

66,240 WORDS
Mystery Novel

SLOW FALL
by E. W. Williams

CHAPTER ONE

Sheriff Homer Beane pushed through his office door, grunted, and tossed a plastic bag onto his desk. The contents, dark and heavy, thudded to the center. The Sheriff dropped into a swivel chair behind the desk.

"Fact is, boy, J.B. just up and killed himself. There just aint no more to it."

He looked down at the translucent plastic, then up and across to the tall man who settled awkwardly into the wooden

chair opposite. The tall man's name was Bodie Pickett, his face long and ashen below fine sandy hair. Blue shadows below his hazel eyes suggested fatigue. The Sheriff glared at him for a moment before his eyes shifted back to the object on his desk.

"It aint pretty, I know. But J.B. just stuck this here gun in his mouth and pulled the god damn trigger."

"Uh-uh. He had powder burns all over his face."

"It's his gun, boy."

"Yeah, Homer . . ."

"It was in his hand and his prints was on it."

"And God's in his heaven and all's right with the world."

"Now don't you try and tell me what --"

"Je-sus, Homer . . . A guy shoots himself in the temple maybe. Or holds a shotgun between his legs and pulls the trigger with his toe or something. Nobody's gonna hold a gun out in front of his face and shoot himself in the mouth."

"Where you been, boy? They do it all the time."

"That's just it. They do it in the mouth so they can steady the gun. Hold the muzzle between their teeth, for christ's sake. No burns that way. You tell me, Homer, who the hell would hold a gun out six inches in front of their face --"

"I'll tell you who, smart ass -- a drunk, that's who. A drunk got a boy too damn busy for his old man, too damn busy

being a big city cop or whatever the hell he does to even drop his daddy a line now and again, much less drop by. Nosirree, not no b-i-g city cop like you. Shoot, you aint even got the interest to come see him now and again, now have you? See whether your daddy's dead drunk or just plain dead . . ."

"Knock it off."

"Don't you knock-it-off me!"

"Christ. Why do you think I left?" Pickett looked down and brushed absently at his crumpled trousers. A blue-grey seersucker suit hung from his narrow frame like a drop cloth over idle machinery. "Five years, Homer. Five years. Aint that enough? I put up with it for as long as I could stand it. No kid oughta have to deal with that, Homer. Not --"

"Don't give me none a that. I'll tell you what a kid oughta do -- ever kid. He oughta take care of his own, that's what he oughta do."

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing, boy! I don't want nothing from you. And you can believe that! But if you gone talk about J.B. in this office, you gone do it with some respect. You understand me, boy?"

Pickett lowered his eyes and smiled.

Rage colored the Sheriff's face. His chin set. But before he could speak his eyes found the plastic shrouded steel on his

desk. He picked it up, turned it over and around as if uncertain what it was or what to do with it. Between his massive hands, it looked tiny. His shoulders fell with his features. And Sheriff Homer Beane melted back into his chair seemingly a much smaller man.

"He like to drink himself dead a hundred times over. Wouldn't take no help neither. God damn pig-headed . . . Shoot." He spun the swivel chair to the jalousied window behind him and stared out. The warm air stirred. Palmetto fingers, black against the dirty grey sky, played at the screen, their dry rasp lost in the clatter of the cricket's pre-dawn song.

"It's not right, Homer. You know it's not. Makes no sense."

"Now I don't want no more a that, boy." Sheriff Beane pushed back around. "And don't you come around here telling me what's right, boy -- not you. Now you may be hot stuff down in Miama, and we all know you a big city cop --"

"Was."

"Huh?"

"Was. Quit a year ago."

"Quit?" Beane looked at Pickett in disbelief. "Why the hell you go and do that?"

"Dunno. Burnt out, I guess. Something."

"Well burnt out just won't cut it, boy, will it?" Disbelief became contempt. "Shoot, I been sheriff of Wekiwa County since before you was born and I aint burnt out once -- not nearly."

Pickett looked up. He pulled one corner of his mouth to the side.

"That's fine, Homer, real fine. Sure the folks of Wekiwa County's proud as punch."

"Goddammit, boy --" Sheriff Beane shot up from his chair and leaned across the desk and leveled a finger the size of parsnip at the thin man on the other side.

"I knew your daddy before your mama did. Hell, the last five year I was the only one knew him -- and that includes kin. You understand me, boy? You weren't round then, were you? Not when your daddy drunk hisself so sick he couldn't remember who he was and needed someone to clean him up an put him down? It was near on ever day like that come the last few months. Who the hell you think did that for your daddy, boy? It weren't no god damn ex-big-city-cop come round to tell us poor crackers what's what and who's who."

"For Christ'sake, Homer --"

"It weren't you, boy -- that's for god damn sure! It was me." Sheriff Beane thumped his barreled chest. "Me. And don't you never tell me what your daddy'd do or not do. You hear me,

boy?"

"Course I hear you, Homer, I'm not deaf."

"Never, god damn you! You don't --" Sheriff Beane looked away. "Shoot." He straightened. "Now get, boy. Go take care a your daddy, you hear? You do it right, too. You don't come close, boy . . . You --" He pushed out of the chair and turned away from Pickett back to the window. "Damn." He stuffed thick hands into his chinos and glared into the early morning haze.

The light slanted through the live oaks now, the breeze dead before the morning sun. Spanish moss hung dusky and limp.

Pickett stared at the back of the sheriff's thick neck, brown and cracked like baked clay. Spikes of yellow-grey hair hung down over it. Dark stains spread beneath the broad shoulders. The sheriff sighed.

"In the end . . . Hell, I guess he just figured the liquor weren't fast enough." He sank back into his chair, spun around, looked at the gun, then up. "J.B.'s on the bottle for what, fifteen, twenty year?"

Pickett's eyebrows rose with his shoulders.

"Since your mama died, anyways. Good woman, your mama. Good woman."

"J.B. fixed that."

The Sheriff straightened. "What'd you say, boy?"

"I said, J.B. fixed her. He did, didn't he."

"Wha --"

"He killed her, Homer. You know that better than anyone."

Pickett stared past the sheriff and through the window, his face blank.

"What you talking about?"

"J.B. never forgave himself. That's why he drank."

Pickett's hazel eyes met the Sheriff's, but appeared to see nothing but whatever hid behind them. The Sheriff pulled away, as if from that hidden thing.

"That's enough a that."

"He killed her sure as if he put that gun to her head."

"Come on now Your mama died in Belle Haven Memorial. And that's a fact. Doctor said it was -- well, I can't rightly remember But it was whatever the hell they said it was."

"But you and I both know what did it."

"Now, boy --"

"No, Homer -- I was there. I know. And J.B. knew. And it wasn't in a hospital."

"Now, you can't go holding J.B. responsible for that. It was -- well"

"Did you know, Homer?"

"Know?"

"Christ, Homer, they're both dead. I just wanna know. Did you know about J.B. and that woman -- what was her name?"

Sheriff Homer Beane looked down and sighed, deeply.

"Hudgins. Betty Hudgins. Yeah, I knew. But it weren't nothing, son, . . ."

"Nothing? It killed Mama."

"You aint gone blame your daddy for that now, boy."

"No?"

"A man can't help himself sometimes, son. And that Hudgins woman . . . I mean, boy, she sure as hell had something to do with --"

"Hell, Homer . . . She was just trying to make a buck best way she could. Her husband got himself killed in Korea or something. Had a couple of kids, I heard later. Hell . . ."

"Now don't go putting it all off on your daddy. Liquor'll do all sorts of things to a man."

"J.B. hardly drank before that, and you know it, Homer. Christ, he hardly did anything else afterwards."

"Shoot," said the Sheriff under his breath. He placed the bag on the desk, then pushed it to one side. His thick fingers flexed on the blotter. "Look . . . Now, if it was his fault -- and I aint saying it was -- he must of been packing a whole heap

of guilt around these last few years. Tween that and the whiskey, a bullet might a seemed pretty near on like Heaven itself."

"No."

The Sheriff started at the vehemence of the other's voice.

"No," Pickett repeated, the mask of indifference suddenly fallen away, "he would have told me first. He would have had to tell me, to admit it, tell me it was his fault. He never once mentioned it. Never. He -- he owed me that. He couldn't have just --"

A large object fell against the glass partition.

"Hold on, now," cried someone on the other side now, "he got someone in there!"

The door burst open and a conservatively dressed man with a flushed face stumbled in, dragging a deputy behind him.

"I told him to wait, Sheriff. I --"

Homer slapped both palms down flat on his desk. "Well don't this just make my day. Must be a full moon or something."

The flushed man breathed hard. He glanced at Bodie Pickett, then back to Sheriff Beane. Then at Pickett again.

Pickett looked mildly amused.

"Sheriff Beane --" The flushed man drew himself up to almost six feet. "I am a tax-paying citizen of this county, and

--"

"And if you got family problems you take them down the hall to H.R.S., you don't come pestering me. They aint nothing I can do for you. I told you that the last hundred times you come in here. Now get."

"I . . ." The man's eyes moved nervously between Pickett and the Sheriff as if attempting to lock on to a target. They settled on the sheriff. "I demand," he demanded, "that you do something!"

Homer Beane leapt to his feet. The tendons in his neck stood out like girders. "You don't demand squat, friend! Je-sus --" He looked to the deputy and waved his hand toward the flushed man. "Will you get him out of here, Skeeter?" He flicked his head at Pickett. "That one too. Hell. Like I aint got enough to do as it is. . ."

Pickett laughed out loud. "And what's that, Homer?"

"I tell you, boy, I got enough crack come into Wekiwa County to fry your brain just thinking about it. And I aint got no more time to waste with the likes of you -- Jesus, Skeeter, get them outta here. Both of them."

The deputy called Skeeter moved toward Pickett; but then, as Pickett's eyes narrowed and his chin rose, he changed his mind and took the flushed man's arm. The man started. He shook the

deputy off and backed out of the office, all the while fixing the Sheriff with a stare of outraged dignity.

The deputy called Skeeter followed, snickering. "Come again, Rog."

Scattered guffaws mingled with the clack of typewriters as the flushed man marched through the Sheriff Department Annex.

Bodie Pickett followed the man out a steel door into the parking lot behind the courthouse. Two white patrol cars waited there, solar ovens pre-heating for the afternoon shift. The flushed man stopped between them and put a hand to his forehead.

Pickett walked past into the sun. He stopped, shuffled his feet on the hot asphalt. "Nice fella, Homer Beane. Real nice."

The flushed man looked up. "Bo?" He leaned forward, staring. "Good Lord -- Bodie Pickett!"

Pickett looked back over his shoulder, his face blank.

"I'll be damned . . . Roger --" The flushed man tapped his chest. "Roger Mooring. Remember?"

Pickett looked down at the pavement, breathed deeply, then turned, extending a long thin hand. "Yeah, sure. How are you?"

"God," said Roger, grabbing the hand with both of his own. "How long's it been?"

"Been awhile. A good long while."

Roger's face suddenly fell. "Gosh, I'm sure sorry about

your dad. It was in the morning paper . . . Must have been horrible."

Roger paused.

When Pickett didn't tell him how horrible it was, Roger showed his teeth again, threw his arm over Pickett's shoulder, looked embarrassed, took it off again, and said:

"God, it's good to see you, Bo, it truly is."

He sounded as though he meant it. Pickett looked down at his shoes, then back to Roger.

Bodie Pickett smiled too. [END CHAPTER 1]

CHAPTER TWO

". . . Look, she's all I got."

Roger Mooring stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and turned to Bodie Pickett. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief pulled from his blue double-knit blazer.

"I'm pretty much a failure as a father, I know that. But, jeez -- I can tell when something's wrong. And something's wrong. Something serious."

Pickett leaned his narrow shoulders into a wood framed glass door. It read, J. B. PICKETT -- ATTORNEY AT LAW. On the wall between the door and the display window of the 5-and-10 next door, a tarnished metal plaque read: DELEON BUILDING/A.D. 1943.

"Maybe she's just growing up," said Pickett.

Roger walked past him into the dark and started up the stairs. "She's seventeen," he said, as if that made all the difference.

Pickett glanced back out into the sunlight. He took a deep breath, turned and followed the other up the dark stairs. At the top, the two turned into a narrow hall. A frosted glass door opened into an old-fashioned waiting room. An inner door stood open to a dark office. Pickett dropped to a leather couch across from the office door. He stretched out his long legs, laced his fingers behind his head, and stared at his toes.

Roger glanced into the dark office.

"Is, uh, that where it happened. I-I mean where your Dad --"

"Yeah. He was sitting at the desk there."

Roger glanced nervously from Pickett back into the office at the dark stain on the wall behind the desk. He started to say something when Pickett said: "You're talking about her like she's a kid, Rog." Pickett shrugged. "She isn't."

Roger opened his mouth again, but said nothing. He stood facing the other, staring. After a moment he started nervously, looked behind him at a leather easy chair that matched the couch and sat down. His hands lay in his lap. He stared at them as though they were no longer his.

"You, uh, you're still with Miami P.D.?"

"No, I quit a year ago."

"Oh. Are you still in . . . Police work?"

Pickett sighed, bent his legs and hung one over the other. He draped a long arm along the back of the sofa.

"Repo's, skip traces -- insurance work mostly. Some divorce, but not much. Not much divorce anymore. It's that damn no-fault law --"

"You're a private investigator then."

"What? Yeah, that's what the license says, anyway."

Roger's gaze wavered under the other's sharp hazel eyes. He said nothing. Pickett exhaled slowly.

"Roger, what is it you want?"

Roger started.

"Well, I want you to -- I mean, well, I want to hire you to find out what the problem is. With my daughter, I mean."

Pickett opened his mouth, but Roger cut in.

"It's something serious, and, well, it -- it . . ." Roger stopped and knitted his brow at the other.

Pickett shrugged.

Roger began a long story.

Pickett leaned back and watched the tarnished brass paddle fan turn slowly, stirring the cobwebs in the shadowed corners.

His eyes moved past Roger to the office door.

Roger talked on.

In the narrowing light behind J.B.'s desk, death stained the wall brown.

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". . . So Amy decided not to go off to Gainesville. She wanted to be near Mark. Stay in Belle Haven, you know."

"Who's Mark?"

"Amy's boyfriend. They've been close for the last year or so. Were close, anyway. Mark Ayers. You know, Ed Ayers' kid?"

Roger looked at Pickett, waiting for a response. Pickett gave none.

"Everything was fine. You know kids. They were happy -- seemed happy anyway. Until Amy became . . . started going out to that Temple place."

"Temple?"

"Yeah. You know, Ed's church?"

Pickett placed both hands behind his head; it lolled towards Roger. A trace of a smile played on Pickett's lips.

"The new one. The Temple of Glory. That's what he calls the place. The New Temple. Something like that."

Roger shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Amy and Mark had been seeing a lot of each other. They

talked like they were engaged." Roger frowned, but gestured with equanimity. "They never talked to me about it, but that's the impression I got. Then Amy started going with him out to that -- that Temple place. Ed had just started the tee-vee show, and Mark was supposed to be on it -- 'The Hour of Witness' or some such. Anyway, Mark had always seemed half embarrassed by Ed's holy-roller bit, so one Wednesday -- that's when the show's on. Well, not really: that's when it's taped. Anyway, he -- Mark, that is -- took Amy out there and --"

Pickett wrinkled up his face. Roger stopped.

"You've heard about Ed's ministry, and all that, right?"

Pickett shook his head.

"Jeez, you have been gone for a while, haven't you?" Roger settled back into his chair, stuck his legs out in front of him and took a deep breath. "You remember Edmund Ayers. Well, you know Ed -- he'd always had too much money and too few brains."

Pickett's smile broadened. He looked at the floor, shaking his head. Roger didn't seem to notice, and continued.

"Ed never could understand why everyone wasn't spending their summers on the river like he was, and riding around in thirty thousand dollar sports cars their parents gave them for Christmas. Jeez . . ." Roger shook his head. "I don't think he ever realized that the only reason we all wanted to bring him

along everywhere was because of his car."

Roger chuckled. Pickett, still smiling, bit his lower lip.

"Well, the beginning of Ed's junior year at Princeton -- all the Ayers men go to Princeton, you know. Well, the beginning of that year, October or November or something, there was an accident."

Roger straightened his face self-consciously, and looked soberly at the other.

"Ed's mother and father -- both of them -- they died out on I-four. The driver of a tank truck fell asleep at the wheel or something. Pretty horrible. According to the reports I got, there wasn't much left to bury."

Roger paused for a respectable moment, his mouth an inverted U. Pickett closed his eyes and sighed.

"Come on, Roger. Is there a point to this?"

"Yes, of course there is. It's just, well, both parents killed like that . . . Ed couldn't handle it." The thought of Edmund Ayers not handling it seemed to cheer Roger Mooring. "Ed dropped out of school and came home for a while. Then he dropped out of sight -- up and disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Yeah, he just --" Roger's hands went poof!! "-- disappeared. Ran away. Nobody knew where he was."

He paused with some satisfaction.

"Must've been five or six months. Least when I came home for spring break, everyone was still worried about him. He reappeared again that summer. Never told anyone where he'd been or what he'd been up to. Looked a bit frayed around the edges when he came back, if you know what I mean."

Roger raised his eyebrows at Pickett. Pickett emitted a short burst of air through his nose. He opened his mouth to speak, but, before he could, Roger did.

"Ed was a changed man after that, though, let me tell you. He went back to school. They let him back in because of his money, I suppose. Anyway, he found religion up there. Funny, huh? Told everybody he'd been born again -- out of the flames of his parent's funeral pyre, or some such nonsense. They'd burned, you see. He'd quite a reputation. President of two or three student evangelical groups . . . Even ran a daily prayer breakfast or something. Anyway . . ."

Roger exhaled sharply; he was beginning to look tired.

"Ed came back here after he graduated, gathered together all the cash he could lay his hands on and bought himself a church."

"A church?"

"Honest to god, Ed bought himself a church to preach in."

Roger looked at the other man, half smiling, eyebrows raised.

Pickett sighed: "And . . . ?"

"And," mimicked Roger, "Ed attracted a following. A combination of the family name, which everybody in these parts knew, of course, and the Temple -- the place itself. He just finished this new one. Jeez. Must've set Ed back a bundle. Only seen it from the outside but it's quite . . . Well, impressive."

"Roger . . . "

"Okay -- but it's a ritzy looking place. Anyway, Ed married some local girl from out near Sanford somewhere, and built an organization." Roger laughed. "Organization, hell, it's a frigging empire. He gets thousands out there twice each Sunday. Does a weekly tee-vee and radio show. Jeez, they must be raking it in."

Roger looked down at his feet and shook his head -- either in amazement or disgust.

"And," said Pickett, "your daughter's been going out there with Ed's son. Is that it?"

"Right." Roger kept his eyes on the floor. "Every Sunday. A-a-and Wednesday. For the tee-vee show."

Pickett placed his elbows on his knees and the palms of his hands to his face. He grimaced while his palms massaged his eyes. After a moment of this, he dropped his hands to his side,

and straightened.

"Look, I'm sorry, Roger, but I must be missing something. What's the problem? Young people are ripe for this crap. They outgrow it -- most of the time anyway. And it doesn't sound like the sort of outfit that's going to brainwash her and change her name to Ananda-Banana and ship her off to some soybean farm in California. Just sounds like that good ol' time religion -- God, Country, and pass the collection plate."

Roger's mouth opened and closed nervously, but no words came out. Pickett sighed.

"Look, Rog, this is all real interesting; but what do you want from me?"

"What troubles me --" Roger was talking to himself now. "-- is she doesn't seem to have time for Mark anymore. And he's upset about it too, in fact. I talked to him figuring that, well, maybe she'd talked to him."

He looked embarrassed, and added quickly, "You know teenagers, they don't always tell their folks everything."

"Look, it's too bad. But it doesn't sound like anything to get upset about."

Roger scowled. Pickett laughed and flicked the back of his hand toward the door.

"It's not like there's anything you can do about it anyway."

You just have to wait for her to outgrow it. That's all you can do. If she's got half a mind of her own, she will."

Roger rested his forearms on his knees and looked at the floor. He shook his head stubbornly.

"She's --" He pursed his lips. "Something's the matter, something serious. I know it." It's that simple, his hands said. Pickett bridled.

"For Christ's sake, what is it? What's she been doing that's so terrible?" Roger sat up straight, brow furrowed in thought. Then he exploded: "She's been staying away nights, whole weekends even. I thought it was Mark but he denies it. Got pretty angry. He must've talked to Amy about it because she started refusing to see him, too -- except at the Temple. Brothers and sisters under God or something. Jeez --"

Roger kneaded his brow with one hand and clasped the arm of his chair with the other.

"Why don't you just talk to her, Rog?"

"I did, day before yesterday. She starts crying and tells me to mind my own business. Tells me that I couldn't help her, that" -- Roger looked down -- "that she hated me. That she'd always wished I weren't her father, that . . . That God is punishing her."

"What?" Pickett's eyebrows came together. He looked up

sharply.

"She said that God was punishing her. And that no one could help but -- but Jesus."

"Christ," said Pickett under his breath.

"Exactly," said Roger deadpan. His eyes clouded over, but he continued as if unable to stop himself.

"I even called the Temple. That's what Ed calls that place out there, The Temple of Glory. Yeah, right, I-I told you that already. I tried to talk to Ed but they wouldn't even put me through. Said Edmund was too busy. I-I . . ."

Roger paused, looking down into his lap. "I think maybe she's seeing someone. She can't be spending all that time at the Temple -- I mean, she's got to be sleeping someplace."

But Roger didn't like the way that sounded. He put a hand to his forehead and looked up at the other, his cheeks wet.

"I-I-I just don't know. I mean, Amy's upset every time I see her. She's -- she's in trouble, I know it. And I can't even help her. I love her so much and I can't even help."

Pickett exhaled, shaking his head. He looked through the office door. It was too dark to see the stain now. His eyes moved back to Roger, then past him to the window opposite the hall door. He stared down into the twilit park across the street. A bandstand stood there, shaded by water oaks whose

billowing masses were silhouettes against the darkening sky. Pickett closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead with the first three fingers of his right hand.

"What does Amy's mother think of all this?"

Roger looked up, his eyes dull and hard.

"Amy doesn't know her mother. She has no mother."

Pickett nodded quickly, his face blank. He waited a moment with the same expression on his face, then, relaxing, looked up at Roger. "What do you want from me, Roger?"

"You could follow her."

"Come on --"

"Look, you'll be in town for the next couple of days anyway, right? You have friends to visit, everybody wants to see you. . . ."

Pickett smiled at this.

"Can't you just -- sightsee for a day or two? You know, the Old Home Town and all that. You could sort of . . . Well, be where she was." Roger seemed pleased with this formulation. He gestured expansively. "You know, just casually be around. You must do this sort of thing all the time in your . . . profession."

Pickett laughed out loud, then as suddenly pulled a straight face.

"Tailing her might be exactly what you don't want. It might drive her away completely. Anyway, I just can't go following her all over town. She's what, seventeen?" Roger nodded impatiently and began to say something. Pickett cut in. "I got twenty years on her -- and then some. I'd probably get myself arrested."

"I wouldn't want that." Roger looked crestfallen.

Pickett covered his eyes with his left hand. After a moment, he looked up and, wearily, smiled.

"Look, Rog, I do this for a living. If you can call it living. It's not much but it's what I know. Frankly, I can't spare the time right now. I've got a few skips I've traced as far as Opa-Laka, and . . . Well, I'm a little hard up at the moment. You know what I mean?"

"Sure, sure -- and I'll pay you. I mean, I wouldn't expect you to do it for free. I mean, I know you got to make a living, and I -- uh . . ." He stopped. "How much are we talking about here?"

"I'm talking three hundred front. That buys you satisfaction or three days work -- whichever comes first."

"After that?"

"Hundred a day after that."

Roger wrinkled his brow and thought for a moment. "And expenses?"

"Within reason, comes with the per diem. Otherwise, I check with the client first."

For a moment, Roger stared into the space between them, his eyelids fluttering under the pressure of some inner effort. Finally, his eyes refocused, and he rose to his feet.

"You'll take a personal check?"

"Oh, for christ's sake, Rog . . . It's a waste of good money --"

"Will you?"

"Okay -- sure, it's your money. Christ, I'll look into it. But remember I told you it was going to be a waste of time."

Roger's cheeks flushed like a child's.

"Oh, thanks, Bo, I mean it. I'd do it myself but . . . Well . . ."

Roger rifled his pockets. While he found, opened, and began scribbling in a check book, Pickett frowned down at the floor. He stood, stretching as Roger tore out the check and handed it to him.

Pickett studied it for a moment -- more in disbelief than suspicion. "I'll take the three days, but no more. Agreed?"

"Sure, what ever you say, Bo."

"Now, I mean it. Don't expect much -- anything."

"Sure. Right."

Pickett smiled at Roger, shaking his head. "Where will Amy be tomorrow, do you know?"

"I don't. She's not at home -- hasn't been for the last two nights."

"What's your guess?"

Roger looked away and let his shoulders fall.

"Let's see, tomorrow's Wednesday . . ." He sighed and looked back at the other. "She'll be at the Temple. On Wednesday she's at the Temple."

"Okay, I'll start there. Where will you be tomorrow?"

"Home."

Pickett looked a question.

Roger's eyes avoided his. "I'm . . . taking a few days off."

Pickett nodded and guided Roger toward the hall door.

"You know," Roger said, stopping as he gazed wistfully down the dusty passageway, "all these years and I don't think I've ever been up here before. I guess the building's yours now, huh?"

"Yeah." Pickett smiled with half his mouth. "The building, the boat house, some bad debts and a worse name."

Roger turned, smiled himself, then shook Pickett's hand. He shuffled down the hall.

"All these years . . ." he repeated to himself. He disappeared down the stairs.

Pickett looked after him for a long while, a trace of that smile still on his face, fatigue in his eyes. He leaned his long back against the wall and drew a flat tin box from the side pocket of his seersucker jacket. He removed a thin black cigar from the tin box, and then a wooden match. He paused, staring at the grimed floor. His smile broadened, causing the cigar to hang almost vertically from his lower lip. He struck the match against the box and set the black tobacco aglow. Pickett drew deeply. He pushed off the wall.

Back into the waiting room and on into the inner office, he went directly to the desk, switching on a green-shaded lamp there. He picked up the telephone, dialed seven numbers, and draped himself over the chair behind the desk. He waited with the phone to his ear. Smoke curled into the high shadowed ceiling.

"Yeah, this is Bodie Pickett. . . . Uh-huh, this morning. . . . Yes. . . . No, that won't be necessary; no service. . . . I know. . . . Of course, but no service. . . . Do with them? . . . Oh, of course. No, I don't think so --"

Pickett started. He began to laugh but cleared his throat instead. He composed his face and said:

"At sea would be fine. . . . Yes. . . . That sounds very reasonable. . . . Uh-huh, I'm sure you are. We all are. . . . Yes, thank you. . . . To you, too. . . . Uh-huh. Goodbye. . . . Yes, of course. Goodbye."

Pickett leaned back in the swivel chair with the phone in his lap. He looked at the tip of his cigar, frowned, then leaned forward and reached for the dial. He dialed two numbers, made a sound like a growl, and hung up.

He put his hands to the desk as if to rise, but instead sat back and reached for a dog-eared manila envelope that lay to the side of the desk lamp. He pulled it under the light. A spray of brown speckled it. On it was a white label bordered in red. It said: AYERS, CLAYTON (MARJORIE). Pickett bent over the contained papers.

The fluorescent desk light cast his shadow sharply on the wall behind the desk. It cut diagonally across the brown stain already there.

[END CHAPTER 2]

CHAPTER THREE

Old man Otley bobbed his pink pate to Willie Nelson's guitar. Stringy grey hair swung back and forth across the back like the fringe on a movie musical's surrey. His elbows danced to the sizzling griddle as he worried raw materials into a breakfast.

Bodie Pickett hefted a white china mug. He squeezed his eyelids together and swallowed, hard. He'd set the cup back on the saucer and pushed them both away from him when a piece of heavy white china clattered to a stop in front of him.

Otley hadn't even turned around.

In the center of the steaming platter a rubbery orange

splotch in a milky pool bled yellow. Two blackened strips of rawhide intertwined to the right, and a two inch pile of small brown and grey cubes glistened with grease on the left. Pickett looked up.

"Still ninety-nine cent, boy."

Pickett looked down. The yellow liquid was beginning to clot. He stood, threw back the sludge at the bottom of his cup, measured three quarters, two dimes, and four pennies into the saucer, and headed for the door.

"Tax," said the back of Otley's head.

Pickett went back and dropped a dime onto the counter. He didn't look at the platter.

"Thanks. See y'around."

The back of Otley's head grunted. "That boy never did eat right."

"This boy'll never eat again," said Pickett under his breath.

He stood in front of Otley's Rexall and breathed deeply. The air was clear and bright. It had rained during the night, and the pavement was cool. The oaks in the park across the street cast long shadows.

The fresh air turned stale with burnt grease. Otley's arm pushed through the door behind Pickett and thrust a nickel into

his hand.

"Change, boy."

Pickett stood without moving, closed his eyes, and took another deep breath, then turned left down Main. When he reached Palmetto, he turned left again. In front of Dumphrie's Sporting Goods, a tall kid in levi's, running shoes, and a pink T-shirt that said PEACHTREE ROAD RACE was cranking down the striped awning that hung above the display window. The kid admitted that he'd heard of Edmund Ayers and the Temple of Glory but didn't have the faintest idea where Pickett could find either of them.

"I'm a vegetarian," the kid explained.

Pickett had better luck with the kid's mother inside. She not only knew where the Temple was and told him quite clearly how to get there, she tried to sell him a piece of the place.

A "partnership" in the New Temple of Glory is what the woman called it. For 500 bucks Pickett could have his name engraved on the "Partners in Heaven" wall of the New Temple. For 25 he could receive daily "petitions in prayer" offered up in his behalf by brother Ed (or, the fine print read, one of Brother Ed's "Family in God"), and his name printed in the "Partners in Heaven" memorial booklet that was forthcoming. For a sawbuck Pickett would receive her undying gratitude.

Pickett looked down at Otley's nickel, still in his hand,

and smiled; but before he could say anything, three boys shucked in, each about four feet high. One carried a Zebco rod and reel, and a peanut butter jar full of nickels and dimes. He wanted to buy a fishing license. One. For the three of them. Pickett thanked the woman and left her lecturing the fishermen three on the laws of the great State of Florida.

He walked across the street to a once white '65 Nova. After two tries, it started. He drove the Nova back to Main, and then onto Fairview, passing half a dozen fast-food bunkers and two Spee-Dee muffler shops. Pickett turned off Fairview onto I-4 West, toward Orlando.

The traffic was heavy, every other car filled with two or more hysterical kids and two or less morose parents. A large green sign above the highway read: DISNEYWORLD 18/TEMPLE OF GLORY 1."

"Not much of a contest," Pickett muttered.

He took the next exit onto a stretch of county highway flanked by vast seas of asphalt that ran to a horizon of pastel colored boxes of glass and cinder block boasting everything from "Religious Equipment/WHOLESALE" to "TOTALLY NAKED GIRLS!" Above and to the left loomed a high white spire. Pickett drew abreast of it, and hung a left on a divided four-lane road marked "Gateway-To-Heaven Drive."

He faced a steep concrete pyramid flung high above a low, cast concrete dome painted a white that dazzled in the now high sun and in contrast to the flood of newly lined asphalt that spread from it in all directions. It rose from its blacktop bed on a band of tinted plate glass. It seemed suspended in air. Curved beams trimmed in gold rose from the asphalt, crisscrossing the dome like the spokes of a wheel. The structure hung above the blackened earth like a spaceship from another universe -- one that knew nothing of humility or grace.

Pickett passed a white sign bordered and lettered in gold that announced in gothic script, "The Temple of Glory Awaits You." Below this it directed: "General Parking -- Next Three Lefts/Reserved Parking (Partners in Heaven) -- Fourth Left."

He took the fourth lane to the left. It ended at the base of the spire amidst an assortment of large American cars. He went right at a sign that said, "Media Annex," around the dome, and to the front of a flat building attached at one end to the rotunda. A satellite dish and sundry antennae decorated the flat gravel roof. At the end of the parking lane, two tinted, plate glass windows framed a door made out of the same. Pickett squinted at it. He parked next to a white Chevy van hung with ladders and aerials of various sorts.

Gold lettering on the door read, "Media Annex/Home of `The

Hour of Witness'," and announced tours at three every afternoon.

But Wednesday. The letters gave way into the coolness of a white modern lobby.

An overly made-up blonde behind a sleek marble counter beamed a smile in his direction and chimed:

"Can I help you?"

"Could you direct me to the Sound Studio, please?"

Her smile was still lit, but her eyes narrowed and moved quickly from the tall man's face, over his crumpled seersucker suit to his canvas shoes, and back again.

"Might you be with the Millennium Club party?" she crooned.

Without a pause, Pickett admitted that he might.

The blonde directed him through an oak door to the left. She watched him go through it as if she didn't believe for a minute he was with the Millennium Club party but that she did believe, with faith, that anything was possible.

Pickett closed the door behind him without looking back.

The hall was well lit. Double doors opened onto two small sound studios packed with electronic equipment. He paused before each. At the last, he pursed his lips and blew a silent whistle.

At the end of the hall he turned right.

Right into a clot of middle aged men dressed in everything from Brooks Brothers' pin stripes to double-knit leisure suits

and cowboy hats. They gathered around a plump young woman dressed in the navy blue pants-suit of an usherette. She stood before a double fire door that blocked the hall and underneath a blinking red light patting her neatly teased and enameled hair.

The door said, SOUND STUDIO 3.

The woman's left breast said, WELCOME! MY NAME IS KIMBERLY!

The woman said: " . . . so everyone can see. And I must remind you not to take pictures."

She looked up at the blinking light.

"Also, please refrain from talking and smoking."

She looked up at the light again. It was still blinking.

"Thank you."

The light went out.

Pickett frowned and nodded appreciatively. Kimberly leaned into the two doors and the group filed past her into the dark.

"None too soon neither," said a tall man standing next to Pickett. A paper tag on his lapel said, "Hi! I'm . . . ," with something illegible scrawled beneath in felt tip marker.

"Carrithers . . ." The man extended a thick sunburnt hand.
"Fenton Carrithers."

Pickett took Fenton Carrithers' hand.

"Pollock. Jackson Pollock."

The group filed into a bank of theatre seats, like a jury

box, to the right of a dark set. Pickett sat down between Fenton Carrithers and a fat man who sported white patent leather shoes and a belt to match. He smelled of cigars and unearned sweat. The breast pocket of his rayon sports shirt proclaimed, "Hi! I'm . . . SEYMOUR PLOTZ" -- the name printed in rough block letters like a ransom note. Seymour Plotz cocked a head of orange hair at Pickett.

"How much you in for?"

"Excuse me?"

"How much you in for?"

Fenton Carrithers tilted his grizzled head at Seymour Plotz.

"Ten grand."

Pickett pulled his head back out of the line of fire.

"Hargh!" said Seymour. "They hit me for ten grand twice this year already. You'd thought these smart ass college boys they got round here could've put it together by now. Shit." He said it in two syllables. "Those fuckers want another fifty grand."

Fenton snorted.

"If they think a buggy ride round this place is gone spring me for fifty grand, then they're figrin bout as poorly as this here dump looks."

"Shit," said Seymour.

"Now I'm a God-fearin man, as Christian a gentleman as you're lakly to meet, and I don grudge ten. Hell," said Fenton, "that's near on the ten points the Lord axes for. I do my tithin."

"Shit."

"I aint no shirker. But hell, boy, they aint bout to sell me no poodle-piss bout vestin in paradise."

"Shit, no."

"Y'know what I mean?" said Fenton.

"You bet," said Seymour.

"Know what I mean?" said Fenton again, stabbing an elbow into Pickett's ribs.

"Damn straight," said Pickett.

They both looked at him.

"You say you was from where, Pollop?"

[END CHAPTER 3]

CHAPTER FOUR

"Whomp," said a bank of flood lights.

"Please, we must not talk," said Kimberly. A black, back-lit figure standing before the brightly lit box, she shook a finger in Bodie Pickett's direction. "If we're not quiet," she chirped, "we may have to leave."

Fenton Carrithers rubbed his eyes. Seymour Plotz pulled at a pair of large sunglasses caught in the hem of his breast pocket. Kimberly cleared her throat -- and her smile.

She tried to look serious.

"In a moment we will tape the last segment of tonight's 'Hour of Witness.' As members --" Kimberly smiled indulgently.

"-- and prospective members of the Millennium Club, you are well acquainted with the great ministry of our Brother Edmund and the Temple of Glory."

"Amen," said a voice to Pickett's left.

Lights began to thump on around the studio. A half dozen technicians prowled through a jungle of cables, booms, and TV cameras.

"And, of course, his Lovely Family." Kimberly paused for a short burst of Amen's and Praise the Lord's. "But, before the taping begins, I would like to invite all members and" -- she smiled -- "prospective members to a special get-together this evening."

Only the scrabbling of technicians broke the expectant silence.

"Brother Edmund has invited you -- all of you -- to his home." Kimberly smiled through the ooh's and ah's, and leaned forward, beaming. "Brother Edmund would like to meet each and every one of you individually."

Seymour Plotz grunted to Pickett's amusement. Kimberly ignored it.

The set below exploded into a blaze of light, revealing what appeared to be a Victorian parlor. On a rectangular flat, two walls papered in a wine-colored brocade met at right angles.

Against each stood a massive mahogany bookcase containing all manner of bric-a-brac as well as large volumes of what could only have been the World's Great Literature in some late night TV edition. Plush oriental carpets covered the floor. Several wingback chairs sat round a large lion-footed sofa, in front of which stood a squat teak coffee table. A girl in levi's and a headset placed a large and ornate silver coffee service on it and withdrew.

As Pickett smiled, massaging his forehead with the first two fingers of his right hand, Kimberly looked hurriedly over her shoulder.

"The bus will leave the Media Annex at six pee-em. You will have the rest of the day to complete your tour of the Temple. If you are traveling by private car, however, please see me for directions before you leave."

Pickett's eyes moved to the side of the set, where several figures wound their way through the dark studio toward the light.

Kimberly looked over her shoulder again: someone was signaling for silence.

"And thank you for being a part of our historic ministry."

A loudspeaker said, "Fifteen seconds."

The same imagination that designed the set must have designed the small family that now filed onto it. The Father,

who settled on the sofa next to The Mother, counterpointed the broad pink face of a cherub with the sloped, pin stripe shoulders of an investment banker. The Mother, who flourished a head of Dolly-Parton-blond hair and a green gown heavily sequined and padded at the bodice, nestled her narrow hips into the sofa as if laying an egg. The Son lit stiffly on a wingback chair to her right as if sitting on several.

It was the boy -- nearly a man, lean and handsome in a well tailored blue suit, white starched button down shirt and rep tie -- that engaged Pickett's attention, however. He was true to type -- save for the eyes. They seemed borrowed -- quick, troubled, and perhaps a bit embarrassed.

"Ten, nine, eight . . . ," said the loudspeaker.

It could have been the set of the Perry Como Christmas Special, but the loudspeaker said: "The Hour of Witness with the Reverend Edmund Ayers."

An earsplitting burst of recorded music offered proof of the loudspeaker's assertion, though the music seemed designed less to evoke reverence than to awaken the Aryan Race. The lights above the box seats went black. Pickett blinked twice before two monitors directly in front of him flashed to life, their screens filled with the cherubic face of the Reverend Edmund Ayers. Pickett smiled with half his mouth at the plump, rosy cheeks; he

nodded his head in recognition, then shook it in disbelief.

All the while, and in the dulcet drawl of a Kentucky Colonel, Brother Ed made his pitch for God, Country, and the tithes of the Faithful --"that the coffers of Heaven may be full, and that the Ministry of this Great Temple may go forth."

His Lovely Wife Jan glowed at his side, interjecting heartfelt pleas to those as yet untouched "by this Great Evangelical appeal" to pick up their phones right now. "There are operators waiting for your call."

From a glass booth to the left a director artfully cut between two cameras. He caught Ed's boy scout mug from every conceivable angle, filling the screen with images of robust good humor. Earnest down home homilies filled the air.

Pickett no longer watched the monitors, but only the young man with the troubled eyes, Our Son Mark -- which is how the Reverend Edmund Ayers referred to him. But Mark paid little attention to Reverend Ed; instead, he glanced nervously to the side and a black haired girl who sat in a folding chair immediately off camera.

She was lit full-face by the set's reflected light. She never looked at Mark, though his brown eyes pulled at her with palpable force. Her own dark eyes focused with near fanatical intensity on Brother Edmund Ayers. Her pale brow was long and

placid; black hair was pulled tightly off her face to the back of her head, and from there it fell to well below her shoulders. The mouth was large, full, and very red.

Pickett, brow knit, gazed at her intently. His eyes narrowed, then opened, and he leaned his head slightly toward her, as if bent under the weight of his own concentration.

For her part, the black haired girl seemed aware of nothing but the face of Brother Edmund Ayers. Her hands folded calmly before her, she sat bolt upright, taut, exuding a tensile strength that seemed to charge the air around her, and to stand clearly at odds with her youth. The maturity that she wore rang somehow false: she wore it like a protective mantle, heavy and chaste. The strain told in the rigidity of her posture. And though her face was smooth and unlined, it was also cold and translucent, like marble.

As the now familiar orchestral music welled up from the racial memories of a bank of loudspeakers, Pickett started. Telephone numbers emblazoned across the breast of a sentimental portrait of Christ filled the monitors replacing the Reverend Edmund Ayers.

On the set, Brother Ed stood, head bowed, before the sofa; My Lovely Wife Jan sat in the same manner. Mark, however, looked from camera to camera as if ready to bolt at the dousing of a red

light.

Pickett suddenly stood, his jaw slack, his face pale.

He pushed past Fenton Carrithers and several other club members into the jungle inhabited by headsetted technicians. Relays clicked, floodlights hummed. The smell of their hot steel housings blended with that of honest sweat. Pickett inhaled sharply, pulling in a lung full of close, overworked air. This startled the boom operator, fat and red faced, who nearly took Jan Ayers' hairpiece off with a twist of his wrist. The fat man swore under his breath in syllables short, crisp, and sweet as a nut.

Pickett smiled.

At that instant, Mark received whatever signal he'd been waiting for. He walked off camera, one arm raised toward the black haired girl; but she moved swiftly past him without even acknowledging his presence.

Pickett stepped around a camera in time to see the black haired girl gazing deeply into the eyes of the Reverend Edmund Ayers. A good head taller, Reverend Ed stared down at her with the indulgent smile of an insurance salesman who'd just missed a sale. The black haired girl clasped Ed's hand, and her mouth moved, apparently voicing a worshipful appreciation of his message.

Our Lovely Wife stood to the side watching them. Her expression was noticeably blank after the exuberance she'd presented to the TV cameras.

Mark remained where he'd been when Amy passed, his back to the odd trio on the other side of the flat. He looked down at his feet; then, without looking back, walked off the flat and out of the lights.

Pickett turned in the same direction, but a long charcoal-grey suit blocked his way.

The head attached was too small for the shoulders, the hair so blond and short that, from a distance, it would have looked as bald as a baby's. A mouth without lips moved.

"You're with the Millennium Club, I take it?"

With these words, a hairless hand dropped onto Pickett's narrow shoulder. Pickett, face blank, looked at the hairless hand, then at the charcoal grey suit. His hazel eyes glowed unnaturally.

"You can take what ever you can get, friend."

He looked from the lipless mouth to the eyes. Small and milky blue, they were without eyebrows. They said nothing; but the hairless hand squeezed Pickett's shoulder. Pickett bridled.

"And I'd be happy to tell you where to take it and where to keep it while you're getting there --"

"Ahhh . . ." the lipless mouth said, tensing the hand on Pickett's shoulder, and removing the other from its pocket.

Pickett spread his feet slightly, looked at the hairless hand on his shoulder, then to the browless eyes. He moved his lips slightly, freezing them in a thin smile. The two stared at one another, their eyes locked.

Suddenly Pickett relaxed, shifted his weight to one foot and dropped the opposite hand into his pocket. His eyes broke from the other's. They smiled.

"Y'know, I aint seen ol Brother Ed in a coon's age. And, well, y'know, I jus got to thinkin how, well, aint it somethin what the kid's made of hisself and all. So I says to myself I says, `Self, whyn't you go on down to that Temple there and say howdy to ol Brother Ed. And, well, shucks, wouldn't y'all like to go tell Brother Ed that his ol buddy Bo's out here jus dyin to see `im and how'd you like to have your fuckin hand cut off at the shoulder?"

Small ears set flat against the side of the man's head turned pink, but his expression didn't change. He stared at Pickett a moment longer, then let the hand on Pickett's shoulder fall limply to his side.

"Brother Edmund sees no one after a taping," the man said blankly. "I would suggest that you call his secretary to arrange

for an appointment."

He paused, then added mechanically: "May I show you the door?"

"Thanks, but I've seen one just recently."

And Pickett turned away in time to see the black haired girl shake off Mark's hold on her shoulders and rush through a side door. Mark's face crumpled in anger; with obvious embarrassment he looked around him, then wiped his face with the back of his hand. His eyes caught Pickett's and held them. They flickered, then he turned and left through the same door as the black haired girl.

Fluorescent ceiling lights suddenly buzzed on, bathing the studio in cold white light. The man in the charcoal-grey suit seemed to be having trouble adjusting his eyes, and Pickett wound past him, through the tangle of equipment, and to a set of double doors like the ones he'd entered by. He pulled one open and stepped into a vast, white domed auditorium.

The high ceiling hung above multi-tiered rows of red plush seats arranged circularly around a central dais carpeted in the same red plush, but trimmed in gold. It supported two plexi-glass pulpits. A white and gold cross rose from the center of the rostrum and ascended halfway to the ceiling. A group of figures sculpted at its base were apparently meant to represent a

coterie of the faithful, got up in angelic robes and tunics, raising the Cross above the dais like Marines on Iwo Jima. Their expressions were cow-eyed, though, and unabashedly maudlin.

Pickett paused before it in slack-jawed amazement. He started as the fire door closed on its own behind him. He put a hand to each temple, pressed his eyes tightly closed and smiled.

He relaxed with a soft laugh, and chose a pair of fire doors farther to the left. He put his shoulder to them, and stepped out onto the hot asphalt and into the midday Florida sun.

He was fifty yards or so from the Media Annex entrance and from his car. Angry voices rose from the other side of the white chevy van. The black haired girl pulled at the door of a beat-up sky-blue Volkswagen, trying to get in; but Mark wouldn't release her arm.

"You're hurting me."

"Amy, please, just let me t-t-talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to you. There's nothing to talk about."

"Please, Amy --"

"Let -- me -- go."

Mark and Amy glanced up simultaneously as Pickett approached.

Mark released her arm, and Amy dropped into the seat and

slammed the door. She fired up the engine and threw it into reverse. Mark jumped back.

"Amy! P-p-please --"

The blue Volkswagen bolted, leaving a rubber scar on the hot asphalt.

Mark stared at Pickett for a moment, wheeled around and headed for the Annex. Pickett got going just as the blue bug turned onto the main drive.

He took the turn too fast for the suspension on his Nova, but recovered before hitting the median. He accelerated down Gateway to Heaven Drive.

He looked back over his shoulder, through the hot rippled air above the parking lot. The white dome of the Temple of Glory writhed like a bald head in a fun house mirror.

[END CHAPTER 4]

CHAPTER FIVE

He had a time with Amy's blue Volkswagen. It wasn't so much its speed as its abandon. She threw herself into the line of traffic with contempt, and careened between lanes with the arrogance of an eighteen wheeler, either sure of her immortality or suicidal.

Possibly both.

The blue bug shot through the I-4 underpass and east on 17-92. It cut a swath through the midday bustle that left irate shoppers and puzzled retirees in its wake. Pickett followed in a jangle of horns and blunt gestures. He was pulling around a large Ford station wagon when the Volkswagen swung off to the

right.

He put his foot to the floor. The automatic transmission down-shifted to second and the Nova accelerated across the prow of the Ford and a distraught young mother of two, barely making the turn and missing the steel and plastic signboard of the motel next door. The Nova thumped over several potholes, and skidded to a stop in the gravel parking lot of a donut shop.

The Ford shot past in a flash of children's laughter.

The Nova stalled. Pickett shook, clinging to the wheel to steady himself. He took a deep breath.

A bronze Chrysler slid to a stop behind him, letting loose a horn like a freight train's. Pickett re-ignited the engine and backed into a space next to the blue Volkswagen. The front end bumped twice as it rolled in.

A man emerged from the Chrysler and walked past Pickett's open window.

"Got a flat, pal," he chuckled, and walked inside.

Pickett got out. His left front tire looked as though it had melted into the gravel. He looked up at a green signboard next to the highway that said, KRISPY KRUNCH DONUTS. Behind him, on the other side of a plate glass window, Amy talked to a woman behind a cash register.

The woman, dressed in white, wore a funny little cap with

something written on it in hospital green. The man from the Chrysler walked past Amy, the woman in white, and pushed himself up onto a stool at the other end of the counter. He buried his head in the menu.

Pickett rolled a fresh tire to the front of his car, popped the hubcap off the dead one, loosened the wheel nuts, and pumped the jack. He glanced back over his shoulder at the plate glass window.

Krispy Krunch Donuts was made of plate glass -- that and a shoe box shell of white cinder block. A counter fronted by fixed, round stools ran its length. Amy stood, her weight on one foot, her elbows at her side, palms upturned moving as if juggling hot potatoes. She was having trouble getting what she wanted from the woman in white. Impatiently, the woman listened, with an occasional nervous glance at the man from the Chrysler who sat four stools away.

He studied the menu as if it were his last will and testament.

The woman in white finally tired of whatever Amy was dishing out. She slammed her hands down on the counter and leaned into Amy loud enough that a few words made it through the plate glass.

"Who do you think you are . . . Where do you get off . . ."

Amy's shoulders dropped, her hands fell to her sides. She

wheeled around while the woman in white still spoke, and fled through the door into the parking lot. She threw herself into the blue beetle and slammed the door.

Pickett finished tightening the wheel nuts, and rolled the flat back to the trunk. Amy was rigid as he passed. She stared blankly through the windshield, cheeks glistening.

Pickett slammed the trunk closed.

Amy turned. Her eyes focused in recognition. She opened her mouth, thought better of it, fired up the engine and slammed the bug into reverse. Without looking back, she popped the transmission into first and hit the gas hard enough to machine-gun the Krispy Krunch Donut sign with gravel.

Before he could move, a stubby elbow flattened Pickett against his Nova.

"Outta the way, pal."

Pickett turned to see the man roll into the bronze Chrysler and pull out of the driveway after Amy.

As he slid into the Nova, he glanced back over his shoulder into the donut shop. The woman in white stared down at the counter. Now, she was alone.

#

The drive was easy compared to the one that morning. The bronze Chrysler would have been hard to miss even without the

blue vapor trail. Pickett stayed well behind it, changing lanes frequently to avoid the Chrysler's rear-view mirror. He only caught an occasional glance of Amy's VW.

He followed the Chrysler through town past the 5-and-10, DeLeon Building, and Otley's Rexall. The beetle turned right onto Magnolia, and the Chrysler pulled up at the corner. Pickett drove past, averting his head.

The man from the Chrysler loped down Magnolia on foot.

Pickett took the next right, and then the next; he pulled to the curb before reaching Magnolia. A concrete pillar on the corner said, HIBISCUS DRIVE.

Pickett walked to the corner of Hibiscus and Magnolia, and turned right toward Main.

Large oaks grew at regular intervals on both sides of the street. Their branches met, creating a cave-like channel from which depended stalactites of Spanish moss. Magnolia Drive flowed beneath like a slow black river.

The street was empty. Pickett continued toward Main.

There was no curb, only a shoulder of sandy grey dirt that merged into the front lawn of small stucco bungalows. Vaguely Spanish, with arched windows and red tile roofs, they rose behind the elephant ears, spanish bayonets, and hibiscus shrubs that surrounded them like parts of the landscape. Fresh paint

couldn't hide their rotting sashes and sagging porches. Mission Revival the architects called it; Boom Day Bungalows was the local's term -- from the twenties, when land and labor were cheap, and when everyone North and East of Virginia was going to be a millionaire by thirty, buy a Sunshine State dream home, and retire. Developers were ready for them, but they never came -- at least not for another thirty years, and none were millionaires.

The sharp slap of a screen door broke the silence. An engine spluttered to life. The blue VW pulled out of a driveway on the next block and swerved down Magnolia in the opposite direction.

Pickett stepped quickly around a large oak back towards his car. His foot caught. He fell face first into the dirt. He scrambled to his feet with a mouth full of sand, and whirled around into the muzzle of a small black automatic.

The man from the bronze Chrysler held it. He was a head shorter than Pickett, but twice as wide and better armed.

"This jus aint your day is it, pal?" He flashed a smile made to sell toothpaste.

The scars of adolescence pitted his face. He dusted off Pickett's jacket with his free hand, and patted Pickett's lapel. Then, still smiling, he grabbed Pickett's jacket, jerked him

forward, and stuck the automatic under Pickett's chin. The smile disappeared.

"Now, pal --" The man thrust his face toward Pickett's. "-- who the hell are you and what the fuck you think you're doing?"

Tiny blue veins latticed his red nose.

"Gas company. Florida Gas and Electric." Pickett smiled. "I read meters."

The man pushed the pistol deeper into Pickett's neck.

"All right, I lied. I'm not with the gas company. I'm a nuclear physicist."

The man's eyes narrowed, and he peered at Pickett's, as if trying to read his mind.

Pickett shrugged, still smiling. "I split atoms."

The man from the Chrysler frowned; then his eyes flickered nervously, and he almost smiled. "Yeah?"

Bodie Pickett smiled blandly back at him.

Releasing Pickett's lapel and making a show of smoothing it, the man from the Chrysler relaxed, and laughed. The gun moved to Pickett's stomach.

"Shit, that's pretty good." He laughed again at what he took to be the other man's joke. But the smile froze on his face. "You say your name was what, funny man?"

"Bohr, Niels Bohr."

"Yeah?" He loosened up again. "Well, Bohr, since you's a nuculer whachamacallit, you aint got no business with this here girl, do you?"

Pickett smiled broadly, his lips tightly closed. He raised his eyebrows in response.

The man from the Chrysler set his chin and leaned forward, jamming the gun deeper into Pickett's stomach. "Right?"

Pickett coughed then said: "Would you repeat the question?"

And the man from the Chrysler buried a heavy fist into Pickett's abdomen. Pickett dropped to his knees, his mouth and eyes open wide, unable to suck in air. The man grabbed the shoulder of Pickett's jacket and pulled him to his feet.

"Now, you don't have to worry none bout that girl, do you?"

There was real humor in his face now, and not the slightest trace of nervousness in his eyes. "Do you?"

Pickett's long face swung to the side and back in answer.

The man from the Chrysler released his jacket. "There, you see? We aint got no problem." He chuckled.

Pickett's legs buckled. The man from the Chrysler put the cold metal to Pickett's temple, bent over to pat Pickett's pockets.

"Now Bohr -- boring Bohr -- I don't expect to see you again

anyplace. Ever. Got me?" He pulled car keys from Pickett's coat pocket. "Got it, Bohr?"

Pickett's head swung from side to side again. He coughed up dirt and blood. A string of pink spittle hung from his mouth.

The man from the Chrysler laughed -- from the belly this time.

"Jus aint your day." He dropped the automatic into his pocket and walked away from Pickett. "Boring Bohr . . ." He laughed at his joke, and headed back to Main. The man from the Chrysler reached the corner and tossed Pickett's car keys into a clump of Spanish bayonets, then disappeared around the corner. He was whistling.

Pickett coughed up more sandy blood. He felt his ribs, stood up, and fell back against the trunk of a live oak, his face crumpled in pain. He closed his eyes, and opened his mouth, breathing deeply. When he stood the next time, his legs held. He walked slowly to the Nova. He leaned against the door, reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out a soft leather wallet. From it he pulled an ignition key.

Pickett drove slowly back to Main, and as slowly the three miles to Belle Haven Memorial. He turned into the parking lot, and stopped mid-lane. He closed his eyes, lips pursed, and exhaled. When his chin rose, however, it was set forward; when

his eyes opened, they were narrow and hard, their hazel centers glowing yellow in the dusky light. Pickett dropped the transmission into reverse, and the Nova curved back out onto the street, leaning into the curve, dragging its tires, screaming, across the asphalt. He swung back onto main. He drove back into town.

The Nova lurched to a stop in front of the 5-and-10. The suspension creaked as Pickett wrenched at the parking brake. He remained before the wheel, his lips bunched, his brow knit; then he pushed himself into the street and walked, shoulders slightly hunched over his damaged stomach, to the glass door that said, J. B. PICKETT/ATTORNEY AT LAW, and up the stairs of the DeLeon Building, and to his father's office. And the pint of Jim Beam 90 proof that he found, without a search, behind volume 2 of Mackelson's Florida Tort.

[END CHAPTER 5]

CHAPTER SIX

The window was dark when the phone rang. Bodie Pickett, his chest bare, lay on the waiting room sofa, a bruise the size of a softball emblazoned on his stomach. Two fingers of whiskey balanced there in a Dixie cup.

He reached the desk and the phone after six rings.

"Yeah, who is it? . . . Oh, hi. How are -- . . . No. No, it's okay, I should've called first. . . . Well, sorry I missed you anyway. . . . Uh-huh, yeah. Some other time maybe. . . . Yeah? Well . . . Uh-uh. . . . Sure, if you think so, that'd be just fine. . . . Eight-thirty'd be fine too. . . . Sure. . . . Uh-huh, yeah, me too. . . . Right. See you then."

He hung up.

A fresh shirt, a cup of Otley's coffee, and 30 minutes later, the white Nova rumbled over the short one lane bridge that spanned the Lake Anna canal, and turned right at a sign that said, PRIVATE DRIVE. It went for another hundred yards through a tangle of tropical foliage before it pulled into the circular drive of a pink stucco mansion. It rolled to a stop before a pair of massive mahogany doors.

A white-coated Cuban appeared from the shadows and slid into the front seat as Pickett climbed out. The Nova and the white-coated Cuban disappeared through an opening in the profuse plantings that surrounded the house.

Pickett stood in the middle of the drive for a moment, looking at the spanish stone work that framed the windows on each of the three stories. Wrought iron filigree covered the windows.

He put a set of long fingers to his stomach, and pressed gently against the white shirt. In response, he squinted with his left eye, bringing the left corner of his mouth up toward it. Pickett brushed at the sleeve of his blue-grey seersucker suit, pulled his open-necked shirt collar over the lapel of his jacket, and, with a sigh, launched himself toward the door before him, his shadow lengthening over the gravel drive as he approached it.

He climbed the steps and raised his hand to the knocker. He

paused looked at his watch, put the watch to his ear, then struck the door once with the wrought iron knocker.

The door immediately opened.

"Bo, old friend!" The Reverend Edmund Ayers lit his whole-life smile and pumped Pickett's right hand with both of his own. "It's so good to see you again."

Pickett smiled in return, and, after four pumps, tried to retrieve his hand. Edmund held on.

He pulled Pickett through the front door and into a formal entryway. The murmur of a room full of people drifted down the hall.

"I'm so sorry about this morning." Deep concern etched Brother Ed's face. Pickett smiled: "Yeah?"

"Yes, well, that is, I mean that I hope Tom didn't, well, put you off too much. He can do that."

The Reverend Edmund Ayers laughed a hearty laugh. It sounded forced.

"He's, well, a man of few words, as they say." He looked at Pickett, the good humor became wariness. "And a bit . . . Over protective sometimes."

Pickett said nothing.

"I mean he . . . protects my time, you know, makes sure I get places, that my car's ready . . . That sort of thing. You

know."

Pickett looked at Brother Ed as if he hadn't the slightest idea what the Reverend was talking about, but that it was okay by him. Edmund still looked concerned.

"Look," said Pickett, "it's okay. Don't worry about it."

Brother Ed apparently wanted to:

"Tom works for Matt, really. Matt Cheatham, our business manager."

"Ah." Pickett said it as if the name meant something to him.

Brother Ed seemed encouraged: "He's the real financial brains behind all this -- Matt is, I mean. The Lord provides, my boy, he provides, but you need to take care of it."

Brother Ed laughed. It was supposed to be good-hearted, but sounded embarrassed.

"Matt's done amazing things, made it all possible in many ways."

Pickett waited, but Edmund didn't count the ways. Edmund seemed to find the silence awkward. His smile drooped.

"We're all so sorry about your father --" His blue eyes became liquid. "-- so very sorry." He looked mournfully at the bridge of Pickett's nose. "I didn't know him well, of course, but I understand he was a troubled man."

"He was a drunk, Ed."

"Huh? Well, yes, and we shall all miss him. Very, very much. There are travails and temptations for all souls in this world, but --"

"Ed, he's dead."

"Uh -- what? Oh, yes, I know -- I know he's dead. I just wanted to say . . . Well, `the Lord giveth -- '"

"Look, he was a drunk for twenty years, and if he didn't shoot himself, he would've eventually." Pickett closed the door, deliberately not slamming it. "He's dead, that's it. And to tell you the truth, I don't know if I'm sorry or glad -- but I don't believe for a minute that anybody else is too broken up over it. So cut the crap, Ed, I've had a rough day."

The Reverend Edmund Ayers looked hurt, the fat little rich kid nobody liked, but who was put up with for his toys. A second later Brother Ed had rearranged his face, a grownup again.

"Ah, Bo," he laughed, "Bo, Bo, Bo. . . You're pulling my leg aren't you? You never were one for sentiment."

He slapped Pickett on the back again -- not as though he wanted to, but as though one were supposed to. Pickett winced; Brother Ed pretended not to notice and smiled, sagely.

"Still the cynic, huh? Some day, Bo -- some day you'll see. There's more under God's blue sky than doom and gloom."

He hung an arm over Pickett's shoulder and guided him down the large paneled hall, past an arrangement of multicolored cut flowers and a black maid with a doily on her head.

The maid was apparently awaiting Pickett's coat. Pickett didn't have one. The maid smiled, as if to say that no sane man would carry one in this climate anyway, but it was a living. Brother Ed smiled back.

"Thank you, Annie."

"Yessir, Mister Edmund." Then she curtsied.

Pickett nodded his head in appreciation. Brother Ed urged Pickett toward the door at the end of the hall.

"Come on in. There're some people I want you to meet."

Pickett pressed gently at his stomach as Edmund ushered him into a large rectangular room filled with people. One side of the room was glass, revealing an illumined flagstone patio and an impressive expansive of lawn. Stepping stones, like the footprints of some great amphibian, meandered down the lawn to a large dock and bathes silhouetted against a grey-blue lake.

From the far side of the room and a small congregation that included Fenton Carrithers and Seymour Blotz, a woman detached herself and swept toward the two men who had just entered. She was striking in a full floor length brocade skirt and a flouncey blouse that ended in lace high on her neck. The skirt was a deep

purple, almost black; the blouse, scarlet. A velvet ribbon of the same purple as the skirt held a large cameo at he neck. Her green eyes found Bodie Picket's.

Edmund watched her too.

"Mister Pickett, may I present --"

"Bo," she said, as if addressing an old friend, "may I call you Bo?"

" -- my wife, Jan."

The woman ignored Edmund's introduction.

"It is so nice to meet you, Bo. Edmund's told me so much about you."

Without the wig, and with her still blonde hair pulled back off her face to a delicately formed bun in the back, she was a different woman. There remained only the slightest trace of the evangelist in her drawl -- the ivory tones of magnolia, now, all peaches and cream.

She extended her hand, and Pickett bowed as he took it, feigning a kiss. Jan received the gesture as her due.

Edmund nodded to Pickett.

"I'll, uh, see to the other guests."

He touched his wife's arm and, noticeably embarrassed, disappeared into the crowd. Jan appeared neither to notice nor to care.

"I was simply devastated by the news of your father's death. Such a horrible thing. He must have been very unhappy. So many endure so much for lack of faith, don't you think?"

Pickett said nothing. Jan smiled.

"Do you have Faith, Bo?"

Pickett leaned his head to the side and crumpled his brow.

"No, I suppose not."

"Oh?" Jan Ayers cocked her head at the same angle and in the same direction.

"Some things, maybe. I dunno. Truth, honesty . . . That sort of thing, maybe. Simple things."

Jan Ayers dropped her gaze and took Pickett's arm, gently guiding him toward the long window.

"And are those things truly so simple?"

She released his arm and settled back against the glass, her hands limply folded in the shadows of her brocade skirt, her face glowing against the evening sky like the moon itself. It was as if the pose had been prepared.

Pickett was silent. Jan's voice grew softer.

"Are you true then, Bodie Pickett? Are you honest?"

"Sometimes, I hope. I try anyway." Pickett laughed. "The truth is that I try to avoid pain. I dunno, maybe I try at the other too."

They both were silent for a moment, as though reading the other's mind. Pickett spoke first:

"Trying isn't so bad, is it?"

"Try, yes. Try we must. But it's faith alone that makes it possible, isn't it? Only through faith can we be true and honest and --"

"Maybe with ourselves."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Perhaps we can still be honest with ourselves . . ."

"Can we? Can you be honest with yourself, Bo? Can any of us?"

Oh, you foolish child, said her smile.

"We are miserable creatures," she continued, smiling incongruously, " -- weak and willfully evil. It's the Blood of the Redeemer that can show us the way."

"The way to Ed's Temple, you mean?"

Jan smiled indulgently.

"The Lord's Temple, yes. To salvation, to the New Jerusalem . . ." Her eyes glazed, the face tightened though the smile held. Jan placed her hand on Pickett's forearm. "Will you be there, Bodie Pickett?"

She seemed to expect an answer. Pickett paused, his eyes hooded, lost in thought. Finally, he looked up, smiling

sheepishly.

"I don't know where I am half the time, much less where I'll be when it's all over."

Jan raised her chin without moving her eyes from Pickett's. After a moment, the eyes softened, and she laughed.

"Yes, I do know what you mean. We keep ourselves so busy, don't we? Too busy." She paused and turned to the window. "It is lovely though -- don't you think?"

Pickett nodded, smiling; but he was still looking at Jan. She smiled to herself as if reading Pickett's mind, then continued:

"The lake is always beautiful; but as you can see --" She gestured toward the crowd. "-- even here we can't always get away. The shepherd must sleep too, you know."

Jan turned and leaned toward Pickett conspiratorially.

"We have a place on the St. John's. It belonged to Edmund's parents -- God rest their souls. We keep it a secret. We get out there every so often to renew the spirit. Lord knows, it needs renewin' every now an' then."

The twang was a joke that came too easily. Jan took Pickett's arm again.

"You know, your father meant a great deal to Edmund. Edmund was lost, truly lost. A little like you, I hear. When his

parents died, your father helped him back on track. He couldn't bring him all the way, of course: he wasn't a Believer. You understand . . ."

"Do I ever."

". . . But he made it possible for Edmund to return to life. And eventually to Jesus. If only your father let Edmund return the favor. Perhaps, this -- this tragedy could have been avoided."

She seemed genuinely distraught.

"No one could have helped -- except whoever pulled that trigger."

Jan's eyes flew to his.

"Surely you don't mean to imply --" She paused, trying to read his mind again.

Pickett said nothing. Jan started over:

"You don't mean that -- that it was someone else? I mean, that your father didn't --"

"I'm not sure what I mean." Pickett looked away irritably.

"But who would want to do . . . That to J.B.?"

"I don't know." Pickett looked up, his face hard and cold.

"Do you?"

Jan's mouth dropped open, astonishment in her eyes. The very notion seemed to set off some interior struggle.

"What a horrid, evil idea. You can't possibly think that --" She seemed to find the idea unspeakable as well.

Pickett laughed awkwardly.

"Look, don't worry about it. If it hadn't been this way, it would've been some other -- the drink most likely."

Jan Ayers struggled for meaning in the tall man's words. Puzzlement blended with astonishment. "I don't -- I mean . . ."

Clearly, Jan Ayers didn't. In any event, she'd had enough. She found salvation over Pickett's shoulder.

"Mark -- oh Mark," she called. "Yes. . . . I want you to meet someone."

Mark stepped around Pickett and extended his hand, his eyes avoiding the taller man's.

"This is Bo Pickett, Mark, one of your father's oldest and dearest friends."

Mark glanced up from his mother's face to that of his father's oldest and dearest friend. The disdain that pulled at one corner of his mouth evaporated as a question dimpled the flesh between his brows.

"I've seen you before, haven't I? You were at the T-t-temple."

"Uh-huh. Quite a show."

Mark looked to his mother, then more sheepishly to Pickett.

"Well, the shows are a little . . . el-l-laborate."

"Nonsense!" Jan patted her son's cheek playfully. "No more so than necessary, dear. We strive for professionalism, that's all."

With obvious embarrassment, Mark's eyes darted around the room. They caught and clung to something behind Pickett.

"Yes, well, nice to meet you, Mister P-p-pickett. Excuse me, please," and he was off.

Jan leaned after him, raising one arm as if to catch him. She didn't.

"Just a moment. Mark? Mark, I'd like a word with you." Jan turned to Pickett dismissively. "So nice to have met you, Bo. I hope that we can talk again."

Though Jan smiled as she swept off in Mark's wake, her expression suggested that she would be just as happy never to see Pickett ever again.

Pickett turned, following Jan with his eyes.

Jan spoke earnestly, but Mark's attention focused on Amy Mooring. She sat in the far corner, bolt upright on a white modular sofa -- legs tucked beneath her, a black sleeveless dress pulled down over her knees, her eyes rapt upon the long cherubic face of Mark's father.

Edmund no longer looked embarrassed; he was in his element.

[END CHAPTER 6]

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I don't believe that we've met."

Bodie Pickett turned to a well groomed man of medium height, close cropped hair, and horn-rimmed glasses. The man smiled; he appeared to know when charm was needed, but not what it was. His suit was expensive.

"Matthew Cheatham." He put a pink, well manicured hand to his breast as if to introduce his suit. "I am Edmund's financial advisor. And you are . . ."

"Pickett. Bodie Pickett."

"Ah . . ." Matt extending a limp hand. "So nice to meet you."

"Edmund was just telling me about you --"

"You know, Mister Pickett the greater the witness, the greater the need for financial responsibility. No penny should be wasted."

Matt Cheatham continued to look at Pickett; although, at the same time, he seemed virtually unaware of Pickett's presence. The warmth of the other man's body had loaded and executed some infinitely repeatable program.

"When Edmund and I left Princeton . . ."

Matt Cheatham paused as if awaiting applause.

". . . we realized that the gospel must be spread to the modern world in modern ways. And modern ways require modern means -- vast resources, great financial sacrifice . . ."

Matt Cheatham gently turned Pickett toward the crowded room.

"But just as Brother Edmund has given over his wealth to the great witness that he bears, so too have the great supporters of this mission done their share. The great work has been carried forth, but much still is to be done --"

"How much?"

"Uh -- what? Oh."

Matt Cheatham slowly turned back to Pickett. His eyes focused on the other slowly, as if coming out of a deep sleep. Confusion fled as something behind them clicked.

"Well, the need is ever present. We ask no more than you can afford nor less than you feel --"

He'd switched to a sub-routine.

"Mister Cheatham --"

"Matt, please."

"Well, Matt, you got the wrong guy." He tapped his chest with a long forefinger. ". . . friend of the family."

"But Mister Carrithers said . . . Ah, oh, I see. I am sorry. Mister Carrithers thought you were with the Millennium Club."

Matt turned toward the other side of the room. Carrithers waved; Blotz looked at Pickett, sneered, then said something to Carrithers. He laughed. Matt knit his brow.

"And, well, we are in the midst of a drive. You understand. . . ."

"Sure. It's okay." Pickett turned to leave.

"It's going quite well, actually."

Matt, still smiling toward Carrithers and Blotz, was oblivious of Pickett's attempted escape.

"Edmund has quite a following, and with the success of the TV show . . ." Matt finished the sentence by raising his eyebrows and showing Pickett his palms. "We're syndicated now. Did you know that? Fifteen local channels. Mostly Florida --"

and a few in Georgia. We have one in Louisiana, too . . ."

Suddenly, his aspect was earnest. Pickett sighed, and closed his eyes.

"But, Mister Pickett -- Bo, if I might . . . As I was saying, the need is ever present, and we must keep our shoulders to the wheel."

"Looks to me like you got an awfully big wheel."

"Wha -- ? Oh, yes, I see what you mean." He smiled at the tall man next to him, half closed his eyes, and bobbed his head slightly from side to side. "We do quite well, actually; but, mind you," he added quickly, "the need is --" "Cheatham --"

The face that followed the voice was as blunt as the intrusion.

"-- we got business."

A foot shorter than Matt Cheatham and at least as much wider, the man tossed a square head of iron-grey stubble toward the door.

"Now."

"Oh -- Ralph. Yes, of course, in a minute. Ralph Kemp, this is, uh, Bodie . . . Pickett. Pickett's a dear old friend of Edmund's."

"Yeah? Well, good luck, Pickett." Kemp ignored Pickett's hand, and leaned toward Matt Cheatham. "Look, we gotta go somewhere and talk."

"Of course." Matt smiled his thin-lipped smile once again. He took the hand Kemp refused. "You'll excuse us Mister Pickett?"

"Pickett?" Kemp's eyes narrowed. "You related to that clown who shot hisself the other day?"

"Yeah --" Pickett's face was wood. "-- son of clown."

"Oh, my . . ." Matt looked nervously at Kemp. "I-I-I didn't make the connection. I'm so sorry to hear about your -- your loss, Mister Pickett."

"It was more my father's."

Matt pulled in his chin in puzzlement.

"The loss, I mean."

"Yes, of course it was. I only meant to say . . . well, that he was a fine man."

Bodie Pickett released a short burst of air something like a laugh. "It doesn't sound like you knew him too well."

Kemp sighed, looked at the ceiling, then at his watch, as though he had a train to catch.

"Well, I didn't really know him," Matt continued. "Edmund retained him as his personal lawyer, you understand. He -- your father, that is -- had been with Edmund's mother and father, I believe. Edmund didn't really require much of him. We have -- that is to say -- Edmund has several lawyers connected with the

Temple; but Edmund felt it -- your father, that is -- he felt that your father was his, well, responsibility. Of sorts. That is, your father was generally in no condition -- too ill, that is, to undertake legal work of any degree of, well, complication."

Matt breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sure you understand."

"Yeah, I understand. He was a drunk."

Kemp laughed. Matt winced.

"Well, I wouldn't have put it that way myself --"

"That's real nice, but we gotta go." Kemp turned Matt toward the door, then looked back over his shoulder. "Sorry bout your ol man, Pickett."

"You and Jim Beam," Pickett muttered.

Matt looked back as Kemp drew him across the room. He shrugged apologetically.

Pickett took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly through pursed lips; he allowed his gaze to wander from one side of the crowded room to the other, until it reached the glass wall behind him. A handle fitted to the section of glass he leaned against opened, and Pickett slipped out into the damp night air.

He stood in the middle of a flag stone patio surrounded by a waist high hedge. Three stone steps led down to the lawn. Pickett went down the steps and to the left, out of view of the

glass wall, and onto another patio. The limbs of a large oak swept over the flag stones like an awning. Moss melted from the limbs into the half light below, turning in the warm air like ragged pennants. The air was thick with the sweet-sour smell of the water's edge.

Pickett barked his shin on a cast iron lawn chair, swore under his breath, and then sat on it.

The lake was grey with the full moon. In an easy syncopated rhythm, waves slapped at the dock pylons. The party's hum disappeared beneath the thrum of tree frogs, crickets, and the occasional cry of a coot.

"Lake Anna . . ."

At the sound of his own words, Pickett smiled -- as if this were the name of an old friend, one he'd not seen for a very long time. His eyes followed the shoreline into the tangle of bougainvillaea and palmetto palms that bordered the lawn on the right. A tunnel of moonlight passed through, glinting off the surface of a canal. In Belle Haven, one was never much more than a hundred yards from a lake or one of the canals that connected them.

"It is lovely, isn't it," Jan's words echoed, though not her voice.

Pickett started and looked to his left.

Deeper in the shadows, the darkness moved. A voice, light and weary, continued: "But it's not real, you know. It couldn't be."

Amy Mooring sat on a cast iron two-seater at the foot of the oak, arms around her knees. Pickett stepped farther into the shadows and sat down beside her. Her eyes glinted as she glanced at him. Bringing her knees up to her chin, she turned back to the lake. Her black dress fell down around her thighs revealing long, womanly legs covered in black.

"It couldn't be real, could it?"

"Why not?" Pickett whispered; still, it was as though he were yelling, as though his voice were coming from some other world than Amy's.

"Good things are never real."

Pickett wrinkled his brow. He said nothing in reply.

Amy looked at him, then away. "You were at the Temple today, weren't you?"

Pickett nodded.

"And the donut shop." Amy paused. "Are you following me?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

Pickett looked down at his feet, then to the lake, and back again to Amy. The air had picked up a trace of magnolia. His brow knit above a nervous mouth. "Should I be following you,

Amy? Are you in --"

"How do you know my name?" Amy's voice shook, slightly.

"I'm a friend of your father's."

"My father . . ." She tested the words, how they sounded. Her face blank, naked, she looked from the lake to the man next to her. "I have no mother, you know. Did he tell you that? No mother and no father."

"Amy, if you're in some sort of trouble . . ."

"Did you know that I was born again? Well, I am. Born again . . . washed in the Blood of the Lamb."

She put her feet back to the flag stones, and she turned. As if asking the time of day:

"Do you think I'll go to heaven?"

Pickett stared at Amy in silence, his brow twisted. His tongue ran quickly over his lower lip, and he opened his mouth to speak. Before he could, Amy answered.

"I don't. Do you want to know what I do think? I think that I'll rot in hell." She spoke as though she knew the place.

"Know why?"

Pickett shook his head.

"Because I'm real. Real." Amy put clinched fists to her breast. "I'm flesh and bone a-a-and --"

The quiver in her voice blocked the words. She squeezed her

eyes closed, smiling grotesquely; then she swallowed hard.

"The good, and peaceful, and . . . kind is a --" She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand -- quickly, not wanting the other to see. " -- is a lie." She pointed to the lake, her hand trembling.

"It sits out there calm and beautiful and . . . it wants you to think that it's real, you know, that it's really there. But when you reach for it, when you try to grab it . . . it's worse than -- than nothing. It's foul. It's foul and filthy and --"

A shriek broke the litany.

Amy froze, her mouth open.

The shriek became a wail, then hysterical sobs. It came from the canal. Pickett rose. Amy grabbed his arm.

"What is it?"

"I don't know."

"I told you." Amy's voice rose with her body. "It's evil, filth, I told you, I told you, I --"

"Stop it!" Pickett took Amy by the shoulders and pushed her back down into the chair. "Wait here."

He sprinted across the lawn toward the canal and stumbled into the palmettos and ferns that bordered it, heading for the sound. He broke through the scrub to the canal, skidded on the mud. He was ankle deep in mud and water plants before he

stopped.

The wail was a whimper now, steady and low, farther down the creek. A bulky figure shuddered on the opposite bank.

"Help!" -- a male voice this time -- "Over here."

Pickett scrambled out of the water. He slogged through the vegetation toward the voice. His wet socks kept slipping from his shoes. By the time he breasted the figure on the opposite bank, he'd lost the left one.

Two teenagers embraced in terror. The girl, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, whimpered into the boy's chest. The boy pointed down into the dark water.

"There. There!"

The limbs of a sweet-bay magnolia swept the top of the canal just below where he was standing. It was in bloom, its scent overpowering. The kid pointed into the shadow cast by its bulk.

Pickett kicked off his remaining shoe and stepped down into the warm water. It was waist high in the middle. As he reached the shadow near the opposite bank, the girl, who'd been watching him, began to wail. Pickett reached down into the darkness and pulled.

A face emerged from the black water. Its small eyes stared into the twisted foliage above, dull and unseeing. The left eye glinted red in the reflected light, beside it and underneath, a

small ragged hole.

Pickett looked past the cowering lovers. Their green Ford hulked in the shadows of the bank above them. The dead man's bronze Chrysler was no where in sight.

Abruptly, the girl's whimpering stopped. She gasped, Pickett wheeled around.

On the opposite bank, one arm rigid, pointing at the white face bobbing in the black water, stood Amy Mooring. Her face was as white.

"Filth," she whispered, her voice rising. "Filth -- evil. I told you . . . I told you . . ."

It was too much for the girl in the jeans. She made a sound half way between a cough and a gasp and slid senseless through her boyfriend's arms, curling into a fetal ball on the mud.

[END CHAPTER 7]

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I dunno, Homer, looks like suicide to me . . ."

Sheriff Homer Beane swung the beam of his flashlight to Bodie Pickett's face. "Goddammit, boy, you best watch your mouth."

He splashed toward the bank on which Pickett sat, nearly losing his balance in the murky canal. His wake glittered through the circles of his deputies flashlights; the rays danced in the cavernous foliage of the canal as the deputies scattered before his onslaught.

Pickett hunkered on the wet grass watching the sheriff lumber out of the inky water like the title creature in a low

budget monster movie.

"I ought a throw you in a cell right --"

"Come off it, Homer. You got nothing on me but thirty years and a hundred pounds."

"I'll tell you what I got on you, boy. I got obstruction of justice, accessory after the fact --"

"That's bullshit, and you know it. What you got is two corpses with their damn heads blown off and not one goddamn idea what to do about it, that's what you got."

"When I get hold a you I'm gone --"

He lunged at Pickett as if he meant to increase the number of corpses by one. But by the time he hauled his wet bulk and sloshing waders up the short incline to where the other sat, Sheriff Homer Beane was spent. He dropped to the grass next to the taller man, the fight gone out of him with the wind. He motioned vaguely to his men, who stood knee deep in the black water grinning, and between great gulps of air he shouted:

"What the hell you ladies gawking at?"

And they began their random milling again, poking at the bank and canal bottom in an aimless search for nothing in particular.

"They've been at it for at least an hour, Homer. What the hell you think they'll find down there?"

"Murder weapon, maybe. Something. Anything. Hell, I won't know what they're gone find down there till they find it, now will I?"

Homer Beane whipped out a handkerchief and blew his nose.

"Nobody's gone know squat till we get that medical report anyways."

"You send him to Memorial?"

"Whataya think that ambulance was for, smart ass? Take him to the airport?"

Pickett laughed and shook his head.

"What the hell was the siren for? You think maybe they could wake him up before they got there? Not that it'd matter much if they did."

"And whataya mean by that?"

"What I mean is that the quack you got doing the butchering down there couldn't tell the difference anyhow. Look, Homer, you thought about calling in the Florida Bureau? They got the resources for this sort --"

"No I aint thought about calling in the Florida Bureau, smart ass, because I aint gone call in the Florida Bureau. This happened in my county, and I'm gone get the sumbitch that done it."

He spat eloquently at the canal.

He missed.

One of the deputies -- a skinny kid no more than 18 -- watched the spittle slide off the flat black housing of his state of the art Mag-Lite Adjustable Beam Flashlight. He looked up at Homer sheepishly:

"Sorry, Sheriff."

"I'm gone get that sucker." Apparently, Homer didn't mean the deputy. "And don't you worry none about that."

And that, said Homer's expression, was that.

Pickett sighed and stared down into the grass. "How's the girl?"

"Which?"

"Amy."

"Aw, she's okay, I guess. Ed called her father, and he come and took her home."

Homer chuckled; it became a cough, then a wheeze. He pulled out the handkerchief again and mopped his brow.

"Roger and Ed never did get along too good. Hell, I member when those two was just --"

"How about the other two?"

"The kids? They're okay I spose. The boy still didn't seem to know what was going on -- white as a frog's belly when we had him look at the body again. Higher than hell."

Homer snorted and shook his head.

"Just don't know where they get that stuff." He scratched his belly thoughtfully. "The girl weren't worth much. In shock the doc said. No wonder -- hell, drops by the creek for a little snort a coke and some grab-ass and prac'ly steps on a corpse."

Homer hawked, then spat at the canal again.

This time the young deputy saw it coming. He stepped back out of the way, caught his boot on a cypress knee and went over backwards into the canal.

A few half stifled laughs spluttered from the darkness.

"Je-sus --" said Homer.

"S-s-sorry, Sheriff," said the deputy, pulling at his wet shirt.

Homer looked down and shook his head. He spit on the wet earth between his legs.

"Anyways, I spose we got all there's to get from the boy. They'd just got there, seen the body, and the girl'd started hollering. Then you show up like the Lone Ranger, and . . ."

The rest's history, Homer said with his hands. He stared at the canal for moment.

"What was that Mooring kid doing down here anyway?"

"She must've followed me from the party. She seemed pretty shook up herself."

"That gal's never been anything but. Hell, why Roger lets that kid run loose I don't --"

"Anyone make the body?"

"Naw . . . I'll get some pitures, show them around tomorrow. Don't expect nothing, though."

"How you figure that?"

"Look, whoever dumped him cleaned him out -- no wallet, nothing in his pockets . . . didn't want nobody knowing who he was. Would he a done that if anybody round here was likely to know him in the first place?"

Pickett opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Homer continued.

"Hell no. This here's a city job. Some greaser gets knocked off in Orlando, or maybe Daytona, they drive him to Belle Haven, and dump him in the first lonely spot they come to."

"What about the car?"

Homer shot to his feet and stuck a stubby forefinger at Pickett's face.

"What the hell you know bout any car, boy?"

"The car that dumped the guy here. Did anyone see the car?"

"Look, boy, if you got something --"

"Christ, Homer, would you get off my --"

"If you're holding something back on me, boy, I'm gone jam

an accessory rap so far up your shaggy ass you're gone think you had hard time for breakfast!"

"Gimme a break. I just thought maybe the two kids had seen a car or something."

"You see a car, boy?"

"I got here after the corpse, remember?"

Pickett's voice was calm, but his eyes moved nervously under active brows. "If your two kids didn't see a car coming or going when they drove up, you're going to have one helluva time getting anywhere with that theory of yours. Anyway, why'd anyone drive a corpse from Orlando -- or anywhere -- through twenty miles of scrub with nobody around for miles just so they could dump it in Ed's backyard?"

Homer bridled.

"I don't know what you was doing up there at Ed's place -- and I don't believe for a second you're in with that money crowd -- but I don't wanna hear no more bout Ed's backyard. There aint nothing to connect this with Edmund Ayers or anyone else in this town, and less you know something I don't, which damn sure aint likely, get out a here. I got work to do."

He straightened, and headed back toward the canal, brushing at the seat of his pants. As he got to the edge, he turned.

"But not too far." He turned back to the canal, folding his

arms. "I want you round for awhile."

Pickett stood and shook out the tightness in his legs. He walked back to the road past half a dozen county police cars, down it a couple hundred yards, then right onto Lake Drive. Ed's house was only a block farther down, across the one lane concrete bridge that spanned the canal. The moon had set long before, and down the canal to the right the deputies' flashlights cut a ghostly shadow dance out of the black air. Pickett walked the block to Ed's house and his car.

The house was dark save for a blue glow in one upstairs window. As Pickett glanced up, a white face bobbed to the center of the blue rectangle. This one was alive; it belonged to Mark Ayers.

The Nova again sat before the front door. Pickett sat with one hand on the wheel and the other on the ignition key, staring at his lap. He looked up, his eyes closed, took a deep breath, and turned the switch.

The engine caught on the first try.

Pickett smiled, draped a long arm over the seat, and guided the Nova back through Ed's artificial rain forest, and back to the street.

He drove back across the canal bridge and turned off Lake back onto the canal road and towards town. He was following the

slow curve of the road when his headlights flashed bronze in the scrub to the right of the road.

The Nova slowed and turned onto the shoulder. The dead man's Chrysler was just visible, parked off the shoulder behind a copse of pine and sumac.

Pickett drove on another fifty yards to the next intersection, took a left, and parked in the shadow of a cinder block sign that read in peeling white on pink, BELLE AIRE ESTATES/`WHERE A HOUSE IS A HOME'. He sprinted back to Lake past two rundown cinder block boxes that had given up trying to be homes 30 years before, and back along the shoulder toward the Chrysler.

He opened the driver's door with a handkerchief and let the ceiling light burn. The keys were gone, and there was nothing in the front or back seat. In the glove compartment was an owner's manual and a rental agreement between Reasonable Rentals of Umatilla and Herbert Purdy.

He snapped the glove compartment shut and looked up to see headlight beams swinging around the curve from the lake. He pulled the door shut, cutting off the ceiling light, and lay down on the front seat.

The lights passed, flashing across the dashboard above him.

As he sat up again, another pair of lights began their sweep

around the same curve. He quickly ran his hand inside the front seat, pulling out a nickel and two pennies, something sticky that smelled of mint, and a wad of paper. He stuffed the paper into his pocket, wiped the minty stuff on the dash, and climbed through the front window to the ground.

Headlights flashed across the top of the car just as Pickett scrambled to his feet. He crouched in the Chrysler's shadow and waited.

The engine revved down. The backup lights went on; blue lettering said: WEKIWA COUNTY SHERIFF. The Wekiwa County Sheriff said:

"Back there, ass hole. You blind?" He was between Pickett and the Nova.

Pickett rolled away from the Chrysler and into the foliage that bordered the canal. As he reached the water, the Wekiwa County Sheriff bellowed:

"Use your gloves, for Chris'sake. Jeez --"

Pickett doubled back along the canal to the intersection where he'd left his car, then crept back to the road and sprinted across.

The Nova ignited on the second try. Pickett drove off in the direction it was pointed. He didn't look back.

[END CHAPTER 8]

CHAPTER NINE

Bodie Pickett drove around Lake Anna then for another half mile on a dirt road that paralleled the Lake Faun canal. He slowed, squinting into the headlights and the wild growth on either side of the Nova.

Banana trees appeared on the left. They dusted the top of a tin mailbox. "J. B. PICKETT" decorated the box in rough hand painted letters. Pickett turned the Nova down a muddy track on the other side of the mailbox and the banana trees.

A moment later, the Nova rolled to a stop beneath the second story overhang of a small, two story garage-like structure. It was well off the road and hidden by thick vegetation that grew on

and around the trunks of the large hickories and water oaks that shaded it. In the dark it looked abandoned.

Cinder block pillars sunk into the gravel drive supported the overhang. Both stories jutted out slightly into the canal that tunneled through the dense foliage behind. A small screened-in porch above the canal mimicked the overhang above the carport. The floor below comprised a boat house whose walls descended to within six inches of the canal. Green clapboard sheathed the whole. It leaned comfortably against an ancient water oak on the right. It had probably been the chauffeur's quarters on an estate long since subdivided and lost to memory.

Pickett unbent his long body and pushed himself from the Nova toward the door in front of him. He ran his hand along the top of the door frame, producing a key. He put it to the rusty padlock on the door and, after two tugs, pulled it open. Inside the door Pickett waved his hand around in the dark until he felt a string. He pulled it.

He stood on a narrow dock that ran round three sides of the room, framing a slip that ran to two drooping wooden doors; if required to, they would open onto the canal. The chain and padlock that held them closed was orange with neglect. Dust and the refuse of fishermen and drunks littered the decking. Slowly, he shuffled up a narrow stair to the left of the door.

The one at the top of the stairs was unlocked.

The upstairs room showed little to indicate that anyone had lived there. It was a long room with a kitchenette and small bath at the carport end, and a bed, small table, and a few chairs next to the porch door. Most of the windows faced the canal.

Pickett lit a small table lamp next to the bed, then one of his black cigars.

The cupboards were empty except for a few staples -- and another pint of Jim Beam 90-proof. An inch of amber liquid remained in the bottom. The refrigerator yielded a couple of eggs and two potatoes, limp but unspoiled.

He fried them up in some margarine from the freezer, and washed them down with the whiskey. He tossed the stub of his cigar into the sink, switched out the light, and undressed down to his jockey shorts.

He lay down on the unmade bed. He breathed deeply several times, his lips pursed, then sighed, placing his hands behind his head, relaxing his mouth and closing his eyes.

The headlights of a car flashed across the room and as suddenly went out. He sat bolt upright.

Gravel popped beneath rolling tires; then nothing.

Pickett crept to the window. The dark form of a sports car crouched behind his Nova.

The stairs creaked.

Pickett's eyes moved hurriedly over the table and kitchen counter. He picked up the empty bourbon bottle by the neck and flattened himself against the wall next to the door.

The creaking stopped.

Pickett braced himself.

The tap of knuckle against wood broke the silence. After a moment, another tap; then a voice: "Mister P-p-pickett?"

"Oh, for Chris'sake --" Pickett threw the whiskey bottle into the sink and grabbed up his pants from the foot of the bed.

"Who the hell is it?"

"It's M-m-mark. Mark Ayers. Could I talk to you for a m-m-moment?"

Pickett threw open the door. Mark jumped.

"Oh! S-s-sorry to bother you but I have . . . I wanted to t-t-talk to you."

He was dressed as he'd been at the party -- except that his tie was hanging loose at his neck, and the tailored grey suit looked as if it had been wrestling alligators. He caught Pickett's eye.

"I went down to the canal."

He smiled self-consciously.

"I sort of s-s-slipped. Sheriff Beane had a deputy take a

few of us down to see if we could -- could identify the body. No one could." He looked down at the dusty floor. "L-l-least no one did."

"What the hell time is it anyway?" Pickett pulled up his fly.

"I dunno -- two-thirty, maybe three. I'm sorry to bother you but . . . "

Pickett motioned him in and walked to the table lamp. Mark dropped into a straight back chair as if he carried the weight of more years than he'd lived on his shoulders.

He avoided Pickett's eyes.

The older man drew some water from the tap and placed it on the burner. "Want anything?"

"What? Oh, no. No thank you. I . . . "

Mark didn't finish that either.

Pickett chipped a teaspoon of brown crystals from the stuff cemented to the bottom of a small jar. "For someone who drops by at three a. m. to talk, you sure as hell don't have much to say."

The water kettle began to smoke and the room filled with the odor of stale grease. Pickett switched off the burner and poured the tepid water into a cup. He added the brown crystals and stirred optimistically.

Mark looked down, took a deep breath.

"I need to tell someone b-b-but . . . Damn!" Mark pounded a clinched fist against his knee.

Suddenly Mark looked up.

"Can I trust you? I mean --"

"Goddammit boy, don't you start up with that now." Pickett tossed the black liquid into the sink. "Christ, what is it with you people? I don't know if I'm true or honest or good or . . . Jesus!" He slammed a cabinet door shut and slumped back against the refrigerator. "And if that means you can trust me, boy, then you can trust me."

Mark buried his face in his hands.

Pickett glowered at him for awhile, then at the cracked linoleum under his feet. Finally, he closed his eyes, put a hand to his forehead and took a deep breath.

"Look, boy, I'm sorry. I don't know if you can trust me, I don't even know what you've got to tell me. But I can tell you that there's something strange going on and more than one person's been hurt --"

Mark suddenly looked up.

"-- and if you know something, anything, then you might as well tell me as anyone. Then the two of us can decide if we should tell anyone else."

"No, please, no. No one else. You can't tell anyone. Or .

. ."

"Or what, for Chris's sake? What are you talking about?"

Mark grimaced and hit his knee again.

"I've seen him before. Before today -- I mean ton-n-night."

"Him who?"

"The dead man."

"Did you tell the sheriff?"

"I --" Mark looked down at his muddy shoes. "No. No, I
d-d-didn't."

"Why not?"

"Because . . ."

Mark froze.

"Look, Mark, I'm beat. Now, you see him before or not?"

"Oh, yes. Yes."

"When?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I mean the day before yesterday. The
day before . . . b-b-before he was found."

"Where?"

"That's just it. I saw him driving away from our house."

"Your house?"

"Y-y-yes."

Pickett stared at him for a moment, then said:

"What kind of car?"

"Big -- sort of copper colored. I remember because he honked at me. I was just pulling in, sort of blocking his way, and he cut loose with this big horn. Like he owned the place and I was a tr-r-respasser or something. Then he l-l-laughed."

"That's the fella, all right. What was he doing there?"

"I dunno. I mean, I didn't ask. Lots of different people come to the house -- especially during one of their drives." He said it with contempt. "I don't ask about them. I try to stay away from them. I'm only on the sh-sh-show because --"

"Seen him there before?"

"No. I don't think so anyways. I'm pretty sure I hadn't."

"What did your parents say? You asked them about it?"

"They . . . I don't think that they knew I'd seen him. And when they told Sheriff Beane they hadn't s-s-seen him before . . ."

Mark smiled feebly and shrugged his shoulders.

"Why didn't you tell Beane?"

"I dunno. Scared, I guess. I thought -- I didn't think they'd had anything to do with it, with the murder, but I was conf-f-fused. I didn't know why they'd lied."

"You'll have to go to the police with this, son. It's murder, and there's no way around it. You can get into a lot of trouble -- the type that sends you to prison -- for withholding evidence."

"I know, I know . . ."

Mark put a hand to his forehead and looked down, shaking his head from side to side. Then, hesitantly, he looked up to Pickett.

"But you could -- I mean, would you talk to my f-f-folks? First, I mean? See if you can find out why they didn't say anything? I don't think I could. You've got to promise not to t-t-tell anyone -- till you talk to my folks anyway. P-p-please."

"Puts me in a spot, son. With the Sheriff and your folks."

"I know. I'm sorry . . ." He sank down and began working at his brow again.

"Why come to me anyway?"

"I knew J.B. -- your f-f-father, I mean." Mark paused, looked up. "He used to talk about you. A lot. He came to the house once when Mom . . . Dad was buying the Temple property. We sorta hit it off." Pride shown from beneath the fatigue. "I used to come here now and again. Just to t-t-talk. You know. Dad and I don't -- well, can't talk about a lot of th-th-things."

He -- J.B., I mean -- he told me you were coming. He said he'd written and that you'd be coming any day now. That was bef-f-fore --" He choked on the word, hiding it behind a cough.

"That was a week ago. He used to . . . he used to say I

reminded him of you before . . . uh . . . when you still l-l-lived here. In town, I mean. I would've talked to him I guess, but he's . . ."

"Can't help that, son."

Mark shook silently, his face in his hands.

Pickett placed a hand on Mark's shoulder. "I'll talk to your folks tomorrow. They'll talk to Beane. If not, well then . . . you and me will go talk to him. Okay?"

"That's great. Th-th-thanks, Bo -- Mister Pickett."

"Bo's fine."

"Thanks. Bo." Mark made a brave show of tightening his tie and brushing at his trousers. He rose from the chair with a halfhearted smile, walked to the door, then stopped. There was something else on his mind. "When you brought Amy b-b-back. And after you called Sheriff Beane -- even before you called -- I knew something horrible was the matter. I thought it was Amy -- that she'd done something, I mean." Mark fidgeted with the doorknob. "Whatever it was. She -- Amy's been so upset and con-f-f-fused." He looked back at Pickett. "I was almost relieved when I saw the body. That's terrible, isn't it? But I was relieved because Amy -- she couldn't have done that." The last was almost a question. He looked up at Pickett as if for the answer. When Pickett looked the question back, Mark lowered

his head and continued: "I dunno what I expected, but I expected something."

"Why's that, son?"

"I've been waiting for Amy to explode. She's keeping something in. I thought, at first . . ." Mark scrunched up his face, closing his eyes.

"What did you think?"

"That -- well, there've been a lot drugs around. I don't just mean grass, but just -- all of sudden -- there's this super coke --"

"Crack?"

"T-t-that's what they call it. And all of a sudden a lot of different people are really, I dunno, messed over. A-a-and . . ."

"And you thought Amy was doing crack?"

Mark seemed encouraged by the puzzled tone.

"N-n-no, not really. But she was acting so strange, and until I --" Mark paused as if the rest of the sentence were caught some where in the back of his throat.

"Until . . . ?"

Mark looked away and rubbed at his eyes with both hands.

"Nothing, really. It's just that, well, then I thought she was having an a-a-a . . . that she was s-s-seeing someone.

S-s-someone else. You know, that all those weekends she was g-g-gone, that she . . . I thought . . ."

"You don't know where she goes then?"

"Me?" He seemed shocked. "No. No, I don't know where she goes. She wouldn't tell me. She will hardly even s-s-speaks to me now. If I could just find some way to help. If -- if I'd just never taken her there --"

"Where?"

"The T-t-temple. Everything was fine until then. We were going to get m-m-married. She hadn't actually said yes yet, but I knew. Then I took her there and everything ch-ch-changed." Mark leaned his head against the door, hanging on to the doorknob now. "What a terrible place. Good people go there because they -- they n-n-need something and . . ." He closed his eyes hard, as though crushing something between his lids. "Good people, too. And they come out all twisted and . . . h-h-hard, and . . ."

Pickett rested a narrow hand gently on the boy's shoulder.

"Go home, son. Get some rest. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Yeah?" Mark straightened under Pickett's hand, then he relaxed. "Y-y-yeah, thanks, Mister -- I mean, Bo. Thanks. You'll call me to-m-m-morrow."

Mark disappeared behind the door. A moment later his sports

car roared to life, the high performance rumble dissolving gradually into the sounds of the night, like the passing of a storm, replaced by the crackle of crickets and the hollow call of tree frogs.

Pickett clicked off the light and, for a moment, sat on the edge of his father's unmade bed, listening. The wet slap of a bass brought a smile to his lips.

He lay down on his father's bed and slept.

[END CHAPTER 9]

CHAPTER TEN

"Watch here! Here! Here! Here!"

Bodie Pickett sat bolt upright with his hands to his eyes.

The sun beat full on his face.

He rolled to a sitting position, opened his eyes, and stood, watching his shadow fly across the dusty floor as if to escape his dreams.

"What cheer, cheer, cheer, cheer!" came the cry again. A cardinal fluttered impatiently at the window screen, trying in vain to light on the narrow sill. An open bag of birdseed lay beneath the window.

Pickett took a handful of seeds and unhooked the screen.

The morning was bright, and half gone. Half a beer can littered with seed hulls hung from the clapboards beneath the window. He dropped the seeds into it. The cardinal settled gratefully to his breakfast.

Pickett placed some water on the stove and went to the porch to escape the fumes. A folding lawn chair and an aluminum TV table were its only furnishings. The screen hung loose in several spots. Seed hulls littered the floor.

The sun was already high, and the day would be another hot one. But, for the moment, morning still clung to the shaded canal.

Pickett went back to the stove, and poured the boiling water into the jar with the brown crystals. He swirled it around until it was the color of mud, then poured it into a cup. He took the cup and the birdseeds to the porch and settled into the lawn chair. A handful of seeds tossed on the floor attracted three sparrows and a red-wing blackbird. Pickett looked away from the bird's scarlet wing to the canal that tunneled through the tropical growth below. Suddenly, gesturing grandly toward the canal, and in a voice low and theatrical -- Orson Wells selling ancient wines -- he said:

"Death, random and impartial as life itself, the product of chance, necessity . . ."

He paused, as if awaiting a reply. The canal, unimpressed, gave none.

"And another senseless killing tonight in Belle Haven . . ."
-- his voice mellower now, and taking on the random cadence of the nightly newscast.

Still nothing.

"Death," he boomed, Orson Wells again.

The blackbird cocked its head, shat on the floor and took off for the other side of the canal.

Pickett lifted his cup in a silent toast to the departed bird and drank, cringing as he sucked it in. He stared down into the murky water of the canal below. Then suddenly, in a stage whisper:

"Murder!"

Just as suddenly, a bluejay flashed through a hole in the screen. His squawk scattered the sparrows, and he settled down to the abandoned feast.

Pickett stood and stretched.

The jay took off for a cypress across the canal. The sparrows returned. Below, a black water turkey stalked brim, its long legs easing through stands of tiny elephant-ears as though crossing thin ice on stilts.

Pickett drew a small black cigar from his breast pocket,

hung it from his lower lip, and rifled the pockets of his trousers. His right hand emerged with the sticky wad of paper he'd pulled from the bronze Chrysler the night before.

He sat back, smoothed the paper on his knee. It smelled of spearmint. It said -- in xerox grey:

GIRLS! GIRLS! GIRLS!

Below this floated a grainy photo of a skinny hiped, large breasted woman whose grin suggested that she'd just impaled herself on a cattle prod. Tiny rectangles like parts missing from a puzzle blacked the woman's crotch and nipples -- mouth and eyes of a face infinitely more obscene than the original nude.

EXPERT MASSAGE! BY TRAINED PROFESSIONALS!, it said beneath, giving an address off I-4. It ended with a flourish:

TRUCKERS WELCOME!

Pickett grinned at the sparrows. "Some clue, huh?" He crumpled the flyer and tossed it to them. One pecked at it, cocked its head, pecked again, then went back to a black sunflower seed.

Knuckles rattled against the door.

The birds scattered.

Pickett opened the door to Jan Ayers, busy brushing cobwebs from her dress. She looked up, smiling, then down at his bare chest. She frowned.

"I'm sorry. I should have called first." She slipped past Pickett into the middle of the room. "May I come in? Just for a moment?"

Pickett looked at the empty doorway, then Jan Ayers. He smiled, raising his eyebrows. "Yeah, sure." He shut the door. "Just let me find . . ."

And he found his shirt draped over the refrigerator.

Jan Ayers wandered around the room while Pickett slipped into it. She selected a straight back chair as the least filthy, then settled down into it as if afraid that she might break it. In a cotton print dress colored in blues and greens she neither looked like the woman at the Temple nor the one Pickett had met the night before. She set a straw handbag down by her side, crossed her pale, rounded legs, and smiled:

"Nice place you've got here." Her drawl was playful.

"Yeah, well the maid's been sick."

She raised her chin in a silent laugh.

Pickett worried with another button or two on his shirt, then gestured to the stove. "Can I get you any --"

"I understand that you had a visitor last night."

Pickett turned his back, drew water from the tap.

"You shouldn't take Mark too seriously. He's just a child. With a child's imagination. He -- well, he imagines things.

He's not sure in his faith." She sighed. "He's a troubled child, I'm afraid."

Pickett hovered over the stove, saying nothing, watching the water not boil.

"What -- if you don't mind my asking -- do you intend to do with the . . . information that Mark provided?"

Pickett turned, counterfeiting her tense smile. "Talk to you."

Jan Ayers still smiled, but the ease with which she'd nestled into the hard wooden chair had become forced. Her crossed leg pumped up and down nervously. "And what would you like to talk about?"

"Herbert Purdy for starters."

The movement of her leg had exposed an expanse of white thigh. Her eye caught Pickett's, and, without looking down, she smoothed the crisp material back down to her knee. "And who is Herbert Purdy?"

"Was. Herbert Purdy was a nasty little fella who drove a great big ugly car. Last time I saw him he had an extra hole in his head and was under three feet of water in a creek not fifty yards from your house. Now, last time Mark saw him, he was walking out your front door."

Her leg stopped. The smile remained, but the lips had grown

thin. "And what do you suppose I or my husband would have in common with a man like that?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know, Mrs. Ayers," Pickett poned irritably. "Perhaps you could tell me."

She stood. Smoothing the dress down over her hips, she walked out onto the porch. She stopped, arms folded, and stared through the screen.

Pickett switched off the burner and dumped the lukewarm water into the sink. When he turned, she stood in the middle of the room.

"Can I trust you, Bo?"

Pickett stared at her blankly for a moment. Then he exploded into laughter. He leaned back against the refrigerator covering his laughing face with both hands. He wiped his eyes, looking at the woman across from him, and, with an effort, began the process of straightening his face. His mouth, though, remained crooked.

"Yeah, sure --" He waved both hands, loose at the wrists.

"-- why not?"

Her face had hardened during this.

"None of this can get out, you understand. My husband is a public figure, and, well . . ."

"Tell me about Herbert Purdy."

Jan Ayers hesitated. She wet her lightly rouged lips, then, suddenly, said:

"It's quite simple, really. Though it could be, well, troublesome. You see, that man Purdy came to me for money. He said that he had, well, certain information -- information about Edmund -- that he would make public unless I paid him."

"How much?"

"Five thousand dollars."

Pickett's brow rose. "Did you pay him?"

"Certainly not. I told him that I wouldn't pay him a cent. And," she added self-consciously, "to get out of my house or -- or I would call the police. He did. Get out, I mean."

"Did you?"

"What?"

"Call the police."

"No! I mean I couldn't -- you can't --" She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "You must try to understand. Anyone in Edmund's position can be destroyed utterly by no more than -- than rumor. No matter how base, no matter how disreputable the source, only the slightest tinge of scandal can, well, destroy him -- his work, everything. Can you understand that?"

"I understand what you're saying, yeah. But if your

husband's image is so fragile, why didn't you pay Purdy?"

"What he was selling was so patently absurd that I --"

"What was he selling?"

She looked away. "Information."

"What sort of information?"

"I don't think we need go into that."

"I think we do. Sheriff Beane will insist."

"You won't -- but you wouldn't -- you can't go to the police!"

She grabbed Pickett's arm, then as suddenly she released it. Embarrassed, she turned and fled across the room to the unmade bed. She sank down on to it only to realize where she was, jump up and stride quickly toward the door. She placed her hand on the knob, stared at it for a moment, then turned.

The softness was gone from her face. All its bone and muscle strained as if struggling to hold itself together -- or keep something from coming out. The eyes had sunk deep into the skull, yet they stared wide and glassy. The voice came from somewhere beyond the mouth.

"If he could, the he would destroy us."

Pickett's mouth came open, but nothing came out.

Jan Ayers leaned towards him, her body straining toward his.

"He works silently. Corrupting, tempting . . ." She raised an

open hand before her face and slowly made a fist. "He insinuates himself. He creeps in. Not even the Righteous are safe.

Slowly, relentlessly, he insinuates himself. When suddenly we realize that we're his, it's too late. Too late . . ."

She glared at Pickett as if it were already too late -- for him anyway. Then she leaned back against the door, closing her eyes. Slowly she relaxed. With the softness returned the traces of a smile. She'd just explained something difficult; her performance pleased her.

Pickett looked as though he were missing a page from the script. "And --" He coughed uneasily. "Herbert Purdy is, uh, was like that? Is that it?"

Her smile became somehow patronizing.

"It's Satan I'm talking about, Mr. Pickett. And yes, Herbert Purdy did his work, whether he knew it or not. And whether or not you believe it, it's true just the same. It's no simple truth, like the ones you like, but it is true nonetheless. One seldom knows Satan for what" -- she gestured vaguely -- "or who he is."

As if to comfort the tall man across from her, she smiled.

Pickett appeared far from comforted.

"And what Satanic message was the evil Mr. Purdy purveying?"

"Oh, now you're laughing at me. But I'll tell you anyway

because I -- and Edmund's flock -- know it to be untrue. And I'll rely on your faith in . . . simple truths." She straightened and took a deep breath. Her voice was as grave as her aspect. "We are to believe that Edmund was seeing another woman." She paused.

"No, we are to believe that he was meeting another woman for the purpose of intercourse. Sexual intercourse, Mister Pickett."

It was as if Edmund had taken an ax to a Brownie troop, and Pickett laughed loud and long.

"Yes, you see how ridiculous it is." Her breast rose like armor plating. "However, I find little to laugh at in the . . . situation."

"Look, I'm sorry." Pickett wiped at his eyes with a dish towel, not looking particularly sorry. "It's just hard for me to imagine anyone thinking that kind of information worth anything to begin with."

"It's not information. It's an out and out lie."

"Whatever."

"I will not have this lie repeated."

"Fine, but I'm afraid you'll have to repeat it -- to the Sheriff at least. If this clown's been running around Belle Haven playing badger games with himself, it oughta give Homer some clue as to a motive; though" -- Pickett chuckled again into

the towel --"I wouldn't bet on it myself."

Color rose suddenly to Jan Ayers's cheeks. "If you mean to imply --"

"I'm not implying anything. I simply mean that unless you want a real scandal on your hands, you best go to the sheriff with it now. Look, if Mark saw him at your house, anyone might've. Better to tell the sheriff yourself, than . . . well --"

"Oh!" Her hands went to her mouth. "Y-yes. Yes, I begin to see what you mean." Her mind was racing away from that meaning. "I . . . I appreciate your advice. And -- and I will think about it. I'm out of my depth here, I'm afraid."

She lingered over the doorknob, then turned back towards him, smiling.

"I hope that you'll forgive me for troubling you with all this." Her voice was soft and animated, that of the woman Pickett had met the night before. "It's just that, well, Mark was so worried." She brightened incongruously. "A mother worries, too, you know." Then she stepped toward Pickett and extended a small white hand. "Thank you again. I hope that Mark and I haven't inconvenienced you with our . . . intrusions."

Pickett took her hand, but he didn't kiss it. He held it for a moment, then released it. "It not just the dead man, you

know. That Mark's worried about, I mean."

"Oh?"

"No. No, he's worried about Amy -- Amy Mooring."

"Yes, I know who you mean." Jan's face was expressionless.

"Is he in love with her, do you think?"

The fullness drained away. The lips flattened against her teeth.

"Love?"

Jan Ayers released a harsh laugh. She bit it off as quickly. Chin raised, eyes narrowed, she stared at him for a moment, then, softly, said:

"And what do you think, Mister Pickett?"

The tall man shrugged. "One seldom knows Satan . . ."
Pickett paused, smiling benignly. "How does it go? . . . for what or who he is -- is that it?"

Jan Ayers looked at Pickett defiantly.

"Or she?" Pickett pressed.

"She?" Mock amazement lit Jan's face.

But before the other could reply, her face darkened, and in a voice cold and thin, she said:

"Good day, Mister Pickett," and smoothly slipped through the door into the dark of the landing, closing the door softly behind her.

The tap of her heels faded into the natural sounds that floated up from the canal. A moment later, an engine sputtered to life, and the canal birds scattered.

Pickett stood where Jan had left him. He ran long fingers through his hair. His puzzlement appeared genuine.

[END CHAPTER 10]

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It sat off to the right on a patch of sandy land reclaimed from the pine scrub that surrounded it. The exit said, IDDO SPRINGS and Bodie Pickett took it.

Three cars rested next to a white mobile home that looked neither mobile nor homey. Pickett's car made a fourth. A heavy traffic that materialized much later in the day had churned and pitted the dirt beneath them. At the far end of the trailer a door flanked an open window -- weathered grey plywood covered the others. A simple sign, black on white, leaned against the side next to the door. MASSAGE, it said in foot high letters.

Pickett, squinting in the glare of the midmorning sun,

climbed from the Nova. He wore a light blue work shirt, khaki jacket and trousers, and once white deck shoes. He yawned, shook his head as if to clear it and shuffled across the dusty lot to the trailer's single door.

Just inside the door an old man sat at a card table reading a newspaper, like a desk clerk come down in the world. To his left a kitchenette flanked a narrow door that led into a dark hall. Behind him, three 8-by-10 glossies hung by duct tape from the wall. Remnants of a fourth still clung to the cheap paneling. A name tag depended from each of the three still there -- from the woman on the flyer, "Mandy."

"Massage, twenty-five bucks."

The old man hadn't looked up. Pickett laid two tens and a 5 on the newspaper in front of him.

"Sheila." The old man spoke as if to the bills before him.

The three of them sprawled on a cheap red plush sofa to Pickett's left, each stoned senseless -- apparently by the Phil Donahue Show which burbbled from a small color set behind the old man. One of them looked up when the old man spoke, then back to Phil who was discussing child pornography with a convicted child molester and a lawyer from the A.C.L.U. She looked reluctantly then, at Bodie Pickett.

"Pshhhh," and she pushed past the tall man into the

kitchenette. This was Sheila -- although about the only resemblance between her and the photo on the wall were the two prodigious lumps beneath her T-shirt.

Pickett followed the three of them to the refrigerator.

"What now?"

"Like, you laid out the two bits, honey." Sheila slammed the refrigerator door shut with a roll of her ample hips, bringing up a can of Colt 45 Malt Liquor. "Whatever" -- ("Pwoosh!" said the can) -- "turns you on."

Sheila poured the contents down her throat in one go, looked at the can, and belched. Her heavy breasts swung wildly at the explosion, colliding with one another several times before coming to an uneasy repose beneath her pink T-shirt. Her eyes went blank for a moment with whatever visions a shotgunned can of malt liquor conjured, then slowly focused on the space between herself and her client. She appeared surprised that he was still there. Or, rather, disappointed.

She sighed, pulled a smile as fresh as the handbill he'd pulled from Purdy's Chrysler, and jiggled down the narrow passageway to Pickett's right, balancing precariously on a pair of gold lamé spikes. Two crescents of white flesh winked from under her cutoffs. She led Pickett through a narrow curtained door into what looked like a discount store dressing room.

Thin mahogany look-alike paneling covered three narrow walls; a full length mirror covered the third. A bench draped with dirty white towels made pink by the single red Christmas bulb that lit the cubicle ran along the mirror. A small shelf high to the left of the door held an assortment of bottles and rubber utensils. The odor of stale sex scented the room.

Before Pickett could say anything, Sheila wiggled out of her T-shirt. "Hokay, honey . . . She cocked her hip, a red eye bobbing in the center of each breast. "Two bits gets you the hand job. Anything extra, like, costs extra. Price depends."

"Uh-huh." Pickett seemed unable to decide where to look. He settled for the eyes in her face. Behind the green, they were red, too. "Can I ask you something?"

"You got fifteen minutes, honey, and, like . . . it's your bread."

"I'm looking for a guy, and I was wondering . . ."

She looked at Pickett skeptically for moment, then fished a pack of Virginia Slims out from behind a bottle of baby oil on the shelf. She dropped to the bench.

Pickett said: "Herb Purdy, you know him?"

Sheila struck a match, setting the tobacco on fire and two of her red eyes in motion. From behind a cloud of smoke made pink from the reflected light, she said: "You a cop?"

"Nope."

"You look like a cop."

"Yeah?"

"Sure."

"Well, I just wondered if you knew him, was all."

She emptied her lungs of pink smoke. "Yeah, I know him. What of it?"

"Nothing at all. Just wondering what he was up to."

Sheila rose, dropped the cigarette to the floor, and ground it out with one lamé'd foot. "You got the wrong gal, honey. You want Millie. But she aint here no more." Sheila pulled down the zipper on her cut-offs, releasing an impressive mass of doughy white flesh. "Now, honey, if you got anything tween those long legs of yours, you'd best, like, get it out. Know what I mean? Aint got all day."

Pickett smiled and expelled air through his nose as if to say that all day was about all she had. But what he said was:

"Millie who?"

Sheila stopped, her cut-offs rolled about half way down her massive thighs. "Millie Millie. How the hell I know?"

"What's she to Herb?"

"Jesus!" Sheila yanked the pants back up over her bottom. "Like, what are you? Taking a poll or something?"

She leaned over, sucking in her stomach, trying to fasten the snap on her jeans.

"It's worth another twenty."

Sheila dropped back to the bench exhausted, her jeans still unfastened. "Show." She stuck out her hand.

Pickett placed a ten in it. Sheila raised her eyebrows.

"You answer, then the rest."

Sheila got up, holding her pants together with both hands, and peeked through the curtain and down the hall. She stuffed the ten in her pocket and sighed. "Herb, he works for the guy who runs this place. He come by every now and again to, like, pick up the cash and stuff, y'know?"

"And he used to get it on with this Millie?"

"Herb?" Sheila laughed out loud, red eyes jiggling in unison. "Are you kidding? Ralph would a cut it off and made him eat it. Like, Ralph don't let none of his boys fool around with the help. Strictly business."

"Who's Ralph?"

"Who's Ralph?" she mimicked. "Ralph -- the guy who, like, runs this dump."

"Ralph Kemp?"

"You know him?"

"Uh-huh, we've met. So what did Herb want with this

Millie?"

"It's what she want with him. She used to, like, give him money, y'know? She told me he was doing a job for her or something."

"What kind of job?"

Sheila shrugged.

"Know where I could find her?"

Sheila opened her mouth to answer, but paused. Her eyes narrowed, she smiled. "I know . . . You work for Ralph."

Pickett said nothing.

Sheila leaned forward, leveling an index finger at him. "I knew you weren't straight. Look, it's just like I told Ralph last week. I just work here, I don't, like, tell any of the other girls my life story, and they don't tell me none of theirs.

If Ralph wants to find Millie, I mean, like, I can't help him. I only seen her when she come to work. If she's took off . . ."

Sheila finished it with another shrug.

"Did she have family hereabout?"

"How'd I know?"

"Know where she lives then?"

"I told you, I don't know nothing about her. Why's Ralph pickin on me . . . ?" Sheila picked up the T-shirt, covered her breasts -- the part the T-shirt could cover -- and whined: "I

hardly even, like, talked to her."

"What did you talk about when you did?"

"Nothing. Stuff . . . Her eyes brightened. "She asked me to mail a letter for her once. Is that important?"

"Could be. Who to?"

"Just a sec." Sheila scrunched up her face. "Yeah, it was funny, y'know -- Herb had just come round with our money. And Millie, like, gave some back to Herb, and . . . and, stuffed the rest in an envelope and asked Herb to mail it cause she had somebody coming. Yeah, and Herb, like, laughed at her and told her to have her John mail it. I was going home and she asked me to drop it in the mail. So I did."

"Who to?"

"What?"

"The letter -- who was it addressed to?"

Sheila looked down at her toes and scratched at her head. "To someplace out State forty-six . . . Something, like, outta the Bible."

"The Bible?"

"Yeah, like, you know, outta the -- "

"Canaan?"

"Huh?"

"Canaan?"

"Yeah, now I remember. Addressed to somebody Moses -- in Canaan. Moses in Canaan -- I thought that was funny, y'know? Like outta the Bible and all?"

Pickett admitted that it was funny and asked her how long this Millie had been gone.

"A couple of weeks, maybe."

"Why'd she leave?"

"She didn't, like, leave, really. She just never shows up one morning. Matter of fact, the last I saw her was the day I mailed the letter."

"The same day she paid Herb?"

"Yeah."

"Did he say anything to her -- scare her off or something?"

"Nah. Matter a fact, she seemed pretty up after she talked to him. Said things was gonna, like, change or something. I didn't think anything of it then, but I guess she meant that she was gonna leave." Sheila didn't need to explain the assumption.

Pickett asked if she could think of anything else. Sheila couldn't.

"But that's something aint it?"

Pickett told her that it was.

"Well you tell Ralph that I, like, helped, okay?" Sheila grabbed Pickett's arm. "You tell him, now."

Pickett told her he would, gave her the other ten, and left her struggling with the snap on her jeans.

The old man had taken Sheila's place on the couch. Phil Donahue fielded questions from the studio audience. A fat middle-aged woman asked if the guest didn't think being a lawyer for the A.C.L.U. contrary to the Judeo-Christian Ethic; she admitted that the other guest couldn't be held responsible for being a convicted child molester since the National Enquirer had recently reported that such things were probably due to fluoridated water. Phil seemed relieved. Pickett glanced up from the TV to the glossies on the wall, then to the floor. A photo lay face down next to the card table. The missing corners matched those still taped to the wall. He dropped his car keys, knelt and picked them up while sticking the photo into his coat.

One of the other two girls giggled as Pickett stood. The old man grinned at her and removed his hand. He threw a smug look Pickett's way. "Come again, son."

It sounded as much a question as an invitation.

[END CHAPTER 11]

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bodie Pickett took I-4 east to the Sanford exit, and then route 17-92 back south along the St. John's. The sun was high and hot, but something in the glitter of the river made up for the heat.

He turned east on route 46 toward Canaan, then pulled up near the Osteen cutoff at a place called the Crab Shack. If they sold crabs, the name was apt.

Inside, it was cool and dark. Half a dozen tables covered in red checked plastic filled the small square room; windows covered three sides. A plump young woman emerged from the double doors on the fourth side with a menu typed and decorated with

copious notes and emendations in pencil.

Pickett took one look at it, then at a chalk board above the kitchen door marked "Specials."

He ordered "Shrimp 'n Beer." While he waited, the plump waitress brought him a half gallon plastic pitcher of sweetened iced tea. Soon the heady aroma of beer, shrimp, Tabasco, and Zatarin's Crab Boil turned through the room, steaming the windows.

Pickett pulled the ragged 8-by-10 from his jacket, and smoothed it out on the checkered tablecloth.

Standard cheese-cake -- knees bent, one hand on the hip, the other behind the head, a seductively startled expression in the eyes and mouth. The image was generic, interchangeable with any thousand others of the sort; still, something -- in the face, perhaps, or the black hair pushed high on the head -- something wrinkled Pickett's brow.

The kitchen door swung open and Pickett turned the photo face down.

Round faced, plump and pretty, his waitress returned, setting before him a bowl of shrimp that billowed steam both white and yeasty. Next, came a bowl of dip -- ketchup, tabasco, and horseradish blended; then an empty bowl for the shells, and a hot platter of sweet yellow hush puppies. She stepped back

from the table, surveyed her handiwork and grinned.

"Y'enjoy it now, y'hear?"

Pickett did. And when he finished the waitress returned and they talked: Yes, she liked her job, liked Canaan; someday she'd like to open a place of her own, but closer to the city. (She called Sanford "the city.") Her name was Liza. "You know, like the movie star?"

Pickett asked her if she knew anybody by the name of Moses -- like in the Bible.

Liza laughed. When he didn't join in, she thought a minute, pursing her round red lips. "You must mean the newsstand downtown, by the bus station. The old man died, but it's still open, I think. His wife runs it, I suppose." Liza took a deep breath, unselfconsciously inflating her ample chest, and sighed.

She settled into the chair next to Pickett, put her elbow to the checkered table cloth, and rested her chin in her hand. She rested a frown on her chin. "Sort a sad, y'know, what some people have to go through. Just aint fair. Some people -- well, everything goes their way. Others . . ." She raised her brow and plump shoulders. "They just can't get a break."

Pickett relaxed back into his chair.

". . . I mean, take that Moses woman . . . Losing her husband like that . . . And he weren't all that old neither.

Though she was a good bit younger than him now's I think of it. Losing him after losing her daughter and all. . . . It just -- well, it just don't seem right, that's all. Y'know what I mean?"

Pickett nodded, smiling the while, basking in Liza as if in the sun. Then he frowned a second in thought. "What happened to the daughter?"

"It was a while back. Well, she just up and disappeared. One spring, I think. Hit Miss Moses hard -- the old man too; but, as I remember, it weren't his daughter, y'know? By another marriage or something."

"Anybody find out what happened to her?"

Liza shook her head. "Nope. There was a lot a talk, but nothing, you know, official."

"What sort of talk?"

"Well . . ." Liza leaned toward Pickett, checking the empty corners as if for eavesdroppers. "There was this family that come in the summers. Had this big spread up near Osteen, y'know? Lots a money. Lots. The son, he hung around Pugh's Inn -- down by the river. That's where the kids used to get together on the weekends. You know, hang out and what not?"

Pickett nodded.

"Anyways, he -- the son -- he used to hang out around Millie and her kid sister -- "

"What was her name?"

"Nettie."

"The one that disappeared?"

"Uh-uh. Millie's the one that disappeared. Nettie's her sister. Millie and Nettie Moses. Anyways, this rich kid -- the one I was telling you about -- used to hang around them a lot. That's in the summers, y'know, when his folks were at their place up near Osteen? Anyways, he shows up in town that spring and takes Millie out once or twice . . . Then, fore you know it, she's gone." Liza looked at Pickett, one eyebrow raised, the other eye half closed. "What do you think?"

Pickett smiled and shrugged.

"Well, what I think is that she up and run off with that kid. Anyways, that's the way it looks to me. Miss Moses, why she was all over the city police and the county sheriff . . . Boy, she raised a real stink. But there weren't nothing anybody could do. Didn't know where she went. Didn't have nothing on the boy, really -- excepting he was hanging around and all. Don't really matter in the end, I guess. . . . It was hell for Miss Moses, though -- and the old man too. I dunno what happened to the sister, Nettie. I aint seen her for years. Liza looked up at Pickett, her chin lowered, and her cheeks coloring.

"Course I was just a kid then."

Pickett smiled. The colored remained in Liza's face.

"Where you from?" she said, "round here?"

"Miami."

"Up here on business?"

"No. Personal."

"Yeah?" And Liza looked at him, as if waiting for more.

Pickett looked up nervously, then at his fingers spread tensely before him on the checkered plastic. "My Daddy died."

Liza's face fell.

"Oh, gee. I'm sorry to hear that." She looked down at Pickett's fingers pressed white against the red and white checks, then slowly up again to Bodie Picket. "Was he . . . I mean, well, he been sick for long?"

Pickett sighed, leaned back, thrust his narrow hands into his pockets and cast a stony glare toward the window. "Yeah, I suppose in a way he had."

Liza brightened slightly. "I mean, you know, sometimes its a blessing. In disguise, I mean. The ways some a those strokes and cancers and things can just go on and on --"

"Nah, he was shot. Killed himself . . ."

"Oh, god --"

". . . least that's what the police say."

The color drained from Liza's face. "That's horrible. You

must feel like . . . Oh, god, I'm sure sorry." She looked away.

Pickett's absent expression softened; he smiled and patted Liza's plump forearm.

"No need to fret. You're probably right anyway. He was a drunk and had a whole heap on his conscience. However it happened he's probably better off."

"But . . . why? I mean, what sort a guilt could make someone wanna go and do that? To himself."

Pickett's expression tensed slightly then, as he glanced into Liza's baby-doll eyes, it fell. And he sighed. "Well, for all practical purposes, he killed my mama. She caught him with another woman. Two months later, she was dead. Dead as he is now."

"Lord . . ." She cocked her head to the side and laid a plump hand hesitantly on his forearm.

Pickett smiled at her, then shrugged. "Happened right there in the DeLeon building, in Belle Haven, you know? That's where J.B.'s -- Daddy's -- office was. Little two story building. He had the second floor. Had an office there to let next to his own. It'd always been `to let.' No one ever moved in. Anyway, he was, well . . ." Pickett exhaled sharply and shook his head.

The smile that disfigured half his mouth dissolved slowly back into blankness as his head stilled and his eyes drifted from

Liza's expectant gaze to the window. "Mama and I been shopping -- first day of high school or something. Anyway, Mama decides to drop in on J.B. -- you know, bring him an egg-salad sandwich.

He wasn't there. I was wandering around out in the hall while Mama went into his office to write him a note. I heard something in the vacant office at the top of the stairs. Just curious more than anything . . ."

Liza raised her head as if to speak, but closed her mouth again when the words failed to come. Pickett spoke as if to no one.

". . . and there was old J.B., his trousers down around his ankles, and ol' Betty Hudgins flat on her back. She worked at Otley's Drug Store downstairs. Cosmetics, I think." Pickett laughed an unpleasant laugh. "Least that's where she usually worked. It's funny, Mama never had liked her. Rude, she said. I can't remember J.B. ever even noticing her. Anyway, he was sure as hell full of her that morning." Pickett laughed the laugh again. "Or the other way around . . ."

Liza bunched her lips, moving her head from side to side. She seemed to notice, for the first time, her hand on Pickett's arm. Embarrassed, she gently removed it. She said nothing.

"Well, I didn't know what the hell to do. J.B. hadn't even noticed me. But Betty sure had. She started beating on J.B.'s

chest -- you know, like trying to get his attention. Christ -- he just seemed to think she was enjoying herself. Anyhow, I decided to get out. But when I turned around, I ran right smack into Dad's thirty-eight, the one that he --" Pickett paused, his mouth open. His eyes flickered as if to clear the image that was before them. He closed his mouth and glared down at the red checked table. "Mama had it. She just stood there, pointing that thing at J.B. Like something out of a Joan Crawford movie. Christ, I hardly recognized her . . ." Pickett exhaled slowly, sat back in his chair. "I'll tell you though, when that revolver went off into the plaster next to J.B.'s head, it got his attention all right. Betty let out a scream that scared the living shit out of me. Sent J.B. over backwards flat on his ass. Christ --" He looked as if he wanted to laugh, but couldn't. "I took off down the stairs, Mama right behind me."

Pickett reached casually into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small, flat box. He opened it and took out a thin black cigar. His narrow hand shook slightly. He fired the tobacco, looked up, and, in a billow of white smoke, said:

"I never heard Mama say another word to J.B. as long as she lived." He exhaled sharply through a thin-lipped smile. "She was dead by Christmas."

"That why he did it? Killed himself, I mean?"

"He didn't."

"Well, the guilt and all . . ."

Pickett turned his head away with an embarrassed shrug. His expression hardened. "He didn't do it. No matter what that hayseed Sheriff says. He couldn't have. Not without . . ."

Liza stared at the tall man for a moment, puzzled. Then she sighed; wetness glistened round her eyes. She moved her plump hand toward Pickett's, then slowly pulled it away. "I'm sorry, Mister, I truly am."

Pickett turned toward her. She smiled, her face as white and soft as a magnolia petal. Pickett leaned toward her and smiled back. "Liza, Liza, Liza . . ."

She stared into his hazel eyes, her eyes glistening, her mouth red and ripe as a berry. He took her hand in both of his and grinned, like a kid.

"You wouldn't consider marrying me, would you?"

Her jaw dropped. Pickett chuckled, still clinging to her hand. "Didn't think so."

Liza bunched her chin gleefully and slapped Pickett's hand, withdrawing her own. She laughed. "Well now Mister, I'll tell you what -- y'all pay your bill then maybe we'll talk about it . . . Maybe y'all come back another time. We got great blues."

She stood, her cheeks the same color as her mouth. "You come on back sometime and we'll talk about it."

Pickett said he would if he could and paid the bill. He left her a five, picked up the photo and shuffled back out into the afternoon heat and to his super-heated Nova.

He stood for a long interval at the open car door looking at the photo, his brow knitting as it had before. He took a deep breath, tossed the photo onto the front seat, then dropped in after it. He looked up from turning the ignition to see Liza at the Crab Shack door.

She leaned one rounded hip against the door frame and waved. "See y'around."

Pickett smiled, nodded, then threw the Nova into reverse. He looked down at the seat next to him and slammed on the brakes. The photo slid to the floor, landing face up; he retrieved it and stared. Tearing away all below the woman's neck, he looked again. He tore off the hair piled high on the woman's head and looked again. Then Pickett pulled back out onto route 46.

The light turned red.

Liza waved lazily from the doorway, her face flushed, and ripe with some private cheer. Pickett smiled back, then went straight out of Canaan, back towards I-4 and Belle Haven, the remains of the photo still in his hand.

[END CHAPTER 12]

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Just coffee. Thanks."

Without a word, the woman in the photograph dropped a spoon and napkin in front of Bodie Pickett. She wiped the front of a menu with her apron and handed it to him.

"Anything to eat?" She pulled a pencil and pad from her apron pocket.

Pickett glanced at the green cardboard, then back at the woman. She stared absently into the dusk over Pickett's shoulder, her cheek bones high and fine, softened by skin of porcelain pallor that became pale blue in half moons below dark eyes. Her black hair parted in the middle and hung down her back

in a ponytail. A loose strand played on her forehead. She brushed it away. "No. Thanks. Maybe later."

Her lips twitched a smile, and she turned to the coffee pot. She returned with a heavy white ceramic cup labeled KRISPY KRUNCH in hospital green. It matched the hat she wore. And the plastic tag on her collar which, in white lettering on the same green, said: MILLIE.

She walked as though her feet hurt.

Pickett sipped at his coffee. "You new here?"

"Guess so. I been here a week, anyway."

Millie put an elbow on the counter and looked over her shoulder at the line of empty stools as if, any moment, one might ask for a refill. "You regular?"

"Nah." Pickett sipped at his coffee. "How's it going? The job, I mean . . ."

Millie sighed. "Okay, I guess. It's hard on the feet. But . . . I'll get used to it." The tone suggested that she'd had experience getting used to things. Millie glanced over at Pickett. She smiled a little more warmly, and the porcelain skin crinkled at the corners of her eyes and her youth fled: she teetered for the duration of that smile on the brink of middle-age. "You from outta town?"

"Uh-huh. Miami."

"Yeah? What's your business?"

Two men in suits walked in before Pickett could answer.

Millie sighed, stretched, and said: "Later, maybe."

Pickett stared down into the coffee cup. He raised it to his lips, grimaced as he had at Otley's, then drained it.

"Get the fuck outta here!" Pickett turned toward Millie's cry -- and the two men that had just entered.

Neither man was sitting. One, the shortest, had both hands on the counter and spoke to Millie in a voice almost too soft for Pickett to hear. Standing behind him and facing Pickett was the suit he'd met at the Temple -- Tom, the hairless protector of Ed's time who really worked for Matt. He worked at looking tough now; he was doing a good job. It was the same suit.

Millie cried: "I don't have to go nowhere." But she didn't sound convinced.

The soft man spoke again.

Millie's face crumpled in rage -- or fear. She backed away. "The hell I do!" She pressed back against the wall. "He aint got nothing on me!"

Pickett put a foot to the floor.

Tom took a step toward him, his face blank.

But the soft man stood in his way. He turned to Pickett and smiled. He no longer looked soft. "This here's a private

discussion, Mister," he said in a very public voice. "Maybe you oughta wait outside."

"May be. But then -- " Pickett swung his other leg over the stool and stood facing the man who no longer looked soft. " -- I'd like to finish my coffee."

The soft man, still smiling, looked at Pickett's empty coffee cup, then back at Pickett. He moved toward him. "That right?"

And Pickett moved, as if reading the other's mind. His left forearm blocked the soft man's looping right, and his own right fist caught the man on the jaw while he was still moving in. Something gave under the blow, and Pickett's face twisted in pain. The soft man fell back against the counter and slid down over the stool onto the floor, awake, but not conscious.

When Pickett looked up again, Tom held a revolver. Tom smiled and stepped over his companion.

Pickett held his useless right hand in his left.

Tom's smile broadened.

Pickett stepped backward.

"Better late than never," chimed a cheerful voice from the kitchen door.

Millie yelped.

Tom wheeled around.

Pickett lunged for his back. But his right hand wouldn't hold. Tom threw an elbow into his rib cage and Pickett fell back onto the stool he'd been sitting on. His coffee cup and saucer skittered over the counter and to the floor, shattering.

"What kind a party you throwing, Millie honey?"

Tom looked hurriedly from Pickett to the fat, white-uniformed woman who'd just rolled in. He looked confused.

She looked mad as hell. Her grey-brown hair coiled in tight curls held close to her scalp by a net. Her face reddened. Millie held onto her fleshy arm and followed her to the counter opposite Tom. "Put that thing away, skin head," the fat woman barked, "and you and your boyfriend get out a here before I call the police. There aint nothing here to rip-off -- less you want a couple dozen donuts." Her fleshy cheeks continued to jiggle after the words stopped.

Tom raised the gun menacingly, but there was confusion in his eyes.

The fat woman snorted. "I wouldn't if I was you."

Tom froze.

"I tried em once, and they aren't for shit."

Tom was clearly unused to thinking; taking orders, however, he understood. He stuck the gun into his pocket and lifted the other from the floor. The soft man's legs pistoned up and down

in slow motion as if climbing imaginary stairs. The two slow-danced to the door.

"Next time you jerk-offs go out," the fat lady roared, "pick someplace got something worth lifting."

Tom pushed sheepishly through the door.

"Damn de-fects . . ." The fat lady threw an arm around Millie, patted her shoulder. "Now. How bout you, fella?"

Tires squealed onto the highway.

"Like another cup a coffee?" Suddenly, her cheerful face wrinkled. "Jeez, fella, wha'happened to your hand?"

[END CHAPTER 13]

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Millie had no car, so he'd offered to drive her home.

She laughed.

Millie drove; Bodie Pickett sat shotgun, cradling his right hand. At Belle Haven Memorial a smart aleck intern wrapped his hand in plaster. Millie drove them both to her place.

For Millie, home was an old motor court, a string of square one room stucco cottages arranged around a semicircular drive. The neon sign at the head of the drive had been painted out.

"Manager had to close down when I-four opened. Nobody'd come this far off for a room. So she opened them up for permanents. They're sort a small . . ."

Millie got out, and Pickett scooted over into the driver's seat. She caught the door before he could pull it closed.

"You wanna come in for a minute?" Her eyes held his for a second then moved nervously away.

"Sure," he said. "Why not?"

She opened the cottage door and turned on the light -- a furnished efficiency, cheap and anonymous. Pantyhose hung over the bedstead, and on the floor beneath, a crumpled terry robe. That and dirty dishes were all to indicate that someone lived there. Millie dropped to the creaky bed, kicked off her shoes, and lay back. She sighed, then pushed up on one elbow. She crossed her legs, slowly and theatrically.

"Get you anything?"

"An answer or two maybe."

Millie's brow tensed slightly, then, with an effort, relaxed. She reached behind her head and loosed her hair. She shook it, still looking at Pickett. The hair was long. "What sort of answers would you like? Mister . . . ?"

Pickett ignored both questions. "You wanna tell me about it?"

"Nothing to tell." Millie drew limp fingers up and down the bare skin at the base of her neck. She looked at Pickett from the corner of her eyes. "My hero," she crooned in a Betty Boop

voice. She tried to giggle -- it sounded obscene; she tried to flutter her lashes but her brow was too tense to allow it. Millie pushed up to a sitting position, pulled her crossed leg over the other thigh and onto the bed, and looked down. She drew languid designs on the spread with her finger. "How can I possibly repay you?" she pouted in her cartoon voice; but her face froze. In her own voice she added: "That's what I say now, right?"

Her legs, pale and bare, were almost blue in the artificial light. Pickett shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"What are you talking about?"

"What's the matter, mister?" Her lips curled. "You won the prize. You ran off the other bulls. The cow's yours."

"Come off it, will you? I just wanna talk --"

"Sure, Mister. And your wife don't understand you, right?"

"Look --"

"Well come and get your understanding, Mister." Millie yanked open her Krispy Krunch dress. Buttons clattered to the linoleum like coins in the bottom of a tin cup. Her heavy breasts pushed at a dingy beige brassiere, the elastic frayed in the center, an appliqué rosette hanging loose to the side. "It's yours mister." She yanked off her belt. "Come and get it."

"Stop it."

"Ooo . . . Like it rough, huh, want me to beg . . ." She

climbed onto the bed on all fours and crawled toward Pickett.

"Come on, now . . ." The dingy green uniform slipped down off her hips; frazzled elastic dangled from her cotton panties.

"Come an get it . . ."

"Stop it, for Chris'sake!" Pickett took the step to the end of the bed and cocked his left hand to hit her. He didn't.

But Millie stopped anyway. She fell back on her haunches and glared at him through a curtain of straight black hair. "Pickett picked the robe from the floor and threw it at her.

"Just talk to me, will you?"

The robe landed in Millie's lap. Drawing the hair off her face and to the back of her head, she held it there with both hands. Then she looked at the ceiling. She sighed.

Pickett seemed to relax. "You can start by telling me what those two back there at the donut shop wanted."

"What is this -- you a cop?"

"I know, I look like one. But I'm not. Private."

"Private?" Millie pushed up from the bed and slid into the terry robe. "I need a drink. You?" She limped on tender feet to the kitchenette. "It'll have to be vodka cause that's all I got." She handed him his drink and took a slug of hers. "Look, mister . . ." She paused to wipe her mouth with her finger tips.

"I appreciate you stepping in tonight, but . . ." She gestured

vaguely with one hand, then took a drink from the other.

"But what?"

"But I got nothing to say to you, that's all. If you aint no cop, then . . ." She bobbed her head back and fourth. "Well, then drink your drink and thanks for helping tonight and all, but, well . . . So long. There aint nothing to talk about."

"We could always talk about Herb Purdy."

"Look, I don't have to . . ."

"Know him by any chance?"

"I don't have to --" But her heart wasn't in it. She put her drink on the nightstand and dropped back onto her bed. "Yeah . . ." She took a deep breath, braced her left ankle on her right knee and began massaging her foot. "Maybe I know him. So what?"

Pickett shrugged. "So he's dead."

"Dead? You're kidding."

"Not hardly."

"What from?"

"A bullet in the face best I could tell."

"God -- the guy in the paper . . ." She froze, narrowed her eyes. "You sure you're not a cop or something?"

"Not a cop. Something. I'm trying to help a girl. She isn't mixed up in this yet, but if I don't get some help from you

--"

"Well this girl didn't have nothing to do with it. Not no bullet in nobody's face, I can tell you that, Mister Something or whatever you are."

"I wasn't talking about you. But if I can track you down you can bet the Sheriff can. And will. You'll be telling one of us about Herb Purdy eventually."

"I don't have to tell you nothing, mister." Millie walked across the room, shoulders hunched, sloshing her drink onto the dirty linoleum.

Pickett still hadn't touched his.

She opened her purse, her hands shaking. She produced a pack of Kools.

"Why --" He took a long drink. "Why was Purdy following Amy Mooring?"

Millie froze, her back to Pickett, an unlighted Kool hanging from her lips.

"What did you and Amy Mooring talk about yesterday afternoon, then?"

Millie's eyes glazed. "I need a match." She pulled a book from her purse. The first folded as she struck; she broke a nail trying to strike the second. "Dammit!" She threw the matchbook against the wall and spun around to face Pickett. "I don't have

to --" She stopped and took the cigarette from her mouth. Her brow wrinkled. "You don't work for Kemp. Who the hell are you?"

"Those guys in the donut shop, they were Kemp's men, weren't they?"

"Kemp's got nothing over me."

"What is it? Does he want you back?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mister."

"He doesn't like his employ-ees running off without permission, right? Anymore than he likes them fooling around with his bag men."

"Jesus, I wouldn't of fooled around with Herb if . . . God."

"Is that why you shot him? He was trying to make time?"

"You better just get out of here or I'll . . . I'll --"

"Or you'll give it to me the way you gave it to Purdy?"

"God dammit, I told you --"

"Where's the gun?"

"I don't have it. I mean . . . I don't know nothing about it."

She paused, looked at the floor, her face pink.

"Look, I worked for Kemp. So what? Girl's gotta make a living. And I knew Herb. Last time I heard there wasn't no law against that."

"There's one against blackmail."

Millie blanched. "That wasn't my idea. I just asked Herb to . . . I should've known I couldn't trust that asshole. God. I didn't tell him anything. He just put it together from --" She stopped, her mouth still open.

"What did he put together?"

"Nothing. It was nothing."

"What did you two have on Ayers?"

"It was Herb, not me."

"That why you shot him?"

"I told you --"

"Was he cutting you out?"

"I told you --"

"Were you the badger, is that it?"

"God damn you!" Millie lunged toward him, swinging wildly with both fists. Pickett grabbed a wrist and pulled. She spun around and he pinned her arms to her side, crushing her breasts beneath his forearms.

"Get out!" Millie screamed. She kicked at Pickett's shins with bare heels. "Leave me alone! You've got no right -- no right, you goddamn son of a --" Her voice broke, and Millie went limp in Pickett's arms. "Just leave me alone. Please."

Pickett let her go.

But she remained where she was, her back to him, her shoulders quivering. She crossed her arms, holding herself, as if to still the shaking. "Whataya want from me?"

"The truth, Millie, that's all."

"The truth?" Millie laughed a very unfunny laugh. She shuffled back to the bed. "You don't want the truth, mister, you want a piece of the action. That's what everone wants. You may not know it yet, but that's what you want."

Pickett stared at Millie, his features soft, but blank.

"You hired Purdy to follow Amy, didn't you?"

Millie smiled and shook her head. She watched her big toe draw conclusions on the linoleum.

"Didn't you."

Millie looked up, amused. "No, I didn't. I hired him to find Amy."

"Why would you want to find Amy Mooring?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"How do you know?"

"I know, mister -- believe me -- you wouldn't understand. I know men," she said as if she did.

"You knew Herb Purdy anyway. He's dead."

Anger darkened Millie's face like a cloud the moon, then was as quickly gone. "Why you wanna mess in my life, huh? Aint got

enough problems of your own? Or you working on a merit badge or something?"

"No merit badge. I just wanna help Amy. She's in some kind of trouble."

"And you think I don't wanna help her? You think I wouldn't -- wouldn't walk over live coals to help her?" Millie's face flushed. "I'm her mother aint I? Aint she my fuckin kid!"

Millie glared at Pickett defiantly, then laughed: "Yeah, I know.

That was just about Amy's reaction too." She stood, weary and suddenly very old. "Now, will you get outta here, huh? This got nothing to do with you."

Pickett simply stared at her. She grew nervous, and her eyes shifted from under his gaze.

"You're Roger Mooring's wife?"

"Look, Mister, I don't need this --"

"Tell me."

"Get out!"

Pickett stayed where he was, in the same attitude of amazement. "What's this got to do with Ayers -- Amy being your daughter?"

"That bastard Ayers, he done nothing but fuck-up my life, and now . . . Look, what the hell you think it's got to do with him, you're so goddamn smart?"

Pickett remained, staring; but said nothing.

"Now, get out."

Pickett opened his mouth.

"Get out. Before I --"

"Before you what?"

The color bled from Millie's face. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Softly, she said: "Please. Just. Go."

And Pickett went. The door slammed almost before he was through it.

[END CHAPTER 14]

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The crack of the door echoed from the bungalows across the drive. Bodie Pickett looked up at the sky and let the close, hot air of the evening into his lungs. Low clouds covered the moon.

He dropped into the Nova's front seat and stared into the street. The traffic was light. Putting both hands to his eyes, he rubbed vigorously. Then he blinked into the street light that hung above the drive.

"Right," he said aloud. He fired the engine and turned left out of the motor court in the direction of Belle Haven. He hadn't gone a block when he slowed before a dark Exxon station on the corner. He turned at the intersection, parked, and walked

back past the pumps to a dark phone booth next to the vending machines.

When he closed the door behind him, the booth remained dark. Pickett angled the phone book toward the street light, then dropped 2 dimes into the phone and dialed 7 numbers.

"County Sheriff."

"Yeah --" Pickett glanced toward Millie's place. Her door opened, and Millie emerged from the light and closed the door.

"Whataya want?"

"Uh . . . the Sheriff -- Sheriff Beane." Millie had changed into jeans and a t-shirt. She was walking toward the street with a large leather handbag over her shoulder.

"He aint here, he's out on a case," the telephone said, the tone adding, he aint got time for you. "Who wants to talk to him?"

"What?" Pickett watched a man -- the one with the soft voice -- step out of the shadows behind Millie.

"Who the hell is this?"

"Yeah, sorry, I --" And an engine started across the street. "Yeah, tell Homer that Pickett called." A dark Buick drove past, and Pickett could just make out Tom's pink head behind the wheel, before it turned into the motor court.

"Yeah? Well the Sheriff's been trying to get you, Pickett

--"

"Look, I gotta go. I'll see Homer tomorrow."

"Wha --"

Pickett let it fall to the end of its cord, and pressed himself against the door. It wouldn't open. Millie suddenly turned to the man on foot, saw the car coming, and ran for the street. Pickett pulled, and the door gave. He sprinted into the street.

The soft man caught hold of Millie's arm; she swung the bag and caught him in the face. He yelled in pain, his jaw still tender from Pickett's punch. Tom got out of the car, leaving it running, and circled the front of it toward Millie.

Pickett reached the other side of the street just as the soft man recovered and blocked her retreat. Pickett hollered. Tom turned. Millie pushed past him around the car. Tom went after her. They were in front of the headlights when Pickett caught Tom square in the nose with a left jab. Tom fell back out of the lights into the path of the soft man. The car door slammed, the engine roared. Pickett leaped back as Millie skidded into the street and squealed around the corner in Tom's Buick.

Pickett watched a moment too long.

A large hand spun him around in time for him to catch a blow

at his belt buckle. A knee flew to his face as he doubled over; his head snapped back and over, his eyes blankly scanning the moonlit sky. Pickett landed on his back, his eyes showing white before they closed.

#

He woke with a start, a bloodied mouth before him.

"Not a pretty sight, huh?" said the mouth without moving.

"But it could be worse. I could make it much worse."

Blood stained the lips like rust. The eyes squinted. They were Pickett's eyes, Pickett's lips.

"Sit up."

Apparently, Pickett was speaking to himself. But he didn't move. The bloodied face wrinkled in pain. Pickett opened his mouth; so did the face. It said: "Mil-l-l --" but that was all.

Pickett tried to spit; he couldn't. Pink saliva ran down from the corner of his mouth.

Then the face before him fell away, and Ralph Kemp laughed. He got up from the side of the bed and handed the mirror to Tom. Tom glanced in the mirror at the white bandage covering his nose, then at his hand, covering a black .38. When he looked up at Pickett, he smiled.

"Well," said Kemp, "let's get started, huh? Let's make it quick and easy."

Pickett closed his eyes. Fingers closed on his chin; someone groaned. It was Pickett.

"Now, time to wake up and listen."

Kemp shook the tall man's chin, and the eyes opened again. Pickett stared at Kemp. The grey stubble of Kemp's hair looked like weathered cypress planed smooth on top. Kemp's already tiny eyes narrowed.

"This is the way it'll go. You answer my questions, and Tom won't hurt you. See? Simple." Kemp lowered himself to Pickett's bed. "Now. Where's Millie?"

"Car -- Tom's car."

Kemp looked to Tom, then back. "You know Tom then?"

"No, Mister Kemp, I never --"

"Shutup, dip-shit." Kemp stood, hitching up a pair of grey double-knit slacks, and walked toward the man with the gun. Tom's eyelids quivered, and he stepped back. Kemp turned back to Pickett. "Answer me."

Pickett sat up, knuckled his eyes, and looked around the room, blinking. "I ran into him. Tom, I mean. At the Temple. . . . I don't think it did him much good." Pickett looked puzzled, as if unsure why he'd said that. Then he smiled and explained: "Didn't do him any good going to the Temple, I mean."

Pickett was making a joke.

Kemp stepped forward and swung the back of his hand at Pickett's cheek. The jolt closed Pickett's eyes. When they opened again, they were brighter, less muddy.

"You aint nearly so funny as you gonna look when Tom gets through with you." Kemp took a deep breath and hitched up his trousers again. "Now. I got three questions, simple and straight forward. Just answer them on the level, and we can all go home to bed."

"You got one left."

"What?"

"You asked me about Millie, then if I knew Tom. That's two. You got one left. One question."

Tom advanced on Pickett, pulling the pistol back over the opposite shoulder. Kemp put an arm in his path, but his eyes never moved from the man on the bed. "Funny boy. Now let's see if you're smart. I asked you the first question already. Now you answer it. Where's Millie?"

"How would I know? I only met her this afternoon. Find her yourself."

"Where?"

"Try the Personals." Kemp swung the other hand at him, open palm. Pickett grabbed it with his own, and chucked Kemp across the mouth with his cast.

Kemp straightened, his pink eyes smaller than they'd been before. Calmly, he wiped red from his mouth with the back of his hand. He motioned to Tom. "Bernie," he called.

Tom reached Pickett in two strides. Tom put a hand to Pickett's collar and a gun to his belly and pulled Pickett to his feet. Pickett looked down, apparently surprised that he could stand.

"Bernie!"

The un-soft man with the soft voice emerged from what must have been the bathroom. He held one finger to the side of his nose and inhaled sharply twice through the other. He squinted absently toward Kemp, then Pickett. As he moved toward the tall man on the bed, he dusted a smudge of white powder from the tip of his nose. Tom smiled at the prospect of violence, and turned to Bernie as he approached, a smart ass grin of expectation lighting his face. His revolver moved with his head. So did Pickett.

He brought his cast down hard on Tom's hand; Tom wailed, and bent to the blow. The gun exploded into the wall behind Pickett, then clattered to the concrete floor. Quickly, Pickett brought the cast back up into Tom's hairless face. Tom moaned and went over backwards into the advancing Bernie.

"Shithead," said Bernie, kicking Tom aside and moving toward

Pickett.

Kemp's hand went inside his coat.

Pickett came up with Tom's revolver; it roared.

The slug careened off the floor in front of Bernie, whined between his legs, and smashed into the door behind him. Bernie froze.

Kemp slowly removed his hand from his coat, and held it, palm up, in front of him. "Easy, man."

Tom moaned and rolled onto his stomach. Bernie looked down at him without emotion, and then put his hand to the purplish brown stain on his own left cheek. Both he and the bruise looked angry.

"Just take it easy." Kemp pushed at the air with open palms. "Nobody wants to do anything they'll -- they'll be sorry for."

Pickett smiled, painfully, and wiped his mouth with the finger tips at the end of his cast. "You oughta be sorry. Kidnapping's a capital offense -- or'd you forget that, Ralph?"

Bernie cocked his head to one side and took a step toward the man with the gun.

"C'mon, Bernie, show's over." Bernie stopped with one foot forward. "I think I'd feel a whole lot better if both of you put your hands behind your head." They did. Though it seemed to

cost Bernie considerable effort and no little embarrassment.

"And sit on the floor."

"Oh for Chris'sake --"

"Sit!"

Kemp sat.

"Now . . . just sit tight." And Pickett lowered himself back to the edge of the bed. He took a few deep breaths, all the while swinging Tom's .38 back and forth between the two men on the floor, as if trying to decide which to shoot first. After a moment, Pickett smiled with half his mouth and chuckled. "Let's make this quick," he said in imitation of Kemp; then, in his own voice, he added, "I got a headache."

Kemp chuckled. "He's got a headache."

"Let's talk about yours first. What about Millie? What did you want from her?"

"Oh, come on man . . . It's business."

"What sort of business? Blackmail business --"

"You're way off --"

"-- or murder business?"

"Hey, come on now. You can't connect us with that Herb Purdy shit."

"Why not? He worked for you and he's connected to Millie. And you're after her. Want her enough to risk capital crime to

get her. And Purdy . . . well, he's dead."

"Hey man, hold on. What I want with Millie aint got nothing to do with Purdy. And I don't know nothing about him and Millie."

"Why is it I don't believe you, Ralph?"

"Who cares," said Bernie.

"Shut up, for Christ's sake," said Kemp.

"Uh-arghf," said Tom. He pushed up from his stomach to his elbows and rolled over. Blood matted his face from nose to neck.

"You better turn him over before he chokes," said Pickett.

Bernie gave Tom a shove.

Kemp muttered: "He might as well for all he's good for."

Bernie chortled. Pickett smiled.

"Hard to get good help, Ralph?"

"You better believe it."

"Then why burn Herb?"

"You don't hear so good. I said I didn't know nothing about that."

"Like hell."

"Look, I went after the girl. Okay, it's business. She ran out on me. It's hard enough getting good meat for a dump like that, let alone let em think they can just up and leave whenever they want."

"You're breaking my heart, Ralph."

"She was holding out, too. Doing overtime with the customers, and not paying the management. We got overhead, you know."

"Overhead? Hell, that place's hardly got a roof."

"Overhead, man. What we're selling out there aint exactly legal in neither county. So, I put the joint on the county line. A little overhead sprinkled in each county and they can say it's the other one that aint doing their Christian duty. Get me?"

"You want me to believe that Millie's the only one that ever held out on you?"

"No, no, they all do, I know that. But they know they aint supposed to, y'understand -- that I don't like it when they do. I let em though, cause it keeps em there. Soon as they start talking about leaving, I stick it to em. They gotta pay back the hold-backs. I even keep tabs on it. Sort of. That's what the old man's there for. See? It's just sort of a --"

"You expect them to fall for that?"

"Look --" Kemp was talking man to man now. "Those beavers I got out there aint too bright."

"Jesus!" Bernie jumped as Tom threw himself over and sat bolt upright. Tom looked quickly at Bernie, then Kemp, then Pickett, then back to Kemp, without seeing any of them.

"Di' we ge' hiwm?" Tom managed through swollen lips.

Kemp rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Sure, shit-head. We hog-tied him, beat the crap out of him, then gave him your gun so he could finish himself off. What the hell you think --"

"Ah, Mifer Kemp --"

"Shutup, for pete's sake," said Bernie.

Pickett cut in: "What were you doing at the Ayers' place?"

All three were silent. Tom looked at Bernie; Bernie looked at Kemp. Ignoring them both, Kemp barked: "Business."

"You sure as hell do a lot of business. What sort was it this time? Blackmail business, maybe?"

Kemp looked relieved. Bernie looked down and smiled. Tom showed the whites of his eyes.

"What's with you, man? I said business. Legit. I got a construction company up Umatila. We done most of the work on the Temple. They was hitting those suckers for more dough for an extension to the TV studio, and Ed invited me over. I'm the contractor." He and Bernie actually looked proud.

Tom looked ready to pass out again. Pickett just looked tired.

"Yeah, and I'm the Shah of Iran. Where's my flying carpet?"

Bernie looked up.

"My car, Bernie. Where's my car."

Bernie tossed his head toward the door. "Outside."

"Keys," said Pickett.

Bernie looked at Tom.

"Keys."

Bernie stuck his hand into Tom's coat and tossed car keys at Pickett. They fell to the floor. Pickett watched them hit. When he looked up, Kemp's hand was fumbling inside his coat again, and Bernie was standing, violence in his eyes.

"Now, now . . ." Pickett rose, flourishing Tom's .38.

Tom fell over onto his side senseless.

The other three men stared at him, exasperation on two faces, a wearied amusement on the third. He knelt and picked up the keys.

"I'm gonna take my car and leave. After I'm gone, you'd best get him to the hospital."

"You're gonna be sorry for this," said Kemp.

Pickett pulled the back of his hand across his mouth, and looked at the blood that collected on it. "Like I'm not already . . . Anyway, you're the one, Kemp. I make it two counts of attempted kidnapping, assault with a deadly weapon, battery . . . That's without accessory on Purdy's murder."

"You're crazy. You know that?" said Kemp. "Fuckin. Crazy."

Picket laughed. "You know, Ralph, that's about the only thing you've said tonight that I believe. And Ralph . . . You best get yourself a new sling for that thing under your arm. That one's not for shit."

Pickett went out the door backwards.

It was a motel, The Rambling Rose. And the Nova was outside.

The third try, it started.

[END CHAPTER 15]

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bodie Pickett drove back to the boat-house with his good hand on the wheel and Tom's .38 in his lap. The windows were dark.

The clouds, dark as well, were low and heavy. Large drops fell irregularly into the dust of the driveway.

He pushed open the boat-house door with his cast and waved the revolver at the dark. He pulled the string without effect. He crept up the stairs, which cracked and groaned with every step, and went through the apartment door like Eliott Ness. The place was empty.

None of the lights worked, but the water did and Pickett stripped and showered in the dark. When he emerged, it rained

softly and steadily. The air was heavy with moisture and the steam from asphalt streets still hot from the afternoon sun.

Pickett dressed, fried two eggs, and chipped the remaining coffee out of the jar. The grimed floor of the porch was slick beneath his bare feet with the spray from screen-filtered rain. And the rain fell hard now.

The palm fronds bent, and the canal frothed below. But as suddenly as it had come, it left. The roar became a patter, then measured pops, then, finally, the random drip-drop that would go on till morning. The usual night sounds returned, and with them, a wrinkle in Pickett's brow.

He went back inside to the phone. It was as dead as the lights. J.B. had finally slipped from the register of the living.

Pickett swallowed the rest of the coffee, and then went down to the Nova. The air was clear, and relatively cool. Moonlight glistened off the wet car. It looked showroom new.

It sounded in need of a tune-up.

Pickett tucked Tom's .38 under the seat and headed back toward Belle Haven.

#

The town was dark, as was the old courthouse; but fluorescent white shown from the Sheriff's annex. Excitement

shown from the eyes of the deputy at the reception desk.

"Does he wanna see you."

It wasn't a question so Pickett didn't answer. A second deputy, in the corner, fed a file cabinet. The graveyard shift.

"He aint here now." The first deputy nodded toward Homer's closet. "We got a call just a little while ago --" He paused, his eyes fixed upon Pickett's swollen lip and discolored jaw.

"What happened to you?"

"Bit a dog. What call?"

The first deputy looked guiltily across the room at the second, who pretended not to notice. "Another body," he whispered.

"Whose?"

"Dunno -- just a body. A dead one. That was all they said. Homer -- Sheriff Beane, I mean -- he went out there with Singleton an hour ago."

"Out where?"

"Can't say. Ficial business."

"Sheriff wants to see me. Right?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So I'll go see him. Where is he?"

"Well," the deputy scratched his head, "Sheriff did wanna see you." He looked to the second deputy. The second deputy

stared at his papers, shaking his head in disgust -- and not at the papers. "Out the old Orlando highway." And the first deputy proceeded to give Pickett directions to Millie's place.

"You know where I mean?"

"I'm afraid I do. Any eye-dee on the corpse?"

"Nope. A female. Caucasian. I didn't take the call." He nodded toward the deputy in the corner. This time, it was the first deputy that shook his head. In amazement. "Man. There sure as shootin's something strange going on around here."

Pickett admitted that there sure as shootin was.

[END CHAPTER 16]

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The motor court was dark, save for a stream of light from the open door of Millie's cabin. The stream flowed diagonally across the semi-circular lawn, emptying into the elliptical pool of a street light at the foot of the drive. Homer's men came and went from the bungalow, throwing spasmodic shadows down stream. Bodie Pickett U-turned beyond the court and parked across the street. Behind Tom's Buick -- the one Millie had taken. It was empty.

Save for the spit and prattle of the radio in Homer's cruiser, all was silent. An ambulance waited in the drive a little beyond Millie's cabin, the back doors open wide, awaiting

a midnight feeding. Pickett walked through the pool of light and upstream, carrying an island of shadow with him.

Two deputies stood in front. They talked with the exaggerated quiet and solemnity affected by public officials in the face of private tragedy. They looked up as Pickett approached. "I'm sorry, Mister, but --"

"I'm Pickett. Homer wants to see me."

The one who spoke looked at the other, then at Pickett's ruined mouth. He shrugged, smiled, and nodded to the cabin. "Round back."

A silent storm raged there. Lightning flashed silently beneath the live oaks, setting the wet moss ablaze in moments of white light. Homer and half a dozen other men stood around in rough circle, their faces alternately lit and dark as the police cameraman took a last turn around.

Millie lay on her back in the center, oblivious of light, time, and the stares of men. Her arms lay limply at her side, legs tangled, head turned to the side. Rain glistened on her face, the wet t-shirt a second skin.

Pickett walked around the circle of men and light. Homer looked up; he was older, by decades. His weight hung like a burden just recently perceived.

"Take a look."

Pickett did. Millie's one eye stared blankly, a drop of water balanced to the side of the iris. The other lid was half closed and concave, the eyeball collapsed around a small hole.

Pickett looked to Homer.

"The rain," said Homer. "Must a been blood, not a hell of a lot, but some. Rain washed it away."

The photographer finished and nodded to Beane. "All right."

Homer motioned to the two white-coated men who stood across from them. "Let's get her outta here." Then he turned to the dark man next to him. "When can I have it, Sal?"

"I'll get on it first thing tomorrow morning, if that's okay."

Homer shrugged. "She aint going nowhere. Singleton?"

Sal turned and disappeared into the dark. The skinny kid who'd fallen in the canal detached himself from the clot of figures around the body. "Sir?"

"You go with her." Homer nodded toward the two men in white. They were lowering Millie into a black plastic bag. "Stay with her till we get someone down there to relieve you."

"Yessir."

The man called Sal reappeared and put a hand to Homer's shoulder. "Forgot the warrant. It's out in the car. I'll give it to Franklin on my way out." He patted Homer on the shoulder.

"Get some sleep, you need it."

Homer said, "Right," as if sleep were the last thing he were going to get.

The men in white took up the stretcher and followed the man called Sal. Singleton walked behind and nervously touched the brim of his hat to the Sheriff.

Homer directed his flashlight at the ground where Millie had been -- had ceased to be. The grass was flat and dry.

"Skeeter?"

The remaining deputy straightened.

Homer made a vague circular gesture with his left hand.

"Get a rope around here or something."

"Yessir." And Skeeter hustled around the bungalow leaving Homer and Pickett alone.

"Well, boy, you sure gotta nose for murder, that's for sure. That's for damn sure." His light was still on the dry spot. He walked around it to the opposite side, then turned the beam on Pickett's face. "Rough day?" He shut off his light, and walked slowly back around the circle toward the younger man. Homer set his jaw as he approached, stopped close in front of Pickett and thumped an index finger against his chest. "Playtime's over, boy. I wanna know where you been and what you know and I want it now."

Homer's eyes drilled into Pickett's; but Pickett said nothing.

"I been running round this goddamn county for the last eighteen hours, and I find I'm running in your wake the whole goddamn way. I trace last night's stiff to up round Umatila, then to a jerk joint out Sanford. I pump some oily bastard for an hour, get nothing. Then, on the way out, some bimbo tells me that this guy sounds a helluva lot like you been round asking the same questions as me, but spreading a little green for sweetening. So's I got to threaten her with damn near everthing to jaywalking just to get the same thing out of her for nothing."

Skeeter busily strung orange tape among the live oaks and around Homer and Pickett, sealing off the crime scene. Homer stopped and thumped Pickett again with his finger.

"You listening, boy? I'm talking to you."

Skeeter pretended he wasn't there.

"I mean, hell, I'm only the Sheriff, right? Why should anyone tell me nothing? So, I come back to Belle Haven, trying to get some kind a line on this Millie woman, and we get this phone call. Seems there's been some old West showdown earlier in the evening at the Krispy Krunch -- a woman name a Millie Moses and some clown that sounds a whole helluva lot like you. Christ, I mean why should anyone tell me bout any of this? So . . . I

get the home address from the Krispy Krunch lady, but nobody's home. So, whataya think, I get a call from Ralph Kemp. Yeah, right, member him? Says this lady stole his car. Now you shut up and just listen.

"So I go back to the office, and whataya know -- I get another call. Yeah. Says to hurry on back. Seems somebody's trying to plant a stiff in the backyard. Now, I high-tail it back, and what do I find? Huh? I find my goddamn witness laid out like a fucking slab of meat. And just then," -- Homer grinned and gestured expansively -- "here comes old super sleuth hisself, prancing round like you was out for a walk or something." The grin became a grimace. "Now you talk to me, boy, and I don't mean tomorrow. You about to get burned bad."

Pickett sighed, eyebrows raised, and talked. He gave Homer everything that he had since that morning. That covered the facts of the matter -- as far as he knew them -- and left Amy, Mark, and Jan Ayers out of it.

Homer was unimpressed. "That aint the way Ralph Kemp tells it. Seems your friend here . . ." Homer pointed to the ground.

He paused, then rubbed his brow. "Cording to Kemp, she up and stole his car. And you interfered when he tried to stop her."

"Come on, Homer, that's bullshit, and you know it."

"Course it's bullshit, asshole. But he's got two witnesses

that'll back him and you aint got two cents worth of chicken-shit to prove otherwise." Homer glared at Pickett for a moment in silence, then closed his eyes and exhaled sharply. He pulled a roll of Tums from beneath the flap on his breast pocket.

"Look, son . . . Kemp's a two-bit greaser from way back. He's got his hand in every minor racket in the county. Prostitution, small-time gambling, some grass probly -- that sort a thing. He aint smart enough for the big-time, but he's plenty smart enough to stay outta stir. And he covers his ass any way he needs to. You got lucky tonight, boy, damn lucky, cause Kemp's mighty worried -- least he oughta be. Someone's unloading some heavy-duty junk in the county the last couple a months, and he's nervous. Wouldn't be a bit surprised if he figured someone was trying to move in on him. Aint no time to go pushing him around, boy, not if you wanna stay healthy. You was just plain flat out lucky tonight, boy, nothing but lucky."

Homer bit off the end of the Tums wrapper, spit it over his shoulder.

"Your Krispy Krunch friend here weren't so lucky." He popped a pair of white tablets into his mouth, crushing them between his teeth. "Don't push it."

And Pickett didn't, he remained silent.

Homer chewed slowly and thoughtfully for a moment. Then he

swallowed hard, looked down at the ground and spat. "Where you staying?"

Pickett told him.

"Well you go on back there and stay. I'm tired of thinking bout you, right now -- shoot, I'm tired of looking at you. Now get outta here." Homer wheeled around and stalked off. Over his shoulder, he said: "Stick tight, Skeeter. We'll set up some shifts and get some relief out here later." He stepped over the tape and disappeared into the shadows.

Skeeter stood in silence, looking at the dark space within the fluorescent tape. "Ain't been this much action around here since that sink-hole. Swallowed up two blocks a down town and a Porsche dealership." He was older than he looked from a distance. He was tall and wiry, but had the weathered face of a middle-aged farmer. He looked over at Pickett, who was looking down at the ground.

"He pretty rough on you, huh?"

"Nah. I probably earned it."

"Don't pay Homer no never mind. He's just upset. Bout all this business, you know. Jeez, who aint." Skeeter slid a couple of bony fingers into his shirt and scratched his stomach. "Two murders in a week. Shi-it."

"Three."

"Huh?"

Pickett glanced up at Skeeter absently. "Nothing. Forget it." He stepped out of the ring of tape. "Who called it in?"

"Manager. The lady lives in one of the other units. She's at a movie or something and comes back late. Ol' Fido needs a walk, but it's raining by then so she watches herself a little Carson -- till the rain stops, y'know -- then she takes the mutt out for a leak. Well" Skeeter was warming up to the good part.

"Yeah?"

"Well, her ol' dog goes bananas, y'know what I mean, and she damn near falls on the body. Then she high-tails it back to her place and calls the office. It's funny"

Pickett glanced up as though it didn't sound funny to him at all. "What?"

"Well, the sheriff -- he was up here right before the storm, y'know, looking for her. The corpse, I mean. Of course she weren't a corpse then. I guess. Anyhow, he got the address from the place she worked." Skeeter smiled and shook his head.

"Must've been right about when she was getting it out back. Never found the gun, though."

Pickett shrugged. "Might not been one. A wound like that Coulda been a lot of things. Won't know till after the post

mortem."

"Uh-uh. A gun. The woman saw a gun, a little silver one, laying next the body. Least she said she did."

"Where is it?"

Skeeter chuckled and threw up his hands. "Who knows? In her mind, probly. Least there weren't no gun when Homer and Singleton got here."

"She do anything with it?"

"Nah. She said the kid took it."

"Christ. What kid?"

Skeeter laughed. "It's something aint it?"

"Goddamn it, Skeeter!"

Skeeter's face fell and he straightened like a buck-private.

Sheriff Beane puffed out of the darkness. "I gotta good mind to leave you here all night. Shoot. Think you can keep your eyes open and your mouth shut long enough for me to get Franklin back here? Huh, think you can handle that?"

"Yessir. I --" "Save it." Homer pointed to Pickett.

"You. Com'ere."

Pickett followed the sheriff to the front of the bungalow.

"Wait here." Homer went inside.

Only two cruisers were left now. A deputy leaned against the wall and smiled at Pickett knowingly. A moment later,

another stuck his head through the door and motioned Pickett inside.

The room was just as he'd left it, except that the waitress uniform had joined the terry robe at the foot of the bed. Homer stood behind the bed, leaning with his back against the wall, looking at Pickett. A middle-aged woman with a puffy white face and unnaturally red hair sat primly on the bed. She smoothed a green print dress down over her knees as Pickett walked in, and looked back at the Sheriff.

Homer gestured toward Pickett with his head. The redheaded woman looked at Pickett, squinting a little, and shook her head.

"No, Sheriff, I am quite certain. The man I saw was much younger -- and not so tall. No, he couldn't have been much over twenty. If that." She put two small white hands to her cheeks and closed her eyes. "Is there anything more, Sheriff. I'm very tired."

"Just a minute more, Ma'am. Can you think of anything else? Like you ever see the kid before?"

"Well, I don't know . . . Perhaps. Yes. Yes, I think so. I saw someone a lot like him -- could have been him -- hanging around off and on for the last week or so." She straightened primly and glared at the Sheriff. "I called your office about it, but they said you had other things to worry about." She

pressed her lips together and looked away.

Homer exhaled slowly and looked down at the floor. "Did he come to see anyone, Ma'am? That's what we need to know."

"Well, no, not as far as I know. I sure didn't see him visit Miss Moses -- least I didn't see him if he did. Only visitor she ever had was that girl." Beane suddenly looked up.

Pickett hardly moved, but his eyes narrowed slightly.

Beane said: "Which girl would that be, Ma'am."

"I don't know, really, some black-haired child. Cute, but a little too -- oh, you know what I mean -- grown up. More than she should be, I mean. Though come to think of it, I did see that kid talking to the girl. I don't know what about. He was hanging around once while she was with Millie. He didn't go in or anything. Just waited. He tried to talk to the girl when she came out, but she wasn't interested."

"Whataya mean?"

"Well, she got mad, that's all. Didn't want anything to do with him." She folded her arms over her breasts and shuttered.

"Now I know why." She sat in silence for a moment, unhappy with the thought.

"Anything else, Ma'am?"

"No, I don't think so --" She started, eyes wide and staring. "You don't suppose he's one of those -- those junkies

they've been talking about on TV do you? I really don't know what things are coming to, all these drugs and what not . . . In Wekiwa County, too." She clucked and shook her head, looking down at her hands.

Homer exhaled and pushed wearily off the wall. "Well, thank you, Ma'am. We'll be back in the morning and take you over to the office for a statement."

"Well, if it's absolutely necessary . . ."

"It's necessary."

"You -- you think he'll be back -- tonight, I mean?"

"No, Ma'am, I doubt that he'd do that. But I'll have a man on duty just the same. Don't you worry none. You go on back home and get some sleep. And thanks again for your help."

"All right, Sheriff."

"Walk her home will you, Franklin?"

She walked past Pickett to the door. She stopped, turned, and smiled. Pickett's face was blank, but his eyes were sharp and wary. The redheaded woman left, followed by Deputy Franklin.

"What was that all about?"

"She runs this place. Saw a fella hanging round the body after she called it in. Went back out there to find her dog. Do you believe it? Lucky she didn't end up like her tenant. Anyhow, she seen this kid -- sounds like a kid, anyway --

standing over the body. He took off when she seen him."

"And the gun was gone?"

Homer looked sideways at Pickett. "Yeah. When we got there the gun was gone."

"And you figured it was me?"

"I don't figure nothing, boy. I just do a job best I know how." He fell into a straight-back chair next to the small kitchen table, and leaned back against the wall. The chair gave off a loud crack in protest. "And you," -- Homer tossed his chin at Pickett -- "you're worse than no help at all."

For a moment, both stared into the silence of the room.

Finally, Homer looked purposefully at his muddy boots, stretched and pushed himself up from the chair. He walked past Pickett to the door and yelled: "Franklin!" Then, he turned back. "Get outta here now, Bo. And stay outta this. It got nothing to do with you --"

Pickett opened his mouth.

"-- or your daddy. Nothing, y'hear?"

Homer glared at the taller man, daring him to speak. He didn't; chin bunched below a frown, brows raised, he stared back at Homer.

Franklin appeared in the door, short of breath. Homer turned to him, dismissing Pickett with a sharp movement of his

chin.

Pickett followed the light out the door and across the lawn to the street and the Nova. He drove to the boat house and sleep.

[END CHAPTER 17]

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The sun was high and bright, but the damp pavement was only just beginning to steam. Noon would obliterate the evidence of the night's rain and by mid-afternoon the clouds would mass at the horizon once again. If the rains came too soon the super-heated earth would have it back in the air by dusk and the night would be hot and steamy. That was the norm; the late night rain that remained was as rare as it was welcome. But in the end, it was always the sun that won out. Today would be no different.

Bodie Pickett raised his left hand again, but the door opened before he could strike.

"Bo." It was a statement of fact, one that Roger Mooring seemed unable to assimilate. The two stared at each other for an instant; Pickett spoke first:

"May I come in?"

"Uh, yes. Yes, of course. God, what happened to your face?" Roger stepped back pulling the door with him. "Please come in."

"Nothing that won't heal." Pickett stepped into a small living room, a small kitchen through a door to the left. A table there was set for two; only one setting had been occupied.

"Please . . ." Roger gestured to a sofa against the far wall. It, like everything else in the room, was comfortably worn. Roger looked as worn, but a little less comfortable in suit pants, white short sleeve shirt, and navy tie. Roger waved a paper napkin in the direction of the kitchen. "I just finished breakfast." It was as if an explanation were somehow called for.

"Would, uh, would you like some coffee?"

"Yeah, sure. Thanks."

Roger disappeared through the arched kitchen door.

The living room was cool and dark. The venetian blinds cast bars of light across the hardwood floor. The shafts of light were visible in the dust particles stirred by Pickett's passage through the room. The dust looked as if it had been there

forever; so did everything in the room -- everything except the red jacket that lay across the easy chair next to the door. It looked new, stylish with a mandarin collar. It also looked out of place on the moth-eaten tweed of the easy chair -- in bad taste almost, a boutonniere at a funeral.

Roger returned. The cup rattled as he handed it to Pickett, and coffee slopped over into the saucer. "Oh. Sorry."

"It's okay. Smells wonderful."

Roger wiped his hands on his pants and looked around the room. He crossed to the other side of the room and settled gingerly into a platform rocker. It creaked. He coughed in embarrassment.

"Is Amy up?"

Roger glanced at the jacket on the chair. "No, I don't think so."

Pickett looked a question at him.

"She -- well, we both were up late last night. I --" He hesitated. Some doubt at the tip of his tongue blocked the words. "You know about my -- about Amy's mother?"

"Uh-huh. I didn't know who she was till last night, though." Pickett sipped at the coffee, and squinted as he swallowed. "How'd you find out?" "Sheriff Beane called late. Seems she was going by her maiden name. Moses, I think it was.

Homer found a driver's license and what-not in her room with Mooring on it. He remembered about the divorce, I guess."

Pickett nodded. "It all makes a little more sense --"

"No," Roger bridled, "no, it doesn't make any sense at all. Why did she come back? Hadn't she punished me enough? She had to turn my own daughter against me. She had to -- to squeeze the last bit of joy out of me and take my Amy --"

"Did Amy tell you that?"

"I wouldn't have let her, you know. I wouldn't have let her do it."

Pickett let his question hang, and said nothing. Roger's gaze wavered; his eyes fluttered briefly with embarrassment, and he looked to the floor, settling back into the rocker. It groaned. Roger coughed.

Pickett said: "Did you know that Millie was in town?"

"Know? No, I didn't know. I couldn't have stood it if I had. If I'd known she was here . . ."

"What, Roger?"

"It was a long time ago, and I just want to forget about it -- her. Look, I've made my share of mistakes. But then I've paid for them by now, surely. But she had to come back, didn't she?" His eyes dared Pickett to answer.

"Did she?"

"Yes," Roger replied sharply, but his anger had peaked.

"Yes, I suppose she did."

Roger relaxed back into the chair and began to rock. He let it groan away without comment. "You know, it's the way I met her in the first place. And the way she left, too -- left Amy and me, I mean. I knew she'd come back. Eventually. I went through the divorce in absentia, hoping, I guess, that somehow it would keep it from happening. Keep her away." Roger smiled down at his lap, still rocking. The chair squeaked in easy rhythm. "The spells and charms of modern man. That's what J.B. called the Law. He told me that when he drew up the papers for me. Spells and charms. I didn't know what he meant then." Roger puffed once in a halfhearted laugh, as if to say that he knew now. Suddenly, he drew a long face. "Oh, I'm sorry, Bo."

"For what?"

"I mean, your father being dead and all . . ."

"Forget it. When did she leave you and Amy?"

"A long time ago. Amy wasn't even one. So that makes it -- what, fifteen, sixteen years?"

"How long had you been married before . . ." Pickett finished the sentence with his left hand.

"Not long. Long enough to have Amy, though. I was in my senior year at Jacksonville, I guess. Yeah. The accounting

program, y'know. Man, that was one rough year." He laughed self-consciously. "In more ways than one. Anyway, I met her in the Fall, and we were married by Christmas. Whirlwind romance, huh?" Roger looked at the other with a crooked smile, then to his hands. "She, well, was gone by the summer."

"What about Amy?"

Roger ran a hand through his thinning hair, then laid his head against the back of the chair. He stopped rocking. "She came in February. February fourth. I'll never forget that day. God, she was beautiful -- even then."

"You were married before Christmas, and Amy came in February? Three months later?"

"Yup, old Rog to the rescue, huh?" He rocked lazily, absorbed in his own past. "Jeez --" Roger suddenly sat forward.

"Look, -- I've never told Amy about that. Christ, I've never told anybody. You forget it, okay? Please, Bo, I mean it. I -- I don't know what got into me just now, I was --"

"Father?" came a sleepy voice from the hall. "Is anything the matter?"

Roger's eyes implored, begged.

Pickett nodded.

"It's all right, Amy," said Roger warmly.

She leaned against the hall door without seeing Pickett.

Her eyes were puffy from sleep. A housecoat once pink but now almost white with wear covered her slender form, falling open in the front, revealing a lavender night gown of some satin-like material that hung loosely down between her breasts in folds of white lace. Her eyes followed her father's to where Pickett sat.

She started, caught the collar of her house coat with both hands. "Mr. Pickett! Oh, excuse me. I didn't know . . ."

"It's all right," echoed Pickett.

"Bo came by to see if you were okay, honey."

"And to talk to you for a few minutes -- if you feel up to it."

"Of course I feel up to it. Why shouldn't I feel up to it?"

"Well, I thought that, perhaps, after last night . . ."

"What was last night to me?" She placed herself solidly in a straight back chair next to the hall door and stared at the tall man on the sofa. She couldn't help blinking the sleep from her eyes. She looked as if she might be blinking back more than that.

"Bo, I don't think Amy --"

"I'm not a child, Father," Amy said with the petulance of a child. As if to prove her point, the housecoat fell away at the knee revealing a triangle of silky lavender beneath and the outline of a rounded thigh. It seemed to make Roger

uncomfortable. Amy seemed not to notice. "I am perfectly capable of talking to Mr. Pickett myself."

"I could come back --"

"No, I want to talk. Why shouldn't I?"

"Could you, then, tell me a little about your mother?"

"I have no mother." Amy stared at Pickett defiantly.

"Could you tell me when she got in touch with you?"

"It was about a week ago. Maybe a little more."

"What did she want?"

"Nothing." Amy glared at Roger, daring him to assert the opposite.

Roger opened his mouth, but decided against it.

Amy turned to Pickett, waiting, her right hand pinning the left to her lap, knuckles white, blue veins coursing. The trapped hand squirmed, clawing at the worn cotton beneath. "She wanted nothing."

"What did she say, then?"

"This is your mother. That's what she said. I believed her at first -- I so wanted to believe her."

"Did she ask to see you?"

"Yes." Amy's body stirred. "She . . . that's all she wanted. Just to see me. She said -- she said that she just wanted to see me once again. Before . . ."

"Before what, Amy?"

"I don't know. She wasn't going to stay. I asked her to. I wanted her to. At first, anyway. But she said she was going away. I don't know where. Or why. She didn't tell me."

"What did she tell you?"

Roger stiffened at the question.

"Told me? Amy bridled like her father. The mark of her nails was visible on the back of her left hand which now held down the right. "She told me nothing -- except that she was my mother. And that she was sorry that she'd left me. That --" Amy put a hand to her mouth and cleared her throat. Her hand shook. " -- that she loved me."

She recited this as if it were a catechism.

"Is that all that she told you?" her father asked. There was a desperation in his voice that he instantly regretted. "I mean, did she tell you her plans or . . . anything?" He looked to Pickett sheepishly.

"What do you care?" Amy said it with contempt.

"Amy, please --"

"No. What do you care. If it hadn't been for you, I'd still have a mother, instead of a . . . a . . ." She gestured angrily toward her father, but couldn't find the word. "You drove her off, just like --"

"Did she tell you that?" Roger Mooring's face grew pink.

"She told you that didn't she?"

Pickett cut them both off: "Amy . . ."

They stopped, as if caught in some pet game, embarrassed that an outsider should have witnessed it. Father withdrew back into his shell; daughter assumed her cloak of composure. The eyes of both spoke pain.

"Amy, I have to ask you this. The Sheriff will if I don't. Did you ever see the man in the canal before that night? Before he died?"

It was as if the sheath of ice that shrouded her were melting away. Her features and posture fell as if only now feeling the weight of the earth that pulled at them. Amy seemed tired now, worn. She looked down to her hands.

"Yes . . ."

"Amy!"

"It's all right, Father" -- all rancor gone now. "I went to see my . . . to see Millie at her -- well, it's sort of a house. I think that it used to be a motel or something . . ."

"And?"

"And we were talking -- arguing really. She wanted to tell me things -- things I guess I just didn't want to hear."

"What sort of things?"

Roger looked at Pickett in horror.

"Just things. She -- she wanted me to understand, I guess."

"Understand what, Amy?"

"Why she . . . had done things. Bad things with men. For -- for money. I didn't want to hear. I wanted my mother to be . . . something else, I guess." Amy pushed her hands deeper into her lap. "Someone else." She rubbed her eyes with the back of a hand. "I wanted her to be someone I could -- could love. She just wanted me to understand . . . so desperately for me to understand." Amy shook silently, shoulders hunched, head bowed over her breast as if to shelter it from such memories.

"Really, Bo, I think that this is just about enough --"

"Roger --" said Pickett sternly; then more calmly: "Roger, you asked me to look into this. I'm in so deep now that there's only one way for me -- for any of us -- to get out of this whole. You don't want it that way, I know, but it's the way it's gotta be."

"It's okay, Daddy. I need to talk -- to tell someone. I'll be fine." She pulled a tissue from the pocket of her house coat, blew her nose, then dabbed at her eyes. As she spoke, she began the slow process of shredding it between her nervous fingers. "You asked about the man -- the man in the canal. Well, I saw him that night. We were . . . arguing and he came to the door.

My . . . Millie wouldn't let him in. I couldn't hear everything he was saying, but she kept saying that she didn't want any part of it. Whatever it was. Then he said he'd break down the door if she didn't open it. She was afraid that he'd wake the landlady. She . . . my . . . Millie was terribly afraid of losing that place. It was so cheap, and she was saving her money."

"What did they talk about then?"

"Nothing really. When he saw that I was there, he laughed, thought it a wonderful joke. He was such an ugly, spiteful man -- I hated him. Millie seemed scared. She told him that she would never have anything to do with his . . . plans -- I think she said -- and to get out. He just laughed and asked her how she'd like it if he told me right there and then."

"Told you?" Roger's voice cracked.

"Yes, that's what he said."

"Told you what?" said Pickett.

"I don't know what. I guess he meant about her, well, past . . . about the . . . bad things that she'd done. But then" -- Amy's pain turned to puzzlement -- "she'd already told me that."

"What did Millie say?"

"She didn't say anything, she got mad. Real mad. I've never seen anyone that mad. I was afraid . . ."

"Of what, Amy?"

"I don't know, I was just afraid."

"What did Millie do?"

"She ran to the bed and got her purse and, well, she had a gun in it."

"Holy Jesus --" muttered Roger.

Pickett admonished him with a glance. "What sort of gun?"

"I don't know. Small, shiny -- sort of silverish."

"What happened then?"

"The man stopped laughing, I can tell you that." Amy managed a laugh of her own. "He thought she was going to shoot him, I could tell. Millie said that if he ever came around again -- that if he ever so much as looked at me she -- she . . ."

"She would what?"

Amy looked down and said, "She would kill him." Amy spoke almost in a whisper. "She said that she would squash him like a bug -- that's what she said -- like a bug, and think nothing more of it. I can still hear her. I don't know if I believed her. I'm pretty sure he did, though. He left, and I never saw him again. Except, well, you know, that time at the donut shop . . ."

"Did Millie say anything to you after he left?"

"No. I asked what was going on, but she didn't say

anything. She wouldn't say anything. She put the gun away in her purse and went to the door, like she'd forgotten I was there or something. She said that she had something to do, someplace to go, and that if that man ever came near me again I was to tell her. That was all she said." Amy paused and took a deep breath.

"It was the last time that I saw her, too. Except the next afternoon. Where I saw you."

"Why'd you go to the donut shop?"

"I don't know, really. I wanted an explanation, I suppose; I wanted to know what was going to happen -- with us, I mean, Millie and me. I demanded an explanation. Oh . . . she exploded, told me who was I to make judgments on others, who was I to . . . to decide who was worthy of love and who wasn't, when I was no better than her, what with --" Amy froze, a word half formed by her lips.

Pickett's eyes narrowed. "Why did she say that, Amy?"

"Say what?" Amy's face became hard and dumb.

"That you were no better. What did she mean?"

"I-I dunno, I mean . . . nothing. She didn't mean anything; it was just, I dunno, what she said." Amy looked to her father for help.

Roger stared back, sternly.

Amy stared at the mangled tissue in her lap. "That's all it

was. Really."

Pickett was the first to break the long silence that followed. "Go on, Amy."

"Well . . . that man came in. It's like our arguing made him come -- you know what I mean, like the last time?"

"Did she say anything to him?"

"No. I don't think either of us noticed him, I mean, who he was. She was pretty mad at me. I don't blame her, now. Then, when she saw who he was, she stopped in the middle of a sentence.

If she could have -- have squashed him then and there, I'm sure she would have. She was so mad . . . Her face . . . She was like a different person. It was scary. I-I-I had to leave. I was too confused and, well, ashamed, I guess."

"Ashamed of what, Amy?"

Amy stared down at the shredded tissue without answering.

"And you never saw either of them again?"

"No. And -- and I never will, will I? God has seen to that."

"God?" Pickett started -- then relaxed. "No, I don't think so. This particular disaster's fairly well man-made."

"Woman-made. The sins of the mother . . ."

"They've nothing to do with you, Amy. You can't feel responsible for them."

Amy smiled -- with her mouth only -- and shook her head slowly. "You don't understand, do you?" Amy turned from Pickett to her father. "Her sins are my sins, and -- and I never will see her again, will I? Not even in heaven." She turned to her father. Roger squirmed in his seat, opening and closing his mouth. Nothing came out. "Will I?" Amy's defenses fell beneath the weight of her grief and regret.

Roger Mooring crossed the room to his daughter. He urged her from her chair and into the darkness of the hall. She was swept away by a father's protective arm -- welcome, but too late.

"She was right, wasn't she?" Amy asked the hall shadows. "And God has punished her for her sins. And now -- and now he'll punish me, won't he? He'll . . . He'll . . . `For whatsoever is not of faith . . . is sin.'" She stumbled into the hall, but her father's arm held her on her feet. "She was right," Amy repeated to herself like an incantation. "I had no right . . ."

Pickett sat alone. The room had become warm and close. The stripes of light had narrowed on the floor; the dust had settled. A door shut softly on Amy's murmured chant. Pickett rose as Roger returned.

"I want to thank you, Bo, for all you've done. But I think, now, that --"

"That's what I came to tell you, Roger. There's nothing I

can do for you or Amy now. I figure that Millie musta hired Purdy to find the two of you -- Amy anyway. Millie musta thought you were still in Jacksonville, and didn't know how close you were. Anyway, something musta gone wrong. This Purdy seems to have been pretty much a low-life. He got onto something else -- what, I don't know; but it's out of our hands now. I just hope that . . . well, we'll just have to let Homer worry about that now, I guess."

"Yes, I think that's best, Bo. And . . ." Roger lowered his voice. "I'd appreciate it if you kept what I told you -- you know, about Amy's . . . well, you know -- as a confidence. I've never told anyone else, not even Amy."

"Sure. Do you know the father?"

"No. No, I don't. I never asked. Does that seem strange to you?"

"Not really. Did you -- do you have any ideas?"

"No. He brought Millie to Jacksonville, whoever he was. That's really all I know. When we were married, I knew nothing of Millie's life before she met me. I learned that later. She was very unhappy, that's all I knew. And now? Now she has succeeded in making me and Amy the same."

The two spoke about getting together again some time, and Roger told Pickett to come by and visit if he ever were in town

again. Pickett said that he would, and Roger seemed satisfied. As Pickett walked out to his car, he looked anything but satisfied.

The seat of the Nova was too hot to sit on. He opened the door and stood, staring down the street. The old bungalows sat in the heat, unmoved and unmoving. Pickett looked back over his shoulder to the Mooring's house, then dropped to the still hot vinyl and drove back to Main.

He stopped at the Gulf station on the corner, but the phone was out of order. He found a phone booth a block down next to the Winn Dixie. He dropped in two dimes.

[END CHAPTER 18]

CHAPTER NINETEEN

By the time Bodie Pickett hit I-4, sweat glued his seat and back to the vinyl.

He had telephoned for Edmund and got Annie the maid. She said that the Reverend Ayers was not at home. No, she didn't know where Master Mark was. Miss Jan was at the river house. She had gone down early that morning looking for Master Mark. Miss Jan had left a message for a Mr. Pickett, though. Miss Jan needed to speak to him -- in person. Yes, Annie thought, it was urgent. No, Annie said, there was no telephone at the river house. Yes, she was certain -- Miss Jan was expecting him. No, she couldn't tell him how to get there: "It's sommers out near

Osteen, east a Canaan. They never takes me out there." And that, her tone suggested, was just fine with her.

He turned east onto oak lined 46; then, at the Crab Shack, left towards Osteen. Gradually, the hardwoods disappeared and the savannas spread out on both sides, seething liquid and insubstantial behind the curtain of parched air that snaked up from the asphalt and roared through the Nova's windows. The dark pine scrub was barely visible on the horizon.

The Osteen bridge arched out of the green ahead, flanked by two clapboard structures of weathered cypress. The largest rose two stories and carried a battered wooden sign. PUGH'S FISH CAMP/BOAT LAUNCH/ROOMS BY THE NIGHT. The smaller structure had the largest sign, the words written in unlighted neon: PUGH'S INN. Both looked abandoned.

The river, hidden below the surface of the marsh grass, appeared as Pickett curved over the Osteen bridge and through the afternoon sun toward the opposite shore. A small cabin squatted directly to the left, slanting downstream into the shadow of a stand of palms and stunted water oaks. Beyond it, the dark humped shapes of brahma cattle dotted the grassland. Farther down river stood a ranch house with out buildings.

The Nova angled down to the eastern bank and back into the saw-grass.

The long green blades rippled in the light breeze, and beat gently on the palm groves that sprang from the marsh like islands in a tropical sea. The cabin was invisible now, hidden by the shoulder high grass that flanked the highway. A once white Ford pick-up, rust spreading up from its underbelly and wheel wells like fungus, napped on the raised shoulder. Next to it, a muddy track ran off into the grass at right angles to the highway. Pickett pulled onto the shoulder opposite and cut the engine.

The dry grass and crickets rattled in the warm breeze. Below this din flowed the low, hollow sound of a flute, as cool and insistent as an underground stream. It came from the other side of the highway.

Pickett crossed toward the path and truck. A gun rack hung with fishing rods covered the rear window. Foam rubber pushed through the worn seat-covers like distended flesh. A dirty, hard bound book lay on the passenger seat, its burgundy cover partially stained black. The dashboard sported a radio, but it was silent. The sounds of the flute drifted through the window from the high grass beyond. Pickett turned down the path in the direction of the sound and the cabin.

A grove of palms appeared above the grass; the path curved toward it. Mud became mostly water, and he skirted the path, walking as close to the saw-grass as he could manage. The blades

clung and pulled at his damp shirt, scratching his bare forearms.

Suddenly, the path cornered to the left, and Pickett found himself at the foot of a small dock, looking across the St. Johns. A rowboat slanted under the weight of an ancient trolling motor; it seemed poised for flight, as if surprised in the act of shedding its alligatored green paint. Pickett turned from the river toward the music. It stopped.

A few yards behind him and to the left was the cabin that he'd seen from the bridge -- no more than a shack leaning into the shadow of a grove of tall palms that hung over it like solicitous kin. Wide open and dark, it looked abandoned. It wasn't.

"Can a man really lack feelings?" The voice was low and liquid, like the flute.

Pickett shaded his eyes and searched the darkness framed by the open door. "Well, sure, I suppose so."

"But how?" A rhythmic creaking came with the voice. "I mean, if he's without feelings, how can you call him a man?"

Pickett walked to the dilapidated steps, and up them to the front porch. A piece of driftwood nailed to a porch pillar read, COLD MOUNTAIN, in crude white letters. The rotted wood was spongy beneath his feet. He stopped at the door and waited for his eyes to adjust. "If he looks like a man, and walks like a

man, and if he talks like a man, why not call him a man?"

"Y'see . . ." The voice seemed to come from a large form that rocked back and forth in the cool twilight of the hut. ". . . you called him man already. And if he is man, he can't be without feeling, now can he? See what I mean?"

Pickett exhaled and shook his head.

The form inside stopped rocking, stood, and emitted a soft laugh. "You try too hard, man. Life'll help itself along. Don't need you. It'll get where it's going."

Pickett stepped back as the voice stepped out into the light. "And where's that?"

"Where ever it wants, m'man, where ever it wants." He was a little shorter than Pickett, but probably fifty pounds heavier. Mostly fat. It enveloped him like a layer of insulation. He wore dirty chinos torn off at the knee and heavy work boots caked with mud. His chest was bare, hairless, and black as tar. A full black beard laced with fine spirals of grey hung to his chest. Tight coils of grey covered the top of his skull like a steel wool cap. "You got the look of the lost, m'man." A blond cat leaped down from the black man's cradling arm. The man's hand half covered a short length of bamboo, pierced irregularly with rough cut holes. He stuck the bamboo under his arm and clapped his hands sharply. The cat disappeared into the

scrub that ringed the palms. "And from the look a your face I'd say you been lost in some a the wrong places."

"You're right there. But I'm not so much lost as searching. Know where the Ayers' place is."

"Look round you, m'man, and whataya see?"

It sounded like a song. Pickett looked at the black man, half expecting him to begin singing. Deep brown eyes looked back, crinkled with good humor.

"Now, you see anybody's place?" When Pickett still didn't answer, the black man threw back his head and bellowed. He doubled over and dropped to the edge of the porch, his laughter flushing blackbirds and coots from the waters edge. "Oh my, my . . ." He wiped at his eyes. "You trying hard, man, aren't you now?"

When he'd calmed himself a bit, he stood. "Relax . . ." He draped an ebony arm over Pickett's shoulder and drew him down the steps. "This here's the Ayers' place, most everthing you see from that there bridge . . ."

Pickett glanced back at the hut, then looked a question at the fat black man next to him.

"Nah, man . . . The big house. Mile or so up river. Saw it from the bridge, most likely. I guess you'd call this'ere my place. Never seen it quite like that myself. I'm the . . ." He

paused and thought. ". . . the caretaker. Yeah. Yeah, the caretaker."

He seemed pleased with the formulation.

"Uh-huh, sorry to interrupt your care-taking. I was wondering if the Ayers were in."

"You a friend?"

"Bo Pickett," and Pickett stuck out his hand.

The black man looked at it as if it were a dead fish. He took hold of it awkwardly and smiled.

"Del Trap. Delano Trapani, really, but nobody believes it."

"Don't know why. What about the Ayers?"

"Well, ol holy Ed and the fambly's in town, I think.

Bel'aven. Aint seen them for weeks. Mizz Ayers come by this morning, though. Maybe gone up to the house. She didn't say." Del Trap looked down to the dusty ground between his boots and marked it with his spittle. He looked up. "Something I can do for you?"

"How often they use the place?"

"They? They don't use it at all." Trap winked at the thin man next to him. "They comes up mosly by themselves, know what I mean?" Trap smiled with satisfaction, like he'd just explained Einstein's theory. Apparently Pickett didn't look sufficiently enlightened. Trap explained further: "See, they don't come up

here together much -- except sometimes in the winters. Don't come no more in the summers, not since Mister Clayton -- Ed's daddy -- not since he and Mizz Marjorie was kilt. Mosly come down by themselves, now. Mizz Jan makes it, oh, I dunno, once, twice a month or so. Usely business. Sometime that Matt fella -- Matt what's-his-name -- he come down too. Anyways, the Holy Reverend gets down, maybe, oh, every other weekend." Trap winked again. "He comes down by hisself, but he aint usely alone."

"He meets someone then?"

Del Trap smiled, but he said nothing.

"What about Mark?"

"Yeah? Yeah . . . What about Mark? Massa Mark." Trap smiled, then winked. "There's hope there, know what I mean? He come down ever now an again -- by hisself, like the others. His momma and papa glad to have him outta their hair. He aint much for that holy roller shit, y'know. But then again, he aint quite sure how to get outta it neither." Trap clucked and shook his head. "The Way aint easy, m'man. Aint tall easy?" Trap scratched at his beard; then he studied his boots for awhile. He looked up slowly, his face brightening. "Y'see that don't you? Simplest things aint clear no more. We beat down them prison walls and all we find is that they the wrong walls." He smiled, spread his arms. "We's just in another cell. Bigger, maybe --

sometimes bigger, if we lucky, but a jailhouse just the same. Crazy, y'know . . . Just plain crazy." He looked up, a light in his brown eyes. "Kinda funny too, don't y'think?" Del Trap did anyway. Tremors of laughter began to rise from his round, black belly like smoke from a wood stove.

Pickett broke in: "Know Mark pretty well then?"

Trap made a gesture with his hands and shoulders, as if to say, Who knows anybody? "I sees him plenty -- or he sees me. Spends the time with me when he's here. He used t'axe questions all day long. Stopped that though."

Pickett smiled as if able to understand why.

"He can sit all day now thout a word. Nothing like that, m'man -- the quiet tween two people, the kind what comes when nothing needs be said." Del Trap stopped with another sentence on the tip of his tongue. But he closed his mouth and looked at Pickett sorrowfully. "Too bad. Too, too bad." He turned and shuffled out onto the dock.

Pickett followed. "Does he ever come with a girl?"

Trap went down on his knees and pulled a bait cage from the river. He paused for a moment, staring out into the haze, then poured flopping minnows into a plastic bucket. He picked it up, and walked back toward the cabin. Pickett stayed at the dock, following Trap with his eyes alone. Trap stopped, set the bucket

down, and turned.

"Comes on her own. Stays up to the big house."

"With Mark?"

"Nope. She aint never come when Mark's here."

Pickett pulled out the torn photo and held it up to Trap.

"This girl?"

Del Trap looked at it, then at Pickett, then back at the photo. "Could be . . . Aint seen her close up. But her hair's sort a like that -- blacker'n me." He looked at Pickett again, and grinned. "Wouldn't mind seeing the rest of that picture none, neither." He winked, then picked up the bucket and a bamboo pole that lay in the shadow of the steps. "Nah. Never seen her with Mark. Nope. Never with Mark. She only comes round when his daddy's here."

Delano Trapani shambled into the swamp grass like some great herbivore seeking refuge from the sun. Soon, only a red and white plastic float that bobbed at the end of his pole was visible above the high grass. Pickett watched it dance for a moment, then walked back to the highway. When he got to the pickup, he reached in and flipped open the book on the seat -- Burton Watson's translation of the Chuang Tzu. It smelled of fish.

Pickett looked back into the saw-grass and he laughed.

[END CHAPTER 19]

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was visible from the highway on the far side of a well grazed pasture dotted with grey stumps and an occasional pavilion of oak and palm. Cattle hunched in their shadows. The house itself was small, low and long. It faced away from the river toward the pasture, a few outbuildings, and the sun. A barbed wire fence ran along the mud drive then cut along the front of the house to a long steel gate that ran before the largest of the outbuildings. A lone brahma bull stood in the angle at the end of the drive.

As Bodie Pickett peeled himself from the seat of the Nova, the beast looked up, grey, dumb and malevolent. Pickett rattled

the screen door with his fist. It was dark inside and Pickett's eyes still squinted from the glare. Jan was at the door before he saw her.

"Oh, Bo. Thank you so much for coming. Come on in out of the sun." She padded away on bare feet, leading Pickett through the cool darkness to the back of the house and a deep screened porch. The St. Johns spread out on three sides providing a light cross breeze, warm but comparatively pleasant. An old dock lay crooked and low on the water beyond, ending in a ramshackle shed like an old duck blind. Occasional new planks striped the weathered grey green. Jan settled into an upholstered chaise longue and motioned Pickett to an aluminum lawn chair opposite. Her legs were bare and tucked beneath a short denim skirt. Her pale arms took on a bluish cast where they curved from a sleeveless plum-colored blouse. Sweat stained the thin muslin material a darker purple under her arms and between her breasts. Her body was smaller, younger than it had appeared the day before. Her face, though, was drawn. Her eyes -- wide, glassy, intense -- belied the languor of her pose. And her body hung suspended from them like a marionette. She spoke softly.

"Mark's disappeared, he -- God Lord, what happened to you?"

"Where'd he go?"

"Go? That's just it, I don't know. He left the house last

night after dinner and never returned."

"Why tell me?"

"Well, I'm afraid he's in trouble."

"Why? Lots of reasons a boy his age might stay away from home for a night --"

"But he's never done this before. Not without telling me -- us first. He's been . . ." She moved her chin through a slow arc away from Pickett and to the river. "Well, he's been very upset ever since he spoke to you."

"Look, Mizz Ayers --"

"Jan. Please."

"Jan, then. We both know that it wasn't talking with me that upset Mark."

"Whatever it was, you've taken on a certain degree of responsibility for his actions."

"How do you figure that?"

"You encouraged him in this -- this fantasy of his."

"Come on. Mark saw something that worried him. I suggested he tell the truth." Pickett wrinkled his brow. "I hope that he has."

"Yes, we spoke to Sheriff Beane. That's not what I mean. I'm talking about that Mooring child." The words were harmless enough, but the tone was ugly. "She's not suitable for him. She

will cause him -- has caused him -- nothing but trouble."

"What do I have to do with that?"

"You encouraged him in his . . . Concern. At least, he left the impression that you had."

"I was worried about Amy, sure. I still am -- for all that I can do about it. As it turns out, the concern was well placed."

"You mean the woman -- the one last night, I suppose."

Pickett nodded.

"It must have been terrible, really. To have your mother -- that's who it was, as I understand it, her mother -- to have her destroy herself in such a horrible manner."

Pickett straightened slightly, almost imperceptibly. "She was fairly well destroyed all right. But not by herself."

"Is that so?" Jan Ayers' voice was calm, but in her eyes was panic. Some desperation lurked behind the studied calm of her pose.

"She was shot in the face, actually. Like the man in the canal."

"I had -- I was under the impression that she'd done it herself. To herself, I mean. The paper said --"

"Not likely. No weapon, for one thing."

"Ah . . ." Jan Ayers raised her chin, putting a hand to her

throat. She let the hand fall, slowly, to the moist skin between her breasts. ". . . I see." She was silent then, her body still. Pearls of sweat glistened on her upper lip; the tip of her tongue slowly swept them away. She unfolded her pale legs and stretched them out before her.

Pickett looked back to her eyes, and they were on his, and no longer far away.

"But," she smiled, "in the end, we all destroy ourselves, don't we?" It was a statement of fact, not a speculation. Jan pulled up the leg closest to Pickett, bending it at the knee. The denim slid down with a slight hiss to rest, crumpled, at her hips. The white flesh of her thigh was damp, its pallor alive in the river's glare.

Pickett looked away. "Is that what Mark is up to, do you think, self-destruction?"

Jan Ayers started at the sound of Pickett's voice, as if her mind were on something else. "What?"

"You asked me here to talk about Mark, didn't you?"

"Yes. Mark . . ."

"And he's never gone off like this before?"

"Never." She stretched out her leg, and brought the other up, bent at the knee, revealing more pale skin -- and a small triangle of white lace below the folds of denim. "Mark's gone

off on occasion, but he's always come down here. And he's always told us beforehand."

"He comes down here alone then?"

"Yes, occasionally. But he seems to spend most of his time with the caretaker. Trap is his name, I think -- Delbert, Delmare . . . Something like that. I've tried to discourage Mark from seeing him, but . . ." She raised open palms to the ceiling and exhaled.

"You don't approve of Mister Trap?" Smiled Pickett.

"Approve? It's not a question of approval . . . The man's quite simply a pagan. A godless man of the worst sort. A heathen, even." The tension between the intolerance of her sentiment and the sensuality of her pose hung in the humid air between them. Jan let her head fall back to the chaise longue, let it loll toward Pickett. Then she smiled.

"And yet you employ him to take care of the place?"

"We allow him to use the house by the bridge in exchange for looking after things, yes. He's been there for years. Ever since I was a child. He went off to school at one point I think, but he had a breakdown of some kind. Never been quite -- well, right ever since. We couldn't just throw him out. Wouldn't be Christian. Not that we would want to . . . In any event, he's certainly not an employee."

"I didn't know you'd been coming here that long."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said that he'd been here since you were a child."

"Did I?" Jan exhaled slowly, then turned to Pickett, her eyes quick and cautious. "I grew up near here, actually." She paused and waited for Pickett's reaction. When he made none, she continued: "You wouldn't have guessed it, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't have guessed."

Jan relaxed; it had apparently been the right answer. "It was the other side of the bridge, but I spent a lot of time near here as a child. I didn't know this . . . Trap fellow or his family of course, but I understand that he grew up in that cabin. His father was a sharecropper on this land when it was still being worked. Celery, I think." Jan looked up self-consciously.

"Anyway, when we -- Edmund inherited this place, Trap was already here; he had the same arrangement with the Edmund's parents. He's been there alone since his Mother died, I believe.

It didn't seem, well, right just to turn him away. What with him being not quite" -- she tapped her temple softly --

"altogether." "Have you asked Trap about Mark's whereabouts?"

"Of course. He denies any knowledge of Mark. Or his whereabouts."

"When did you talk to him?"

"Just this morning. When I drove in."

"You don't sound like you believe him."

"Well, I don't. But then" -- her eyes drifted toward the river -- "what I believe, or anyone believes for that matter, is of no consequence to Satan." It was as if the tension in the air had distilled into that final word. Jan peered silently at the opposite shore, her eyes wide, but somehow blind. Her breast rose and fell in steady rhythm as, gradually, her flesh flushed pink. She leaned forward, without turning and whispered: "You -- you don't understand, do you, Bodie Pickett? You aren't a believer. You've never . . . Felt the call, have you?" She turned suddenly. "I have." Her eyes wide, expectant, she whispered: "Thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and -- and . . ."

She swung one glistening leg to the concrete floor. The other remained cocked at the knee, her skirt crumpled at her waist barely shading the cream colored lace that figured her groin. "Thou sufferest that woman Jezebel to teach, and to seduce and -- and to commit . . ." She leaned forward.

"Do you know those words?" Eyes wide and blank, she stared into the narrowing eyes of Bodie Pickett. "Blessed is he that hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things which are

written therein . . ." Jan took a deep breath; her eyes widened, a thin smile flickering nervously on her lips. "Do you hear the word of God, Bodie Pickett?"

Her breasts hung heavily, the dark centers shadowy points taut against the restraining gauze. Jan watched her own hand move to Pickett's knee as if the hand belonged to someone else. She smiled grimly, and looked up. Wide and blank, her eyes bore into the eyes of Pickett, her voice almost a growl. "Thrust in thy sharp sickle. And gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for her grapes are fully ripe . . ." She dropped to her knees. Her hands rested on his thighs. Her voice rose. "Cast them into the great winepress of the wrath of God . . ."

Pickett started to his feet.

Jan remained as she was, her hands on his thighs. "And I will kill her children with death."

Pickett's jaw dropped; he stepped backwards. The lawn chair folded back on itself, and Pickett went over on top of it. He scrambled quickly to his feet and turned back to Jan.

She stood ramrod straight, her eyes keenly focused on his, a slight smile played on her lips. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I . . ." Pickett rubbed his brow. "I hope I didn't hurt the chair."

The two of them stared mournfully at the collapsed chair.

Each seemed embarrassed by the silence. But it was Jan that spoke first.

"Thank you for coming out here, Bo." She looked at her wrist. It was bare. "I must, however, get back to Belle Haven. Preparations . . . For the Sunday Service. You understand." Her eyes wandered for a moment, confused. Then found Pickett's. "It was kind of you to come. I mean . . ." She hesitated, seemingly confused. "If you hear from Mark, please let me know."

Pickett said that he would but by the time he'd finished speaking Jan Ayers had disappeared into the cool shadows of the inner house. He found the front door on his own and let himself out into the sun. The sweat that he felt was cold.

#

The bull brahma glanced up as if surprised to see Pickett again. He blinked, the eyes glazed and fanatic.

"That there's Li-Po. Fucker's crazier'n a coot."

Delano Trapani's pick-up napped before the open door of the largest of the outbuildings. Trap emerged from the darkness and, with a grunt, tossed a bale of hay up onto the half full bed.

He pulled a large red handkerchief from his chinos and dropped to the running-board of his truck. "Think he's found the Promised Land, Li-Po does. Grazes that there spot till it's bald, then won't go no wheres else. So I toss him a bale so he

won't starve. And, y'know, that sucker just stans there grinning at the moon. Praise the Lord, he says. Manna from Heaven, he says." Trap chuckled, the sound like an old two cycle engine. "That sucker's convinced hisself he found the land of milk an' honey."

Pickett shrugged. "Maybe he has," and Pickett rested his backside against the hot steel of his Nova.

"Maybe has at that." Trap wiped his shiny black brow, then launched himself back into the barn. He reappeared with another bale of hay. He paused, tossed his head toward the house and winked a sorrowful brown eye. "Been confrencing with Our Lovely Wife?"

Pickett blew a short, silent whistle.

Trapp dropped the bale of hay and erupted into laughter so intense that he had to hold on to the side of the truck just to stay on his feet. Looking furtively toward the house, he clamped his hands over his mouth and sank onto the running board, shaking with mirth. "Jee-sus --" Trap wiped his eyes. "She's sure as hell something else."

"Yep," said Pickett sagely.

"Know what her problem is, don't ya? I mean what her real problem is?"

"Damned if I do."

"She got Yin-Yang problems. She got 'em bad."

"Aint we all," said Pickett.

"Aint it the truth," said Delano Trapani.

"Mu-wah --" said crazy Li-Po.

Trap rose, picked up the bale and threw it past the Nova to the waiting bull. Suddenly, he turned to Pickett. "Whataya doing out here, anyway."

"Wasting my time mostly."

"Lady looking for Mark, huh?"

"Yeah, among other things."

"You know it."

They both stared at Li-Po in silence.

Finally, Pickett said: "You wouldn't happen to know where he is, would you?"

"Me? Why we colut folks don know much bout --"

"Jesus, will you cut that out? You sound like Al Jolsen."

Trap looked up, jaw set, eyes narrowed. Both quickly settled into a smile. "Yeah, guess I do sometimes." He kicked at the dust with the heal of his boot. "Learnt that up at A and M. The profs figured me for uncle Tom, then, when I gets back home, my Ma calls me a comnist. Hell, caint much win like that, can I?" He made an expansive gesture with his arms. "So, I goes either way. Both ways. Depending."

"Depending on what?"

"Don't rightly know. How it come out, I guess."

Pickett shook his head, then put a hand to his forehead as if to still it. "You never answered my question."

"No? Well, now, which question you talking bout? You axe a whole heap a questions, m'man."

"About Mark -- you know where he is?"

"Well, like I told the snake lady in there, I aint seen the boy."

"But do you know where he is?"

"Why'd I know where he is?"

"You're worried about him. It must be for some reason."

"Mark don't need no reason to be worrisome." Trap nodded back to the house. "Tween those two and being seventeen, he don't need no more problems."

"Looks like he's got them, though."

"Yeah?" Trap thrust his hands deep into his chinos, turned his back to Pickett, and watched Li-Po crunching hay. "Maybe has at that."

"Why do you think he ran off?"

"Don't know he has." Trap turned. "Do you?"

"His mother does."

"Know why?"

"I might. Funny things going on over in Belle Haven. Funnier than usual anyway. Mark's mixed up in them some way or other."

"It's that girl," blurted Trap.

Li-Po stopped chewing. He looked up, straw bristling from each side of his mouth like uncooked spaghetti.

Pickett straightened. "Which girl?"

"The black-haired girl. Mark found out she been coming here." Trap looked back at Pickett, pained. "With his papa, for Chris'sake."

"Mark? You are talking about the woman in the photograph, right?" Pickett fumbled in the breast pocket of his work shirt and pulled out the torn photo. He held it up to Trap, but Trap stared past it at Pickett's face.

"Knew her? Christ, man, he like to marry her."

"Marry her? Hell, she was old enough to be his mother."

Trap wasn't listening. "I didn't know, I mean, really. I didn't know it was his girl. I mean, hell, the kid talked about her, sure, but how's I to know she's the same one? I sure as hell wouldn't a mentioned it to him if I had. Jesus fucking christ!" Trap smashed his fist against the Nova's fender, and glared at the dull white enamel. "I aint got Li-Po's sense half the time."

Pickett's face flashed white; he grabbed Trap's arm and swung the black man around facing him. "What did she look like?

I mean, you said that she was like the girl in the picture. Isn't that what you said?"

"Hey, hold on now, man." Trap's face distorted in anger. He froze; then, through force of will, softened.

Pickett released Trap's arm; but his eyes ranged nervously, he licked at his swollen lower lip. "Look --" Pickett's breath was short and shallow. "I'm sorry, but this is important. Real important. Was it the woman in the picture or not?"

"I said it could a been -- I don't know. Looked like her anyway. That same long hair. She could a been younger, though. I don't know. But Mark -- Mark like to go through the ceiling when I mentioned her name."

"Christ! You know her name?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Well what is it, man?"

"Amy. Her name's Amy. That's what Brother Ed called her anyways."

"Damn." Pickett rolled his eyes skyward. "When did you tell Mark? About Amy and his father, I mean?"

Trap's eyes narrowed, and he stepped back.

"Look," Pickett pressed, "it's important."

"To who and for what? Man, I don't know you from Malcolm X."

"For Christ's sake, when did you tell him?"

"What's it matter to you? There's a whole lot a white folk leaning on Mark right now. He don't need it -- none of it. You the fuzz?"

"Jeez --"

"What's your interest in this?"

"The girl. Her father asked me to look after her."

"Well," Trap laughed without humor, "you sure as hell been sleeping on the job."

"Come. On."

"I got my own looking-after to do. Now you get outta here." Trap stepped to Pickett and thumped the back of his hand against Pickett's chest. "And don't be fuckin' none with Mark. I aint a violent man, but I'll tell you something. That Mark, he got half a chance if you white bread fascists leave him alone. And I aim to see he gets that half chance. Now . . . You get in your Dee-troit motor there and go back to wherever you comes from."

The two glared at each other above Li-Po's mastication.

Finally, Pickett turned. He got into his Detroit motor and went back where he'd come from.

[END CHAPTER 20]

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Amy was dressed as she had been that morning, but her features had altered under the weight of recent experience. Her house coat hung open to the lavender negligé beneath, bruising her face with cool blue from the reflected glare of the sun.

"Amy . . ."

Amy neither moved nor changed her expression.

Bodie Pickett exhaled slowly. "May I speak with you for a moment, Amy?"

"Roger's at work."

"Your father?"

Amy looked at Pickett, the calm of resignation leveling her

eyes. "No, Mister Pickett, not my father. You know that. I'm not deaf, you know."

"It's you I want to talk to, anyway. It'll just take a minute. It's probably better that your father -- that Roger not be here."

Amy's eyes played on Pickett's face for a moment, then without a word Amy turned, leaving the door open, and walked into the still dark living room. Pickett shut the door, walked to the sofa, and sat down.

"Amy, I want to know what your mother really told you."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you know what I mean."

Amy dropped to a straight back chair, staring straight ahead, past Pickett, to the window. Closed venetian blinds barred it with thin bands of light.

"I wanted to be good. I . . . Can you understand that, Mister Pickett?"

Pickett looked into her eyes for a long moment. "Yes, I think I can."

Amy closed her eyes and shook her head in exasperation.

"No. No, I can't . . ."

"Amy --"

"For I know that in me" -- Amy struck her nearly bare breast

-- "in my flesh -- dwelleth no good thing." She paused to let the remark sink in. "The Apostle Paul said that. He was a good man." Amy struck her chest again. "He was talking about me."

Pickett smiled gently. "He was talking about himself, Amy. Just a man -- troubled maybe, but still just a man . . . a man who tried to figure out his life as best he could."

Amy was shaking her head even before Pickett had finished. "For the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do." Amy looked to Pickett, a need in her eyes. Their cold blues melted, and translucent greys streaked her cheeks. She raised her chin toward the tall man's face, and the grey, wet tracks glistened in the narrow light. "Do you understand now?"

"I don't know, Amy. You have to help me."

Amy paused, then looked up. "You know."

"Wha--"

"Did my mother tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Pickett's eyes were suddenly alive, his attitude wary.

"That . . ." Amy closed her eyes. She exhaled slowly, and as slowly opened her eyes once again. They focused on the floor at her feet, then rose, slowly, to the hazel eyes of Bodie Pickett. "Find out about . . . Edmund. Who told you?"

"No one, really. But I suspected. Did your mother tell you?"

"Tell me?" Amy started at the question. "Tell me what? I had to tell her."

"Wait --" Pickett paused, licking his lower lip, his brow furrowed. "Your mother . . . well, you learned from her didn't you?"

He paused and studied Amy's face; she returned the gaze, astounded. Hysteria lay behind her quick eyes; between Pickett's arched brows appeared a deep cleft. He tried again:

"About your father, your real father -- she told you, didn't she? Your mother, I mean?"

Astonishment became expectation. Amy's mouth fell. She rose slowly to her feet. "You know who my father is, don't you? Please, you must tell me!" She rose.

"You don't know? I thought your mother --"

"What? What did you think?" Amy threw herself to the sofa beside Pickett and gripped his arm with both her hands. "She didn't -- wouldn't tell me. Please, you've got to tell me. What --"

Amy suddenly loosed Pickett's arm.

"Who did you think I was talking about?" Slowly, Amy rose, her face slack. "You thought that I was talking about my father,

didn't you?" Amy leaned forward and caught the thin man's shoulder in a claw-like grip. "Didn't you!"

Pickett appeared lost.

"Oh, God . . ." she whispered, eyes wide and wild. "Oh -- my -- god. Help me!"

Pickett extended open hands to the girl. "I . . ."

Suddenly, Amy looked up and away from him, opening her mouth in a silent scream, some self-induced terror masking her features. Just as suddenly she clamped both hands to her open mouth, as if to trap the terror inside, to keep it from the world for fear that it might become part of it.

Pickett reached for her. "Amy, please --"

"Don't touch me!" Amy stepped back. "Can't you see?" She held her hands open before her staring eyes. "God help me . . . Unclean . . . else were your children unclean."

"Stop it." Pickett took Amy by her shoulders. But Amy was somewhere else.

"Their throat is an open sepulchre. With their tongues they have used deceit."

The front door opened. Rage spread across Roger Mooring's face like a rash. "You -- what are you doing?"

"Let me go!" Amy pushed Pickett off balance. Throwing a desperate glance to the man once her father, she rushed from the

room into the hall.

Roger Mooring and Pickett followed Amy with their eyes. She disappeared; a door slammed in the darkness. Roger Mooring advanced on the taller man who moved to meet him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Roger --"

"Get out of here! How dare you? What kind of man are you to come by when I'm gone and -- and attack my daughter?"

"For Christ's sake, Rog, I didn't attack her. I was trying to --"

"Just who do you think you are? You've treated me -- everybody -- like dirt all your life and now you think that you can just walk in here --"

Amy dashed in, dressed and in a hurry. Frantically, she searched the room, all the while tucking a yellow t-shirt into her jeans.

"What are you -- where are you going?" demanded Roger Mooring.

Amy pushed past him. She pulled a small shoulder bag from beneath the red jacket that still lay on the easy chair.

"Amy!" Roger cried, but Amy was already out the door.

Pickett took two steps after her before Roger caught his arm. He spun around from his own momentum and Roger threw a fist

in his face, catching Pickett below his left eye.

"God damn you!" screamed Roger Mooring, moving in as Pickett fell backwards against the kitchen partition. Pickett rolled to the side as he hit the wall, and Roger smashed into it, pinned against the rough plaster by Pickett who rolled back on top of him.

"God damn you --" Roger screamed into the wall. "Who do you think you are? Coming in here --"

"Stop it!" hollered Pickett into Roger Mooring's ear.

The yelling stopped. Roger began to sob. Pickett pulled away. Roger's legs folded under the weight of his body. He slid to the floor and curled up with his knees to his chin. Through his sobs, Roger Mooring spoke. But he spoke to himself, and in tones indecipherable save for one word. Amy.

As Pickett came down the steps of the Mooring house for the second time that day, Amy's VW turned east on Main. By the time he had his Nova on the road, the blue VW was nowhere to be seen.

Pickett hesitated for a moment at the corner of Main, then headed east; he drove as if sure of his destination.

#

The Friday traffic was heavy, and, with the heat, mean. Pickett made good time nonetheless.

A blue speck curved over the Osteen bridge as Pickett was

still a good mile away. Half a minute later, he pushed his Nova up the same grade. The Ayers' house was just visible through the late afternoon haze; a thinning trail of dust connected it to the highway. The Nova reached the Ayers' drive before Pickett knew it. He hit the brakes hard and went into a skid that left him broad side to the road. Throwing the transmission into reverse and then into first, he returned the twenty yards to the Ayers' turnoff.

As the Nova's front wheels left the asphalt, the blue VW skidded in front of it and slammed sideways into the front bumper, throwing Pickett's forehead against the steering wheel. Pickett looked up into a blue-brown haze of dust and steam. He heard the VW's engine rev, and the transmission grind. Through the haze, Amy was barely visible, wrestling furiously with the gear shift.

Pickett pushed open the door and stepped out onto legs made of rubber. He collapsed into the dust just as the VW's gears meshed; the blue bug lurched forward and skidded onto the blacktop, its rear wheels spinning like broken flywheels. An image of Amy flashed past, her head thrown back from the sudden acceleration, her mouth twisted in a death's-head grin.

As the VW swerved back toward the bridge, Pickett grabbed hold of the Nova's open door and pulled himself up. He stumbled

out onto the highway. Amy's blue car zigzagged down the quarter mile stretch to the bridge. Pickett half trotted, half staggered down the hot asphalt after her.

The VW moved in fits and starts. The brake lights flashed irregularly until the car shuddered to a halt not more than a hundred yards from the bridge. Pickett yelled. The sound was lost in the vastness of the savannah.

The black smoke came first, then, as if in answer to Pickett's cries, came the shrill squeal of her tires. The bug jumped forward, accelerating up the grade. Pickett screamed now, and sprinted dead out for the bridge. His cries were lost beneath the VW's laboring engine.

As he reached the smoke, Pickett pulled up, winded. He breathed hard, bent at the waist, his hands on his thighs, filling his lungs with the dry heat, and the stench of burned rubber. Amy's VW crested the bridge. The right front tire struck the curb, skidded across the walkway climbing the guard rail. The rear wheels bit into the concrete and drove the front end high into the air. When only the left rear wheel touched the pavement, the rail gave way. The blue bug hurtled into open air, falling in a slow, shallow arc like a discarded match box toy thrown to the hazy grey water below, hitting the water with a thud, its wheels to the sky.

Grey blossomed white. Poised momentarily on the surface while the curtain of spray hissed down around it, Amy's VW fell suddenly beneath the foam in a rush of compressed air. Time slowed to the tempo of nightmare. Pickett's limbs pumped to the pilings at the river's edge. The slow fall of the little blue car repeated itself as if in some comic replay as Pickett belly-flopped into the warm river. He was an engine now, a machine without purpose or intent other than to arch one arm over the other and suck in the hot, wet air. His eyes, glancing high above the river, curved down in a slow fall toward death, and his body raced to meet them.

Cutting through concentric rings of waves toward the point of impact, he stopped only once, to pull what remained of the gauze wrapping from his right hand. The water writhed with rainbow hues as Pickett sliced through an expanding slick of oil and gas to the center of the circle. He kicked himself high above the water, pulling in air, then jack-knifed at the waist, kicked his feet into the air, and followed Amy down into warm, grey water. Quickly, it was cold and black.

He pushed downward through the dark, following the tendrils of bubbles that wound up from the depths like particles of light escaping from the wreck back to the world above. A grey smudge in the darkness below became pale blue; the VW had righted itself

on the way to the bottom. The doors, sprung open like vestigial wings, flapped vainly in the swirling currents created by its descent. Amy's car bobbed awkwardly, its rear wheels sunk in the mud, its nose inclined toward the surface, suspended above the bottom by some hidden fragment of weightless upper air. With cheeks puffed and eyes almost swollen shut by the pressure behind them, Pickett reached for the door jam and pulled, thrusting himself into the driver's compartment; it was empty -- save for miscellaneous debris and a pocket of air trapped in the concave ceiling. Pickett pressed his nose and mouth into the musty fabric and inhaled deeply. His lungs expanded with new air and the fragrance of a young woman. He pushed himself from the wreck through the opposite door and squinted up toward the surface light.

Amy hung suspended above him in silhouette, her limbs limply extended as if frozen in free fall. Silver bubbles like pearls trailed up around her black image, then slanted to the surface and a vanishing point in the upper air. Pickett coiled on the roof of the VW and pushed. He pulled against the water, toward Amy and the light. A curtain of black hair covered her face, the individual strands spreading out in all directions from her head like a halo. Pickett caught his right arm under Amy's chin, pulled her head toward his body and kicked for the surface.

It wasn't far, and though the shore was, the shock of the hot, dry air on Pickett's face seemed to revive him, driving him on. And when he reached the wet sand beyond the pilings, he dragged Amy from the water and gently laid her on the warm earth.

Shivering, Pickett knelt, brushing sand and strands of ebony hair from her face.

Half closed and unseeing, Amy's eyes stared into the setting sun, her mouth open as if about to reveal some secret that her eyes had found there. And though her face, cleansed of makeup, was that of a child, the wet cotton clung to her small round breasts and the fullness at her hips, and she seemed suddenly the woman she had strained to become. As the light receded, a siren cried in the distance. And in the extended shadows, Amy's eyes seemed to close in sleep, and the pale, cold skin of Amy's face glowed rosy in the final colors of the day. Pickett knelt there for a very long time, his face as blank as Amy's eyes.

Gradually, the shadows lengthened. Bodie Pickett sank to the ground, the lifeless form that he had pulled from the river now his shadow. And he put his head down on the warm sand and closed his eyes and sank slowly back into the darkness from which he'd pulled Amy -- or that lifeless thing that once was Amy -- as if in search of the life that had escaped him there.

[END CHAPTER 21]

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"This one's alive, I think."

"Shoot. That boy's too goddamn dumb to get himself killed -- takes half a brain for that."

"Got more guts than brains, I guess."

"Maybe so. Maybe so . . ." Homer Beane nudged Del Trap aside and hung, heavy, above Pickett. "Well now, boy, you like to take the long way home that time."

"Amy . . ."

"Calm down now, son. You done all you could." Homer laid a hand on Pickett's forehead and pressed it back to the ground.

"When someone wants to die, there aint no stopping them. You

just rest a spell, now. Doctor'll be here in a minute. Plenty of time --"

"Sheriff!"

"For Chris'sake, Skeeter --"

"Franklin's here with Mooring."

"Shoot!" Homer pulled himself up, hitched up his trousers and lumbered off toward the bridge. "Let's get it over with. God damn," he muttered to Trap as he passed, "I hate this."

Trap's brow was knit, but not with concern. He cocked his head and looked at Pickett from the corners of his brown eyes.

"Whydya do that?"

"That? . . . that what?" Pickett slowly pushed up to his elbows, rubbed his eyes.

"Go in after'er like that. There weren't no use in it. Damn near kilt yourself, too."

"Why?" Pickett repeated stupidly. "I dunno."

"Can't figure you, man . . ."

The rest was lost, covered by a cry that sounded from the highway. Pickett looked down at the dark shape that lay next to him as if the sound had come from Amy. What once was Amy. He blinked and looked back over his shoulder.

Roger Mooring struggled down the sandy shoulder to where Pickett sat. Homer had hold of his upper arm, half restraining

him, half supporting him. He was speaking to Roger. Roger reiterated the cry as he staggered toward the body that lay next to Pickett: "No!"

"Wait for the doctor," Homer was saying. "You don't want to see her like that. Roger --"

"Let go!" Roger shouted.

Homer stepped back as Roger's fist fanned his face. Roger stumbled to the limp form next to Pickett and stopped. He looked down with his mouth loose, his eyelids heavy, the eyes beneath them momentarily losing focus. He dropped to his knees. "Amy," he whispered, "don't go. Don't leave me, Amy." His voice held neither desperation nor tension. Only gentleness. Roger buried his face in the wet sand filled hair and pulled Amy's shoulders onto his lap. "It's okay," Roger whispered. "It's all right, now. Daddy's here, don't you worry." Roger Mooring huddled above the lifeless face like a thunderhead above a grey winter landscape. He rocked it in his arms.

A siren sounded from the far side of the river. The flashing lights moved smoothly toward the bridge, while their doubles glittered through the lazy ripples of the St. Johns toward some more obscure destination.

Pickett rose awkwardly to his feet. He stepped toward Roger, but Homer pulled at Pickett's sleeve and motioned him back

toward the highway.

"Let him be." Homer's face darkened in the last light of the day. "Won't make no difference to her."

Pickett didn't move. "How'd you get here?"

"That nigra fella, Trap. He lives hereabouts. Saw Amy . . . saw the car go over. Gave the office a call. Roger'd already called; said we ought a stop her. Didn't pay no attention, though. Rog been calling me about Amy everyday for the last couple of weeks. Anyways, when that Trap fellow described the car I was afraid maybe Roger was right this time. So . . ."

Homer shook his head. "Should a listened to him, I guess. Hell, you can't though. You can't go traipsing off after every god damn . . ."

He stopped, unable to take his objection seriously.

He looked at Pickett. "Why'd she do it, you got any idea?"

Pickett told the sheriff about Millie's mother, and about Amy's visits to Edmund. He did not tell Homer what, inadvertently, he had told Amy.

"Ed's always had an eye for the ladies, the younger the better. But he's always been, well, careful, y'know what I mean?"

They knowed what they was doing I figured, and it weren't no business of mine. Anyhow, I figured it'd catch up with him eventually. Anyone in the public eye like that. I dunno . . ."

Homer pulled at the loose skin on his neck. "I never figurd him

for . . . well, I guess I just never figured this."

Pickett didn't ask what this referred to, and Homer didn't explain. "Looks like Purdy might've had a hook in him."

Homer raised his chin and squinted up at the other. "You watch it now, boy. You let me do the thinking. I'll get to the bottom of this, don't you worry none about that. But I don't need no loose talk. There's been too much talk already, boy. I hope you understand that. You do understand that, don't you, boy?"

Pickett ignored both the words and the tone. "Think Kemp's involved?"

"God dammit --" Homer thrust a stubby finger at Roger Mooring. "Ain't that enough for you? Aint you helped about enough, Mister ex-big-city-cop?"

The ambulance screamed down the bridge and shuddered to a stop on the shoulder. Its doors flew open and disgorged two attendants with a stretcher. They ambled down to the beach and glanced a question toward Homer. He still glared at Pickett, his unanswered question answered by the low drone of Roger's voice. Finally, Homer turned to the white-shirted attendants and shook his head.

"Aint no hurry, boys. She aint going nowheres." The repetition of his grizzly joke seemed to catch Homer unawares.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then walked to Roger.

Roger let the body slide slowly down his thighs as Homer pulled him to his feet. He looked at Homer, then glanced back down with surprise, almost astonishment. "That can't be Amy." He looked desperately to Homer. Then to the attendants. When his eyes came to Pickett's, they hardened and froze. "What have you done with her." Roger took a step toward Pickett, Homer Beane hanging on one arm. "Where's Amy? Where's my daughter?" There was hate in his eyes. "God damn you --" Roger pulled at Homer's restraining hands like a rabid animal.

"Skeeter!" called Homer.

Skeeter rushed down the grade and grabbed Roger's other arm. Anger welled up in Roger's face, and curses poured from his mouth like sour wine.

Pickett stepped toward him, an open hand extended. Roger hawked and spat, but the tall man ignored it. He stopped close before Roger and took Roger's struggling hand. Roger settled slightly, his face still red, but the words stilled.

"Roger . . ." Pickett moved a step closer. "Roger, look, I'm sorry."

The words hit Roger like a bucket of cold water. His knees buckled and he hung by his supported arms. All the anger and hate washed from his eyes, drenching his cheeks with a torrent of

pent up grief and regret. "I'm sorry," Roger sobbed, as if Pickett's words had been his own. "Oh Amy, I'm so sorry."

Homer let him back down onto the sand as the attendants loaded the body onto their stretcher. Roger followed as they carried the stretcher to the ambulance; he climbed in after the body without a word. Before the attendants could close the door, Homer Beane jogged to the back of the ambulance and climbed in with Roger.

The siren burst to life with the engine, but a flick of the driver's finger choked it off in mid cry. The ambulance accelerated back over the bridge and into the deepening night. Skeeter stood, one foot on the asphalt, one on the shoulder, and watched as it went. "Sure as hell something funny goin' on round here . . ."

Pickett headed down the highway in the opposite direction -- toward the Ayers' place and his Nova. By the time he got there, he was running.

[END CHAPTER 22]

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Nova's dash said ten o'clock. Lights were on in the Ayers' house, but Bodie Pickett beat on the door steadily for several minutes before Matt Cheatham opened it. Matt looked like he'd just walked out of a department store window.

"Mister Pickett, I believe?" Matt glanced blankly over Pickett's drip-dried clothes as if to underscore the question mark in his voice.

"I'd like to talk to Edmund."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. Reverend Ayers is indisposed." He made it sound like a rare tropical disease for which he alone possessed the cure.

"I'd still like to speak to him."

"I see. Would you wait here, please?"

"No --" Pickett stepped around Matt into the paneled hall.

"-- but I will come in."

In the bright light of the hall, Matt looked frayed. Whatever he'd been at, he'd been at since the morning. His mullet eyes stared red through horn rims not quite straight on his nose, his beard cast a five o'clock shadow on his chin. His suit gave uncharacteristic evidence of having been lived in -- though his mask-like pallor suggested that if it had, it had been by someone else.

"I see." Matt closed the door on the dark. "Do come in. Edmund's resting, but I'll tell him you're here." He walked past Pickett, stopped, and turned. "Do I dare suggest that you wait?" His lips flattened against his teeth, parting to reveal them.

"I'll wait."

"Thank you," he said blandly, then disappeared into the large room at the end of the hall where the party had been two nights before.

Pickett shivered at his own damp clothes and the air-conditioning. He winced as he did, supporting his right hand gently in his left.

"Good Lord, Bo, what happened to you?" Jan Ayers was

dressed in the manner of her morning visit to the boat house. She waited for Pickett to respond; when he didn't, she whispered: "She's dead, isn't she?" Soft and sad, her words spoke concern -- but without the participation of her eyes.

"She destroyed herself."

Jan didn't acknowledge the quote. She gestured toward Pickett's damp clothes. "What happened?"

"I went in after her."

Jan opened her mouth in response, but it was a moment before she spoke. "Amy was beside herself when she came to the house -- incoherent, really. I heard a noise at the end of the drive -- "

"I tried to stop her."

Jan raised her brows; Pickett raised his and frowned.

"But I couldn't. Didn't, anyway."

Jan nodded. "I went to the window in time to see her, well, go over. It was horrible." But there was no horror in her face, only a question -- a question directed toward Pickett. His eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly.

"You made pretty good time back here."

"I was on my way out when she came. I didn't see any use in my stopping. I mean, the police were already there. You understand . . ."

Pickett smiled with one corner of his mouth. "What did Amy

want?"

"She wasn't making much sense. That she wanted to see Edmund was about all I could understand." She paused, self-conscious, then added quickly: "She was upset, of course."

"Of course." Pickett's voice was as blank as his face. "What did you tell her?"

"Tell her? Why -- that Edmund wasn't there. What else would I have told her?"

"That was my next question."

Jan paused, put anger on her face, then, as quickly, removed it. "Really, Bo, there's no need for us to quarrel. Come, sit down, and let's talk." Jan took Pickett's arm and propelled him gently toward the door at the end of the hall.

The room seemed smaller without all the people. It was sparsely but softly furnished in white and pastel blue. Long shadows fell across the white shag carpet and white modular furniture as though across a snowbound city. Edmund sat on the far side of the landscape, deep in a square white armchair. The lines and hollows of his face were deeply etched with shadow from the high pole lamp behind and above him that provided the only light in the room. Edmund was half dressed -- dress shirt open, tie unknotted at his neck -- and looked only half alive. An empty glass moved with his hand. A decanter on the low glass

table beside him contained an inch of amber liquid. Its crystal stopper lay beside it refracting the light from the lamp onto the white carpet. Edmund looked up as his wife and Pickett entered, then further up to Matt who hung above him like a second shadow.

Matt's face fixed on Jan's with icy intensity.

Edmund's words shattered the strained silence like a stone fine crystal: "She looked so like her." His tongue was thick and his stare vacant. "So like her . . ."

"Who?" said Bodie Pickett.

"Who?" said Edmund Ayers.

"Really, now," cut in Matt, "You can see that he is -- "

Pickett ignored Matt. "Who?"

"Why . . . Amy." Edmund looked at Pickett in astonishment.

"It was like none of this ever happened." He made a broad lazy gesture, and, in the process, backhanded the decanter next to him. It clattered to its side on the glass. A small pool of gold liquid formed, casting a grey double on the carpet beneath.

Jan produced a handkerchief and knelt next to Edmund; she dabbed at the puddle. It seemed suspended in mid air. The stopper had rolled to the floor, and the rainbow was gone.

Edmund watched Jan uncomprehendingly. "I don't understand. I just don't . . . understand. The Lord gave me another chance -- another Millie; then . . ." He gestured languidly with a limp

wrist. "I-I just don't understand. I didn't know. . . ." His hands lifted toward Pickett, palms up, as if to complete the thought; then he leaned forward, no longer talking to himself. "I didn't know . . . that. I didn't." Edmund Ayers looked to Pickett for confirmation -- or consolation.

Pickett offered neither.

Edmund's hands dropped to his sides, and he sank back into the white cushions looking to his wife. "Jan knew. Jan knows everything." He showed his teeth.

"Now Edmund, you don't know what you're saying." Jan spoke to him as if to a child. She rose and brushed the hair off his damp brow. "You need your rest, dear. You're not used to -- "

Edmund struck angrily at Jan's hand. "Don't you touch me." Jan froze, her hand in midair above his head. "Don't either of you ever touch me." He didn't mean Pickett; in fact, he seemed to have forgotten that Pickett was there.

But Matt and Jan hadn't. Their eyes dueled above Edmund's head. Edmund appeared to revel in the battle.

"You didn't want me to know, did you. You let me . . . let me . . ." Edmund sank deeper and deeper into his chair. "Just so you -- just so the Temple could . . ."

"Mister Pickett," cut in Matt, "I think that you have done

just about enough meddling -- "

"Oh, that's good." Edmund Ayers's mouth twisted into a grotesque smile. "Meddling. Oh that's good, Matt." Edmund's laugh was more a cough. His eyes moved once again to Pickett. "Maybe we could do with a bit of meddling around here, maybe Bo would like to hear how -- "

Suddenly, Edmund's eyes started from his pink face. They focused over Pickett's shoulder. He threw out one arm, palm open, toward the hall door as if parrying a blow. "No! I didn't know!"

Pickett whirled around.

Black in the doorway, back-lit by the bright hall lights, stood Roger Mooring.

"You killed Amy!" he bellowed, his right arm raised toward Edmund, something small and black in his trembling hand.

Pickett lunged toward Roger's extended arm. His broken hand struck cold metal as Roger's pistol exploded. He was on his feet again by the time Roger had brought the gun back to level. Pickett lowered his head and rushed in under the pistol; Roger grunted as Pickett sunk a pointed shoulder into his chest. The gun flew from Roger's hand, thudding to the floor in the middle of the room. Pickett's arms locked around Roger's chest, and the two men tumbled to the floor. Roger pummeled the top of

Pickett's skull with his fists, rolling Pickett back and forth on top him as Matt and Jan rushed toward the gun. With the second explosion, Roger went limp.

Pickett threw himself off Roger and scrambled to his feet.

Matt stood by the chair in which Edmund had been sitting, the gun in his hand. The chair was on its side, the glass table next to it broken in half by Edmund's body. Chin on his chest, his head against the wall, Edmund lay in the V of the shattered table. The small spot on the left side of his forehead as well as the wall behind him were red. Jan stood in the center of the room, both hands to her neck looking from Pickett to Matt. Matt spoke first:

"I didn't want to hurt you." Matt looked from Roger's gun to Pickett.

Roger stumbled to his feet as if only then sure that he hadn't been shot. Both his gaze and his legs were unsteady. He put a hand to his head and dropped to his knees huddled like a vagrant in an empty doorway. He began to cry.

"I fired into the chair." Matt pointed the gun to a small black hole in the arm of the upturned chair; then the gun moved toward Roger. In a voice as cold and hard as his eyes, Matt said: "He killed Edmund. He . . ." His voice now registered astonishment. "Edmund's dead."

"That bastard killed my Amy," burst Roger, then quickly subsided back into incoherence.

Matt stared at Roger, his face like stone. Slowly, he raised the gun.

"No, Matt. Let's call it even, huh?" Pickett stepped toward Matt who moved only his eyes. They went to Jan's. "Let me have it." Pickett extended his hand toward Matt; both Matt and Jan stared at Pickett's hand. It glistened sodden and red in the half-light. A black shadow spread on the white carpet beneath it. Pickett's eyes followed theirs.

Pain crumpled his face; he dropped to the white sofa cradling his right arm.

Matt lowered the gun, walked past Edmund, around Jan's rigid body, and to the phone. Roger hunkered next to it, sobbing on the floor where he'd fallen.

"Nine-one-one? . . . Yes, it is. . . ."

Matt looked to Pickett. His face said nothing. The pistol hung at his side. His voice was small above Roger's sobs, and calm.

Jan stood silently, her face turned from the light.

From across the room, Edmund grinned idiotically at the two of them, as if embarrassed by his gaudy red halo.

[END CHAPTER 23]

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Well, son, it aint pleasant, but then neither's murder. Look, the manager eye-dee'd him, for pete's sake. She seen him with the gun over the body, she seen him hanging around once or twice before. It aint pretty, and it aint nice, and I wish to hell it was somebody else, but --"

"Why, Homer, why? That's what I wanna know."

"It was the girl. It was because of Amy. Roger didn't help that none, neither. But I guess he's gone pay for it now, all right. Anyway, Amy don't want nothing to do with Mark anymore, so he follows her, finds she's seeing this woman and --"

"That's a motive? Come on, Homer --"

"Then the Purdy fella comes into the picture. He goes by the Ayers' house, right? And Mark overhears him -- we know he saw him come. And what does he learn? That this woman's not only Amy's mother, but she got something on his daddy that'd mess him over but good."

"You're reaching."

"Damn straight I am. Now just shut up for half a second." Homer stared at Bodie Pickett for a moment while his face colored. "I don't need to prove nothing to you. Shoot, I don't even need to talk to you, so just shut up and listen."

"I second the motion," said a small black man who fussed over Pickett's damaged hand; it was the intern who'd wrapped it the day before. "Either you stay still or you'll not only have a crooked hand, but one with a hole in it." He smiled at Pickett from under a droopy black mustache and jerked a thread through the ragged gash.

Pickett jumped.

The intern chuckled.

Sheriff Homer Beane said: "Listen, it aint so far fetched." He counted off on his thick fingers. "First, Purdy. The guy could destroy his father. Then Millie. She could not only destroy Edmund, but might take Amy away -- did, in fact, far as Mark was concerned."

"Sure, it's an adolescent's nightmare. But it's hardly motive for murder. Come on, Homer . . ."

"I seen a hell of a lot worse."

"Sure, but that's it. If Mark had shot Purdy on the spot, maybe. Or if he'd had it out with Millie in some jealous rage. But these weren't like that. The murderer lured each to an isolated spot, then executed them. There's nothing impulsive in that. Anyway, what about the gun?"

"We'll find it when we find Mark."

"I mean how'd he get it?"

"Piece a cake, you know that."

"For a kid like Mark? Come on. You know the circles he runs in."

"Yeah, and I know the circles I been running in for the last couple days mostly cleaning up after you. And I been at it long enough to know where it's gonna end. We got a witness --"

"To what? All you got is someone who might've seen Mark at the scene of the crime --"

" -- we got motive, we sure as hell got opportunity, and we got a match on the murder weapon."

Pickett looked up sharply. "Same gun?"

"Yup. Same gun -- both Purdy, and Millie Moses. Or Ayers -- or whatever-the-hell name she was going by."

"Okay. But the gun, it belonged to Millie." He told Homer Amy's story of the confrontation between Millie and Purdy. "And she described the gun the same way your witness did."

"That's chicken-shit, boy. The woods're full of silver automatics -- ladies purses, anyways. You can get them about anyplace but a Wheaties box. Anyways, it don't matter. We got everything we need. Opportunity, motive --"

"Hell, Homer, you want motive, why not nail Mark for shooting Edmund. Christ, he wasn't there, but at least he had a motive." Homer Beane stepped toward Pickett and pushed the intern aside.

"We got three murders and two suicides in Belle Haven since you come back. Your goddamn big nose caused two of those. You killed your daddy yourself as sure as if you pulled that trigger, and since you can't face that fact -- and lemme tell you, boy, it's sure as hell a fact -- you go stirring up people you got nothing to do with, and one kills herself and the other kills somebody else and I'd say you done just about enough for Belle Haven. And the Moorings."

Pickett opened his mouth to speak, but Homer cut him off.

"Now I come down here to get your statement, that's all. If it weren't for your daddy -- for J.B. who was bout the best friend I ever had or hope to have . . . Well, I wouldn't even be

talking to you bout this. Now it's all over. We're gone find Mark and he's gone have to answer for what he done. And you're gonna go home. And that's somewheres else, boy, not here. And then you can answer to your own self bout what you done and what you dint do. Shoot, by all rights you're as guilty as -- as --"

He looked wildly around the room as if for the word he couldn't find. When he failed to find it, Sheriff Homer Beane jammed his hat back on his head, wheeled around, and marched out of the room, his big boots clattering down the tiled hall. His voice echoed from the reception lounge down the hall: "God dammit, Skeeter . . . Get off your shaggy ass!"

The black man chuckled self-consciously. "Ol' Homer's never been one for diplomacy." He tied off the thread with a flourish, and delicately transferred Pickett's hand to a redheaded nurse for wrapping. "That's why they keep electing him. Everybody always knows what's on his mind." He leaned back against the white wall and pulled a stick of gum from his white jacket and popped it into his red mouth. "You wouldn't think that people'd worry about that sort of thing out in the sticks, but they do."

Pickett's nurse tossed her red head toward the black man. "Listen t'him. Guy's from Cleveland. Do you believe it?" She had a few years on the young intern, and even more miles.

"Now Martha . . ." said the black man obviously enjoying himself. "I'm about to make a profound analysis of small town life."

"Ugh." Martha looked disgust at Pickett. "Guy comes from Cleveland to bring us poor crackers outta the stone age. They still wear bones in their nose in Cleveland, Doctor?"

The intern proceeded with mock solemnity: "People like me come to a small town to get away from the city, to have a private life. But what we find is that the city's the only really private place. Nobody cares what you're doing or when your doing it. But in a small town, say, Belle Haven for instance --"

"Right," smirked Pickett's redhead.

" -- In a town like this everybody wants to know what you're doing and when you're doing it and who you're doing it with. Or to."

"Watch your mouth now, Doctor."

"And that's how Sheriff Beane fits in, see? Everybody's dirty secrets are safe because, if they're still secret, Homer doesn't know anything about them, and, hence, he doesn't believe them when he does find out. See?" He was talking to Pickett now. "You can't just live on the surface in a small town."

Pickett smiled. "You lost me, Doc."

"Look," pushing himself from the wall, "you have to live on

the surface, sure, you need a life to show everybody else, but you have another life underneath, a life that supports the other, that's lived behind the façade."

"Jeez --" The redhead rolled her eyes.

Pickett wrinkled his brow above the smile. "Yeah, so?"

The intern shrugged. "So nothing, I guess. It's just that nobody else seems to notice. Know what I mean? Everyone pretends that things are the way they seem. Everyone acts as though their lives are private, but in a town like this --" He gestured expansively to complete the thought. "So, I guess motives get very complicated, that's all. Motives for anything."

"You're telling me," muttered Pickett's nurse as she finished smoothing out the plaster on his wrist.

The black man took it as a request: "I mean, everyone's got two lives -- at least two lives. How many motives they got?" He chuckled then goosed Pickett's redhead. "But we aint gotta worry about that, Martha, do we?"

Martha swore under her breath as the intern disappeared into the hall.

"There." Martha presented Pickett his hand as if it were a bottle of rare wine. It was as white and hard as the emergency room lights. "Don't pay no never mind to him. Two lives . . . Lord, I'm lucky enough to squeeze out one most days. You take

care a that hand now, y'hear?"

Pickett told her that he did and would. Then he tailed her to the reception desk where he took care of the bill.

Though it was the dead of night, the air was still warm. Skeeter had delivered Pickett's Nova to the hospital lot. Pickett slipped behind the wheel as if into a hot bath. He headed toward town.

"Two lives . . ." He smiled and shook his head. But the smile slowly straightened, and Pickett's eyes widened beneath a crinkled brow. He stomped on the brakes and pulled off onto the sandy shoulder. For a long while, he sat there in the same attitude. Suddenly, his face cleared, his jaw set. He U-turned off the shoulder and headed back to 17-92.

[END CHAPTER 24]

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Bodie Pickett breasted the Osteen bridge again at 3 a. m. by the Nova's dash.

Del Trap's place was dark.

Farther down river at the Ayers' house one window glowed dimly.

Pickett cut his lights as he passed Del Trap's pick-up and parked in the saw grass a few hundred yards beyond. He fished Tom's revolver out from under his seat. The dark crackled with night sounds -- crickets, frogs, the buzz and whine of hungry mosquitoes. They covered Pickett's footfalls as he skirted the swamp grass up the Ayers' drive and sprinted to the side of the

house.

He peered into a dark bedroom that opened onto another room lit by a small table lamp. A leather easy chair stood next to the lamp with its back to the window. A thick male forearm hung over the side of the chair swirling ice cubes in a highball glass. The arm didn't belong in that house.

Headlights swept across the yard.

Pickett dropped to the ground behind a rangy hibiscus.

A car pulled up to the front door.

Pickett crept to the back of the house and into the shadow of the azaleas that ringed the screened porch. Double doors opened onto it from the living room. The aluminum lawn chair that he'd upset the previous morning glinted in the secondhand light. A moment later, Ralph Kemp's shadow enveloped it like a shroud.

Kemp stood with his back to Pickett, masking the man who'd taken Kemp's place in the armchair. Kemp was a little drunk, and a lot worried. He gestured with the highball glass, sloshing whiskey on the oriental rug. Kemp wheeled around suddenly and stepped onto the porch: "God damn amateurs."

Pickett dropped to the scrubby grass.

Kemp stopped a yard from him on the other side of the screen. He turned back to the living room. "I'll tell you one thing, pal. There aint gonna be no more after this one unless

you take care of your end. Christ, what the hell's going on up there, anyway?"

The other man raised his voice: "We can't be held responsible for -- "

"Look, I'm delivering good shit -- "

"And getting a fair return."

Pickett's mouth turned up at the corners. The voice belonged to Matt Cheatham.

"This fucking blood bath wasn't part of the bargain." Kemp grunted as he dropped to the chaise longue that Jan had occupied earlier. "I got cops climbing up my ass for the last two days, man. And I keep thinking to myself, over and over again how what a coincidence it is that those two stiffs both worked for me." The chaise creaked as Kemp turned. "Sort a sounds like a frame, don't it?"

Matt was silent, but his footsteps sounded on the porch floor. Kemp rattled his ice cubes nervously. "Whattaya think, pal?"

"We're in business, Ralph. We work the odds. What odds would you give us if we turned on you?"

"Fuckin' short."

"Exactly. Don't you suppose I'm intelligent enough to see that?"

"Yeah, you're smart all right. A regular smart ass." Not even Kemp laughed. "Icing them two was just plain fuckin' stupid. If I'd wanted them dead, I could a fixed it so's nobody would even find them, much less connect them up with me. Sounds like amateur night shit to me." Kemp pulled spittle to his tongue with a rasping sound. He spit on the floor. "Sounds like some smart ass stuck his pecker in the wrong hole is what it sounds like to me."

"I hope you don't mean to imply that I -- that we had anything to do with those killings." Matt paused, then added smoothly: "What could we possibly hope to gain?"

"You aint gonna gain shit, cause the cops'll be all over us both till some fucker fries. You got that, Mister Brain? And I'll tell you one thing for goddamn sure, I aint gonna hang for nobody, least of all for you crazies. Christ, I ought a be strung up just for getting mixed up with you morons."

"Nobody will fry for anything if we stick to our bargain. You can't hold me responsible for the action of some homicidal maniac."

"It aint that Mooring clown that bothers me. It's that kid, what's-his-name --"

"Mark."

"Yeah. Christ, that kid aint got enough balls to wipe his

ass without his mommy's say-so. You really think he hit those two up in Belle Haven? Who you kidding?"

"The police seem to think that he did it."

"And you're so smart you think that let's us off, huh?"

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"That means I think we got major-league problems if they turn that kid. Where is he?"

"I've no idea. He dropped out of sight a day or two ago."

"You best not be shitting me, cause if that kid's found you're the one got the big problem."

"If you mean to imply that --"

"Come off it, for Chris's sake. I don't know what sorta shit's going down up there, and I couldn't care less long as it don't interfere with business. But don't you play Mister Clean with me. If you wanna set that kid up, it's ace with me, but that kid hangs around here a lot. Stays up there with that shine, what's-his-face --"

"Trap isn't a problem. He has an easy life here and isn't about to jeopardize it."

"Yeah, well what if that kid's a tad more curious, what then? And maybe it just won't be business that he talks about."

"Look, I've had just about enough of these innuendos. The victims were, as you yourself admitted, associated with you, not

us. For all I know, you killed the both of them and set up Mark."

"You fucking --"

"And frankly, I don't care. But, if you're planning to make trouble for us, remember that if you reveal our . . . our business relationship to the police -- or anyone else for that matter -- you will simply provide yourself with a motive, which, of course, is all the police would need to -- to have you fry, as you put it. So I'd advise you not to threaten me."

"Yeah, well, I'd advise you to find some other source till this blows over. The shipment tonight's the last."

"We made a bargain. I've kept my end and I -- we -- expect you to keep yours. We have cash-flow problems at the moment and need continuous supply."

"Yeah, well you better have your problems some other time of the month, honey. And your cash best flow tonight or you'll be getting more than a few kee's for your --"

"Look," Matt sighed, "this is getting us nowhere. Now, when's the shipment scheduled to arrive?"

"S'posed to be here in an hour. But those assholes --"

"Good. Now let's calm down and wait. We haven't had any problems yet, and there's no reason to expect any. We'll talk about the future after things have settled down."

Kemp grunted. "The future?" The chaise scraped along the concrete. "Shit," said Kemp, considering his future, "I need a drink."

"Yes, I imagine that you do."

Their voices disappeared into the house and were lost in the rattle of the crickets. Pickett rose to his knees. The porch was empty. Kemp was back in the living room easy chair, staring down into an inch of whiskey as if it held portent of his future. Matt was nowhere in sight.

Pickett crawled to the other side of the house, then sprinted to a hummock of palm and live oak behind the barn. From it he could see the dock and its ramshackle shed black against the grey St. Johns. He buttoned his collar against the mosquitoes, stretched his legs and leaned back against an oak. In his lap lay Tom's .38. Pickett's eyes blinked erratically, then slowly closed; his long body relaxed.

#

Light glinted off the river from the shed at the end of the dock. A boat, sleek, low to the river, bobbed in the mottled light. The low grumble of voices mingled with the lap of water and bumping of hull against pilings.

Pickett started; the .38 slid from his lap, and he awoke with the thump. He blinked, gazed blankly around him, then

focused on the light before him. He stuffed the pistol into his chinos and crawled deeper into the shadows. The scrub was thick but the moon too bright to chance moving into the open. He made way slowly.

The curtain of moss that hung from the twisted oaks masked the dock. The shed was a yellow glow filtered as if through grey fog. At the river's edge, the palmetto scrub gave way to cypress, drowned oaks, and an unobstructed view. The hut was alive with light that knifed through the weathered clapboard and broken roof. It pulsed to the movement of figures inside.

Pickett barked his shin against a cypress knee. He bit off a curse and knelt behind a tangled pile of driftwood, massaging his leg.

The dock extended fifteen yards into the river as a T, with the shed perched precariously to the left and the speedboat moored to the right. Pickett glanced repeatedly from one end of the dock to the other, his body poised for motion.

A hand fell lightly to his shoulder.

Pickett twisted on the balls of his feet, still kneeling, and pulled frantically at the pistol with his good hand. He went over backwards with Mark's hand over his mouth and the barrel of Tom's revolver hopelessly tangled in the waistband of his trousers.

"Ch-rist --" Pickett spit into Mark's hand, knocking it aside with his own.

Mark held a finger to his lips and, motioning to the dock with his chin, grabbed Pickett's sleeve and pulled him back into the shadow of the scrub. Pickett brushed the limp palmetto fingers from his face and whispered:

"What the hell you doing here? Where you been?"

"Here -- in the w-w-woods. Del's been looking after me."

"Why the hell didn't you --"

"I wanted to talk to you, but Del s-s-said --"

The shed door flew open with a crack, empty-ing light and angry voices into the night: "Yeah, well count us out!" It was Bernie.

Pickett yanked Tom's .38 free from his trousers in time to see Tom and Kemp follow Bernie out of the shack. Kemp was the first to speak.

"Goddammit, you got the money. I'm just asking you to wait till this shit blows over."

Tom guffawed from underneath his bandages and passed a paper sack to Bernie who was now in the boat. "Bullshit, we're clearing out."

"Come on. I'll take care of you. I always have, haven't I?"

Tom stepped down into the boat and grunted: "Yeah, just like you took care of Herb and that bitch from the trailer."

"I didn't have nothing to do with that, I told you. Man, we're on to something really good here --"

Bernie stopped and looked up: "Yeah? You wanna be such a big man all of a sudden, you going places so fast . . . Shit." Bernie watched Tom drop to the seat next to him, then looked back up at Kemp. "You find someone else then."

"Trouble with you assholes is you aint got brains big enough to think beyond yesterday --"

Bernie cut Kemp off: "It's the same ol chickenshit -- cept you got your pecker caught in fence this time, Mister Big shot, and we aint waitin round to get ours lopped off with yours."

"Fuck you," added Tom with dumb satisfaction.

Kemp opened his mouth as the outboard exploded into life. Bernie jammed the throttle forward, leaned into the river and accelerated south as if all his yesterdays were after him, disappearing around the bend long before the thrum of their engine.

Gradually, the racket of wildlife, silenced by their departure, once again filled the pre-dawn air. Kemp stood, fists to hips, staring down the river. Pickett was on the dock and five feet behind him before Kemp turned.

"Christ Almighty!" Kemp threw his hands into the air and let them slap loosely to his side. "What else. . . ."

Pickett smiled: "That's my question, Ralph."

Kemp's eyes darted involuntarily toward the shed door. A briefcase lay open on a rough work bench littered with a bunsen burner and assorted vials and test tubes. In the briefcase lay several clear plastic bags filled with brown crystals.

"Cornering the rock candy market, Ralph?"

"Yeah, right. Gonna give the whole fucking state an insulin high."

"What's it go for up here, Ralph, ten bucks a rock?" Kemp turned his head without taking his eyes off Pickett's and spit into the St. Johns. "No, probably less even. No overhead. Right, Ralph? You know all about overhead, don't you?"

"Yeah, so what're you gone do about it?"

"Maybe I should turn you over to the Sugar Board, Ralph. Whataya think?"

"What is it?" Mark jogged up behind Pickett.

"You got some friends, Pickett," sneered Kemp. "That kid's a fugitive from the law. Aint that right, kid? Wasted those two over in Belle Haven. Nice work, boy. Wouldn't a thought you had it in you. Too bad you got eye-dee'd, huh?"

"Save it." Pickett tossed his chin toward the shed, keeping

his eyes on Kemp. "You know anything about this, Mark?"

"N-n-o."

Kemp chuckled, his eyes fixed to Pickett's gun.

Mark stuck his head in the shed and then looked back at Pickett, astonished: "Really, Mister Pickett, I-I-I . . ."

Kemp guffawed. "Come off it, kid."

Mark looked puzzled. "I don't know what's going on. I mean, I used to hear th-things sometimes when I'd be staying with Del. But he told me not to worry about it, th-th-that it wasn't any of our business. I guess I knew something was going on. I-I-I just didn't want to . . . well, you know."

"What about the stiffs, huh kid, what about that?"

"Shut up, Ralph. You'll have your chance in front of the Sugar Board."

"Real funny, Pickett, a reg'lar Johnny Carson --"

Pickett took a step toward Kemp, and the dock creaked behind him. He wheeled around into a crouch.

"Lower the gun, please, Mister Pickett." Matt's gun was smaller than Pickett's, but better aimed.

Pickett did as he asked.

Matt leaned forward, his pistol still aimed at Pickett's stomach and reached for Pickett's weapon. Mark tensed as if ready to move, and Pickett grabbed his arm.

"Good." Matt shifted Tom's .38 to his gloved gun hand and dropped his own pistol into his coat pocket. "We don't want to do anything rash, now do we, Mister Pickett? You wouldn't want to, say, get shot trespassing on private property in the middle of the night would we?"

Kemp pushed behind Pickett into the shed. The briefcase snapped shut. Kemp quickly walked around Pickett to Matt's side.

"Shit, I didn't think you was gone make it." Kemp smiled nervously and wiped at his forehead with his sleeve. "Tie 'em up and let's get outta here."

"I'm afraid not, Ralph."

"Afraid not? What, you gone wait around here?"

"There's no need to run, Ralph. This'll work out just fine."

Kemp's jaw hung loose.

"There is no need to panic. Unfortunate, yes. But just a complication, nothing more. They will, quite simply, need to be disposed of."

"Not by me they won't."

"That's enough --"

"Holy Jesus, Cheatham --"

"Be quiet. And listen. We have Mister Pickett's gun do we not? Mister Pickett went after the fugitive Mark Ayers and shot

him. In the struggle that ensued, the gun was wrestled away from Mister Pickett and used upon him. No other solution will offer itself to the police."

"Jesus-fuckin-christ! Whataya talking about? That's Tom's gun. You just gone stand here and shoot them like that with my --"

Mark pushed nervously past Pickett. "Mister Cheatham. I-I don't unders-s-stand --"

"Be quiet!" Both Mark and Kemp froze. Matt inhaled deeply in an effort to still his shallow breath. Softly, in a rasping whisper, stepping away from Kemp, pointing the gun so as to cover all three men, he said: "The Work, Mark -- the Temple. It's larger than either of us."

Kemp's eyes grew larger at this. Holding the briefcase in front of him as if suddenly afraid of it, he set it down next to Matt. "Sh-shit, Cheatham, you can have it. I mean, Jesus, I'm willing to take some heat if I have to, but -- but this . . ."

Kemp took a step backwards wiping his hands on the side of his pants.

Matt turned toward Kemp. "Where do you think --"

Pickett lunged forward and buried his shoulder into Matt's kidney. "Run!" he yelled.

Mark dashed past as Matt hit the dock underneath Pickett.

The revolver skittered to Kemp's feet. He picked it up, looked at it in his still shaking hand, and pointed it halfheartedly after Mark as he disappeared into the scrub. Pickett scrambled to his feet and grabbed Kemp's wrist, deflecting the shot. It smashed into the decking at their feet.

"Give me that," cried Matt.

Pickett released Kemp and ducked to the side; Matt and Kemp collided. They fell to the dock, scrambling frantically for the pistol. Pickett sprang from his crouch into midair and landed flat on his belly in the warm river. A grove of cypress projected into the shallows not fifty yards up river, and Pickett pulled toward it.

The .38 exploded. A bullet th-wopped into the water to his right.

Pickett kicked his legs up and went under -- for the second time that day. The thwoop-hiss of another round broke the underwater silence. Pickett pushed off the bottom and continued his sprint toward the cypress grove. The .38 was empty.

He hit a cypress knee, mud, and then pulled himself around behind a smooth grey trunk as two snaps from Matt's automatic sounded in quick succession. Pickett didn't wait to hear any more.

He slogged through the shallows to the shore and sprinted

up-river through the saw-grass and palmettos. He ran until the Osteen bridge loomed black against the lightening sky. He continued to run, stumbling, forcing himself up, on and on toward the bridge. His pace slowed, but steadily he put one foot before the other, stumbling, rising again, then staggering to his knees, his eyes held by the filigreed arch on the horizon. Finally, he could not rise and fell to his stomach in the high grass.

Pickett raised his head toward the bridge, but now it was gone.

Sadness, regret, and fatigue knotted his face like a dried fig, and Pickett wept. Through the tears, he spoke -- a single name, repeated, again and then again. After a long while, Pickett closed his eyes and put his head to the dry sand. He became still finally, and slept.

[END CHAPTER 25]

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The heat lay on Bodie Pickett's shoulders like a physical object. He rose to his elbows as if under the weight of the sun itself.

Squinting into the noon glare, Pickett found himself imprisoned in a circle of swamp grass. Mud caked his ragged clothes, his shoes were gone. His face, arms, and feet were crisscrossed with saw grass cuts -- shallow, but pink and angry.

The sky was clear, but of that washed out blue that melded with the haze on the horizon and presaged rain. The Osteen bridge towered above the brown grass like the skeleton of some mythic monster, while below it, less dramatic though more

substantial, lay Del Trap's hut.

Pickett pushed off toward the hut.

The old fishing boat was gone, the ramshackle dock seemingly sunk deeper into the river without its support. The hut stood open and dark. A pair of mockingbirds nattered away at some grassland villain, alternating sorties from Trap's tin roof into the high grass up river. Pickett climbed the steps, fending off a surprise attack from the roof-top defenders. He walked in as if no one were there.

Someone was.

"I wondered which one of you white folks'd show up. I have to say, I'm a might surprised." Del Trap didn't sound surprised, he sounded weary. He sat facing the door behind a small kitchen table. His hands rested palm down on the dirty muslin tablecloth, in the center of the table a small silver automatic.

Pickett stopped in the doorway, his eyes on the gun.

"Where's Mark?"

"Gone."

"Gone . . . Where?"

Del Trap smiled a tired smile, and picked up the automatic.

"Where?" he echoed. "Where he'll be safe" -- he set his elbows on the table and leveled the gun at Pickett's abdomen, his massive hands almost covered it -- "from the likes a you."

Pickett stepped closer, halfheartedly extending his good hand. "Don't. I'm trying to help . . ."

"You're gone help him, huh?" Trap's smile broadened. "Everone's gone help poor Mark -- right into the lectric chair. Real white a you Christian folk, I gotta say."

"He's innocent. I can prove it."

"Innocent?" Trap cocked his head to the side, eyes momentarily closed, and shrugged. "Who cares? Don't matter shit iff in he's innocent or guilty. Them things aint nothing -- they worse than nothing. They l-i-e-s." Trap lingered over the last word with obvious distaste. "You don't unerstand, do you?"

Pickett said nothing.

"Good, bad, innocent, guilty . . . They don't make it, man. They just crap you white folks throw out there to mess over the rest of us. Innocent, guilty . . . what's the difference? They jus the game you white lying -- " With effort, Del trapped calmed himself. "You don't get it do you? You smart bastards jus miss the whole fuckin thing don't you? Miss the whole way a things. Shit, it's funny don't y'know? A bunch a ghosts run by things, and they don't know shit bout the way of things." Trap looked down to the greasy muslin and shook his head wryly. "So, what's it matter you live or die, ghost? No differnt, really. It's clear as the sky, man, can't you see it?"

"See what? You show me."

When Trap didn't respond, Pickett wet his upper lip and shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other. "Look --"

"That we's already dead. That we's always been and always will be jus as live as we is now . . . jus as dead." Trap sighed as if depressed with the obvious. He jacked a round into the chamber. The clack of the mechanism cut through the velvety fabric of the morning air like a razor. Trap didn't seem to notice. "So, y'see man, shootin you don't mean shit to me one way or the other. Don't make no diffrence to you, neither. Though" -- Trap scratched his wooly head -- "I spect you might feel someways else bout it. Funny . . ." But there was no humor in his eyes.

Pickett stepped to the table and extended his hand. It closed on the cold metal.

Trap offered no resistance. His eyebrows rose in a question.

Pickett gently pulled.

The machine came from Trap's hand like a plug from its socket. Trap's eyes clung to Pickett's, quizzically, without fear. Pickett released the hammer, disengaged the clip, and slid the barrel back over the breach. A small copper cartridge

spiraled across the room, clattering to the floor in the corner.

Pickett stared at it.

Moisture beaded his upper lip, sweat stains spread beneath his arms. The automatic shook in his hand before thudding to the center of the table. He walked away, out the door and into the heat of the day. He moved as if his head were lighter than air and pulling the rest of his body slowly down the steps -- barely touching the rotted planking -- then more quickly to the river's edge. He sank weightless to his knees and looked down into his own eyes. His stomach turned then, and he huddled frozen in a silent scream. But terror was seemingly all that his stomach held, and he subsided into dry heaves, working out what he could in a clammy sweat.

Trap followed. The small silver machine lay flat in his pink palm.

Pickett looked back over his shoulder. He leaned away from Trap and his offering.

"No. Here. Take it." Trap pushed it toward the other. "I don't want no truck with this thing. It's been cause a nough."

Pickett stared at it for a long moment; then, with shaking hand, he took it. He set the safety and sank back, sitting, onto the ground. "Mark give you this?"

Trap nodded, burying his hands deep into his cut-offs. As

if to protect them from such things.

"Did he tell you where he found it?"

"Look, man, he tol me lotta things -- things no kid oughta have to deal with. Now, I know things I don't wanna know --"

"Like those midnight deliveries down river?"

"Yeah, for one, but let me tell it my way, okay?"

Pickett nodded.

"After your daddy died, I was the only one Mark could talk to. I been trying to help the kid, but I aint no damn good off river. You seen that." Trap tossed his chin back toward the cabin. "Off river" seemed to encompass more than geography. "I --"

Trap knelt down beside Pickett and scratched at his grizzled head.

"I unerstand what's going on out there. I mean, I know better'n the people living out there what makes things tick. But, shit, I just aint no good off this place. I mean, I went off to get some schoolin and all . . . And I seen what they want you to learn and how they want you to be, and, well, I got pretty good at them games, y'know what I mean? But I got so tangled up inside I thought I was gone splode. Jesus, I'm just tryin to say that Mark needs help out there, and I can't cut it. He trusts you, I guess cause a your papa. I've gotten so I don't trus

nobody -- nobody what aint as tied up inside as me, anyhow. But I got a trust you. Now, I want you to tell me. Can I? Should I trust you, man?"

Pickett looked up, stupidly.

"Can I?"

"I . . . I don't know."

Trap stared at Pickett for a moment, then said: "He's up river, this side a Lake Poinsett. Town called Jesup, off five-twenty. You take forty-six through Canaan, then thirteen south. You get five-twenty at Bithlo. There's a sign, but it's easy to miss if you aint watching for it. Colut folk. Farmers -- sharecroppers mostly. I know a fella there who'll put Mark up for awhile. It's the only eatin place in town. `Pulley's' the name of the place. His name, too. Got some rooms upstairs. Good folks. Anyhow" -- Trap stood -- "you go take care of him."

"What'd he tell you about the gun --"

"Best talk to him bout that. That ol' skip-jack of mine aint much, but it'll get'im there." Trap waved his hand toward the highway path. "Now scat. Get goin. Might even get there fore him if you get on it. They'll never find'im, but I don't know how long Mark'll stay. He's pretty shook up."

Pickett stood, headed down the path to the highway. He turned back once.

Trap stood at the dock, watching. His black face was featureless in the noon sun and seemed to melt into his beard and down onto his chest. He raised a hand as if to wave, then changed his mind, and dropped it, limp, to his side. Pickett continued to the highway and his battered Nova, the two of them now a matched set.

[END CHAPTER 26]

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A plate glass window pierced the narrow brick store front. NEWS, the window said, ISIDORE MOSES, PROP.

The building looked as if it had been gradually squeezed into its present one room width and two story height by the Western Auto on one side and the Trailways Bus Terminal & Taxi Stand on the other. A wrought iron awning hung low above the door supported by heavy chains. They emerged from the mouths of stone faces fixed on either side of the one second-floor window.

Long rust stains ran from the mouth of each and down the brick facade like dried blood. The glass in the door said, NEWSPAPERS, BOOKS, SUNDRIES, and gave the hours. Closed Mondays. The door

tinkled as Bodie Pickett entered.

A high two sided rack of paperbacks divided the narrow room in half. Newspapers and sundries covered the wall to the left, and a short counter backed by cigarettes and girlie magazines ran along the right. An old woman stood behind the counter sorting receipts.

"Can I help you?"

She appeared built to scale. Tall and slender hipped, she looked designed to fit behind the pinched counter, to maneuver the few feet of cramped aisles. Her height, though, was an illusion fostered by the narrow room and low tin ceiling. She barely reached Pickett's shoulders. Her age was illusory as well. Her hair was white, but the premature white that makes a woman appear middle-aged at thirty and old at fifty. She was long past thirty, but not so far past fifty as the sloppy old maid bun fixed at the back of her head might suggest. She'd settled into dowdiness the way most women her age had sunk into the beautician's chair. It was the mask she wore in place of the paints and powders of synthetic youth. A cotton shift hung from her boney shoulders masking a form fuller than the straight line of the fabric would suggest. She was comfortable here; but, it seemed, that comfort had been hard won.

"Just looking for the Orlando paper. And a place to buy

some clothes."

She leaned over the counter, looked him over. "You in a accident or something?"

"Something."

"Hurt?"

"Not so's you'd know it."

The woman shrugged. "You can get just about anything in the Woolworth's cross the street. Long as you're not looking for nothing fancy. Sentinel's on the rack behind you. Thirty-five cent."

Pickett rifled his pockets for change. "You Miss Moses?"

"Missus. Mister Moses died eight year ago." The explanation seemed to satisfy her. "Thirty-eight with tax."

Pickett pulled change from his pocket and picked through it. He laid coins on the counter, one by one. "I'm sorry to hear about Millie."

The woman's face turned to stone. "I don't know no Millie, Mister."

"Yeah?"

"I run a respectable business here. I don't cause nobody no trouble." She swept the coins into the palm of her hand. "Now you get out of my shop and leave me alone." She glared at Pickett, her mouth set half way between defiance and fear.

Gradually, the expression grew puzzled. "What you say your name was?"

"I didn't. But it's Pickett. Sorry to bother you." And Pickett turned toward the door.

"Pickett, you say?" Her face fell, the features gone limp. "You, uh, what's your first name -- your Christian name?"

Pickett turned back to the old woman. "Bo. Bodie Pickett. I was hoping --"

"You from around here?"

"I grew up over in Belle Haven. Live in Miami now. Did, anyway."

The old woman's eyes glazed. She stepped back and lowered herself into a narrow wooden chair wedged between the counter and the wall. Her hand went to her mouth as if to keep something from falling out. "Oh my . . ." She stared at the floor for a moment, then looked up as if to ascertain that the tall man was still there -- her face composed now, but her eyes far away.

"You're just like him."

"Miss -- Missus Moses, I'm sorry to trouble you, but --"

"And now he's gone too." She looked up. "You don't remember me, do you?"

Apparently, Pickett did.

She seemed to see it in his expression. Her smile

brightened. It was a lovely smile, only just a little tired.

"Your father, he . . . well, J.B. was very kind to me. Except for Izzie -- Mister Moses -- he was the only man that'd ever been kind to me." Her brows knit, and the words came as if foreign to her. "I wanted to stay, you know; but he wouldn't let me. He couldn't -- wouldn't leave your mother. Not even after . . ." She looked down and was silent for a moment. When she looked back, she tried to smile again. "I never blamed him. I -- I wasn't a very good person in those days. It was hard with the girls, you know; but your father helped whenever I needed it. He wouldn't see me no more. Nope. And I tried, too. Two or three times I tried. You see, he blamed himself -- for your mama, I mean. You know, the way she . . ." The dreamy eyes suddenly woke. "I want you to know that . . . I've always wanted to tell you that . . . that --" She buried her head in her hands, and the words that filtered through her thin white fingers strained and broke. "That your father, he always loved your mother and you. He never loved me. Not really. I know that now -- oh, I knew that even then -- he never lied to me. And I just want you to know that I'm sorry, terrible sorry. It aint worth much I know -- my being sorry -- but, well, I am. Please believe that. He done nothing but help me, and I . . . I damn near destroyed his life. Did, in a way, I guess. And now he did that

. . . that horrible thing to himself. I'm to blame, you know? It's my fault in the end. I'll never be able to make up for that, no matter what I do. And I'm so sorry. That's all. I'm sorry."

She stared up at Pickett; but she wasn't waiting for absolution, she was beyond that. She wanted him to listen, that was all; she wanted to tell someone of her sorrow and regret -- someone, perhaps, who shared it. For his part, Pickett said nothing. But she read something from his face, and it was what she wanted. She relaxed.

After a long moment, he said: "And Millie, she was your daughter?"

"My daughter? Yes, she's my daughter. Was. Not that anyone'd know it. She and Nettie went away a long time ago. They didn't come back neither. `Cept Millie. Once -- no, twice."

"Did you know that she was in trouble?"

"Millie?" Betty Hudgins Moses laughed painfully. "She was always in trouble. One way or another."

"Do you have any idea what kind of trouble?"

"The only kind there ever was for her -- for any of us. Man trouble." She smiled bitterly at Pickett. "Millie said things was gonna be different for her from now on, that she was gonna

make up for all the lost years. She said . . . Oh, she said a lot of things. She talked my ear off. Then she left -- left for the last time." Betty Hudgins was silent for a moment. "I don't know what she wants from me." She closed her eyes tightly. ". . . what she wanted. Guess I'll never know, now."

"You saw Millie recently?"

"She stayed the night last week sometime. She didn't say so, but I knew she was in trouble."

"Why man trouble? She mention any names?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Purdy. She mention a guy name of Herb Purdy?"

"Who? No. But she did say she was going back to Belle Haven and get what she was owed by that Ayers bastard."

"She mentioned Ed Ayers?"

"Yeah, that's right, the Reverend Edmund Ayers." She said it as though announcing the radio show.

"Know what she meant?"

"Know?" She laughed in amazement. "I knew all right. It was him started it all."

"Ed Ayers?"

"Yeah, you knew him back then. Wasn't much was he? But he had money, and lots of it. His folks had a place out here. Up towards Osteen. There was a place down by the Osteen bridge

where the kids used to hang out. They'd have music on Saturday nights and -- during the summers -- there weren't much else for them to do. Millie and her younger sister used to go up there. Millie wasn't but seventeen, and Nettie, what, fifteen? Anyway, she always had to do what her sister did -- had to have what she had."

The old woman paused, staring into the shadowed corner.

"Well, things was different then. Anyway, that bastard Ayers started hanging around Millie. They dated a couple a times, maybe, that summer -- no more'n that. Then he's off north for school. First thing you know he shows up on the doorstep. It was the middle of the year. Millie's still in school. Izzie sure didn't like it much. Ayers said he was going to marry her."

The old woman laughed as though she'd heard that one more than once. "So, Millie goes off with him. Didn't tell Izzie and me, of course. He just picks her up one day and they're gone." She was still amazed by the whole thing. She shook her head, then shrugged. "Maybe he meant it -- who knows? He was pretty broke up over his parents getting killed and all. He was gonna quit school and start a family. That's what Millie said, anyway." She grimaced. "Sure -- with a sixteen year old kid."

"They get married?"

"Ho! Fat chance." She tried to muster a laugh, but managed

only a throaty wheeze. "No sir. He just puts the bread in the oven and leaves, nice as you please."

"Leaves?"

"He takes her to Jax, bangs her till his money runs out and then he leaves. You can do anything with money." A fact, her tone said, that she had never doubted. She looked Pickett square in the eye. "You know what that son of a bitch does then?" She didn't expect an answer, and Pickett didn't give her one. "He comes back after a couple a years, like he's coming home from work, and first thing you know, he takes up with Nettie, Millie's baby sister -- d'you believe it? Her kid sister. Like Millie never even existed. But he's all holier-than-thou, all praise-the-lord and howdy-do, now. It damn near killed Izzie on the spot when he turned Nettie against him. It did, I guess. His heart gave out not six months after that. He'd lost one family already. In the war. He . . ." She seemed to be losing herself in a past too dark and bitter to allow a way out. "He was from Poland, you know. . . ."

She paused, finding her way back to the present.

"So she finds the Lord. She wouldn't have nothing to do with Izzie after that. No time for the man who pulled her and her mother outta the gutter and give them a home. After she done that to Izzie, I told her she weren't no kin of mine. She said

it was fine with her and I aint spoke to her since." The anger unfocused with her eyes, and sunk back down inside her. It drew her vitality with it. She became a bitter old woman again. And silent.

"What happened to her?"

"She called me once -- no, twice -- from Jacksonville. She said she was getting married. Did it. Up in Jacksonville to some guy. She called up one other time and said they'd had a baby."

"Nettie?"

"No." She looked at Pickett, puzzled. "Millie. She got married up in Jax. The guy must a been all right -- least he didn't mind about the baby. Not being his, I mean."

"What about Nettie?"

"Nettie?" She continued to look at Pickett, and puzzlement had become disbelief. "She married him."

"Him who?"

"Why, Ayers of course." She smiled grimly and released a short burst of air through her nose. "I saw her on TV once. It like to make me puke."

Pickett looked lost, or as if by some mis-step he had slipped into the labyrinth of Betty Hudgins' past. "Jan Ayers? You're talking about Jan Ayers?"

"Yeah, sure. Janet -- Nettie we called her. And Millie . . ."
" she continued, as if unable to stop. "Millie wasn't through yet, though -- oh, no. No, Millie weren't nearly through messing up her life. She shows up here one night with her suitcase and says she's left the guy. Left him up in Jax with the baby. That was right after Izzie'd died. God. Least he didn't live to see that. Do you know why she left? She was gonna get Ayers back."

She released another burst of air something like a laugh. "When I told her about Nettie she, well, I thought she was gone drop dead on the spot. She left that night, and I never seen her again. Least not till last week."

"Why'd she come back?"

"I dunno. She kept talking about things being different, about getting her life back. Things like that. She said she wouldn't be sending me anymore money for awhile, either."

"Did she often send money?"

"Yeah, over the last year or so anyway. Izzie had a couple of big operations before he died. It took all we'd saved. Had to hawk half the shop in the end. And he still died." She smiled a crooked smile at that cosmic joke. "Millie sent me a little money every now and then after that. Nettie never even wrote."

She looked up at Pickett. "I didn't care about the money."

Pickett nodded, exhaled, and gazed down at the dusty linoleum. Suddenly, his brows came together. He glanced up: "How long she stay?"

"Stayed the night and left. Said she had a new job and that she'd be in touch when she found a place to stay. I didn't really believe her. Ah, I don't know. Maybe I did. It don't matter really -- not any more. She was born trouble." She pushed herself up out of the chair, grimaced with the effort. "But . . . well, I guess they're over now." She sorted receipts. "Hope so anyways." Her tone suggested that hope was something she knew about but not come across for a long time. "Bo Pickett . . ." she said to herself, shaking her head. She continued to sort. She seemed unaware that Pickett was still there. Betty Hudgins Moses had become one of the fixtures.

Pickett turned toward the door. As he opened it, he paused and glanced back over his shoulder. There was more on his face than pity or compassion. There was, perhaps, envy.

[END CHAPTER 27]

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

By the time Bodie Pickett left Betty Hudgins, the haze on the horizon had already darkened. He bought a pair of Dickie chinos and a chambray work shirt at the Woolworth across the street, then changed at the Texaco station while they filled the Nova. When he reached Jesup late that afternoon, the rain had begun in earnest.

Pulley's was long and dark, lit by a single low watt bulb. A bar backed by a long dirty mirror and fronted by a few mismatched stools ran along one wall, a line of high backed booths along the other. A plate glass window at the far end, grime streaked by the rain, published the proprietor's name in

flaking red letters. The feed store across the street was dimly visible through the downpour. In front of the window, and leaning against the wall in a permanent state of tilt, stood an ancient pinball machine covered with lurid illustrations of half naked Amazons. Above it in the middle of the window, a bug strip mottled with long dead bottle flies flowed up from its yellow canister like dirty ribbon candy. A single fly walked lazily and with apparent immunity amidst the bodies of his brethren. Pickett, his back to the kitchen, sat in the last booth before a plate of black-eyed peas with chipped ham, listening to the rain splatter on the sidewalk.

Pulley had turned out to be a tiny man of beige complexion and indeterminable age as taciturn as Trap was prolix. Pulley had heard from Trap, but Mark had yet to arrive. Pickett said he would wait. He ordered from the cardboard menu that hung behind the cash register. He was working on a side of vinegar and greens when the door swung open and Mark Ayers lurched in out of the rain.

He wore a dingy olive-drab raincoat frayed at the sleeves. Squinting into the darkness, he ran a hand through his wet cropped hair, over his furred chin, the loose flesh around his mouth, then to his eyes, pressing thumb and forefinger into the sockets and squeezing toward the nose. A fist emerged from his

pocket, fell to the bar and released a crumpled twenty.

"Whiskey," he said. The word caught in the back of his throat, and he coughed twice through clinched teeth, staring at his hand and the twenty. From the dark behind the counter Pulley spoke:

"Scotch, Canadian, Bour --"

Mark straightened petulantly. "Anything." The limp hand, tensile once again, closed back to a fist. "Doesn't m-m-matter."

Pulley move behind the bar. His thin arm materialized in the circle of light that fell from the bare bulb. In the shadow of Mark's fist, he set up a heavy glass tumbler mottled with the imprint of other hands. "Give me the b-b-bottle," Mark dead-panned. A clear bottle half filled with amber liquid appeared next to the glass. Mark pulled glass and bottle to his chest and walked across the room to the nearest booth. Pickett followed him in the mirror, finishing his greens.

Mark dropped to the hard bench and put bottle to glass. The liquor glugged in rhythm to the rattle of the bottle against the thick rounded lip. Mark pressed glass and bottle to the oily table top. The effort steadied his hand. Suddenly, he brought the tumbler to his mouth and threw back his head as if with the impact. Hand and empty tumbler fell back to the table with a thud. Mark swallowed hard and with some difficulty. His chin

sunk to his chest and his eyes closed.

Pickett picked up the bottle before Mark and examined it elaborately. "Foul stuff, boy."

Mark exhaled deeply, raising his chin, and with it, his eyelids. The muscles around them tensed as he focused on Pickett's face. An attempted reply lapsed into a cough. He put both hands to his mouth till he was through, looked at the man standing next to him, took a deep breath, and said: "I'm sorry, Mister P-p-pickett."

"Bo."

"I'm just no good, am I, Bo?"

"I imagine you're some good . . ."

"I just couldn't take -- couldn't f-f-face it."

"Facing-it is about the only thing left, I think."

"I . . . Yeah, I guess so." Mark massaged his eyes with both hands. He smelled of gasoline and cheap bourbon. "Hell, I just don't know anymore." He starred blankly at the scarred table top, his jaw loose, the tip of his tongue tracing a thin upper lip. His gaze met Pickett's and, for a short moment, the opacity clarified and his eyes brightened. He looked down as if embarrassed. "It was f-f-Father's gun. The one next to -- that woman's body. I didn't know what to d-d-do. I . . ."

"It's all right, Mark," lied Pickett. "Take it slow, from

the beginning."

"It was so sudden -- I mean, like a n-n-nightmare, one that wouldn't go away. One minute we were in love -- Amy and me, I mean. We were going to get m-m-married." He swallowed hard and looked up. "Then, overnight, she doesn't want anything to do with me. It was like she became old -- adult, or something -- all of a sudden, like she'd lived through a hundred years while I slept one n-n-night. She wouldn't talk or even see me. I should've seen what was going on, I . . ." Mark rubbed at his eyes. "I don't know, maybe I did. I just didn't want to believe it. I knew what father was like but -- Damn! He didn't deserve to die like that, and -- Oh, Jesus, Amy's father -- I can't blame him. I could've killed them all myself. Sometimes I felt like I could -- but . . . I . . ." He paused, shook his head. "I couldn't decide what to do. About anything."

Pickett watched him for a moment. "Look, there's no use in torturing yourself. Just start from the beginning and tell me exactly what you did, what you know. Blame doesn't matter."

"Yeah, sure." Mark's tone placed the meaning of his words somewhere between sarcasm and resignation. "Yeah. So, I, uh, didn't understand why she all of a sudden shut me out. And I started following her. I . . . well, it sounds s-s-stupid, I know, but it wasn't. I mean, I wanted to find out why -- what

was really happening to her. Anyway, I saw her meet that w-w-woman at -- what's-its-name, you know, the donut shop? Amy met her there a couple of times. I wanted to know who she was so I followed her to that motor court and, well, I didn't do anything. I mean, I didn't know what to d-d-do. I was just sort of hanging around, waiting."

"For what?"

"I dunno. For Amy, for -- a miracle, the second coming, Christ, I don't know! It was all I could think to d-d-do."

"Did anyone see you there?"

"This woman came out of one of the other cabins that first time and gave me the once over. So I left." Mark was silent for a moment. He chewed abstractedly at his lower lip. Abruptly his thoughts found voice: "I only wanted to help, to find out what the trouble was!" He broke off as abruptly, embarrassed by the outburst, and closed his eyes, hard. When he looked up again, his eyes were liquid and unguarded. He spoke in barely a whisper: "I was there at the river house, don't you see? In the woods. Hiding, for Christ's sake. I heard her go off the bridge.

I didn't even know what -- who it was. Do you see? It was the end for Amy. And me. I was just plain scared, Christ, I was hiding. I was going to help her, pro-t-t-ect her, I was going to . . ." His hands rose, palms up, as if lifting something, or,

perhaps, demonstrating their emptiness. "Right." He let his hands fall to the table. "It all happened so fast. I mean, over the last couple of weeks, but it sounds -- feels, even -- like years, decades. Then -- what, three or four days ago? -- Amy and that woman had a real big fight. I was outside, waiting for Amy to leave. I'd followed her. I was going to try to talk to her again. And then I started hearing their voices, loud. Amy came storming out with the woman after her. She kept saying -- the woman said, 'Promise me. Promise you'll not see that Ayers bastard ever again.' I remember that: '. . . that Ayers b-b-bastard.' That's what she said." Mark looked up, desperately. "I thought she was talking about me. I mean, that was only natural, wasn't it? I'd have to've been -- Christ Jesus, would it've been normal to figure that your father was -- I mean, with the girl you were going to m-m-marry? Would it?"

Pickett said nothing.

Mark looked down, kneaded his furrowed brow and continued: "That was the night before the party. I decided right then and there to talk to the woman, to find out what she had against me, what she had over Amy. I couldn't the next night because of the party and all -- Christ, and that business with the m-m-murder . . ."

"Why didn't you tell me about this woman when you came to

see me?"

"I didn't mean to talk about Amy at all. I didn't see the connection until the next day. I was in my room, and I heard this ruckus downstairs. All hell's breaking loose. It was that woman -- the one Amy'd been seeing. Christ, she was yelling at Father, really giving it to him. I don't think I've ever heard that kind of talk. Mother was there too -- and that was really strange. The woman was mad at m-m-Mother, yelling at her -- and Father -- like she knew them both. God, she was mad. Told Father to lay off the kid. That's what she kept saying, 'Lay off the kid.' Told my Mom she was -- called her horrible names. There was some sort of fight. I mean, I heard some sort of scuffle that broke the name-calling off pretty sharp. Then all of a sudden she was gone. Everything was quiet. I went downstairs a few minutes later and saw father drop something into the top drawer of that desk in the hall. You know, the one with the leather top?"

Pickett nodded.

Mark wet his lips, ran a hand carelessly through his short hair. "It was the g-g-gun. The one I found next to the body that night --"

Pickett pulled the gun from his pocket. "This?"

Mark flinched. "Yeah." He opened his mouth to say more,

but nothing came out.

"Just tell it as it happened. One thing at a time."

Mark took a deep breath. "I didn't think much about the gun because, well, what she'd been saying about the kid -- 'Lay off the kid' -- and what I'd heard the night before -- you know, her telling Amy to stay away from Ayers -- well, it all of a sudden made sense." He started, bringing both hands to his forehead.

"No. No, it didn't make any sense at all. But I knew -- for the first time I thought that I knew -- what she was talking about. She wasn't talking about m-m-me. I don't know why I didn't think of it before. I --" Mark's hands began to shake again. He exhaled again, more slowly, his mouth slack, eyelids heavy. "I tried to reach Amy all day. I couldn't find her. I went to the woman's place --"

"Had the rain started yet?"

"What? Oh. Yeah, I-I-I think so. I'd sat around the house till after it was dark. I couldn't decide whether to go or not -- I mean, I just wasn't sure if I w-w-wanted to know what was going on."

"Why? What made you finally decide to go?"

Mark's eyelids fluttered, fanning his eyes into brightness.

"I thought that I -- that the house would explode. There was so much unspoken, so much -- up in the air. Father was in his study

-- or I'd thought he was -- had been there since the afternoon without coming out. And Mother, she -- I dunno -- she was so intense, so wired. . . . When she came back I just had to get out. I don't know why I went to that woman's place except that I thought maybe Amy would be there. I parked around the corner and came in through the woods. I could just see the cabin through the trees when I heard a dog barking, a-a-and this scream. It scared the crap out of me. For some reason I thought it was Amy. I ran t-t-toward it -- where I thought it came from a-a-and --" Mark cleared his throat and wiped his mouth. "And I found the body laying there -- j-j-just like the man in the river. And the gun was lying there, t-t-too."

"That's why you ran, because of the gun?"

"Yeah, I guess. I just don't know, I wasn't really thinking what I was doing. Maybe I was running from everything. It was the gun that gave me an excuse, anyway. It was the same gun, you see -- the one Father had put in the d-d-drawer. I was afraid -- afraid that he'd . . . he'd . . ." Mark swallowed hard and blinked. "I-I-I hadn't seen him all day, and I was afraid that he'd gone out and . . . So I took the gun. That's when the woman -- the one from the other cabin, with the dog -- saw me. I ran. I drove to Del's. I couldn't think what else to d-d-do. We hid the car in the saw grass. Del said the police would be

looking for it."

"You gave the gun to Trap?"

Mark nodded. "I, well, he wouldn't let me take it. Said it was time to break the karma chain or something. He talks like that sometimes -- Del does. He-e-e's . . ." Mark's eyes became unnaturally bright and the words began to roll from his tongue.

". . . had a tough life, y'know, Del has? But he's been awfully nice to me. He's been . . ." Mark shifted in his seat, his eyes blinking erratically. "Y'know some people think he's crazy. You know that? But, well, I don't know why -- I mean, yes, I do know -- know why, I mean -- see, people all want the same thing, but they don't know what it is, or they think it's something else -- that's what Del says -- and when someone like Del comes along, well, people think . . . they think . . . But then -- th-th-then people don't always . . . know . . ."

Grief or fatigue or too much life lived too soon overwhelmed the words. Mark pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets, and pressed hard. His face froze distorted; his body grew rigid and silently quivered to the frequency of some interior current. Pickett put his hand to Mark's forearm.

"Mark --"

"No! Just . . . leave me be for a minute. Okay?"

Pickett stood and, for a long interval, stared down at Mark

Ayers. He walked to the screen door. The rain still fell. The floor was damp from the fine spray that filtered through the screen. Pickett closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the cool wet air. A hand fell softly on his shoulder.

"Boy gone be alright?" Pulley's brown eyes looked up to Pickett's. "Aint takin him nowheres tonight, are ya?" The voice was warm and musical; the eyes, quick and wary. Pickett looked over Pulley's head. Mark slumped over the table, and buried his head in his arms.

Pulley's eyes were still on Pickett's. And they smiled. "Stay the night, Mister. Aint no use rushin nothing." Pulley took Pickett by the arm. "Aint no use in that, son. Plenty a time for trouble . . ."

Pickett bunched his lips, and nodded. "Yeah. You're right there . . ." He walked past Pulley, Mark, to the back of the room and a pay phone. He lifted the receiver and dropped in a dime. He dialed 8 numbers, waited, dropped in two quarters and a nickel, and waited some more. "Yeah. Sheriff Beane, please. . . . Uh-huh, I know. I'm Pickett. . . . I'm sure he does. Put him on, will you? . . . Yeah, I'll wait. Got plenty of time . . ."

Pulley smiled at Pickett from across the room. Pickett raised his chin and eyebrows, and he smiled too. But only with his lips.

[END CHAPTER 28]

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"You'll need see Homer. But I don't think he'll keep you long."

Bodie Pickett threw open the Nova's door and swung one foot out onto the hot asphalt. He squinted in the glare down the rows of parked cars that ran to the white Temple dome beyond. "Stay here and wait. Now I mean that -- enough's enough. Don't make things any harder than they are already."

"It's all r-r-right, Bo. I . . ." Mark's weary face relaxed. "I'm sorry. I mean, well . . . Yes, I'll wait."

Pickett pushed himself from the front seat. He stood unfolding in the sun, then walked around the front of the car to

the passenger side.

"What?"

Pickett pulled the silver automatic from his pants pocket. "I'd just as soon get this out of circulation." He reached inside the window, clicked open the glove compartment and tossed in the pistol. "Enough is enough." Pickett slammed the door shut. "You stay put now. This shouldn't take long." Pickett wound through the parked cars toward the media annex. He passed the Sheriff's empty cruiser on the way.

On the other side of the glass door the same blonde sat behind the same counter, but the smile she lit was not the same -- at half-mast in memory of her slain leader. Skeeter paced the linoleum behind her, twirling his Stetson around a boney index finger. He looked up: "Jeez, Mister Pickett. . ." He looked at the blonde. "Tell the Sheriff Pickett's here."

The blonde looked up.

"Do it!"

She jabbed at the intercom.

"Yes?"

"Mister Cheatham, there's a Mister Pickett here to --"

The box popped and spat. "Get that boy in here," crackled an electronic Homer Beane.

Skeeter leaned toward the box. "Y-y-yes sir. Right away."

Skeeter reached the sound studio door before Pickett.

Kimberly the usherette stood on the other side, one hand extended toward the knob. "Oh!"

"I'm Pickett."

"Oh, Mister Pickett. Please follow me."

He did. Skeeter remained behind with the sad blonde.

"It's horrible." Kimberly spoke without looking back, moving swiftly down the long hall. "Just horrible." She didn't feel the need to explain what she meant. Pickett didn't ask. She pulled up in front of the door from which the Ayers family had entered the studio on the day of taping. She opened it for Pickett; he smiled at her. She lowered her eyes. "I just don't know. . . I mean, what's going to happen?"

Not a question, so Pickett didn't answer. He walked past her through a short hall to a door marked, PRIVATE. He leaned into it and stepped through onto a wine colored carpet.

"Well, it's about time, boy." Sheriff Homer Beane rose from a brown leather easy chair.

The walls were darkly paneled and lined with books and religious artifacts. To the right were an easy chair before which stood a weary sheriff and a large carved oak desk behind which sat Matt Cheatham. Only Matt's torso showed, covered by a stiff white dress shirt. Silver clasps held the french cuffs, a

red silk tie hung from his neck, his face only slightly less white than his shirt. "Perhaps Mister Pickett can tell us what this is all about."

The Sheriff bridled. "Maybe I'd best do the talking here, Mister Cheatham. For the moment anyways."

Matt Cheatham shrugged. "Whatever you think best."

Pickett said nothing.

On the opposite wall between two large bookcases, a door bore a black and white plastic sign: SANCTUARY/PLEASE DO NOT ENTER WHEN LIGHT IS ON. A light above the door glowed red from its brass fixture. The door itself emitted sounds, vague and muffled. An amplified voice, distant organ chords -- they came as if from under water; and below them all, the indistinct rustle and random hacking of a congregation. Pickett tossed his head toward the door.

"Jan?"

The sheriff nodded.

Matt Cheatham quickly added, "The memorial service. It began right before Sheriff Beane arrived." He looked at his wrist. "Jan usually returns here during the offertory. Another five, ten minutes." He paused. "Fortunately, I was still here when the Sheriff Beane arrived."

"Yes," Pickett nodded. He smiled. "Fortunately." He

closed the door, walked to the wall opposite the desk and a brown leather sofa that matched Homer's easy chair. The leather creaked under his weight. The two men opposite stared, waiting. But Pickett said nothing.

"The, uh --" The Sheriff coughed. "The autopsy report's in. Sal's up half the night with it." He cleared his throat, coughed once again, then finally looked at the tall man opposite. "Well, you was right, boy. Simple as that. It looks like the shot come after the blow to the head." He turned. "You getting this, now?"

Matt's expression remained bland and wooden. Only his eyes moved -- from Sheriff Beane to Pickett. "I'm not sure that I do."

Pickett, still smiling, stared back. "The burns?"

"Not on the chair," said the Sheriff. "On Ed. Not much, but enough. Nough not to've come from across the room anyways."

Matt Cheatham shook his head. "I'm sorry, gentleman, I don't quite understand --"

"Well, Mister Cheatham, let me see if I can clarify it some for you." Homer scooted forward in his chair. "First, it seems that Brother Ed smashed his head gainst that wall before he died. You understan, Mister Cheatham? I aint goin too fast for you now, am I? Now, second, it seems like you must a been standing

in the hall when you made that hole in Ed's chair cause from the look of them powder burns it pears that ol' Rog Mooring must a been standing where you were when Ed got shot. Seems strange, don't it. Don't it seem strange to you?" The volume rose with the intonation. "Don't it seem just a little goddamn bee-zare, Mister Cheatham?"

"I've no idea what you're talking about, Sheriff. Just ask Mister Pickett, he was there -- he saw Roger shoot Edmund."

"I saw Roger shoot, and I heard Ed fall. A few seconds later, I heard your shot."

"You see, Sheriff? Roger shot --"

"That's not what I said." Pickett's smile disappeared. "Roger fired, hitting the chair. Edmund rolled away from the shot onto the table, hitting his head against the wall. You grabbed the gun while I tried to quiet Roger. Then -- well, you shot Edmund, Matt. That's the sum of it."

Matt winced.

Pickett smiled and shrugged. "Nothing to feel bad about. Goddamn good shot, really -- considering the pressure you were under. And the distance. Took nerve, anyway."

Matt Cheatham's mouth opened slightly, then closed. His tongue flicked quickly over dry lips.

Pickett's smile broadened. "Far enough to make the shot

chancy. But, too close not to leave some powder marks on the body. But, aside from that, not too shabby."

"But this is absurd! Why would I want to kill Edmund? Really, now . . ." He gestured wildly. "This is barely . . . circumstantial!"

"Circumstantial my country ass," boomed Homer. "All I need's a jury knows its ass from a watermelon and I got you sewn up, boy. You got that? Now you talk to me -- and I mean now. Or you sure as hell gone talk to the electrician up at Starke." Homer leaned forward, almost out of his chair. "You wanna talk, boy, or you want three-thousand volts shot up your ivy-league ass?"

The din of organ music drowned out Matt's reply. It swept through the sanctuary door along with Jan Ayers. On seeing the three men, Jan paused, chin raised, a pose theatrical and self-aware. She closed the door on the harmonious racket outside.

"Well . . ." Her tone was casual, her look decidedly formal. A black gown ran high on her neck in patterns of black lace. Her wig was blonde and high; her makeup, exaggerated. At her throat, tied around the lace with a black velvet ribbon, full and red as her mouth, bloomed a silk rose.

"Matt. Sheriff." She looked at Bodie Pickett. "Is

anything the matter?"

Homer rose. "Considerable, I'm afraid, Ma'am. It appears that your husband was . . . well, that Roger Mooring wasn't the one who --"

"She's the one!" The silence that followed Matt's pronouncement resonated with the vehemence of his tone.

Pickett shook his head. "No, Matt."

"It was! It was Jan."

"Not likely."

"Not Edmund, that Moses woman."

Pickett said nothing. Once again, he smiled.

"I . . ." Matt blinked rapidly. "I put the gun back. She didn't . . . Jan was supposed to . . ." His eyes rose to Jan Ayers, hardened and grew small. "Jan was supposed to give it to the sheriff after the body was found."

Beane looked skeptical. "Which body?"

"Purdy. He . . . Purdy, he had to be silenced, surely you can understand that. The Moses woman, Millie -- her gun gave us the chance we'd been waiting for. If Jan had turned over the gun like she was supposed to, you would have had to blame that woman --"

"Oh, come, Matt." Jan's mouth smiled. "You can't expect these people to believe --"

"No? You think I don't know, don't you? It was you -- it couldn't have been anyone else. We were in the clear, too. But that wasn't enough for you. You had to get even, didn't you? You never forgave her. She got to Edmund first, and you just couldn't stand --"

"Be quiet, Matt. They don't know enough to --"

"Be quiet so they blame me? Is that it? No, my dear Jan. No more --"

Pickett cut him off: "How did you get the gun?"

Matt stiffened and turned his head slowly toward the tall man across the room. "Ask Jan. She came up with the idea."

"Millie brought it, didn't she?" Pickett stared at Matt, whose eyes were still on the woman in the middle of the room. "Millie threatened Edmund with it, told him to leave Amy alone. He took the gun from her." Pickett relaxed back into the soft leather, turning his head toward Jan Ayers. "Then you got the gun from the hall desk. I know that already. What I don't know is who told Ed about Amy -- who she was. Millie?"

Jan stared at Pickett, her face blank.

"Or did Ed figure it out on his own?"

"On his own?" Jan's face collapsed around her mouth as if shattered by the burst of hysterical laughter that broke through it. "Fat chance. Of course she told him. Edmund had no idea.

As a matter of fact, he wouldn't believe her. It was almost comical -- that pathetic harlot come to shame the Reverend Edmund Ayers, come to destroy the ministry of the Lord Je --"

"Why Ed?" cried Homer. "Why kill him?"

"Why?" Jan Ayers looked up in amused astonishment. "He found out. We had to kill him -- no other choice. We --"

Jan paused, recomposed her features. And with the air of someone explaining something to a child she said, "The Lord simply presented us with the opportunity once again -- this time as Roger Mooring. Edmund found out about our" -- she gestured vaguely -- "relationship with Ralph Kemp. He knew long before that, I think. But he didn't have the nerve to bring it up. Much less nerve enough to go to the authorities. He --"

"Look . . ." Matt's voice brightened, apparently in response to the topic. "His inheritance dried up long ago. His name was collateral enough for a while, but the New Temple strained even that. It was a simple cash-flow problem. We needed cash, that's all. Tithes were not even meeting operating expenses, much less keeping up with the debt payments. Ed said the Lord would provide." Matt smiled indulgently. "He didn't understand, he never understood, that . . . well, the Lord's provisions aren't always, shall we say, palatable? Jan and I both realized that he would have to become the front man -- the .

. . the . . ." Matt drew himself up straight in his chair; he fairly beamed. ". . . the Aaron to my Moses. Someone had to do something. Or this great witness would simply --"

"And that slut's daughter ruined it!" cried Jan. "That whoring child destroyed herself. And then Edmund --"

"You told her," cut in Pickett, "didn't you? Amy came by to see Edmund. She wanted the truth, and you threw it in her face. She couldn't take it. That's why she killed her self."

"I told her, yes." Jan straightened, proudly. "But the Lord destroyed her. For her sins. What have I to do with that? He destroys all those who stand between the Word and its witness. I was merely His tool. But when I told Edmund -- told him that his whoring child was dead, gone for ever, he blamed me. Me! He gave himself over to Satan, then. Entirely. He had to die. He would tell, he said. He would have actually gone to Sheriff Beane." The amazement seemed genuine. "He would have told you, Bodie Pickett, if Matt hadn't --"

"And what about you?"

"Shut up!"

"What about you, Nettie Moses?" Matt leaned awkwardly across the desk. "You explain what shooting Millie had to do with the Lord's work, with the Word's witness. Explain that, Nettie dear."

"Millie had to die." Jan polled the room with her eyes. "You see that don't you? She was all that remained of the Reverend Edmund Ayers' fall -- the only one left who could taint Edmund and the great work of the Temple."

"Your sister," said Pickett quietly. "That's who we're talking about."

Jan Ayers paused, her mouth still open, and turned from Matt to Pickett. Her voice low, barely human, she said: "No sister of mine. I was born anew. Born into the New Jerusalem, from the blood of the Lord, and the Grace of the Lord God . . . Born anew."

Organ music billowed into the close room through a crack in the sanctuary door; a youthful head came with it. "Mizz Ayers? There anything the matter? The service -- they're waiting."

Without a word, Jan Ayers whirled around and pushed past the young messenger into the sanctuary beyond. Pickett rushed to the door as it closed.

"No. Leave her be," Homer shrugged. "She aint going nowheres -- not yet anyway."

A light tapping and Kimberly's voice came from the opposite door. "Missus Ayers, are you in there? They're waiting. Are you in there?" The door opened. "Oh. I'm sorry." Kimberly moved back through the door leaving only her head in the room.

Homer stood. "It's okay." He leaned over the desk, bracing one hand on the blotter in front of Matt Cheatham, and reached for the intercom.

Kimberly scanned the silent faces, and slipped back into the room, backing up against the door and closing it in the process.

"Is anything the matter?"

Homer paused over the array of buttons and looked back to Kimberly. "Not that can be helped, honey." He pushed the red button. "Skeeter? . . . Skeeter! Where the hell are you?"

The intercom crackled. Matt Cheatham moved uncomfortably in the chair. Sheriff Homer Beane loomed over him like a wrathful god.

"Yessir."

"Skeeter, better get in here. Call for another car -- we'll need two."

"Sir, Singleton and Franklin's already here. They found another stiff up round the Osteen Bridge. It looks like --"

"Jesus. Get in here, Skeeter, or am I gonna have to --"

"Nosir. I'm comin! I --"

Homer released the button. With a grunt of effort, he pushed himself off the desk. "Just what I need right now, another goddamn body."

The revolver slipped from the sheriff's holster without a

sound.

"Let's hope it's the last," said Matt.

He held the revolver awkwardly, using both hands. He cocked the hammer. He moved toward Kimberly and the door through which she'd entered. A loud knock at the door brought a gasp from Kimberly.

Matt grabbed her, pulling her in front of him.

Skeeter burst through. "Sheriff, that there body they foun, it was --" Skeeter froze, looked at Kimberly, Cheatham, and the long barrelled service revolver that joined the two. Without moving anything else, his eyes shifted to Beane's.

Beane shook his head.

"Uh, Mister Cheatham?"

Matt stood, silent, tightening his grip on Kimberly's arm. Kimberly grimaced in pain. "Please, Mister Cheatham. I . . . You're hurting me. I don't understand --"

"Be quiet."

Skeeter raised his hands to shoulder height. "Mister Cheatham -- look, we got two officers out there in the lobby, and another car comin. They aint no way in hell you gone --"

"Be quiet."

Pickett said: "It was Kemp, wasn't it?"

Matt turned nervously. Pickett smiled nervously.

"Kemp. Had to be. The last two shots you fired -- the two from your gun -- they weren't fired at me, were they? Kemp was coming apart, you couldn't count on him any more. You had the gun again, so you killed him. Not bad."

Skeeter cut in eagerly: "Tha's right, sheriff, it was Kemp. He had two holes in him. Small caliber, probably one of those there pocket automatics. Like the one what --"

"Be quiet! All of you!"

All were.

Matt pulled Kimberly with him toward the sanctuary door -- and Bodie Pickett, who planted his weight firmly on both feet and stood, hands at his sides, blocking the way.

"You will please move, Mister Pickett. We are leaving. And if you" -- and he swung the revolver back toward the center of the room -- "or anyone else does anything to stop us, Kimberly will be the first but certainly not the last to get hurt." Matt Cheatham moved closer to Pickett and the door. "Do you understand me?"

Bodie Pickett stepped aside. "Perfectly."

"You're a goddamned fool, Cheatham."

"No doubt, Sheriff, no doubt." Matt released Kimberly long enough to open the door. She gasped when he grabbed her again and pushed her into the space beyond. "But then I've nothing to

lose. Nothing what-so-ever." And the door closed softly behind them.

Homer rushed to it, paused, then turned back to Skeeter. "Send Franklin and Singleton round front to the sanctuary. You wait for the other car out front then cover as many of the exits as you can. And call for all the backup we got. Pickett?"

Pickett stared down at the floor, apparently lost in thought.

"You."

Pickett started. "Yeah?"

"You wait here. Lock the door after me so's he can't get out this way. Get going, Skeeter!"

With that, Skeeter took off through the door he'd entered by. Pickett opened the opposite door for the sheriff. "You lock it now, y'hear?" Pickett nodded, and held the door open as Homer stepped through.

It opened at floor level. A runway cut through the tiered seating which formed a high wall on either side. It ran to the three broad steps at the base of the center dais, the distance carpeted in red. Matt and Kimberly pressed against the wall, inching their way down the runway toward the dais. Homer followed them, always at the same distance, not threatening, but nonetheless holding his ground.

On the central podium, Jan Ayers stood with her arms outstretched, a black shadow cast by the high white cross above her. The white sculpted figures behind her listened in cool silence to the voice she raised in tribute to the Reverend Edmund Ayers and his vision -- the Temple of Glory. The congregation was rapt.

No one noticed as Matt dragged Kimberly to the steps. Matt looked nervously over his shoulder, noticing Homer -- and Bodie Pickett, who still stood in the open doorway. He wheeled around, putting Kimberly between himself and the Sheriff. The first few rows of seats not more than ten yards away could now see Matt's revolver. There were whispers.

A large sunburned man with grey hair stood from his seat at the end of the second row. Matt's eyes bulged; he turned the gun quickly on the risen man. Sheriff Homer Beane exploded:

"Stay back!"

The hall fell silent as his cry multiplied throughout the vast doomed space. The sunburned man froze, he sat back down. The clatter of feet echoed through the hall as Singleton and Franklin ran to the front, down separate aisles.

"No!"

At the sound of the sheriff's voice, they froze, revolvers drawn, in front of the dais -- and Jan Ayers who stopped

mid-sentence. Homer said in his public voice:

"Nobody move. Everbody stay put, and everthing'll be just fine." The words multiplied and spiraled through the sanctuary.

Slowly, theatrically, Homer strode forward toward Matt Cheatham. He stopped not ten feet from Matt and his hostage, braced his legs apart, hooked his thumbs through his polished tooled leather holster belt and, cocking his massive head to the side, said:

"What's it gone be now, Mister Cheatham? They aint but two ways outta this. And you know what they are. They jus aint no sense in --"

But Beane gave it up. Matt Cheatham was beyond sense -- eyes large and red, face gone pink against the background of his white dress shirt. With an arm around Kimberly's neck, he pulled her behind him up the steps, and onto the dais. Kimberly's eyes started as her own face grew red from lack of air. Matt backed against the white marble figure of a saint, the beatific figure dwarfing both Matt and his burden. Sibilant murmurs ran low through the space.

Jan Ayers lowered her arms, and descended from the plexiglass pulpit. When she stood before Matt Cheatham and the terrified Kimberly, she turned.

The congregation quieted.

Beginning low, her voice quickly rising to a volume that filled the hall without amplification, Jan said:

"Lift thy sword, Oh God. Release thy terrible swift sword upon thy children. And kill thy children with death. For vengeance is Mine, sayeth the Lord. And terrible is the wrath of our God. And terrible is the day of His Wrath --"

"No!"

Jan froze.

Matt's voice spoke terror. "No, no you can't! I . . . I --"

Jan looked at him, then back to the congregation. "A-a-and kill thy children . . ."

Jan looked at Matt then, in silence; he returned the stare. Awe and wonder spoke in the eyes of each, the remnants of Jan's last words the only sound vibrating the cavernous sanctuary.

Homer stepped forward. His boot missed the carpet, striking the marble floor. Matt started at the sound. Homer froze. But Bodie Pickett moved.

He moved quickly down the aisle, past the sheriff, and to the steps. He paused there, staring at Matt, his eyes bland and disinterested. Slowly, he mounted the steps, stopping in front of Matt Cheatham, Homer's service revolver six inches from his belly. Apparently calm, his hands to his sides, his weight

firmly planted on both feet, he stared into Matt's bulging eyes, his own narrowing and opening in turn. Quietly, as if in intimate conversation, as if oblivious of the thousands of souls staring down on the two of them, Pickett said:

"That's not all, is it Matt?"

Matt didn't move, but his gaze became less glassy.

"It's not, is it? You killed J.B. -- or had him killed. The same thing. I wanna know why."

Matt's eyes shifted nervously from Pickett to Jan Ayers. Then to the Sheriff.

"Then I'll tell you, Matt. He was executor of the estate -- Clayton and Marjorie's estate, Ed's parents. He knew Ed had overextended himself. He spoke to Ed about it. Was that it? And Ed told him what he thought you were up to. You killed him then, just like the others . . ."

Matt mouthed a "no."

But Pickett ignored the other's denial. "And just like the others, you pointed the evidence someplace else. Notorious drunk shoots self in drunken depression. You could have predicted the headlines."

"No," and this time the word found voice.

Still, Pickett ignored it. "That's the way they read. And that's the way you planned it. Isn't it?"

"No," said Matt clearly.

"Isn't it?" repeated Pickett, the mask of calm gone from his face. It flushed with desperation.

Matt suddenly laughed; then, as suddenly, stopped.

The laugh echoed into silence. Matt smiled then, shook his head slowly, for an instant closing his eyes. "You pathetic sod . . . You think that drunk could have found out anything about anything? He didn't know one drink from the next. He didn't have the faintest idea about us."

He leaned forward, his smile hardening into a sneer.

"You get me, Pickett? You understand that? Kill him? --"

Kimberly gagged.

Matt shook her, drew his arm tighter around her neck, then looked back up to the tall man before him. He showed his teeth, his eyes crinkling with genuine amusement. "He killed himself, Pickett! Himself! He stuck that gun of his in his mouth and --"

In desperation, Kimberly kicked back.

A spike heel caught Matt in the shin. He cried out, threw Kimberly to the marble floor and pulled back Homer's revolver as if to strike her.

But he never got the chance.

Three sharp snaps as from a bullwhip broke the echo of Kimberly's fall. The crack of each hammered Matt against the

marble statue behind him.

Jan screamed, the echo of her voice cutting through the periodic echoes of the three gunshots. Her hands went to her throat, closing on her neck and the red rose that hung there.

At the same moment, to the left of Matt's red silk tie, three gaudy flowers of the same hue bloomed on his white starched shirt. The revolver twisted in his hand, and, for an instant, hung limply from his index finger before it clattered to the polished marble. Matt glanced down to his shirt and the three expanding stains. They had become one. He looked up at Bodie Pickett. His mouth came open; but before it released any words his eyes went white, his jaw slack. Matt Cheatham slid down the white marble statue behind him, and to the floor. His passage streaked the white marble red.

Silence became murmur; then, quickly, roar.

Jan Ayers stepped over Kimberly, reaching for Matt's pistol. Catching her foot in the hem of her gown, she went over on top of the other woman, falling toward the gun. Pickett stepped forward quickly and kicked the revolver out from under her. It skittered across the dais and over the edge. Jan Ayers and Pickett followed it with their eyes as it clattered to the floor at the feet of Mark Ayers.

He stood, feet braced apart, eyes wild and staring, with

Millie's silver automatic still held before him clasped tightly in both hands. A wisp of white smoke spiraled up from the barrel.

But it no longer pointed at Matthew Cheatham, but Jan Ayers.

Pickett, his eyes red, his long face as white as those of the saints behind him, stepped between Mark and his mother.

Below the roar in the Temple, he said:

"No."

"But --" Mark batted his eyes. " -- but she . . . she --"

"No. Enough."

Mark looked from Pickett to the silver automatic. It trembled in his white hands, sparkling in the reflected glare of the stage lights.

Pickett raised his eyebrows in a question.

In answer, the silver automatic dropped to the cold stone floor.

Homer pushed past, scooped up the pistol, and stopped, staring up into the dull eyes of Bodie Pickett. "Well, boy, I guess you bout --"

But Pickett wasn't listening. He rushed down the steps, and cut through the pressing congregation toward the double door marked EXIT. He pushed through without stopping. Out onto the steaming asphalt, into the midday glare. Brisk, deliberate, his

face blank and hard, Picket continued past the ranks of glittering windshields and super heated steel.

Until he came to a white '65 Nova. He put a hand to its door.

He stopped. He looked down at his hand.

Slowly, he turned his face toward the sky -- the high Florida sky, blue with that azure sometimes seen in the eye of a child. He stared up into that sky and into the bright Florida sun fixed in its center like the glint of light that can sometimes hide the black center of the eye. He stared into that light till his hazel eyes brimmed. Translucent blues streaked his face then, and his lids grew swollen and closed.

And Bodie Pickett looked down at his hand then, and opened the door. He dropped to the hot vinyl. The Nova started on the first try.

[END CHAPTER 29]

[END SLOW FALL]