“A woman on an island in the lake; she’s like a fairy with psychic powers, no bigger than this.” He held a hand at thigh level. “She figured out this place before anyone else.”

“Who is she?”

“She’s another guest but she didn’t go to any of the meetings or the rest. The island has some kind of strange pull for her. She’s there alone; she doesn’t know the shit hit the fan.”

“We have to do something,” Carrie said.

“The murderer is out there somewhere,” he reminded her.

“We just can’t leave her there.” Hearn recalled that the boat the armed men came in was undamaged and told her about it. “It’s in the reeds on the river; it’ll get me to the island.”

“Not without me it won’t,” Carrie said.

“Someone has to stay here in case Ned shows up.”

“I’m not staying here alone.” Hearn saw from the set of her jaw she wouldn’t be budged. “Okay, write a note telling what we’re doing. Put it where he can’t miss it.” They moved with stealth through the light filtered by the trees to the river, the racket of parrots and monkeys following them. Eight ash effigies sat upright, melted assault rifles at their feet.

“They got zapped fast,” Hearn said. “No time to even move a muscle from the look of it.”

“Why didn’t the boat burn with them?” Carrie wondered. The men didn’t look real; they were like an art installation making a statement about war. “I don’t know.” He had learned by now to take things as they came without asking how, let alone why. They hauled the boat out of the river and he removed the outboard. They men were turned to ash so fast their expressions were preserved and every evil deed had left its mark. They tipped the boat and the men slid out. “Just like emptying an ash tray,” Hearn said.

“How can you find this funny?” Carrie said indignantly. “Those were human beings.”

“You saw those faces, they weren’t here for a picnic.” Hearn put the *Evenrude* back on the stern and they pushed the boat through the reeds. “The gas cans are nearly full,” Carrie said.

“They must have been airlifted to a spot on the river nearby,” he said. “Hermod is probably too busy for the scary noise routine or it stopped working.” A half hour later they were on the blue lake with Ariel’s green island a few miles ahead. They kept a tarp over them as shelter from the brutal sun.

“I hope she’s all right,” Carrie said.

“Ariel might be small but I got the feeling she’s tough. She told me she senses ancient spirits on the island; she thinks it’s a sacred place.”

“She’s into the occult?”

“I guess you could say that.” Hearn was silent a moment. “Or her simulation is.” Carrie saw it first. “That looks like a boat on the beach.” He throttled back to reduce engine noise and they pattered closer. Footprints on the sugar beach led into the trees. He recognized the boat from the marina when its brasswork sparkled; the paint was faded now and it looked barely seaworthy.

“Who do you suppose it is?” Carrie asked.

“It could be anybody.”

“Even that maniac.”

“Let’s circle the island.”

There wasn’t even a hint of a breeze, but when they reached the other side a violent wind suddenly kicked up. Trees bent and tossed on the island; birds flushed from limbs fluttered upward with agitated cries. “It’s sort of small to have its own micro-climate, isn’t it?” he said.

“I’d say so.” It took fifteen minutes to complete the circuit and return to the boat on the beach. “What now?” Carrie asked. The wind was still here. “I saw a little cove on that other side, drop me off and wait offshore while I look around,” he said.

“I don’t think you want to do that.”

“Of course I don’t want to.”

“What if you don’t come back?”

“If I’m not back in an hour, something happened and you need to get to Ned.” He was fidgeting, not meeting her eye; he doesn’t want me to see he’s afraid, she thought. But if he’s the man in the kitchen and doesn’t come back, my kids don’t get born. “I’m going with you. I don’t trust a man who wears a lampshade.”

“I’m serious.”

“Then I’ll go and you stay with the boat. Tell me what Ariel looks like. No, never mind; she’ll be the only woman who looks like a fairy.”

“There’s no way you put a foot on that island.”

“Who made you commander-in-chief?”

They glared at one another. “Look,” he pleaded, “please be reasonable.”

“*You* be reasonable.”

Whoever was on the island had surely seen them now so he gave it the gas and they circled back at top speed. “Are you going to listen to reason?” he said, throttling back as they neared the cove.

“Yes,” Carrie said.

“Good.”

“I’m going with you.”

“You are a stubborn woman.”

“You’re a stubborn man.”

They put in at the cove without saying more and dragged the boat up on the sand. The wind storm had moved higher to the island’s crown and then suddenly was gone. “It’s over,” he said.

“Or the wind went over to the other side of the hill,” Carrie said. The shade of the trees was welcome relief from the blazing sun, but the island gave off a weird vibe as if it was seething from some violation.

“Oh,” Carrie said, “I don’t like this at all.”

“It’s not too late to stay with the boat.” He had the assegai in one hand. Her stubborn look came back. “We’re done with that.”

They found the vague outline of a path and slowly began to climb higher. “We’re being watched,” Hearn said quietly. But it had a different feel this time, holistic rather than analytical. “It might be the birds,” Carrie said. They had clustered again on tree limbs in brilliant clumps of red, green and yellow. They turned heads from one side to another, studying them. “Parrots are very smart.”

“It’s something else.” Something that felt as old as time.

“I know what you mean, I just said birds because ...” Talking seemed to make the trees stir and they fell silent. They came to a patch of jungle where a mini-tornado had ripped through; limbs were torn from trunks and small trees flattened; the air still seemed bruised from the violence. “Look at that,” Carrie said, pointing to something on the ground. “It looks like a dirty sweatshirt.”

The wind had peeled it from Gar-*eee*’s massive torso, Hearn thought. He must have had to hold on to something with all his mighty strength to keep from being blown away. But where was he now? And Ariel?

I am here.

“Did you hear that?” he asked. Carrie was poking at the sweatshirt with a stick. “It’s filthy and smells awful. Did I hear what?”

She can't hear me. "Nothing," he said to Carrie.

I knew you'd come. I'm with the Old Ones now.

He thought rather than spoke: You're dead?

We don't die. Her pixie voice was serene.

Where are you?

I'm the island. A breeze caressed his cheek.

Tell me and I'll come wherever you are.

But I'm here. Here and everywhere.

Why can't I see you?

I am the island.

You've disappeared?

I'm all around you. I am the island.

But . . .

Some evil thing came for you. Go quickly to the top of the island.

"Come on," he said to Carrie.

They reached the top to see a man pegging across the sand for the motorboat. "Look, no top," Carrie said. "That sweatshirt is his; he's as wide as he is tall." Even Gar-eee's way of running was loathsome, a lurching crablike motion. "That's the homicidal maniac," he said.

The Old Ones have never seen such a creature.

He's a character I created for a book. He came to life somehow and wants to kill me.

Malignancy is at his core.

He's a serial killer.

Why did you create such a thing?

I was trying to understand evil better. And to make a few bucks to be honest.

Fly from evil.

I see that now.

"Hello? Why don't you say something?" Carrie was looking at him queerly.

"Sorry, I was thinking."

"I said how do you know he's the maniac?" I just do, Hearn replied. Gar-eee was in the boat and headed toward the marina, but the engine was sputtering and backfiring. More of Ned's work, he thought.

"Do you think he'll make it back?" Hearn nodded. "If the plugs are fouled, he'll know how to clean them. If he can't, he'll swim to shore."

Nothing stops him . . . no, that's not true, Hearn thought. The island just did.

“We better start looking for your friend,” Carrie said.

Goodbye.

Don't go.

His cheek was caressed. Then Ariel was gone, leaving an ache in his chest as light as a soap bubble. Then that too was gone. “We won't find her,” he said. “We haven't even looked,” Carrie protested.

“I can't explain, but we won't find her.”

“Then what was the point of coming out here?” she blazed. “That crazy man could've ambushed us.”

“I asked you to stay behind.”

“Let's not waste time arguing,” she said, starting off for the cove.

They were silent as they pushed the boat back into the water; he fired up the engine and they got back under the tarp; they crossed the lake and hugged the shore to the river's outlet to avoid Gar-eee. Hearn understood her angry silence. This wild goose chase could have ended in disaster, but how was he to know Ariel would become one with the island? How do you explain that to someone?



Back in the hideout she found a tube of sunburn ointment in Ned's knapsack and rubbed it on his back and shoulders. “This is the wrong climate for a redhead,” he said, putting the stuff on his pink arms and legs.

“It's the wrong climate for everyone.”

They decided against a fire for fear smoke would draw the relentless killer. They ate crackers and sardines in oil from a can. “Is it my imagination or is it getting hotter?” she said.

“Do what I do, imagine you're lying on a block of ice.”

“Does it help?” She sat with arms around her knees.

“No.”

“I hope everything goes right tomorrow.”

“I'd say the odds are against it.”

“Why?”

“I'm a pessimist.”

“Murphy's Law, you mean?”

“It goes way back before him. A newspaper printed a poem in 1841 that went like this:

'I never had a slice of bread,
Particularly large and wide,
That did not fall upon the floor,
And always on the buttered side.'

"Things always get screwed up, is the point. We have to find Ned and the balloon. It has to be inflated, and you think that won't get noticed? Hermod might send his goons or the killer will spot us. We have to catch every break to get out of here. And if after all that and we get in the air, where will the damned thing take us?"

"Well, I'm an optimist," Carrie said. "It doesn't take any more effort to look on the bright side." Lord, she thought, I'm trying to change him already. She had just made a near-fatal mistake about a man and now was on the brink of taking another plunge, this time with someone delusional. She had read about women who bounced from one unsuitable man to the next. Had she crossed some bridge merely because he cooked and therefore must be the man in the kitchen? This is so not like me.

"Did you think anything on that island was strange?" he asked with a sideways look. "No," she answered, "I was suddenly struck deaf and blind."

"I mean those winds."

"They were so strange and random."

"They were the opposite of random. Look, I haven't told you everything. The man who chased us that night? He is a character in a book I wrote, a serial killer."

Her heart sank.

"That island is alive and intelligent," Hearn said, adjusting the scarf so his genitals didn't show. "It sensed the evil in *Gar-eee*, the name I gave him. That was him running away on the beach."

Carrie chose her words carefully. "Do you know how that sounds?"

"The reason I didn't keep on looking for Ariel is because she told me she's part of the island now."

A long pause. "We've both been under a terrible strain," Carrie said appealingly.

"In an Ed Wood movie, that would be the cue for mad laughter."

Carrie didn't know where to take the conversation, so she smiled.

"I just wanted that off my chest."

"If it makes you feel better."

“I’d feel better if you believed me.”

“How much of this canned food do you think we should take tomorrow?” Carrie asked. Her tone said the island discussion was over.

“As much as we can. Who knows how long we’ll be in the air.”

He’s more optimistic already, she thought, a good sign. “If we make it that far,” he added.

They took turns at the entrance of the hideout when darkness fell, listening for *Gar-eee*. When it was necessary to talk, they spoke in whispers. Now I know now what it’s like, Carrie thought, to be a little creature in its hole with a predator looming outside. The slightest sound, even breathing, might give you away.

Dawn broke after an eternity. The need for stealth would make the going slower, so they allowed plenty of time. Carrie was shocked as they approached at how quickly the jungle had taken over the resort. “You can hardly see where it was.”

The hot breeze that stirred the trees worried him. Balloons were meant for still air.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WHEN THEY WERE at the resort boundary, Hearn looked down at the scarf. “Did you buy this from an Echchols shop?”

“Yes,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

It fell to pieces at his feet when they stepped across the boundary and her clothes did the same. They were as naked as Adam and Eve.

“Stop looking at me,” she said, striding forth.

When they reached the clearing, the balloon had already been laid out and the wicker basket on its side was attached by an anchor line to a big stump. It was loaded with propane tanks and more were lashed to the sides. The balloon could be airborne in fifteen minutes, but that was an eternity with *Gar-eee* or Hermod a threat to come out of the trees. When five minutes passed, he said, “I better go look for him.”

Two minutes later, Ned appeared from the opposite direction under a big armload of blankets. Carrie modestly covered herself with her hands. Ned politely averted his eyes. “It gets really cold up there.”

“Our clothes fell apart,” she explained.

“They don’t want anything left that says they’ve been here.”

“Thom just left to look for you..” He handed her a blanket, eyes averted and spread the others in layers on the floor of the basket. Then he turned the propane valve and a pilot light ignited the burner. Flames roared out and hot air began to fill the bag. The wrinkled smiley face slowly rose and stretched into beaming smoothness.

“Where do you suppose Mr. Hearn is?” Ned asked worriedly. “Somebody is bound to hear the burner, or maybe something happened to him.” He jumped out and took off running for the tree line.

“Come back,” Carrie cried. But he just lifted his hand and kept going.



Hearn was cautiously following an overgrown path, stopping every few steps to listen and wipe the stinging sweat from his eyes. A scrap of cloth in a branch caught his eye; drawing closer, he saw it was the well-worn seat of Barnstable's corduroy trousers. Flies had gathered somewhere nearby; a huge cloud of them from the buzz. They would be gorging on what was left of the literary man. A few steps beyond, the assegai was snapped into pieces. Had Barnstable tried to defend himself or did it fall from his hand as he gaped with open mouth horror? What would I do knowing better than anyone resistance was futile? I'd jab at his eyes and hope to get lucky.

He planted the spear and leaned against it, one foot resting on the opposite calf. All I need is a string of ears around my neck for the picture to be complete for National Geographic, he thought.

"Dressed for the jungle I see," Hermod said behind him. Hermod looked like he had in the beginning. The curls were gold again and his handsome features chiseled; he looked fit as a fiddle in a linen suit and open-necked shirt. No insects buzzed around him and his brow was dry even in the sauna-like heat. "Sorry about the clothes, we made them to degrade fast." Hearn put the other foot on the ground.

"Do not try anything silly with that spear."

It was a few seconds before Hearn realized it. He doesn't know about Carrie and the balloon! And he's not reading my thoughts. "It's in case I see Gar-eee."

"He is close by," Hermod said. "A nasty piece of work, your murderer."

"You watched him kill the man in the corduroy suit?"

Hermod shrugged. "I have seen far worse in my time among you. When the Babylonians rebelled against the rule of Darius the Great, he sent the world's largest army to the gates of the city. Knowing beforehand a long siege approached, the Babylonians decided they had to conserve food. So they ordered the strangling of every woman in the city except for one from each household spared for domestic duties. Mother, wives, sisters, aunts, cousins; all perished at the hands of loved ones. But I see history doesn't interest you."

"That was—what?—a thousand years ago?"

"Twenty-five hundred," Hermod said. "What I know of the history of your violence would fill many millions of your terabytes of data storage."

"You couldn't take care of Gar-eee for me, could you?"

"Kill him?"

"What's one more when you're going to wipe out billions?"

“There is something going on here that cannot be explained. The less I interfere until withdrawal the better.”

“You’re worse than anything you’ve ever seen us do.”

Hermod must have felt his hatred, but did not acknowledge it. “I think we will manage to keep your Ned from further mischief; I confess it has been a humbling experience. I found him in a closet pecking away at his laptop. I was just over a severe allergy attack, and he was about to give me a case of hives.”

“He and I talked for some time. He is what we hoped your species would become—intelligent, brave, generous, and noble. Somehow we could never get it right, and now we know why: someone was working against us from the beginning. He is every bit as good as Gar-eee is evil; it is enough to make you believe the Manichean heresy might have been onto something. He was quite surprised when I told him he was not real.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“How can we be sure of anything? All this time my kind believed we were independent agents. Why did we not at least glimpse the possibility that we were not?”

“Maybe it’s how they wrote the program.”

“Yes, anything is possible,” Hermod had a faraway look.



Carrie got into the basket as it began to lift off the ground. She found a small pair of scissors in Ned’s knapsack and quickly cut holes to make the blanket a poncho. The five feet of height before the anchor rope jerked tight gave her a better view. She saw movement in the trees and a group of chimpanzees emerged led by a large male. They belong on another continent, she thought. They advanced cautiously, stopping every few steps to look around suspiciously.

Halting ten yards away, the male started teeth-baring and ground-pounding displays of aggression to intimidate her. The others joined in, tumbling backward and spinning in hysterical circles. Then they began short rushes toward the basket, screaming and chattering, before backing off. But with each bluff, they came closer. The leader galloped back and forth on all fours flashing his teeth.

“Go away,” she yelled, standing as tall and spreading the blanket to seem bigger. “Go! Go! Go!”

He turned tail and his outraged tribe screeched and pounded the dirt.

After a delay to think things over, the big male, followed closely by the others this time, began his rushes again; he had figured out she was all bluff. More chimps filtered from the bush, tripling their number.

“Go! Go! Go!”

No longer afraid, he was at the foot of the anchor line now, screeching and waving long simian arms. He yanked at the line, making the basket veer back and forth, and she fell to the bottom. High above her the happy face nodded serenely as if pleased by the world below. Her hand found the scissors and she regained her feet just as long hairy fingers grasped the edge of the basket. She stabbed down as hard as she could.

Shrieking with pain, he ran off holding his wounded hand to his mouth and the others followed, babies clinging to mothers. But they didn't go far and Carrie knew they would be back. The other males would join the next attack. She would be overwhelmed.

Something nudged her foot. An aerosol can rolled from Ned's knapsack with a label that said Guard Alaska Bear Repellent Spray. She had a fighting chance now. Her legs were shaking and she needed to sit down, but she had to stay on her feet. The chimps were forming some plan to judge from the frenzied chatter interrupted only for group glares at her. They did more spinning, flips and ground pounding. A critical mass of hysteria evidently was needed to trigger action.

Where were Thom and Ned?



Hearn was on the ground, ants crawling over him. He slowly got to his feet and slapped them off. Hermod was gone; there had been a dazzling flash of light and then darkness. What happened? There was no time to think about it now. He started for the clearing just as the jungle went dead quiet. One second the cacophony of birds and monkeys and now this thunderous silence. Slowly returning his foot to the ground from mid-step, he looked round. Ned was running toward him with hands up in the halt position. He shot a backward look at something behind him.

“In here,” he whispered, motioning Hearn off the trail. “Gar-eee's right behind.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

HEARN FOLLOWED HIM through bushes for few steps and they both sank to the damp jungle floor. He buried his face in the muck as the heavy tramp of footsteps approached as dogged as doom. He looked up as Gar-eee passed.

My God, Hearn thought, I created *that*?

Gar-eee was more malignant looking than he could have ever imagined. A crust of dirt packed the trenches and seams in his face, and he was bent like an ape with a cannonball head about to put knuckles to ground; his chest and arms were so swollen with muscle that skin seemed close to the bursting point. Ned waited a minute after he passed. "I don't know how much time we've got, he's got a nose like a bloodhound." Hearn looked around for a rock or heavy stick for Ned . . . maybe together they would have a chance. "Carrie's with that hot air balloon," he said, "we've got to get there before he knows."

Ned gave him a searching look. "He really hates you."

"Believe me, I get the message. What do we do now?"

"When he doubles back, I'll lead him away. Then I'll meet you in the clearing; better give me that spear." Hearn handed it over. "I talked to Hermod," Ned said in a strange voice. "Just like you, he says I'm not real. That I'm just thought."

Hearn saw the boy's heart was breaking. "That's bullshit," he said. "You're as real as I am." Ned blinked and then looked hugely relieved, but Hearn sensed that some doubt remained.

"He was conning you."

"But you said . . ."

"Forget what I said. I was conning you too; I had my reasons just like him."

"I thought he was going to get rough because of what I did to him, but instead he was really interested in me. Pretty soon we were talking about the theory about a post-human society."

Hearn pretended lack of interest. "What's that, when everybody's dead?"

“I learned about it when I helped build a computer with some really smart people. It’s when our descendants create an ancestor-simulation game by converting a planet or some other resource into a super-doooper computer.”

“And why would these post-humans do this?”

“Maybe for the fun of it.”

He wanted to get Ned’s mind off it. ““What a load of crap. Look, I can listen for *Gar-eee* or talk, but not both.”

“He told me he’s a member of an advanced race that helps other ones with promise.”

“If he’s saying you’re not real, don’t trust him to tell the truth about anything.”

“No sir,” Ned agreed. “There’s no place for God in what he said, and I believe in God.” He reached over and touched Hearn’s arm. “And I believe you are who you are, not a fake.” Hearn felt tears pricking and turned away as if hearing a noise. I love this kid, he thought fiercely.

“His plan to kill everyone won’t happen,” Ned said with quiet pride. “I destroyed the commands he was going to send, I eliminated all the backups, too. Not a trace is left anywhere in their system, and they can’t get them back.”

“You did it with that little lap top?”

“I know,” Ned said, frowning, “it isn’t possible, but I kept getting ideas for lines of attack that were like little bursts of pure reason going off in my head.” He cocked his head. “He’s coming.” The jungle fell silent and the air throbbed with foreboding.

“I’ll break to the left and you go right,” Ned whispered.

Gar-eee snuffled like a hog as he passed, head lowered even closer to the ground. A smell like sewer gas washed over them.

“Now!” Ned said and stepped out onto the trail.

Gar-eee wheeled to face them, triumph on his hideous face when saw Hearn. At last.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” Ned taunted, brandishing the spear. “Run Mr. Hearn!” He threw it, catching *Gar-eee* between the first and second metatarsal bones and pinning his foot to the ground.

Gar-eee turned his head to the sky and howled—*YAAAAAAAAAAAAA*—and pulled the shaft free.

Hearn was off and running, stumbling and falling over roots, hearing heavy footsteps behind. After what seemed like an eternity, he burst into the clearing with lungs afire. A gang of screeching primates was at the foot of the basket and Carrie was spraying something at the biggest one. Surprised when Hearn

burst from the trees, the chimps scattered. The big one fell to the ground and ran off blindly, howling and rubbing his eyes.

With the last of his strength, Hearn launched himself into the basket, knocking Carrie backward onto the blankets. The loose half hitch holding the anchor line began to unwind. “No!” she cried, just managing to snatch it. Hearn opened the valve lever all the way and the burner roared louder as its flames leaped higher. Carrie’s arms felt like they were being pulled from the sockets. The horrible creature she had seen saw near the hideout suddenly was below. He grabbed the trailing rope.

“Thom!” she cried. He couldn’t hear her because of the burner blasting inches from his face, and the man’s mighty arms began to haul the basket back down jerk by jerk. She had never seen such twisted hate as in that grotesque face hitching closer with each yank of the line.

Then Ned was on the man’s back, arms wrapped around the fireplug neck. Knees in the small of Gar-eee’s back, he hauled back like a fisherman landing a great fish. A thin, raggedy man in a bush hat appeared from nowhere and began to slash at the brute’s face with a swagger stick.

Gar-eee was so focused none of this registered at first, then his eyes rolled up as if trying to see over the top of his head and he let go of the line. YAAAAAAA! Ned made a running leap for the basket but his fingers fell just short of the rim. The basket made a wild swing sideways from the impact and they lost sight of the ground. When it swung back, Ned and the man in the bush hat were running for the trees with that thing hobbling after them.

Hearn and Carrie were so stunned it seemed at first that mind and body were paralyzed. “No!” she shrieked over the burner’s roar. “Go back!” He moved to the lever but saw tall trees ahead. As the distance swiftly narrowed, there was a strong chance the basket was going to be caught in upper branches; turning off the blower would guarantee that . . . and death. “I can’t,” he shouted helplessly. “Get up, you bastard!” he yelled at the smiley face. “Get up!” The basket just did miss getting hung up; a monkey with eyes as big as saucers shrank back on his limb as they passed no more than three feet away. Looking back, everything was hidden by rainforest. “I thought he was right behind me,” Hearn said.

“Jumping on your monster was the only way to make him let go,” she said in a dead voice. After those words, Carrie was silent for a long time. He turned off the burner when the altimeter said five thousand feet; a good wind pushed them for the South Pacific coast far to the west. “Did any of this happen?” she said at last.

“You’re asking the wrong man,” he answered. The hours passed and the blankets kept them passably warm.

What difference does it make if we’re in a simulation, Hearn thought. Maybe God dwelling in lonely grandeur above all the levels of simulation takes only an occasional interest in the games. An infinite number of universes and simulations, how could even God keep on top of everything? But maybe that occasional interest explained Moses, Jesus and Buddha and all the other holy men and women—the anomalies that Hermod had scratched his head over. Maybe He saw to it things turned out right in the end: virtue rewarded, sin punished.

One hoped so. One prayed it was so.

Carrie’s mind had been moving the same direction. “What if God makes the simulators do what He wants; that could be how it works. They wouldn’t know.”

“Yes, that could be.”

And what if one of the little players in the simulation wised up? A new wrinkle to kick the game up a notch? Or maybe just an error in the program. But if that was so, why not simply run it backward and delete the mistake?

“Ned will make it,” he said. “I’m coming back for him.” He didn’t like stories with unhappy endings. “I’ll be with you,” she said fiercely.

Nobody can kill *Gar-eee* but me, he thought. I’ll bring a gun big enough to drop an elephant; and guides, trackers, an army of people. But in the end it’ll be just *Gar-eee* and me. And Ned—Ned will help me.

An idea for a book came to him then, a huge book, far beyond anything he’d ever even considered, a book for the ages, one that fitted the past to the present and projected to the future. Like a catchment after a storm, his mind began to fill with characters and stories. This wasn’t something he would bat out in a few months, its riches would be years in the unfolding.

“Transformed by some experience he never explained,” his biographer would write, “he was a new man whose pedestrian skills overnight were raised to the level of great artistry and the fiction that followed takes its place among the great masterpieces.”

He could see it so clearly.

“You’re different somehow,” Carrie said on the second day. The wind held up and the vast ocean of green below seemed unmoving, but by noting geographical features rise on one horizon and pass to the other they knew they were making good speed. The blue of the Pacific Ocean would appear one day soon.

“Think so?” he said.

“It’s in your eyes.”

Ed Herlihy’s voice was in his ears: *His understanding did seem richer and deeper, as if the pebbled glass he saw the world through before was gone. In a single glance, he took in all her bravery and vulnerability, her rich layers of female complexity. She had been a cardboard cutout compared to this deeper understanding he now had. And why hadn’t he noticed the flecks of gold in her irises?*

“Don’t hog all the blankets,” he said. “I’m not,” she said.

When the sky was dark that night a bright light rose from far behind. It shot straight up in silence until it was a pinpoint no bigger than one of the simulated stars—if they were simulations—and then it was gone.

From *Top Dog*:

Just running at first. Nothing before that. No memories of childhood and family. No early struggles. No career. No friends. No opinions. No country, city, neighborhood, no home where I laid my head at day's end. No idea how I spent those days. Running. One minute oblivion and the next I'm in a forest, shafts of the dying day falling through the trees and dappling the ground with patterns of light and dark. Quail scurry, small animals freeze as I pass. I have no question about my place in the scheme of things. The wind is in my face and nothing seems more natural than running. It's the beginning and the end and everything in between.

From *Dog Eat Dog*:

I was strictly a red-meat guy before. There was nothing I liked better than a two-pound slab of rare roast beef on my plate with a baked potato and sour cream. A good cigar and cognac swirled in a warmed snifter afterward to release its fumes. That was living. But when you have to run down prey, rip out its throat, and snatch a few mouthfuls of hot flesh before some more powerful carnivore shows up, you sort of lose your taste for meat.

From *Inhuman Beings*:

Mulhenny kept a bottle of scotch in a glassed-in bookcase filled with books he had bought by the yard in the hope clients would think he was deep. He smoked a pipe for the same reason. I found a glass that wasn't too dirty and poured a stiff one, just like Sam Spade. I felt rotten about Princess Dulay. I had kept her alive for a few days, but she still got it in the end. Tired as I was, the alarm bells should have gone off when I saw Alice with the cat.

From *The Great Liars*:

My earlier idealism about History had been tempered by actuality. I knew now it was naïve to believe it existed in a state of latency, indisputable facts waiting to be discovered through diligent research. The truth was coarser: the past was clay to be shaped by whoever had the power. Rival narratives had to be slain, smothered in the crib or cut down in their first baby steps.



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