

Francis turned into Portia Way, no homes in sight. He puttered along looking for an address, sycamores and oaks measuring his progress. There, a mailbox—408. He was seeking 566. He got ready the four things he needed: the papers to be served, his city courts-issued process server ID, his log book and a pen. It would be on the left up here just a ways now, over that crest. On the other side of the crest, he saw a nice lawn and a mailbox. There was a thick row of six-foot tall canna lilies lining the property at one side of the lawn, red blooms at their tops. There was a car coming toward him, and it looked as if it was just leaving the place.

The car slowed as it got closer and the driver held up his palm: Hold up, there. Francis stopped, and the blue Dodge Challenger with no front plate pulled up alongside so they were door-to-door, only feet apart. Just them, no one else around. The driver fortyish, unshaven, wavy brown hair beneath a camouflage-style cap, something written on it. Stoner grin, snaggletoothed, with a porno mustache—Francis was unimpressed. He took a few seconds to look Francis over, and Francis saw that he was having trouble focusing. The driver held a thin cigarette in his left hand which rested on the window frame. He put it to his lips, took a few quick hits. Nervous? Seconds went by. He seemed to be working up some comment. Francis waited.

“Hey ya doon?” Francis processed this drawled salutation: What’re you doing here?

“Got some business up the way,” he replied, then turned his head to give a hearty beer belch.

“What kinda business?” The guy pretty much out of it, trouble getting his words out.

“Confidential business,” answered Francis, also inebriated but nowhere near as much as this joker.

“Confidential, huh? Thas’ a good one,” he smirked.

“If you’re security, just say so.”

He nodded—or was it a tremor? “Nah, I ain’t no security, more like a caretaker. An’ thas’ why I’m askin.”

Francis motioned to the home in plain view now. “I need to

knock on that door, and deliver something.”

“I kin take it,” the guy shot back.

“No you can’t,” corrected Francis.

“Won’t do you a bit a good to knock on that door,” he pressed, playing with his mustache, “that lady’s not there. She went on vacation, back next month.”

“Thanks for the heads up” he said, about done with this nonsense, “but I’ve come this far and I’ll just give it a try.”

“You ain’t listen to me.” The tone just short of menacing.

“I guess we’re done here,” said Francis, seeing for the first time that the guy wore angry scratch marks on his cheek, plain as day. Like he’d gotten into it with a tomcat, raked him good.

“Suit yerself. You wanna waste your time, be my, uh, my ... hell, go for it.” He took a drag on his slender cig, shook his head like he was disgusted with the general state of things. He gave Francis a goodbye nod, took his foot off the brake, and pulled away slowly, the engine making a rumbling sound. Francis turned in his seat to watch. The Challenger was in cherry condition, the envy of any gearhead. On the rear of the receding car Francis caught sight of a bumper sticker FOLLOW ME TO MERAMEC CAVERNS and a vanity plate N-AGADA, smiling at the reference.

Francis put the engine in neutral, pulled up the emergency brake, left the car running in the street. He’d leave it running when this far from home. It was an old car, what if it wouldn’t start again? He knocked at the front door of the charming domicile on Portia Way. For a minute he became distracted watching a ruby-throated hummingbird scouting the pale blue blooms of a Rose of Sharon bush. He knocked some more, quite emphatically. No answer, but there was a dog barking inside. Proof that shitfaced-on-something yahoo was lying about Elizabeth being on vacation. But why? He peeked in windows, saw nothing but furniture, a nicely kept house. Finally, and somewhat reluctantly—loathe to tip his hand, but maybe she’d cooperate—he left his card on her door, asking that she call him.