

Speed kills ...

HOT LAPS

A STOCKCAR THRILLER



STEVE EUBANKS

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HarperCollins e-books

*To Mark Reiter,
best agent in the world,
and an even better friend*

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Chapter 1

“Awwight, awwight. You can turn it on, but keep it quiet.”

Chester Dix fiddled with the buttons on the Sony car audio system, careful not to hit the volume by mistake. The fact that his boss and companion for the evening, Sergeant Burley Hamrick, allowed him to turn on of the car radio was nothing short of a star-in-the-east miracle. Chester knew to act quickly and carefully before the crusty old fart changed his mind. Burley did things by the book, and since there was no mention of AM, FM, or XM stereos in the North Carolina State Patrol Sergeant’s Manual, Burley, twenty years in a trooper’s uniform, considered the enjoyment of said devices to be a breach of protocol. Chester never pushed the issue. He’d once caught a glimpse of a Merle Haggard cassette on the front seat of Burley’s F-150, leading Chester to conclude that any discussion of the radio would end in a fight. But tonight was different. They were on the job, but that shouldn’t force them to miss the most important event of the weekend. Burley must have had some strong feelings on the subject as well, since nothing else could have forced him to authorize such a flagrant misuse of a government-owned Ford.

Chester squinted to make out the dimly lit digital display. “I think it’s—”

"Shhh," Burley said. "Keep it down, now."

"I am. I am."

"You know I don't normally—"

"I know, I know. I think it's . . ."

Chester's efforts were rewarded when a familiar voice shot forth from the speakers and filled the cabin.

"That's it," Burley said.

Both men leaned closer to catch the sounds emanating from the dash. They made quite a sight: two of North Carolina's finest sitting in their soot-black sedan on the side of a dark dirt road on a Saturday night, listening to the radio and waiting for their latest tip to pan out, or not.

"The white flag is out on lap three-thirty-three here in Richmond as we prepare to go back under green in the Exxon Mobil four hundred. Junior Senior Jr., in the Jack Daniel's Chevrolet, is your leader. The forty-four car of Rusty Twain is second, followed by Mudfish Dupree in the Browning fifty-five Ford. Bobby Camber moves into the fourth spot after taking two tires and fuel, and your points leader, Piston Stackheus, rounds out the top five."

The staccato tenor belonged to Dirk Manley, the radio voice of stockcar racing for the past thirty years. With a clipped Appalachian cadence, Dirk was one of those announcers who could make a bake sale sound exciting. Chester caught himself leaning closer to the radio.

"Senior has led for sixty of the last one hundred laps, but his lap times slipped before that last caution. He took four tires and fuel but no trackbar adjustment in what will likely be the last round of pit stops. We'll see if he can hold off Twain as they round turn four and prepare for the restart."

"Hold 'em off, Junior," Chester blurted.

"Shhhh!"

"Okay, okay."

"Twain tries to move to the inside. He can't complete

the pass as Senior holds on to the lead. Now Twain's trapped on the inside. He's going to lose several spots as Dupree, Camber, and Stackheus all move up coming out of two.

"Your race now is for third. Stackheus tries for position outside Camber as they head into turn three. They're two wide through three and four as this battle heads to the front stretch. Stackheus moves to the outside. He can't make the pass as they drive into one.

"Junior Senior has extended his lead, but he's about to hit lap traffic. The battle remains for third as Bobby Camber holds the inside line and fights off Piston Stackheus as they exit turn two.

"Down the back stretch, they remain two wide into three. Lap traffic ahead. Something's gotta give as they approach the lapped car of Faduki Yamata in the sixty-nine car.

"Oh! Camber's loose in three. Stackheus slides by. It looked like Stackheus took just enough air off of the spoiler of the thirty-four car. What a great save by Camber. That car looked to be headed into the wall."

"Yankee sumbitch," Burley said.

"Who?"

"That Minnesota boy, Stackheus."

"He's from Wisconsin."

"Same difference. What the hell's he doing running that crazy, anyhow? He's got the points lead. All he needs to do is finish."

"Maybe he wants to win."

"Maybe he's a dumbass," Burley snapped. "Bobby should have run him into the wall."

"Can Junior catch him tonight?"

"I don't know. You need a computer to keep up with all them points. All's I know is Junior'd be a damn sight better off if somebody'd wreck that Yankee sumbitch."

Another voice crackled over a speaker, and it took both

men a full second to realize it was their police radio and not the Sony. Burley fumbled with the volume before answering the call. "Yeah," he said into the mike.

"We got movement coming your way," the voice said.

"Roger," Hamrick said, all gruff and official, like he'd been waiting on pins and needles for the call.

Chester waited for him to place the mike back in its cradle before inching the volume up.

"Junior Senior is having trouble. He's telling the crew the car is tight. His laps time is off by a full second. Whatever adjustments T-Bone Bennett made during that last stop haven't worked.

"Looks like Rusty Twain's taking a run at the lead. Senior goes low and blocks him through two. I don't know how long Junior Senior can hold him off. The high line has been the fastest for the last hundred laps.

Twain takes that high line into turn one and . . . he completes the pass! We have a new leader at lap three-thirty-nine: Rusty Twain in the Viva Las Vegas forty-four Dodge. He is your sixth different leader of the night."

A row of small yellow lights cut through the darkness where the dirt road straightened and leveled.

"Here they come," Chester said. He instinctively crouched in the seat, even though there was no way he could be seen. Burley had hidden the Ford behind a honeysuckle outcropping. Unless the driver of the oncoming vehicle had X-ray vision, the troopers were invisible. A bigger worry was not being seen. Lake Norman wasn't far away. If an inebriated fisherman chose this route to avoid being stopped for DUI, Burley and Chester stood a pretty good chance of being sideswiped by a dually pulling a bass boat.

When the vehicle topped the hill, Burley let out a long slow whistle and snatched the mike from its perch. "We've got an eighteen-wheel tractor trailer up here," he said in the loudest voice of the night.

“Affirmative,” the voice on the radio came back. “That’s the target.”

“Aw shit,” Burley said.

Chester wasn’t sure if this vulgar snippet had been broadcast over the airwaves, but he knew his boss was pissed. They’d expected a pickup. The tipster had said the seller would be driving a truck. Who would have guessed it would be a diesel rig that looked like a freight train?

The big truck wobbled on the clay and gravel. Then it slowed to a stop forty yards from Burley and Chester’s hiding place. The lights went out, and for a moment the truck disappeared in the darkness.

“Damn,” Burley said.

This time Chester knew he wasn’t on the mike. Once could be chalked up to heat of the moment, but Burley would never bungle procedure twice in one night.

“I can’t see a thing,” Chester said.

Burley cued the mike once more. “Truck’s parked,” he said. “Lights out. Any movement?”

“Negative,” the voice said. “Hold your position.”

As if they’d planned on anything else.

“Mudfish Dupree is now challenging Junior Senior for second as they head down the front stretch.

“Trouble in turn two! Jett Jordan is in the wall. He’s been struggling with a loose car all night. It looks like he might have lost a tire. . . . Yes, we’re hearing that he lost a tire coming out of one and hit the wall hard, bringing out our fourth caution of the night.

“We’re under caution at lap three-fifty of the Exxon Mobil four-hundred. Let’s pause momentarily for station identification. This is the STOCKCAR Racing Network.”

“Second vehicle on the way,” the voice said over the radio.

“This is it,” Burley said. He cued the mike. “Everybody in position.”

“Roger that,” another voice answered.

“Ready,” came a third.

“Wait for my signal.”

Another set of lights appeared on the road, smaller than the semi, and moving a lot faster. The truck, a Chevy Silverado, slid to a stop beside the big rig, sending a cloud of dust and gravel into the sky. Chester recognized the distinctive thump-thump of an Eminem song coming from the cab. The rapping continued even after the lights went out.

“Get ready. Get ready,” Burley said.

The cabin light in the Silverado came on when the doors opened. Two men, one white and one Hispanic from the looks of them, climbed out of the cab. The white guy, a fat kid in his twenties with stringy blond hair falling out from under a lime green John Deere cap, walked to the front of the truck and began fumbling with the zipper of his jeans. His amigo stood outside the passenger door and lit a cigarette.

“Be a good time to go,” Chester said. “Get him with his dick in his hand.”

“Shhhh.”

No light came on when the driver door of the rig opened. A figure, male from the build, six feet, about a hundred seventy pounds, climbed down and stood on the gravel road with his hands either in his pockets or on his hips. It was hard to tell since the only light for miles came from the cab of the Silverado.

The Hispanic raised his chin and tipped his cigarette in the direction of the rig. Burley couldn’t tell if he said anything. Once Fat Boy finished his business, he marched over to the man in the shadows and handed him something.

“That’s it!” Chester said.

“Wait.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Wait.” Burley gripped Chester’s knee with a big right hand.

Shadow Man and Fat Boy appeared to talk for a few seconds while Amigo finished his cig. The whole thing couldn’t have taken more than thirty seconds, but it felt like an hour. Chester’s heart pounded. He gripped the twelve-gauge a little tighter and ran his hand up and down the stock.

Then Shadow Man nodded and waved toward the rig. Fat Boy and Amigo ambled over to the big truck and climbed in, which was no small feat given the white guy’s girth. Shadow Man kept his head down as he climbed behind the wheel of the Silverado. His first order of business was to turn off the rap just as Eminem was going on about cutting some skank’s head off.

For some unknown reason, Burley took this as his cue.

“Go,” he said into the mike as he threw open the door of the Ford.

Two troopers approached at full sprint from the right. Two more came from behind. Burley and Chester closed in from the left.

“Get out! Get out! Get out!” Troopers screamed and beat a hard path toward the trucks.

Spotlights on their scopes illuminated three startled faces, as the men in the trucks tried to decide what to do. Fat Boy’s decision was easy. He hadn’t fully nestled into the driver’s seat. Startled, he reached for the door, and promptly fell out of the rig. His belly hit the gravel with a thud.

Amigo tried to make a run for it, darting toward the rear of the rig where a trooper in riot gear hit him in the mouth with a nightstick, knocking out two teeth and sending him sprawling to the gravel.

Burley and Chester surrounded the Silverado, their lights and shotguns trained on the driver. His eyes were wide with panic, but he didn’t appear ready to run.

“Hands up! Now! Get out! Hands up! Now!”

The man's hands flew up, which presented a problem since he couldn't open the driver's-side door with both hands above his head. Chester rectified this dilemma by opening the door and pulling the man out of the cab.

"Secure!" Burley yelled.

"Secure," another voice shouted from behind.

"Secure," came a third.

That was it. The whole thing had taken less than a minute, and not a single shot had been fired. The Hispanic boy, still searching the ground for his two teeth, would need a little medical care, but other than that, this one had gone without a hitch.

Burley felt good about how smooth the operation went. They were usually not that easy. Then he took his first good look at the man Chester had pulled from the Silverado. Thin and pale with dirty red hair, the man knelt beside the truck as Chester cuffed his hands behind his back. There was something oddly familiar about him—the white skin, the red hair—something Burley couldn't quite place.

"What's your name, boy?" Burley said.

The man sniffled and spit on the gravel, but said nothing.

"Man's talking to you," Chester said as he grabbed a wad of red hair and pulled, revealing a freckled face.

And that's when it hit him. "Oh, shit," Burley said.

"What?"

"Don't you recognize him?"

Chester pointed his light at the redhead's face and looked at him for a full five seconds.

"Junior?" he said. "Wait a minute. That can't be."

Then a wave of recognition swept across Chester's face.

"Oh, no," he said. "Troy Slackherd."

That's when the two troopers realized that the radio was on in the Silverado. The redhead they recognized as Troy Slackherd had turned off Eminem, and tuned in to something more important.

“Once again, Piston Stackheus takes the checkered flag at the Exxon Mobil four-hundred for his eighth win of the season. Rusty Twain takes second, followed by Mudfish Dupree. Bo Pickett, and Junior Senior Jr. round out your top five.

“On behalf of everyone at the STOCKCAR Racing Network, this is Dirk Manley hoping you’ll tune in again next week as we head to Pocono for the ThermaCare 500. So long everybody.”

Chapter 2

Robert Redding didn't listen to a second of the race, and couldn't have cared less who won. Those worries were years behind him. Tonight, the lateness of the hour, the traffic, and the fact that both his kids were wide awake in the back-seat three hours past their bedtimes concerned him a lot more than who took the checkered flag in Richmond. A family outing to a professional bull riding competition at the Charlotte Arena had seemed like a good idea when he'd gotten the tickets, and a good idea when his kids saw the first bull and rider explode out of the chute. It only ceased to be a good idea when the Reddings got back in their minivan, and realized that every street in town was a parking lot.

"Can't you call somebody?" Melissa Redding asked.

Robert's wife had treated this little family foray like a trip to the dentist, but she'd appeared to enjoy herself once she met a few of the cowboys. They'd all tipped their hats and called her "ma'am," which made her smile. The months since Robert's nomination for a federal prosecutor's job had been hard on Melissa. Every person she and Robert knew—every friend they had, every banker who'd ever given them a loan, and every school teacher and therapist who had ever tested the kids—had been interviewed at length by clean-cut, unsmiling federal agents.

Then there was the shadow Justice had seen fit to give them: a fine young lawyer and agent named John Paul Westport, who insisted on going by John Paul in case anybody questioned his Mayflower roots. You couldn't spend ten minutes with John Paul without knowing that his great, great, great, great grandfather had been a pointy-hat pilgrim, and that his family summered in Newport, Rhode Island, and still used the word "summer" as a verb. At twenty-nine, John Paul had been at Justice his entire legal career, which started after graduating in the middle of his class at Columbia Law, the school where he'd played quarterback as an undergraduate. If Melissa had cared to look it up, she would have learned that Columbia lost twenty-two games in a row with John Paul taking snaps. Just to tweak John Paul's Waspy sensibilities, Robert had taken to calling him Johnny Pea. The young man was ostensibly there to "advise" Robert and prepare him for the upcoming confirmation process, but Johnny Pea was a baby-sitter. His job was to keep the Reddings out of trouble and smooth out the inevitable wrinkles of confirmation. Such was the way of a federal appointment these days, even one as straightforward as Chief Prosecutor for the Sixth District of the U.S. Federal Court. Robert couldn't imagine what judges had to go through.

The hoopla didn't bother Robert, but it was unfair to Melissa. She hadn't asked for this, nor was she thrilled by the prospect of having every scrapbook, tax receipt, and love letter she'd ever written combed through and scrutinized. She'd spent a lot more time indoors in recent weeks. Bull riding didn't qualify as a romantic night on the town, but at least she was out of the house. Now, the air in the van had thickened after thirty minutes of bumper-to-bumper gridlock.

"No, I can't call someone," Robert said. "As soon as we get off seventy-four it should thin out."

"Where's Johnny Pea when you need him?" Melissa had picked up on Robert's nickname for John Paul Westport.

"Not sure what he'd do about this," Robert said.

"Johnny Pea smells funny." This tidbit of youthful honesty came from ten-year-old Michael Redding, who had turned his attention away from the backseat DVD player long enough to impart his opinion of Agent John Paul Westport.

"That's not nice," thirteen-year-old Katie Redding signed.

"What did she say?" Robert asked. He couldn't see his daughter's hands and watch the brake lights in front of him.

"She said I wasn't being nice, but it's true."

"It's called cologne," Melissa said. "You'll learn to like it soon enough."

"Katie likes it now, especially on Johnny Pea," Michael said.

"Shut up, you puke," Katie signed.

"Mom, Katie told me to shut up."

"Katie," she said, turning so her daughter could read her lips. "Don't speak that way to your brother."

"Yeah," Michael said. Then he began to sing: "*Katie loves Johnny Pea, kissing by the pine tree.*"

"You little shit," she signed.

"Katherine," Melissa said.

"But, Mom," she signed.

"Both of you cut it out," Robert said, ending all discussion.

They sat in silence until Robert's cell phone rang. Melissa answered it. The tone in which she said "just a moment" told the tale. This was not good news. "It's for you," she said, all but throwing the phone in his direction.

"Redding."

Ten seconds later, Robert said, "Now?" followed by, "I'm

stuck in traffic” and “I took my family to the arena . . . Yeah . . . professional bull riding . . . Yes, she enjoyed it . . . Well, I don’t know what I can do about it out here . . . I’m on seventy-four about a mile from six . . . We’re not moving . . .” and finally, “Okay, I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“You’re going in?” Melissa said.

“That’s the bad news,” he said.

“There’s good news?”

Rather than answer, he put on his flashers and pulled into the emergency lane. A patrol car was five hundred feet ahead. The cop got out. After a brief conversation, the Reddings had a flashing escort up the narrow emergency corridor.

“God, Robert, slow down. The kids!”

He gave her a quick glance over the top of his glasses. “Melissa.”

It was all he needed to say. There was still one area of his life that was above criticism, even from his wife.

As Robert predicted, the traffic thinned out past the 74-77 interchange. He drove the minivan between eighty and ninety miles an hour the rest of the way home, much to the silent chagrin of Melissa, who studied the airbag deployment warning on the glove box.

They were home in fifteen minutes. He helped Melissa get the kids inside, and made sure Michael brushed his teeth. Then he kissed his wife, and made a meaningless promise to be back as soon as he could. With that, he hopped into his Corvette, the car he drove when he wasn’t chauffeuring anyone, and sped out of the drive.

A bevy of questions raced through his mind. What sort of bust could be important enough to call him out this late at night? And why didn’t he know about it ahead of time? Troopers loved to keep the state attorney’s office informed,

sometimes calling Robert at home to let him know they'd nabbed an intoxicated father who hadn't returned his children to the ex on time, or a lawyer who'd opened his trap at a honky-tonk and gotten his nose bloodied. "Just keeping you in the loop, sir."

Robert wondered what could have happened tonight. Someone would have told him if a major bust had been planned. And what was this nonsense about a "sensitive subject" in custody? Ty Johnson, the man who had called him, was one of the most capable attorneys in Robert's office, not someone prone to ominous ambiguity. If Ty said the state police needed Robert to help interview a suspect, then that was that. But the question still remained: Why the hell hadn't he been "kept in the loop" on this?

Cloud cover kept the night unusually dark, and the winding road around Robert's lakefront community seemed more narrow and twisty than usual. He'd driven this stretch of asphalt so many times, he knew every bump. The only surprise this time was the flashing blue light behind him. He must have been going seventy in a thirty-five-mile-an-hour zone. The speed limit was perfectly appropriate for daylight hours when fishermen, recreational boaters, and families with children traversed the many waterfront inlets of Lake Norman. This time of night, the only two cars on the road were Robert's Corvette and the patrol car behind him. He pulled onto the shoulder near a clearing, giving the cop plenty of room to approach.

It took a minute for the local officer to run his plates and meander up to his window. By that time Robert had his license and his state's attorney ID out and ready.

"License and registration," the cop said as he shone his special issue Maglite in Robert's eyes.

Robert passed the appropriate documentation through the window. Then he remembered the gun. He put his hands where the cop could see them. "I have a licensed handgun

locked in the glove compartment,” he said. “You’ll find the permit behind my identification.”

The cop grunted. He glanced at the name on the license, and then pointed the light back in Robert’s face. “Redball Redding?”

Not Robert, the name on his license, or Robbie, which was what his mother and siblings still called him, or Chief State’s Attorney Redding, the proper title this peace officer should have used: If Robert were elected president of the United States, he’d still be “Redball” to guys like this.

“That’s me,” he said.

“Gosh, I’m sorry. You were going seventy-one out here. You know, a Corvette and all. I just figured . . .”

“And you were right,” Robert said. “State guys had a bust tonight, and they called me in.” Better to get the reasoning for his moving violation out in the open.

“Yeah, right, sure, uh-huh,” the cop said. “Anything I can do for you? Need an escort?”

That wasn’t a bad idea. “Can you keep up?” Robert said, smiling.

The cop cackled, even though the joke wasn’t that funny. “I’ll do my best. Hey, did you see any of the race tonight?”

“Afraid not. I was out with the family.”

“Darndest thing you’ve ever seen. Stackheus was running fifth to tenth all night. Then on the final five laps it was like he got some extra juice. He went past Mudfish like he was going backwards. Junior should have won the thing, but I don’t know. Car just went away from him at the end.

“You know, I was there when you won Richmond that last time. That was a helluva race. Boy, you could really put it on ’em.”

“Thank you,” Robert said in a let’s-get-on-with-it tone. This was so typical. Everybody he met claimed to have seen

him win one race or another back in the day. Some of the tracks would have had to seat a million people to house all the folks who said they'd eye-witnessed Redball Redding win races there. "If you want to help me out . . ." Robert said.

"Oh, yeah, yeah. Sorry. Just follow me."

Like all cops who met him for the first time, this one had to show off his driving prowess by leading Robert on a hundred-mile-an-hour sprint down I-77, blue lights flashing the entire trip. It wasn't as though they were chasing a murder suspect or trying to rescue a hostage: the suspects were in custody, and the investigators were probably drinking coffee at the jail. Still, the officer had to have his moment. It wasn't everyday that you provided a high-speed escort for Redball Redding.

When they arrived at the Mecklenburg county jail, Robert thanked the cop, shook his hand, and signed a couple of autographs. Being a former Salem Cup champion and so-called stockcar legend made it easier to run for office in North Carolina, even though Robert had attended a second-tier law school and had less experience than other capable candidates in the DA's office. People wanted to vote for a racecar driver, and the racecar driver wanted to put bad guys behind bars. His second career fulfilled a promise he'd made to his mother after his father passed away, and as long as he proved himself to be competent, capable, and above corruption in his second life as a public servant, he was all but assured of reelection. Still, times like these he wished his name were Bob Smith.

It was almost one in the morning when the officer on duty buzzed Robert through the secure door, and he saw Ty Johnson standing beside the dispatch desk flanked by a couple of troopers still wearing their Kevlar. This must have been some episode.

“Robert,” Ty said when he saw his boss. He walked over and extended his hand.

“Ty, why am I not at home in bed with my wife?”

“You’ve got these fine gentlemen to thank for that,” Ty said, pointing to the three troopers, who had trouble making eye contact.

“Gentlemen?” Robert said.

The eldest of the troopers couldn’t have been more than forty-five, but he looked sixty and grim with a flattop haircut straight out of Fort Bragg.

“Sergeant Burley Hamrick,” he said. “I’m the one who insisted that you be called.”

“Okay, Sergeant,” Robert said. “Why am I here?”

Burley cleared his throat. “At precisely ten twenty-nine this evening, my men, acting on a tip from a reliable informant, witnessed a probable illegal transaction off county road fifty-six near Huntersville.”

“You raided a drug drop,” Robert said, attempting to hurry things along.

“That’s what we thought,” Burley said, uncomfortable with the interruption. “But it turned out to be something different.”

“Well,” Robert said, no longer able to hide his annoyance, “what was it?”

Burley hesitated.

“Toy cars,” Ty said, pleased that he was able to deliver the punch line. Five years out of Wake Forest Law, Ty Johnson was a handsome African American who looked a lot like Will Smith, a resemblance that led him to put a little more value than necessary on comedic timing. Ty also wore cowboy boots, drove a pickup truck, owned shotguns, and hunted quail, deer, rabbit, and anything else that moved in the woods. Not your typical black lawyer. Since Robert wasn’t your typical state attorney, the two of them got along great.

"We're now down to investigating toy cars?" Robert asked.

"Not toys," Burley jumped in. "We seized a whole tractor-trailer rig full of Trackage die casts, you know, the official ones."

"I know what they are," Robert said. "I've autographed enough of them. You mean, you brought me out here in the middle of the night because some yahoo tried to steal some die-cast cars?"

"He hijacked a whole truckload of them," Burley said.

It took Robert a second to realize his mouth was agape. This would have been funny if it weren't so late. "Why the hell am I here?" he asked a little louder.

"Maybe we should show you," Ty said.

"What a good idea."

They walked through a couple of security doors, and down a flight of metal stairs. A semicircular work counter stood enclosed by bulletproof Plexiglas with a dozen small monitoring screens dotting the countertop. Burley pointed to one. On the screen a large, pale man with stringy blond hair and blotches on his hefty cheeks sat behind a table. He'd obviously seen better nights.

"Rufus Dearborn," Burley said, pointing at the fat man. "He was taking possession of the rig."

"Just planning to drive away with it?" Robert asked.

Burley nodded. "Apparently so. He and another fellow, a Mexican named Jose Manuel Hietus, met the hijacker, handed him an envelope, and crawled into the cab of the truck. Hietus is in the infirmary."

"What happened?" Robert said.

"He tried to run. Nightstick restraint. By the book. Dearborn surrendered without incident. 'Course, they wouldn't give us their names. It took about fifteen minutes to run their prints."

Getting a hit on prints that quickly meant that Dearborn

and Hietus were well known in the criminal justice system.

Burley continued: "Mr. Dearborn has an outstanding bench warrant for a drug trial he skipped, as well as seven previous arrests and three convictions on everything from possession with intent to grand theft auto."

"How old is he?"

"Thirty-one, if the record's right."

"Another rehabilitation success story," Robert said.

"Hietus is better. Assault with a deadly weapon. Aggravated battery. Attempted kidnapping. He was obviously the muscle of the operation."

"You need muscle to steal a truckload of toys?" Ty asked.

"This was a big haul," Burley said with a tinge of defensiveness in his voice. "Guys here tell me the value could run as high as a million dollars."

"What was in the envelope?" Robert asked.

"Locker key from the Greyhound station, and a napkin from the Huddle House with a bunch of numbers scribbled on it. Don't know what they are. We figure the payoff for the truck is in the locker."

Robert nodded and grunted before getting back to his original question. "So why couldn't this have waited until morning?"

"You haven't seen the best part," Ty said.

"Well, spring it on me."

Burley nodded to another officer, who moved behind the counter and hit a few buttons on a computer keyboard. One of the screens that had been showing an empty shower blipped and changed views. The new image was an interrogation room where a lone figure sat handcuffed to a metal table.

"There's your hijacker," Burley said.

Robert leaned closer and stared at the grainy image of a skinny redhead with a day's growth of beard.

"Junior?"

“That’s what one of my boys thought. You can’t hardly tell them apart, can you?”

“Oh no, Troy Slackherd,” Robert said.

“Now you know why I called you,” Ty said.

“Junior Senior’s stepbrother hijacked a truck full of toy cars.”

“Die casts,” Burley said.

“Whatever.”

“Am I off the hook for pulling you away from home?” Ty asked, unable to hold back a smile.

“You’re off the hook,” Robert said. He put his hands in his pockets and stared at the screen, shaking his head in disbelief. “Troy Slackherd, what the hell were you thinking?”

Chapter 3

Troy Slackherd, screw-up stepbrother of stockcar's most popular driver, had invoked his constitutional right to keep his trap shut. Other than a few poorly aimed obscenities, the only words he'd uttered since being dragged from the Silverado were, "I want a lawyer."

Burley had been happy to oblige. The thought of the Senior family attorney being jarred awake at this hour put a smile on the trooper's face.

Troy's accomplice, Rufus Dearborn, chose to forgo his right to counsel. Rufus had been through the system enough times to know that he would be lucky to get a five-minute conference with whatever lame-brained public defender the court assigned him before arraignment, even less before trial. He figured he'd get five to fifteen for skipping out on that little cocaine misunderstanding. Probation violations would tack on another two. This was before any of the present charges made their way to the docket. Throw in his previous convictions, and he was looking to spend the most productive years of his adult life pressing license plates and avoiding the showers at the state penitentiary in Boone. Those prospects led Rufus to figure, what the hell, he could bargain with Burley and the boys just as easily as some two-bit do-gooder from Legal Aid.

Shirtless and sore from his earlier belly flop, Rufus hunched over the interview table and picked his nose as Robert, Ty, Burley, and Chester entered the room. The suspect recognized Robert immediately.

It was unusual for the chief state's attorney to be involved in an initial interview, but Robert had learned long ago that his presence could save the state a lot of time and money. More times than he cared to count, the pitiful souls he confronted became so ecstatic upon meeting the great Redball Redding that they happily confessed to their misdeeds. One suspect had wanted to talk about racing so badly that he confessed to killing his girlfriend, her girlfriend (with whom she was having an affair), and a Good Samaritan who lived in a nearby trailer. "Now can we talk about Daytona?" the kid had asked after signing the necessary paperwork. Robert didn't have the heart to tell him no, so they sat in the interview room and talked racing for an hour before authorities carted him away.

Using a celebrated officer of the court as an interrogator triggered a mild Constitutional crisis in the Charlotte legal community. Trial lawyers rallied, blustered, and filed so many petitions, appeals, and amicus briefs that the clerk's office doubled its overtime budget processing the paperwork. After reams of threat-to-democracy-and-civilization rhetoric, the crux of the argument was simple: most defendants were too stupid to keep their mouths shut in the presence of a former stockcar champion, even though said racecar driver was now a prosecutor.

Hearings ensued, and the media spent the better part of a week speculating on what was right and proper for a prosecutor who was also a celebrity. The state argued that their lawyer could not be barred from investigating cases he would eventually have to try. In a feeble attempt at wit, the state's brief read: "If Britney Spears became prosecutor, the state should not be unduly penalized." That line drew a

scolding from the presiding judge, who sided with the state. After stripping away the legal mumbo-jumbo, the ruling allowed Robert “Redball” Redding to be present during questioning as long as the suspect fell under Redding’s prosecutorial jurisdiction.

For several months thereafter, suspects competed to see who could get Redball as a prosecutor. One career degenerate named Otis Suckerman stole a Honda Civic and asked for Robert to be his prosecutor. When the request was denied he posted bond, and stole a Jaguar. The second time through he told the arresting officer, “If I don’t get Redball this time, I’ll boost a Ferrari.”

Robert was careful not to overdo it. A three-judge panel had ruled in his favor on the law, but he knew there were jurists who found these shenanigans reprehensible. He’d been stingy with his jail visits after being elected Mecklenburg County DA, and had only been back once since becoming chief state’s attorney. This was the first time he’d darkened the jailhouse door in almost two years.

A lot had changed in that time, but a few things remained the same: When Rufus saw his face, the first words out of his big mouth were, “Hot-damn, Redball Redding!”

That’s when they knew they had him.

Robert smiled and took a seat in the cheap metal chair facing Rufus. He reached across the table and shook the suspect’s hand as if this were a fan club meeting or sponsor luncheon. He even said, “Nice to meet you.” Anything to loosen them up. They talked about Robert’s first win at Daytona, his final season in racing, two of his four victories at Charlotte, and, as always in these sessions, his decision to walk away from the riches of racing to become a lowly public servant.

It took Rufus five minutes to get to the question they all eventually asked: “Why’d you do it?”

“I had to keep chasing somebody,” Robert said. “Figured it might as well be guys like you.”

Rufus laughed so hard he drooled on the table, another typical reaction to Robert’s canned response. The question came up all the time, and he always deflected it. He’d given up his ride for the late nights and low pay of the prosecutor almost fourteen years ago, but the decision—the promise he had made to his family—had come long before that. But those were details he would not share with the likes of Rufus Dearborn.

It took another five minutes for Rufus to spill the details of the night’s activities. He was just the driver. Jose had the contacts. The two of them had met through a mutual ecstasy dealer out of Charleston. Rufus occasionally ran pills to Raleigh for the kids at North Carolina State, while Jose kept the Hispanic populations of Greenville and Spartanburg supplied. This revelation prompted another round of Miranda warnings. Robert couldn’t have a guy confessing to crimes they didn’t know about without making sure the dumbass understood his rights.

With that bit of procedure out of the way, Rufus continued his narrative. “Jose calls me a couple of days ago, and says he needs a truck driver. So, I says, ‘What kind of truck?’ and he says, ‘A big rig.’ I says ‘Okay,’ and he tells me to hook up with him at the Greyhound station.”

“You had no idea who you were meeting or what you were transporting?” Robert asked.

“No, I figured it was ex,” Rufus said.

So did Sergeant Burley Hamrick’s informant, but Robert kept that little tidbit to himself.

Rufus digressed into a mini-seminar on creative ways to smuggle the little pills from state to state. These ranged from inserting them into foam packing peanuts to insulating a rig’s interior with ziplock bags full of the drug. “Nobody rips into your insulation,” he said. “If you act like

you're shipping tomatoes, and you show the cops a couple of crates of tomatoes, you're home free."

This seemed like wonderful advice from someone with numerous drug-related arrests, but Robert let it go. He would file a report with the highway patrol and DEA on Monday.

"Anyway," Robert said, trying to move things along.

"Yeah, well, me and Jose hook up at the Greyhound station like he says. We hop in this pickup he's brung—I figure he stole it—and I drive us out to the country."

"What was in the locker at the bus station?"

"What locker?"

"The locker we're opening right now. The one the key in the envelope opens."

"I didn't know what was in that envelope," Rufus said. "Jose gave it to me when we got the Chevy. You driven that new Silverado yet? Man, it's got some jump to it."

"No, I haven't had the pleasure," Robert said. "Now, back to the locker."

"Yeah, I don't know nothing about no locker. Jose was waiting for me at the Greyhound station. He hands me this envelope, and the keys to the Silverado. I figure it's cash or something. I didn't open it. Jose tells me where we were going, and I drive. That's it."

"Who's Jose working for?"

"Some guy in Georgia. I didn't ask, and Jose wasn't telling. We're supposed to pick up the rig and drive it to Savannah."

"What's in Savannah?"

"Ten grand and a couple of hotties for me," Rufus said with a smile.

"And one of the busiest ports in the country," Ty added.

Rufus prattled on for another ten minutes about the trip, and what he'd expected to get out of it, particularly as it related to the "hotties" he'd been promised. He had never

met Troy Slackherd before that night, didn't care who he was. Jose was the "mastermind" behind this. He was the guy they needed to question.

"I say we let Troy cool down for a while," Robert said.

"His lawyer will be here before long."

"Let him come," Robert said. "Troy's not going anywhere. Don't put him in population. Keep him isolated, especially from Rufus."

Several officers nodded.

"What about the press?" Burley asked.

"I'm not planning to call them, Sergeant, are you?" Robert said.

"No, no, but they're not stupid."

"They're not ambitious, either. If I don't call them, and you don't call them, and we inform all these fine officers that I'll have their balls in a jar if any of them place a call, then we should have a day or two of peace. It's Sunday morning. Any reporter not home asleep right now is too drunk to file a story."

"I doubt anybody in Troy's family is going to call them," Ty added.

The uniformed among them shared a couple of guilty glances. If this story leaked, it would come from one of them, and no one doubted Redball's sincerity in threatening castration. This one would stay inside the cream-colored concrete walls of the Mecklenburg County Correctional Facility, at least for now.

"Are we clear?" Robert asked.

"Clear," one officer said.

"Got it," another offered.

"Yes, sir, Red . . . ah, Mr. Redding."

With that, Robert bid them all a good night. They would interview Jose and Troy first thing in the morning.

Chapter 4

North Concord was the closest emergency room. Not that Jose Manuel Hietus's trauma required emergency care. The two front incisors had been knocked out, which created a torrent of blood, but once the gushing ceased, Jose appeared otherwise unscathed. Like everyone who loses a tooth or two, Jose couldn't stop rubbing his lips and tongue over the gap, a fidget that accented the crater in the middle of his mouth and made him look like a middleweight version of Leon Spinks.

Trooper Todd Padgett had been assigned to escort Mr. Hietus to the hospital, a shitty way to spend a Saturday night, but a duty Todd accepted without complaint. Concord emergency put on a freak show this time every weekend, and Todd was enjoying the view. A woman slumped in a chair near the check-in desk squalling that she hadn't peed in three weeks. Her distended belly seemed to verify this malady, but none of the nurses or residents appeared too alarmed. There was more concern for a man with an arrow in his neck, through and through, front to back. He had driven to the hospital and checked himself in, creating quite a stir among the young doctors. Throw those two in with the standard cadre of knife wounds, broken hands from bar-room brawls, and babies with croup who sounded like they

were about to barf up a lung, and it was easy to see why snaggle-toothed Jose fell low on the priority list.

They waited an hour before a hospital security guard ushered them into a back corner and drew a thin white curtain just far enough around them to hide Jose's handcuffs. Ten minutes later, a doctor who looked about twelve stepped around the curtain and said, "Well, let's see what we have here."

"Police brutality's what we got," Jose mumbled.

"Uh-hum," the doctor said. "Why don't we have a look?"

Jose opened his mouth, and the doctor felt his jaw, which seemed to cause Jose some discomfort.

"Nora, can we get some film on this one?" he yelled to someone on the other side of the curtain.

"Two's open," a voice came back.

This made Todd uneasy. Traipsing around the hospital with a prisoner wasn't Trooper Padgett's idea of a good time.

"What are we planning here?" Todd asked.

"This man needs some X rays," Dr. Puberty said. "I don't think there's a fracture, but we need to check his jaw and sinus."

Todd started to protest, but on second thought a quick X ray wouldn't hurt. He looked forward to testifying that Jose had received all recommended treatment for his injuries at taxpayer expense. This always went over well with juries, especially if the trial came around tax time.

A frowning nurse appeared out of nowhere, and said, "Come with me," which they did. Todd kept a firm grip on Jose's arm as they walked down a corridor littered with boxes, gurneys, and a cart or two. The nurse marched past an open door, turned on the heel of her bright red Keds, and pointed inside. The room was dark with a large table in the center and a contraption that looked like an engine block suspended from the ceiling.

“Please have a seat and remove all metal objects from your pockets or your person: watches, jewelry, coins . . .”

“Handcuffs,” Jose mumbled.

This caused the nurse to wrinkle her forehead and purse her lips as if she’d bitten a sour persimmon. “Those will have to go,” she said.

“Whoa, wait a minute, now,” Todd said. “This man’s in custody.”

“Well, I can’t X-ray him with those things on,” the nurse said.

“Why the hell not? He ain’t getting an MRI. You’re shooting his face for god’s sake.”

The nurse’s frown grew longer, and her shoulders rose toward her ears in a dismissive shrug. “Hospital policy,” she said.

Todd shook his head. “Well, we might have to break policy tonight.”

“And who’s going to be responsible when this man’s lawyer sues the hospital for irradiating him?”

“For what?”

The nurse gave a slow nod. “Hospital already had one class action suit. Lawyers say X rays irradiate their clients’ jewelry. Say it gives them everything from bone spurs, to arthritis, to cancer.”

“Oh, for the love of Christ . . .”

Todd didn’t mind unchaining prisoners on the side of the highway. Hell, he even handed them shovels and pickaxes when they were on road duty. But that was outside and in the open, with two or three guards carrying shotguns and sidearms. This was a cramped, poorly lit hospital room with plenty of civilians who would be in harm’s way if something went awry. He also had a bad feeling about Jose. After a few years on the job, you learned which prisoners were really good guys who had made bad decisions. Those were the ones Todd would take through the Burger King

drive-through on their way back from work detail. Then there were those who shouldn't be let out of their cages no matter what the ACLU said. Jose seemed to fit that category.

He'd tried to use the "*No habla Ingles*" line until Todd snapped back in perfect Spanish. Todd grew up working side by side with Mexicans in his father's Polkville chicken farm. His Spanish was better than some of the second-generation Latinos on the force. Jose's English improved dramatically once Todd displayed his bilingual skills. The suspect knew all the requisite curse words and "fuck yo' mama" insults Todd expected.

"I don't know," Todd said to the nurse. "We shouldn't take any chances with this one."

"What did he do, kill a cop?" the nurse asked.

"Not exactly."

"Well?"

"He was hijacking a truck."

"How'd he lose his teeth?"

"Fucking cop beat me down," Jose jumped in. He was working through his new lisp. "Brutality, man. I wasn't even armed."

"Shut up."

"He wasn't armed?" The nurse raised her eyebrows.

"We don't have all the details," Todd said. "He was attempting to flee the scene."

"Nightsticked me, man," Jose said. "Beat me down like Rodney King."

"*Si usted no es callado, yo lo golpearé. Vaya adelante. ¡Hágalo!*"

The nurse stared at Todd without blinking. Her lips were drawn tight and her skin looked pasty in the low light. "Please remove those handcuffs so I can shoot this film," she said in a tone that told Todd this was not a request.

Todd sighed. "Stand up," he said to Jose, who was al-

ready seated on the X-ray table. The suspect obliged, and Todd stood far enough behind him to fend off a potential attack while he removed the handcuffs.

Jose rubbed his wrists, and calmly climbed back on the table.

“See, that wasn’t so bad,” the nurse said. She handed Jose a gray lead apron, and told him to cover himself, another hospital policy dictated by trial lawyers.

“Want to protect those family jewels,” Todd said. “Wouldn’t want to stop a fine citizen like you from procreating.”

“Fuck you.”

“That’s enough,” the nurse said. “Trooper, I need you to stand over there.” She motioned toward the door.

Tired of arguing, Todd stood in the doorway with his right hand propped on the frame.

The nurse disappeared into what looked like a closet with a Plexiglas window. “Hold still,” she said. A click and hum later she came out, moved the camera to the other side of Jose’s face, and repeated the process. “That’s it,” she said as she walked toward Jose.

He moved faster than either of them expected. Two wooden blocks, two-by-fours cut to six-inch lengths that were used as positioning chocks, sat on the end of the table. Jose grabbed one and struck the nurse in the temple before she had a chance to scream.

Todd reached for his mace, but his relaxed posture in the doorway cost him. Jose sprang toward him and threw the lead apron over the trooper’s head. Todd tried to block the apron with his left arm while his right hand grabbed the spray. But the apron blinded him long enough for Jose to pounce. Todd fell backward as Jose hit him with a shoulder. The two men spilled into the hallway. The Mexican’s hand went for Todd’s gun.

Once the apron fell away, Todd hit Jose in the temple with

the butt of his hand. This wasn't intended to incapacitate, just dislodge. Jose continued to grab for Todd's weapon.

Academy training kicked in, and Todd rolled to his side so that the gun was pinched between his hip and the tile floor. At the same time he struck Jose in the temple with his left hand while bringing his knee up into Jose's hip. This had the desired effect. Todd created some separation between himself and his attacker, which allowed him to gain a firm grip on his weapon. He removed the sidearm from its holster as he kicked Jose in the side.

The nurse had gotten back to her feet and was kicking Jose in the rump as she screamed for security. The Mexican tried to swat her away with his right hand as he continued to grab for Todd's gun with his left.

Todd rolled into a seated position and gave Jose another swift kick as he drew the firearm. "Hold it! Hold it!" he shouted.

But Jose wasn't stopping. He gritted the teeth he had left and let out a primal growl as he climbed into a sprinter's stance and made one final charge at Todd.

The shots sounded like explosions in the corridor. Todd kicked the floor and slid backward from a seated position as he fired. The first slug sailed through the gap where Jose's teeth had once been, and exited the back of his throat. That didn't kill him, although he would have died within minutes. The second bullet expedited the process, entering Jose's skull above his right eyebrow and bouncing around his brain cavity like a Super Ball.

The body fell face first into Todd's crotch. Doctors, nurses, and security guards ran toward them as Todd gave one final kick to Jose's lifeless gut. "You stupid fuck," he yelled. "I told you to stop!"

Robert did his best cat burglar impersonation as he crept back into his house at 2:46 A.M. He left the Corvette in the

driveway so he wouldn't have to open the garage door and risk waking the kids. Then he slipped in through the kitchen entrance. The front door to the house had been imported from Ireland. It was twelve feet high, three inches thick, a hundred years old, and squeaked like his Aunt Ernestine's mattress. The marble in the foyer magnified this noise, so you could hear the front door opening from any room in the house.

The kitchen door was much smaller and quieter, and the alarm keypad was next to the refrigerator. Robert disarmed the motion sensors before all hell broke loose. He'd added the alarm a month after buying the Greek revival house from a former Charlotte Hornet who had moved to New Orleans with the team. The first time they toured the place, Michael knew the house better than the realtor. "It was on *MTV Cribs*," he'd said. Robert had changed a few things since then. The disco-style dance room had been converted into a game room, and the mirrors were gone from the ceilings in the bedrooms. The theater screening room and enclosed swimming pool remained intact, although he'd removed the tile painting of lesbian mermaids from the bottom of the pool.

The Reddings had paid a shade north of two million for the house and three acres, which came with a boathouse and a Tierra cigarette boat, a steal in today's market. But the transaction had wounded more than a few bureaucratic sensibilities at the state attorney general's office. It didn't matter that Robert had enough cash from his racing days to buy that house and a couple more just like it: his salary as chief state's attorney wouldn't pay his property tax bill.

"It looks bad," the A.G. had told him in a closed-door meeting one week after the closing.

"No, it looks great," Robert had said. "The colors are a little gauche, but we're having painters in this week. You'll have to come over. It's going to look fabulous."

Neither the attorney general nor any of his minions in Raleigh got the joke. Robert couldn't have cared less. He'd never worked a day in his life for a paycheck, and considered money a subject you didn't discuss outside the family. He had driven racecars because he loved it, and he'd made a fine living. Now he prosecuted criminals out of love, and duty. Any criticism of the house, cars, boat, condo in Park City, or the bungalow in St. Croix was envy, pure and simple.

The cat food bowl was empty, so he refilled it before tiptoeing through the dining room, past the library, and into the sitting area off the master suite, where he undressed down to his boxers. He slid into bed so gently the sheets barely moved. As he silently congratulated himself on his stealth entry, Melissa said, "Did you reset the alarm?"

"I thought you were asleep."

"It's only three o'clock, why would you think that?"

"Sorry," he said.

"No." She rolled over and kissed his forehead. "I'm sorry. I was bitchy again when I shouldn't have been. Is everything okay?"

"Troy Slackherd stole a truckload of Trackside die casts."

"Toys?"

"They're not toys," he said. "They're official licensed collector merchandise."

"Oh, that was why they called you."

"They called me because it was Troy. Junior's name will be all over the papers when this leaks. Might even make 'The Best Damn Sports Show, Period.'"

"Oh, then you had to go."

"Wouldn't have wanted to miss the fun."

"Troy Slackherd. What an idiot."

"Afraid so. Every family has one."

She kissed him again and rubbed his cheek in the dark.

“I enjoyed tonight,” she said. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you before.”

“Is that why you stayed up?”

Her hand slid down his neck and chest, stopping just south of his naval where her nails rubbed gently against the elastic in his shorts. “Well,” she said, “that’s not the only reason.”

Chapter 5

Redding House Rule No. 19 went as follows: Mom and Dad sleep until eight A.M. on Sundays. If Katie, Michael, or any friends thereof awake before eight, they are to refrain from any and all noises that could disrupt the aforementioned sleeping covenant.

Enforcement of this rule got easier as the kids grew older. Katie was thirteen, and could cook pancakes without waking the cat. Michael, two months shy of his eleventh birthday, rarely stirred before nine on the weekends. So Robert was both startled and confused when his daughter shook his shoulder at 7:22 A.M.

“Daddy,” he heard her say. Her verbal skills had improved in the last couple of years, but it still took a trained ear to work through the dropped consonants and dull tone coming from someone who had been deaf her whole life.

“What’s wrong baby,” he said as he propped up on an elbow.

“Johnny Pea and two guys in suits are downstairs,” she signed. “I told them we couldn’t bother you before eight, but they said it was important.”

“Okay,” he signed. “Tell them I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

She disappeared through the sitting room as he slipped

out of bed. At least Melissa would get a little more sleep.

Katie cut through the library, but stopped behind the French doors when she saw the three men talking. Johnny Pea was just so good-looking she couldn't stop staring. He reminded her of Luke Perry, but with a little more muscle and a prettier smile. And he'd been a quarterback in college, which was just *so* cool. Even in the cheap suits he wore, John Paul Westport was about as handsome a man as she'd ever seen. When her dad first told the family about the job offer, and that it meant having a Justice Department agent underfoot, Katie had crinkled her nose and given the universal thirteen-year-old response to news she didn't like but could do nothing about. "Whatever," she had signed before storming off to her room. Now she dreaded the day Johnny Pea went back to Washington.

From her hiding place, she could see all three faces. One advantage to lip reading was that she could follow conversations from greater distances than hearing people, a skill she had honed at Davidson Christian Academy, where the girls could be pretty cruel when they thought she couldn't see what they were saying.

"She was born with no ears?" one of the new guys was saying. "Man, that's rough."

"It's called congenital aural atresia and microtia," Johnny Pea said. "Not really that rare. She does pretty well; goes to a private school with normal kids, keeps up, makes high honor roll. Once you're around her for a while, you almost forget."

"And that's why he gave up racing?" the other newcomer asked.

"Pretty much. The wife was never thrilled about having him gone all the time, but after she was born, he figured that risking his life every Sunday with a deaf child at home didn't make a lot of sense. He's got plenty of money, so he called it quits."

It infuriated Katie when people assumed she was the reason her father gave up racing. She and her dad had had many tearful discussions on the subject. He had made up his mind to retire when he found out Melissa was pregnant. Katie's birth condition had nothing to do with it.

"So, how'd he become a prosecutor?" the first no-necked goober asked.

Katie thought Johnny Pea was cute, but the two men with him looked like second-string jocks on a Kmart wardrobe budget. She'd been around her father enough to know they were FBI agents. The scowls were always the same, part of the uniform. These two lugs probably worked out together at the bureau gym. Not like Johnny Pea.

"File's a little sketchy," Johnny Pea said. "Something about a promise he made to his mother. I've never asked, and he's never offered. It'll come up before confirmation. He went to undergrad night school while he was racing, and passed the bar three years to the day after his retirement. Won the DA election in a landslide."

Katie had seen enough. She opened the French doors with great fanfare. "Dad said he'll be out in a few minutes," she announced in a flat robotic tone.

The goobs looked at her as if she were from Mars, but Johnny Pea smiled. "Thanks, Katie," he said. She walked past them without another word and took the Aunt Jemima pancake mix out of the cabinet. Why was Johnny Pea hanging out with such ignoramuses? And why did he have to be *so* cute?

Five minutes later, Robert appeared in the kitchen, his hair still wet from the shower he'd needed, to jolt himself awake. "Johnny Pea, what are you doing here?" he asked.

The other agents smiled. They hadn't been briefed on Redding's nickname for Agent Westport.

"Morning, Robert," he said. "Sorry for the hour. This is

Special Agent Withers and this, Special Agent Dumbrowski from the FBI.”

Robert shook the agents’ hands without speaking, which didn’t stop Dumbrowski from saying, “It’s a great honor to meet you, sir. My father was a big fan when you were driving.”

“Robert, these men are here because of what happened last night,” Johnny Pea said.

“The toy heist? You’re kidding.”

“There’s a little more to it than that,” Withers said.

Johnny Pea cleared his throat: “One of the men involved last night, Jose Hietus, has been on the watch list for more than a year. He was a rising star in the Delacroix crime family, running drugs, money, guns, and prostitutes for Eddie Delacroix.”

“But Hietus is Mexican,” Robert said.

“Part of a deal the Delacroixs worked out with their supplier in Guadalupe,” Withers said. “Eddie got Hietus and another man named Jorge Gonzalez in exchange for two of his lieutenants who are now in Mexico.”

“Some kind of crime-boss work-share program?”

“Pretty much. We’ve been tracking Hietus for the last three months, hoping he would lead us to the Delacroixs.”

“According to his partner, a loser named Rufus Dearborn, they were headed to Savannah,” Robert offered.

“Did Dearborn give you anything else?” Special Agent Withers asked.

“He didn’t know much. Said he met Hietus at the bus station. Hietus brought the Silverado, which we assume was stolen, and handed Dearborn an envelope that contained a key to a locker at the bus station. State guys had a tip it was a drug deal. We figure the money’s in the locker.”

“And you were called in—”

“Ty Johnson from my office called, because Troy Slackherd was involved.”

Withers's blank expression asked the next question for him: Who the fuck is Troy Slackherd?

"Look," Robert said. "Let me change clothes and we'll drive downtown and talk to Hietus. I didn't get a chance to interview him last night."

"You're not likely to get much out of him," Johnny Pea said.

"Maybe not, but it's worth a shot."

"No, it's not," Withers said. "Jose Manuel Hietus was shot and killed last night by one of your troopers."

Robert closed his eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath. Now he understood why special agents were in his kitchen this early on a Sunday.

"Mr. Redding, would you mind filling us in on this Slackherd fellow?"

Another deep breath, and Robert said, "Sure." Then he told them the long, sordid family tale, the one that paralleled the sport in which he'd made his fortune.

American stockcar racing began as an accidental by-product of Prohibition in the 1920s. While gangsters like Al Capone controlled most of the rum-running in the Northeast and Midwest, southerners got their alcohol fixes from homegrown "shiners," who brewed corn whiskey in black kettles and distilled it through old car radiators. Smoky Mountain men had been making and selling "shine" or "corn" for years. The ventures weren't as profitable or as corrupt as the smuggling operations in Chicago and Boston, but they provided a valuable service to menfolk who toiled long hours in the fields and still harbored deep resentments over their losses in the War of Northern Aggression. Like a fair percentage of the population, southern men numbed their pain with a bottle or, in the case of moonshine, a canning jar.

When Prohibition was repealed, most of the northern

rumrunners went out of business, but the moonshiners of the south continued to thrive. Baptists and the politicians who catered to them passed blue laws that kept sinful drink out of their towns and counties well into the 1960s. This provided the perfect market vacuum for local shiners. Their product was cheap, strong, easy to make, and easy to sell in dry towns from Louisville, Kentucky, to Loxahatchee, Florida.

All worked well until Franklin Roosevelt realized how much alcohol tax revenue the New Deal was losing to southern shiners. Tax collectors, known in the South as “Revenuers,” a term used almost as disparagingly as “Yankee,” tried to stop the flow of shine by raiding the stills and arresting the distillers. A fair number of the government’s finest tax officers never made it out of the woods.

So they took a new tack: if the revenuers couldn’t stop production, they would cut off distribution. Most of the stills were hidden deep in the forests, which meant product had to be transported on narrow treacherous dirt roads. If the revenuers could block these transportation routes, they could put a crimp in the moonshiners’ operations. Crafty shiners accepted this challenge by souping up their cars and outrunning anybody who chased them. During the thirties and forties, more tax collectors were killed in car crashes on lonely dirt roads in the South than were lost in all other work-related incidents combined.

Outfoxing and outrunning Uncle Sam became a source of great pride in the South. Every shiner wanted to be known for having the fastest cars and most skilled drivers. These were family operations, which added a component of familial pride: “My son is a better driver than your cousin” or “My brother can build a faster hotrod than your uncle,” that sort of thing. To settle these disputes, shiners brought their best cars and drivers to makeshift dirt tracks in places like Hampton, Georgia; Fayetteville,

North Carolina; and Sylacauga, Alabama. Some of the more industrious entrepreneurs took bets at the ensuing contests. Before long the races became as big as the moonshine running that had prompted them.

By the early 1950s a schism had formed in the shine-running community. There were those who believed that racing was their primary business, and the product they carried was incidental. Others remained devoted to moonshining, and viewed racing as nothing more than a link in the distribution chain.

That gulf widened in the late fifties when a monkey-wrench salesman named Roger English mortgaged his house and bought the rights to market and operate a stock-car race on the brick-hard beaches of north Florida. The family tree split for good when English bought a track in Charlotte, another in Pell City, Alabama, and a third in McDonough, Georgia. He formed his own league, named it Street Track and Oval Course Championship Auto Racing (a contrived name that came close to producing the acronym STOCKCAR) and became the P.T. Barnum of American auto racing.

Those who believed their business was making and selling illegal liquor severed ties with their drivers, and expanded their product line. They planted exotic seeds from Asia and South America, and traded their cars for camouflaged DC-3s. The drivers, who cared not a wit about running shine, found legitimate work and riches beyond their wildest dreams in Roger English's STOCKCAR racing league.

The Seniors, a clan of hillbilly bootleggers with a long, mean history, chose the racing route: the Slackherds, another equally sordid tribe of Smokey Mountain rubes, stuck with bootlegging.

Lester Senior was the first in his family to choose racing over running. He and his two boys, Lester Jr. and Junior, traveled to every dirt track from Roanoke to Baton Rouge,

racing a 1956 Dodge and living hand to mouth. When Lester Sr. died in a crash in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1962, Lester Jr. fell to pieces. His little brother, the aforementioned and willfully named Junior, eleven years old at the time, had to repair the car, wash the blood and brain matter off the steering wheel, load it onto their rickety trailer, and haul it and his father's body back to North Carolina. He sat on a Coca-Cola crate in order to see over the dash of their pickup while his fifteen-year-old brother lay in the seat beside him sobbing like a whipped pup.

Thus began the legend of Junior Senior, the toughest SOB ever to strap himself inside a racecar, winner of ninety STOCKCAR races and six championships.

Lester Senior Sr.'s second cousin on his mother's side was a hapless shiner named Eli Slackherd who sampled too much of his own product and froze to death in his yard when he passed out drunk three hours before the biggest snowstorm of the decade. Eli left behind two wives, neither of whom knew about the other, and nine children.

The youngest boy, Clave, took over the family business and expanded it to include the production and distribution of low-grade marijuana. His first stint in jail came when he was seventeen. He was incarcerated a second time at age twenty-two. By the time he was twenty-six, Clave was looking at life behind bars after he got a fifteen-year-old girl pregnant.

So he married her.

Dolores Diggs and Clave Slackherd were wed at the Mount Zion Baptist Church in Boger City, North Carolina, in June 1978. Six months later, they named their son Troy.

Dolores strayed from her marriage early and often, as did Clave. The Slackherds were on a first-name basis with every deputy in Lincoln County, and Troy jostled back and forth between family members during no fewer than six "trial separations."

In the Slackherd family tradition, Clave partook of his own product with great regularity. He would harvest a few plants, make a couple of runs, and be flush for about six months, during which time he would stay stoned every waking hour, and piss away cash at breakneck speeds. It was during one of those flush periods that Troy bought pit passes to the Firestone 500 in Charlotte, bragging to everyone in Boger City that Junior Senior was his cousin.

Dolores didn't believe him until several of Clave's siblings confirmed the distant relationship. She pressured Clave to introduce her to Junior, which he was able to do after more than an hour of pleading with the team manager.

A torrid affair between Junior Senior and Dolores Slackherd commenced in earnest. Clave found out after three months. On other occasions he'd thrown violent temper tantrums upon learning of his wife's dalliances. This time he slipped into a deep despondency. The wounds from having been on the wrong side of the family moonshine split were laid bare once more, this time with a cousin from the other side stealing what was left of his dignity along with his pretty, young wife.

Not long afterward, Clave was involved in a high-speed chase across three state lines near Johnson City, Tennessee. An hour into the ordeal a local cop from Kingsport forced Clave's Malibu into a ditch, and he surrendered peacefully. State police seized one hundred fifty pounds of marijuana from the trunk. Three months later, Clave was sentenced to ninety-nine years.

The affair between Dolores Slackherd and Junior Senior became public the week of the annual stockcar banquet in New York when the two were spotted smooching at an Upper East Side single's restaurant called Maxwell's Plum. The *Racing News* ran a picture and some quotes from Junior's wife, Mrs. Veronica Senior, who screamed, cried,

and claimed complete ignorance of the matter. She and Junior separated on New Year's, and were divorced by Independence Day. A week before Thanksgiving of that same year, Junior and Dolores married at a small private ceremony on the Grand Banks.

Despite their inauspicious beginning, Dolores proved to be good for Junior's career. She was a capable business manager with good media instincts, and ambition to burn, the kind of savvy forward thinker who brought in trademark and copyright lawyers, licensing experts, and marketing consultants to build Junior's brand long before anyone in racing thought about such things. Winning three consecutive Salem Cup championships didn't hurt. Dolores and her team positioned Junior as the "Toughest Man in Racing," and made a mint off his Marlboro Man looks and winning ways. There was even talk of trademarking his car number "5," but lawyers thought claiming ownership of an integer was a stretch.

Dolores didn't do as well at home. Her son, Troy, ransacked a garage when he was six; spray-painted graffiti on the showroom window of the local Ford dealership when he was nine; was expelled for bringing a switchblade to school when he was twelve; and got arrested for drunk driving two days after getting his license at age sixteen. He never showed the slightest interest in racing. While other kids lined up to shake hands and get their pictures taken with Junior Senior, Troy did everything in his power to make his stepfather's life miserable.

Junior couldn't have cared less. If Troy got in trouble, it was Dolores's problem. Junior had more important things on his mind than childrearing. At least he was consistent. His bad parenting wasn't limited to his stepson. Long into his second marriage he had no idea that his three children were one late child-support check away from the breadlines.

When the doorbell rang one Monday morning, Junior Senior Sr. answered it in his underwear and found his three kids—dirty, thin, and shaking—on his stoop. Veronica hadn't taken the divorce well. Red wine and Valium were her primary vices, but it didn't take long for her to make the jump to Percodan.

"I can't do it," she said to Junior.

"Can't do what?" he asked while scratching dandruff from his scalp.

Then she launched into a rambling speech about the travails of single motherhood, and how she couldn't stand the pressure of being "Junior Senior's ex wife."

"I just can't take care of them anymore," she said. "They're your kids, too. I just can't do it."

With that, Veronica waved her arms over her head and ran down the driveway, wailing at the top of her lungs.

The kids didn't budge. Junior didn't know it at the time, but the two boys were malnourished and in shock, and his daughter, the oldest child, suffered from ulcers. They moved into Dolores and Junior's mansion with nothing but the dirty clothes on their backs and three mouths full of rotting unkempt teeth.

Dolores treated Megan, Junior Jr., and Chester no different than Troy, which wasn't very well. Junior Jr. and Chester beat Troy to a pulp the first month they were together, and Dolores handled it by saying, "Play nice, or we'll have to send you back to your drug-addled mother." Within a year the family dynamic was clearly defined: Dolores and Junior Sr. had a relationship that was separate from the kids; Megan was a surrogate mother to Junior Jr. and Chester; and Troy was on his own, a role he didn't handle well.

Despite this dysfunction, all the kids joined Junior Senior Racing, Inc. They were expected to work the minute they turned eighteen, and since none of them had any life skills outside of racing, the choice was easy. Megan ran the fan

club, while Chester was shop foreman, a job that carried a big title and salary and very little responsibility. Troy swept the floor, delivered the mail, and did whatever his mother said, while Junior Jr. became a darned good racecar driver. Before his twenty-first birthday, Junior Senior Jr. was the object of widespread soothsaying among racing experts. Jr., people said, might be the most successful Senior yet.

Then tragedy struck. Junior Senior Sr. was testing a new chassis at Pell City when the suspension in the primary car let go at the entry to turn one. The car was traveling 201 miles an hour when it hit the wall. No amount of safety gear would have saved him. The car nosed forward, flipped, and landed upside down like it had been dropped from the sky. The safety cage snapped like an overcooked tortilla chip, and Junior was crushed by the weight of the car. He died before the emergency crew reached the scene.

The outpouring of grief that followed rivaled the procession at Graceland when Elvis fell off the toilet. Dolores had to hire temporary staff to handle all the calls, cards, letters, and gifts that poured into the offices at JSR. Within a week, window decals of Junior with a halo started showing up. Souvenir sales skyrocketed by a factor of ten. One "artist" even marketed a black-velvet portrait of Junior, still dressed in his race suit, shaking hands with Jesus outside the pearly gates. If the licensing numbers were accurate, the artist sold 100,000 prints in the first six months. For a full year after Junior Sr.'s death, fans paid tribute by holding up five fingers on the fifth lap of every race. Most spent fifty dollars or more at the Junior Senior Racing trailer after the race.

Dolores took control of JSR, Inc., and Junior Jr. stepped in as the team's number one driver. Junior never missed a race after Senior's death.

Chester cashed out his interest in the family business and retired to Tampa where he bought a boat and could be

found most weeknights at one of the all-nude clubs near the University of South Florida.

Megan married another driver's business manager and resigned from JSR three months after the funeral.

And Troy Slackherd, stepson of the great Junior Senior Sr., stepbrother of the prodigal son, Junior Senior Jr., and son of Junior Senior Racing chairman, Dolores Senior, ended up in the Mecklenburg county jail after hijacking a truckload of officially licensed die-cast model cars.

"Didn't Dolores Senior remarry?" Dumbrowski asked. Unlike Withers, he knew a good chunk of the story.

Robert nodded as he poured himself a second cup of coffee. "Eighteen months after they put Junior in the ground, she married Phil Cheney."

"The car dealer."

"Biggest seller of used vehicles in the world," Robert said. "He's got a hundred dealerships in thirty-eight states, and exclusive rights to sell custom vans in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Dubai."

This news perked up the no-necks. They both whipped out their Bureau-issued PDAs and scribbled notes on the screens.

"So Troy Slackherd is Junior Senior's stepbrother," Johnny Pea said. "Sounds like he's been a screw-up for most of his life. Doesn't every family have one?"

"Sure," Robert said. "But the visuals are a problem, at least for Dolores and Junior."

"What do you mean?"

"Troy and Junior could pass for twins, even though their only blood relation is some distant cousinship," Robert said. "I don't know if it's a recessive gene, or just a serious freak of nature, but it's spooky when you see them together."

"And this is a problem?"

Robert nodded as he took another sip. "Remember, Dolores built JSR, Inc., on the image of her late husband. That

won't last forever now that he's gone. The future lies in the son. And if *her* son, who just so happens to be the spitting image of *his* son, has his mug shot posted—"

"The brand is tarnished," Johnny Pea said, finishing Robert's line.

"Not the kind of publicity you want as you negotiate a multimillion-dollar sponsorship extension."

"That's why the troopers called you in last night?"

"Exactly. Anytime there's a racing connection . . ." He didn't finish the sentence. "Anyway, I didn't know about Hietus or the Delacroixs."

"You knew Junior Senior Sr., didn't you?" Dumbrowski asked.

"Oh, yeah," Robert said. "I knew him better than most."

Chapter 6

Sonny Delacroix unbuttoned his blue poplin jacket, shoved his hands in the pockets of his linen slacks, and gazed up at a towering water oak in Reynolds Square. He loved to walk Savannah's historic district on Sunday mornings. He loved the Spanish moss dangling from the trees, the eighteenth-century homes with iron fences and manicured lawns; he even loved the horses, often setting his gait to the clack of their hooves. Sonny had learned to saunter since moving to Savannah, something he would never have dreamed possible in New Orleans or L.A. God knows his blood pressure was lower.

As he strolled west along St. Julian, clicking the heels of his ostrich boots against the curb, he noticed a gull swirling overhead. On the opposite side of the square a group of ladies from a local tea society chatted about nothing as they walked to one of the gothic churches that littered this portion of historic downtown. Living here was like being in a time warp, and Sonny loved it. People were cordial and minded their business, competition was virtually nonexistent, none of the turf wars you had to deal with in New York, and unions were rarer than blizzards. Cops and judges weren't as corruptible as the ones he'd bought off in Louisiana and California, but they weren't rabid crime-fighters

either. Live and let live seemed to be the city's motto. Sonny couldn't have agreed more.

The low rumbling blast of an inbound freighter cut through the morning air, and Sonny's face broke into a huge smile. It was the sound of gold being delivered to his doorstep. Sometimes he couldn't believe his good fortune. Given Sonny's spotty knowledge of geography, Savannah might as well have been Botswana. Now, four years after Uncle Eddie moved him here, Sonny couldn't fathom leaving. Technically he was still a captain in the family. But here, amid the historic Georgian mansions, ancient graveyards with their wrought-iron railings, authentic Irish pubs, and quirky Old South citizenry, he was the boss, king of his own genteel fiefdom.

He was about to turn left on Whitaker when the opening riff of the O'Jays 1974 hit "For the Love of Money" sprang forth from his breast. He retrieved the phone from his jacket and saw a 504 area code. New Orleans. Never a good sign this early on a Sunday.

"Yeah," Sonny said into the phone as he waved to a couple of carriage-riding tourists.

"Where you at?" the caller said.

"On my way to the thing."

"Go to the place and call me."

"Now?"

"Ten minutes."

He picked up the pace until he reached Barnard Street north of Telfair Square. His standard pay phone, the one where he knew he wouldn't be watched, was on the back wall of Savannah's only gay package store, a quaint little bottle shop called Sucker's Liquors. Thank god it was closed. Sonny hated fighting off the drag queens. He had cut the owner's protection fee in return for a key to the side door and unlimited use of the storeroom and phone, a good deal for all parties involved. The place hadn't been robbed

since word filtered out that the Delacroixs protected it, and Sonny had a quiet place to make these kinds of calls.

As he feared a call from New Orleans at this hour on a Sunday wasn't to issue "atta boys." Things had gone sour in Charlotte. The truck was gone; the money was gone; Jose was dead; and that Slackherd shithead was in jail saying god only knew what.

Sonny reeled off a string of consecutive "fucks" before calming down enough to hear the rest of his instructions. He reached into his pocket and popped a couple of Aldomets into his mouth. You weren't supposed to take them this way, but he figured his blood pressure had to be through the roof. When he hung up, he grabbed a bottle of Cointreau off a new display, broke the seal, tossed back two huge gulps, and put the bottle back on the shelf. What a way to spoil a perfectly good morning.

He marched two more blocks with his head down, mumbling obscenities and chewing Aldomets as if they were tic tacs. When he got to the warehouse, he threw open the door and shouted, "Where's Jorge?"

Legs and arms flew everywhere as three girls in various stages of undress untangled themselves from a kinky human pretzel. One of them hooted and the other two swore, startled by Sonny's abrupt intrusion.

"Jesus, Sonny, we're in the middle of shooting," Gopher the cameraman said as he turned off floodlights.

"Do I look like I give a fuck, Gopher? Huh? Look deep into my eyes, and tell me if I give a fuck. It's digital for fuck's sake. You can't even claim to be wasting film. So don't give me any shit about fucking up your lousy fucking shoot!"

"It wasn't that lousy," one of the naked girls said.

This sent Sonny on another sputtering rant where he used the word "fuck" as a noun, verb, adjective, and adverb in less than a minute. Then he said, "I will ask again, and for the last fucking time. Where the fuck is Jorge?"

"He's in the back," Gopher said.

Sonny dropped his head and marched to the rear of the warehouse as the spotlights went back on, and the girls resumed their on-camera game of Twister.

The back room housed a pool table, two desks, five file cabinets, a walk-in safe salvaged from the First Federal Savings and Loan, an antique claw-foot loveseat, and a Thomasville sofa, which was where Jorge sat while receiving oral sex from a young lady whose parents thought she was enrolled at Savannah College of Art and Design. She hardly glanced up when Sonny crashed through the office door.

"Aw fuck, Jorge."

"Give me a sec, huh, Sonny."

"No. Get lost, honey." Sonny put the sole of his boot on her bare ass and pushed.

"Hey," she said as she spat Jorge from her mouth. "Wait your turn."

"Get the fuck outta here before I close that vacuum hole for good."

The girl grabbed a red robe and scurried into Gopher's studio.

"Hey, Sonny, what the fuck?" Jorge said.

"We got trouble," Sonny said. He waited until Jorge zipped his trousers before putting a hand on the Mexican's shoulder. Then he told him about the troubles in Charlotte, and about Jose's untimely demise. Sonny could have sworn Jorge's eyes turned from brown to black.

"Get packed," Sonny said. "We're going to Carolina."

They took Johnny Pea's Mercury Marquis downtown, and Robert filled them in on his history with the Seniors, including how Junior Sr. had come up with the name Red-ball.

"We were at the twenty-four-hour race at Le Mans. I had just gotten my first Salem Cup ride after winning the Pabst series championship the year before."

“What’s that?” Johnny Pea asked.

Robert stared in disbelief for a second, before saying, “Don’t you know anything about racing?”

“I grew up in Manhattan and went to Columbia,” Johnny Pea said.

This was supposed to pass for an answer, so Robert gave an expanded history of Roger English’s STOCKCAR league, and the various divisions therein, including the Salem Cup, Truck series, and Pabst series.

“I got to know Junior fairly well when I was racing the Pabst car. When I won the championship, he was one of the guys who approached me about making the jump to Salem Cup.”

“He offered you a job?”

“Yeah, at the time Junior Senior Racing was Junior Senior. Junior Jr. was just a kid. So, Junior approached me about racing for him. This was before anybody had multiple-car teams. Junior wanted to be the first.”

“But you went with Healey.”

“Right. Don Healey called. He wasn’t the big deal in racing that he is today. In fact, I was going to be his only driver for the first year. We had a couple of meetings. He said all the right things. Plus, I knew I’d always be the ‘second’ driver at JSR. Don was willing to put all his effort into making us a championship team. So, I went with him, and the rest is history. Now Don’s got Jett Jordan, Bobby Camber, Jimmy Winston Jr., and Derrick Rush in Salem Cup, and another three teams in the Pabst series.”

“Must have pissed Junior off, you going with the competition.”

“He wasn’t accustomed to rejection. I heard later that he pitched a tantrum after I told him no, but we worked through it. We partnered in a land deal once, and did a couple of marketing things together.”

“But what happened at Le Mans?” Dumbrowski asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I was driving with Raff Shultzmänn, the open-wheel champion, and Peter Newburg, the actor. Junior was on the British Telecom team with two F-one drivers, Simon Stewart and Nigel Twigfarter. Anyway, we were eighteen hours into the race before Junior and I were on the track at the same time. The car had gone away from us by then. I was fighting to hold position. I took one of the hairpins pretty shallow to block the inside. Junior swears I ran him off the track, but he’s full of shit. He had plenty of room. I came out of that turn, took a wide line into the next one. Next thing I know Junior clips my left fender.”

The scene had been played thousands of times on highlight shows. Robert’s car wobbled and fishtailed, and for a split second it looked like he might save it. Then the front end broke at the same instant the car hit some off-track debris. It flipped twice, spun once in the air, and exploded on impact. The ball of fire made it impossible to tell that the hulk of metal had once been a car. Race announcers instantly speculated that Robert could not have survived.

Five seconds later, a figure came staggering out of the inferno. Robert’s racesuit had been charred black, but his only injuries were a sprained ankle and a broken wrist. By the end of the race, the video had made it onto every major sportscast.

Robert was sitting on the edge of a bed in a local hospital having his wrist set when he saw the wreck for the first time. He also saw the interview with Junior Senior, who rejected any responsibility, but who came up with the line of the night. Junior looked straight into the camera and said, “I’s glad to see Redding come walking out of that redball. It could have been a lot worse.”

From that day forward, Robert had become Redball Redding, the man who had walked out of fire.

* * *

The parking lot at the jail was segregated by class with the deputies' trucks parked at one end, the impounded jalopies belonging to the prisoners in the middle, and at the far end, away from any possible dings and dents, sat a handful of pristine penis cars belonging to the criminal defense attorneys unlucky enough to be visiting their clients on a Sunday morning. Robert recognized the silver BMW Z-8 as the vehicular property of J. Smith Hybill, of Morris, Leggett, Polasky, and Hybill, attorneys of record for Junior Senior Racing, Inc. At least there were no television trucks in the lot. The deputies had managed to keep their mouths shut overnight.

Inside, Robert found Burley Hamrick asleep in a chair with a cup of cold black coffee growing mold on the table in front of him.

"Why are you still here?" Robert asked.

Burley jolted awake and jumped to his feet. "I was hoping to get another crack at Slackherd," he said. His hand shook and he had trouble holding eye contact. The man needed some sleep. "Hybill showed up a couple of hours after you left. They've been closed up alone ever since. Given what happened tonight with Trooper Padgett, I just thought—"

"Where is Trooper Padgett?" Special Agent Withers asked.

"He's home, now. Poor kid's pretty shook up. A dozen witnesses at the hospital told the same story. It was a good shoot. But that didn't make it easier on him."

"Or on us," Dumbrowski added.

"I don't believe we've had the pleasure," Burley said in an edgier than normal tone, if that was possible.

Robert took a few seconds to introduce his companions. The words "FBI" and "Justice" landed like donkey turds on the jailhouse floor.

"We can handle this," Burley said to the group. Two troopers and a couple of deputies stood a little closer in case Burley needed backup.

"So far, so good," Dumbrowski said.

"Boys, boys," Robert jumped in. "Go to neutral corners. There's enough work here for everyone."

Burley harrumphed around the desk, picked up the cold coffee, and took a huge gulp, which he promptly spat back into the cup. "Ahhhhh." He stuck out his tongue and wagged it like Gene Simmons.

Withers and Dumbrowski doubled over in laughter. So did the troopers and deputies. Robert even chimed in with a chuckle.

"What did we get out of the locker at the bus station?" Robert asked when the guffawing died down.

"Mother lode," one of the troopers said. "Quarter-mil in used hundreds."

Withers opened his cell phone and made a call while Dumbrowski let out a slow soft whistle.

"How much are we guessing the truck and contents are worth?" Robert asked.

"Million, maybe one point two, max."

That didn't make sense. Hijackers, even connected ones, never paid twenty-five cents on the dollar for a take. A penny was more like it. Troy would have been lucky to get twenty grand on the open market.

"You sure there were no drugs?" Robert was trying to make sense of the incomprehensible.

"Nothing," Burley said. "We even checked inside the die casts to make sure something wasn't stashed under their little hoods. Nothing."

Robert bit his lip to keep from smiling. The mental image of Burley and the troopers opening boxes of toy cars and checking under their hoods tickled him almost as much as the cold coffee incident.

"We also checked the cars themselves. Made sure they weren't made out of some funny substance, like in the movies."

"Then, what the hell was somebody paying two hundred fifty thousand for?" Robert asked.

The question was answered by a roomful of shrugs, grunts, and blank stares.

"There was also a sheet of paper in the locker with a bunch of numbers scribbled on it," one of the troopers said.

"Any leads on the numbers?"

The trooper shrugged.

"Could be bank accounts," Withers said. "I can have one of our guys cross-check them against Delacroix's banks."

"Dela-who's what?" Burley asked.

Robert gave a dismissive wave. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves," he said. "Why don't we see what Troy and J. Smith Hybill, Esquire, have to say?"

"They might not say much to us, but they've been raising hell with one another," one of the deputies said.

"What do you mean?" Robert asked, not quite sure he wanted to know the answer.

"They've been yakking up a storm in there, and it hasn't been swapping recipes."

Robert winced, and closed his eyes tight before asking the next question. "You personally witnessed this?"

"Yeah," the deputy said with a stupid grin. "They were pretty animated in there."

Robert felt nauseated. "And you were watching all this from where?"

"The monitors," the deputy said.

"The monitors."

"Yeah, you know, the ones downstairs. We got them everywhere."

"And you watched a conversation between Mr. Slackherd and Mr. Hybill from those monitors."

“Yeah.”

“Did you prop your feet up? Maybe eat a little popcorn while you watched?”

“No.” The deputy’s smile faded. He looked confused.

“So you just watched.”

“Well . . . yeah.”

“You just watched a conversation between a lawyer and his client.”

“Yeah. I didn’t eat nothing. Just watched.”

“Just watched.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Just watched a *privileged* conversation between an attorney and his client, one where neither party was aware of your presence.”

“I didn’t eat nothing. Didn’t prop my feet up neither.”

Don’t slap him, Robert told himself.

Even Burley looked pissed. He listened in silence as Robert gave a terse lecture on process. The only mitigating factor saving the deputy was the fact that the video didn’t have accompanying sound.

“I just watched. I didn’t listen,” the wide-eyed young man said. “There ain’t no law against watching, is there?”

Luckily for the deputy, the answer was no. You could watch a privileged interview—cops did it all the time—as long as you didn’t listen in on an attorney-client conversation without the attorney and client knowing about it. Jailhouse phone calls were fair game. Everybody knew they were recorded. And no one expected privacy in the common areas, but a one-on-one conversation in an interview room was off limits.

“Don’t let it happen again,” Robert said.

Anxious to change the subject and the scenery, Burley said: “Want to see the money?”

“Sure,” Robert replied. He needed to see all the evidence, including the napkin with all the numbers, but he really

wanted to see the money. No matter how much you had in your bank accounts, 401(k)s, or investment portfolios, something about seeing bundles of cash made your heart-beat jump a notch or two. Robert had been handed checks worth millions without batting an eye. But having a quarter-mil in bundled hundreds poured out on a table still took his breath away.

Burley led the crew down a small stairway, through a door, and into a brightly lit room that housed the evidence locker. Sure enough, the hundreds were bundled with rubber bands and scotch tape, fifty bills to a stack, a total of fifty stacks, stuffed in a Wilson Sporting Goods gym bag along with an eight-by-ten sheet of typing paper that had what looked like a thousand random numbers and a few letters on it.

“Have we logged the serial numbers on the bills?” Robert asked.

“Hey, Redball. Yeah, almost done,” the evidence deputy said.

“Be sure to get a copy to me, and a copy of that sheet. Any idea what the numbers are?”

“Looks like some kind of code,” the deputy said. “I ain’t much of a code breaker.”

Robert never would have guessed.

“The bureau will need a copy of that,” Dumbrowski said.

“Will you now?” the deputy said. “Is the bureau gonna send anybody down here to help me copy all these serial numbers? How ’bout forensics? You gonna help us test the bag and bills? Just curious.”

“Is there going to be a problem?” Dumbrowski said.

“Not if you don’t get your blue-boy panties in a wad.”

Robert didn’t have the energy or desire to break up this fight. Dumbrowski had it coming for trying to bully his way through. You didn’t show up unannounced and piss on a man’s front porch, even if you were the FBI.

"Are we ready to see Troy?" Robert finally asked.

"Can't wait," Withers said.

Two minutes later, Robert, Burley, Johnny Pea (who had no business being anywhere near the jail, but who insisted on following Robert's every footstep) and the two federal agents walked into interview room 2 where Troy and J. Smith Hybill looked as though they had gone fifteen rounds.

"Smith," Robert said by way of cordial greeting. "We would like to talk to your client about last night."

"No need," J. Smith said, waving his hands as if he were shooing away a panhandler. "After discussing the matter fully with my client, and informing him of the consequences, he is prepared to make a deal to plead out."

It took Robert a second to realize his mouth was open. Special Agent Withers mumbled something that sounded like "What the hell," while the others stared at J. Smith Hybill as if he'd just beamed down from the Enterprise. After a stammer or two, Robert finally said, "Well, that's all well and good, Smith, but we're not sure what we're charging him with yet."

"Oh, come on," Smith said. "He's ready to deal on stealing the rig off the loading dock at Trackside, a B felony. He'll testify against Rufus Dearborn, who is the real serial criminal here, the one you should be trying to put away for a long, long time, in exchange for cooperation in the sentencing phase."

"That's very magnanimous of your client, Smith, but it depends," Robert said.

"On what, for god's sake?" Smith erupted. He couldn't help it. Confrontation was in his blood. Even when the client was throwing himself at the feet of the prosecutor, J. Smith Hybill couldn't stop fighting.

Robert turned his attention to Troy. "Tell us about Jose Hietus."

"Two-bit drug dealer," J. Smith jumped in. "We all know that Troy has had some troubles in his past. This Hietus character was one of his acquaintances from that period of his life."

"Thanks for that, Smith, but I'd like to hear from your client," Robert said, keeping his eyes on Troy.

Troy cut Robert a hateful gaze. Then he said: "Whatever he says. That's the way it is."

"And the money?"

Troy turned his head slowly and stared at J. Smith with a look that told Robert the boy wanted to rip his lawyer's head off. "That was *payment*." Spit flew out of his mouth as he said the last word.

"Come on, Troy, a quarter of a million dollars?" Robert said, leaning forward. "It was a truckload of toys."

"Die casts, man. It was good stuff."

"That's enough, Troy," Smith interjected. "Robert, what are we doing here? You've got your cargo. Troy will give a full allocution to taking the truck and attempting to sell it and its contents. You've got Dearborn. Hietus, unfortunately, is no longer with us. What more do you want?"

"Do you understand that you're talking about a felony?" Robert asked without taking his eyes off Troy. "Depending on what kind of mood the judge is in, you could get three to five in Boone. Even with full cooperation, you're going to have to do some time."

Troy cut an even more evil glance at J. Smith, who was rocking back and forth in his Salvatori Ferragamo loafers, and taking great interest in his legal pad.

"Do you understand what your lawyer is saying, Troy?" Robert repeated.

He hesitated.

"Troy?" J. Smith said.

"Yeah," Troy finally said, biting the word off through clinched teeth. "I got it. I stole the truck. Jose was a spick

who sold ex. He and Dearborn offered me two-fifty large for the truck and the die casts. You know the rest.”

“If you say so, Troy,” Robert said.

“We say so,” J. Smith barked, a little louder than was necessary.

“But you’re wrong about one thing.”

“What’s that?” J. Smith said.

“I got a feeling we don’t know the rest. Not by a long shot.”

Chapter 7

Once back at the Redding house Melissa offered coffee and scones to Ty Johnson, Johnny Pea, and the special agents. She had already taken the kids to church, alone, again, and now she was punishing Robert by being hellishly nice. This was Melissa's idea of passive aggression. When she was furious, she went out of her way to be kind and accommodating to prove her martyrdom. Robert was the ogre, always leaving her to attend to the houses and family while he jaunted hither and yon. It had been bad enough when he went to law school after retiring from racing. Other retired drivers took their kids fishing, skiing, and scuba diving. He put rapists and drug dealers behind bars. The federal job had only made matters worse. Every minute of his life these days seemed to belong to some assistant to the secretary of this or that. He hadn't taken a vacation in months, and the kids hadn't been to the cottage at St. Croix this year. Now Melissa's suffering was laid bare for all to see on a plate of blueberry scones with a fresh pot of hazelnut french roast brewing nearby.

"How do you take your coffee?" she asked Special Agent Withers.

"Black is fine, thanks."

Robert rubbed his temples, and closed his eyes. What a morning.

“The money is the key,” Dumbrowski said to nobody in particular. “If we can track the money back to the Delacroixs, we’ll have them.”

“Any ideas why a New Orleans crime boss would give a quarter million dollars to a mental giant like Troy Slackherd?” Ty asked. He’d kept his mouth shut most of the morning, but Troy’s lame-brained explanation about the money being payoff for a stash of stolen toys demanded further exploration.

“My guess is they didn’t spend two hundred fifty thousand on a truckload of die casts,” Dumbrowski said.

Ty gave a big nod and said: “Really! Did you ponder that one long, Pythagoras?”

“I’m just saying—”

Robert grunted and continued to rub his eyes. He was having trouble mustering a lot of energy for this one. Despite protests to the contrary, this was a toy heist. The quarter-mil was hefty, sure, a seizure that would have required his attention at a decent hour on Monday morning, but to have his weekend ruined, and to have these federal agents roaming his house and drinking his coffee was above and beyond all calls of duty.

“Phone’s for you,” Melissa said, tapping him on the arm ever so gently.

“I didn’t hear the phone ring,” Robert said.

She patted him on the shoulder. “You were busy.”

The hits just kept on coming.

He marched through the French doors of his study with his head down, wondering how his weekend could be ruined any more than it already was. Okay, it beat driving into a wall at a hundred fifty miles an hour, but those wrecks were like his half-pipe snowboarding runs and Caribbean

free-diving: distant, faded memories from many years gone by. These days he made pancakes and oatmeal, and sang hymns at First Methodist on Sundays. Handling cases was Monday through Friday work, civil servant hours. His weekends belonged to Melissa and the kids.

He closed the study doors for a little privacy, and grabbed the phone on the table that housed his own specialty die casts, and the seventh-eighths-scale replicas of his Salem Cup trophies.

“Redding,” he all but yelled into the receiver.

The voice on the line surprised him.

“I hate to bother you at home again,” Sergeant Burley Hamrick said. “But you’re not going to believe this.”

“Hamrick?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you have a family, Sergeant?”

“Yes, sir, wife, three sons, and a daughter.”

“But work is your mistress, huh.”

Burley hesitated.

“Never mind,” Robert said. “Spring it on me. I can’t think of anything that could surprise me at this stage.”

He was wrong. When Burley filled him in, Robert made the sergeant repeat the details a couple of times just to make sure he understood.

“You mean, he wants to talk to me, now, without his lawyer?” Robert finally said.

“He was adamant, said . . .” Burley paused, and Robert could hear him shuffling some notes. “He said, ‘Get Redball on the phone right now, and don’t tell that peckerhead lawyer of mine.’ Sorry about the language, but that’s what he said.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“I told him you probably wouldn’t talk to him without his lawyer, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer. Said it was a matter of life and death.”

“Life and death.”

"That's what he said."

"Whose life and death was he talking about?"

"His own."

Robert blew a loud lungful of air into the receiver. "Is he right there?" he finally asked.

"Sitting right in front of me, pretty as you please," Burley said. "We brought him upstairs on the off chance you'd take his call."

In the background Robert heard Troy Slackherd say, "Just give me the goddamn phone, Burley. Jesus H. Fucking Christ, can't nobody understand what's going on here?"

Troy's voice sounded like an out-of-tune banjo.

"All right," Robert said in the resigned singsong cadence of a beaten man. "Put him on."

A second or two of fumbling later, Robert heard Troy say, "Redball? That you?"

"Yeah, it's me, Troy, sitting at home pining for your call."

"Well, good. I'm glad these shitheads put me through."

Sarcasm and irony flew over Troy's head like a flock of migrating geese.

"Troy, I can't talk to you since you're represented by counsel," Robert said slowly so there could be no misunderstanding. "This conversation gives Smith grounds for . . ."

"Fuck him," Troy snapped. "Look, he's the one come up with that pleading out shit. I don't want to do no time. Hell, I can't do no time. They'll kill me."

Robert sighed into the phone. As he suspected, this was a plea from a congenital screw-up who had just become aware of his predicament. Robert's net worth would double if he had a dime for every time he'd heard the "they'll kill me in prison" defense.

"Troy, as I explained to you earlier, the charges you're pleading to carry jail time. There's no way around it. Now, if you want to reconsider your plea, you certainly have time. You should consult with your attorney—"

"No! No! You don't understand. I can't trust him. He might tell."

"Tell what, Troy?" Robert asked. He knew he should have hung up immediately, but Troy's panic peaked his curiosity.

"I can't say right here, but if you get me out I'll tell you ever'thing."

"Oh, that's a helluva deal, Troy. You need anything else? Maybe I can pick you up, drive you to your car, give you a little cash."

"No, just get me out of here, and I'll give you ever'thing I got."

"And what, pray tell, does 'everything you got' entail?"

"A lot," Troy said. "That's how come I can't do no jail time. I go in, there's a lot of folks going to see to it I don't never come out."

"Troy, if you're looking to cut a deal in exchange for information, we need to have this discussion in the presence of your attorney."

"No! We can't!"

Robert thought he heard the early quivers of a sob in Troy's twangy voice.

"Smith'll tell. He's mama's lawyer. He ain't mine. He'll tell."

"Tell what, Troy?"

"Look, them boys you brought with you this morning, they ain't interested in me, are they? They want somebody bigger. Well, I can give 'em what they want. When I'm finished telling all of what I know, you're gonna know I can't go back inside."

Just like that Troy leaped off the confidentiality bridge, and put Robert in the middle of a slue of improper contact motions, fruits of a poison tree, blah, blah, blah. How could he have been so stupid?

"Troy, look, I need you to stop right here. We can not continue this conversation until your counsel . . ."

"I can't talk to him," Troy shouted. "Don't you see?"

"See what, Troy?"

"If word gets out that I'm even talking to you, I'm good as in the ground. We can't call that peckerhead. He'll tell."

It took Robert a second to realize Troy was implicating J. Smith Hybill in the innocuous "stuff" being offered in exchange for Troy's freedom. Robert should have slammed the receiver down and called Smith that very second, but he didn't. Something about the earlier meeting at the jail had been bugging him, and it had nothing to do with Troy Slackherd, Junior Senior, or Trackside die-cast cars. J. Smith Hybill's performance had gnawed at him all morning. No self-respecting rookie public defender would let his client plead out this early on a case this weak. For J. Smith Hybill to throw Troy Slackherd at the mercy of the prosecution was like Brett Favre missing half a season because of a hangnail. Smith was a pit bull, a legend in Charlotte legal circles, and the courtroom magician who had won the Sunderland case, a prosecutorial loss that still stuck in Robert's craw.

In that one, Charlotte PD, responding to a complaint from neighbors, entered the apartment of one Jerry William Sunderland, and found Mr. Sunderland holding a garbage bag full of partially decomposed body parts. Turns out Sunderland had invited a young man into his apartment, shot him in the head, chopped up the body, broiled and eaten what he could, and was in the process of taking the inedible remains out to the Dumpster when the police arrived. It was a cut-and-dried case. They recovered the gun, registered to Sunderland, along with a hatchet, hacksaw, skinning knife, and an industrial can of Adolph's Natural Meat Tenderizer. Sunderland's prints were all over these items, including two

perfect eight-point matches in the victim's blood. The only thing missing was the floss he used afterward.

Then J. Smith Hybill entered the picture. Before a jury of eight women and four men, Smith wove a fantastic tale of good deeds gone awry. Since the evidence was overwhelming, Hybill did the only thing he could do: he admitted that his client had, indeed, killed the victim, a drifter named Jamal Randell. He also stipulated that Mr. Sunderland chopped Randell's body to pieces and stewed it with okra and new potatoes. But, according to Smith, it was all a giant accident, an epic confluence of unfortunate and unforeseeable events for which Mr. Sunderland could not be found guilty. Sunderland had pulled a gun when Randell made untoward sexual advances. He hadn't meant to kill Jamal, only force him to get dressed and leave the apartment. The gun went off when the drifter tried to jump poor Sunderland, who had only been trying to help a destitute stranger. As for the dismemberment and cannibalism, Sunderland had panicked. He knew how awful this would look. He didn't know what to do. In a state of confusion and shock, he chopped Mr. Randell to pieces. Realizing that he couldn't leave a pile of body parts for the trash men, Sunderland ate the evidence.

It was a despicable work of homophobia, and the jurors, all middle class and married, lapped it up. What would they have done if confronted by such a man? The message, of course, being, "These gays are so unstable, who knows what they might do?" Sure, the decent men and women of the jury might not have broiled and eaten a human, on the off chance that any of them were ever confronted with a naked, dead homosexual in their living room, but surely they could comprehend the fear, disgust, and blind mind-numbing panic that led Mr. Sunderland to such irrational measures.

The jury convicted Sunderland of involuntary manslaughter, degradation of a body, and a couple of firearms charges,

which amounted to squat. Now the lawyer, who had gotten a murdering cannibal out on the streets in two years, wanted to throw Troy Slackherd on the mercy of the court.

Smith should have been able to sleepwalk his way into probation for Troy, if not an acquittal. God knows Burley and his bunch hadn't won any gold stars for procedural efficiency. One of the suspects was dead, shot by a trooper assigned to guard him while he got X rays on a possible broken jaw suffered at the hands of another trooper wielding a nightstick like ninja chocks. The other suspect looked like his belly had been used as the starting block for a dirt bike race. And Troy, bless his heart, was sitting in Burley's office stammering and stuttering his way through what appeared to be an allocution to this crime, and perhaps many others, all of which put Robert in violation of Miranda and a dozen or more Supreme Court rulings.

"Troy, if you want to fire Smith, I can arrange the paperwork, but until you dispose of your current counsel, I—"

"No, I can't fire him. Hell, I never hired him. If anybody figures out what I'm doing, they'll burn this place to the ground to get to me."

Robert thought about that for a moment. If, as Troy was alleging, a lawyer for a defendant was working counter to that defendant's interests, and if, hypothetically of course, a prosecutor could establish that the client feared for his life if said lawyer became privy to a particular phone conversation, then Robert guessed it would be okay for the prosecutor to proceed, just to see if his good-faith fears were founded in fact.

"Okay, Troy, what do you have, and what do you want?"

"Your Federal boys . . ." Troy paused and Robert could hear some nervous panting. "I can give them everybody they want and a lot more that they don't know about."

"You're offering to turn state's evidence on the Delacroixs," Robert said. He needed to spell it out. You could

never be too careful in situations like this. For all he knew, Troy was offering to spill the beans on a philandering husband. Before Robert involved the agents sipping coffee in his kitchen, he needed to make sure Troy was legit.

"Them and a lot of others," Troy said. "I know a lot. It ain't like Mama says, I ain't no nucularologist, but I ain't a complete dumbass neither."

Robert heard laughter erupt in the background at Troy's "nucularologist" reference.

"Okay, Troy, I'll take this to the agents, and see if we can't work something out."

"But you got to get me out, and you can't let . . . that other one know what's going on." Troy whispered the last part.

"That other one."

"Yeah, you know, that one you been saying I need to call before we can do anything."

"You mean, Smith, your lawyer."

"He ain't mine. He works for Mama and them."

This was getting wackier by the second. Troy was offering to tattle on the Delacroixs, one of Dixie's biggest crime families, for unspecified crimes, most of which, Robert assumed, did not involve hijacking a truckload of toys. But before spilling the beans to the Feds, Troy wanted a Get Out of Jail Free card, and, oh by the way, he needed to keep his mother's lawyer, who happened to be defending him, out of the loop.

"I take it there's more to this than a bunch of die casts," Robert said.

"You got that right."

"Are you going to explain what Smith has to do with all of this?" Robert asked.

"The second I'm outta here and tucked away."

"All right, Troy. I'll see what I can do."

"Hey, Redball," Troy said. "Them boys we're talking

about, they ain't going to wait long. You need to hurry every chance you get."

"I'll do what I can," Robert said and hung up before Troy could say anything else. His head hurt. He needed another shot of coffee. Troy could have been full of shit for all he knew. This could all be a giant ruse designed to ruin Robert's weekend and make him look like a fool. But if the Delacroixs were not involved, why were two FBI agents in his kitchen, and why was Troy so eager to spend quality time with them?

The vagaries of Troy's story raised Robert's suspicions, but, as he himself had pointed out, the boy was not a nuclearologist. He was the congenital fuck-up member of a famous racing family. Everybody had one. Robert's uncle Frankie Redding had been committed to a psychiatric hospital after trying to burn down the NAPA store in High Point. Everybody had known Uncle Frankie was a loon, but that didn't mean Robert had to run to his side every time the old coot fell off his meds. Why should Robert treat Troy Slackherd any different than a member of his own family?

"Who was on the phone?" Melissa said.

He jumped. She had slipped into the study without his noticing.

"It was the jail again," he said.

"Again? Do you have to go back?"

He shook his head without making eye contact, tapping his index finger on his upper lip as he pondered his next move.

"What about those guys?" Melissa said as she tilted her head toward the kitchen where Dumbrowski had just helped himself to a blueberry scone.

Robert smiled. "Looks like they might get what they came for after all," he said.

Chapter 8

Sonny and Jorge stopped at a Waffle House in Smallwood, South Carolina, where Sonny ordered raisin toast and decaf while Jorge gorged himself on country ham, cheese-scrambled eggs, grits, and three Winston Extras.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Sonny said.

“What?”

“Put all that shit in your body. If I ate like that, I’d die before I got to the car.”

“Good clean living, man. Drink, smoke, and fuck every day and you don’t have no problem.”

“Hey, Sweet-ass,” Sonny yelled at one of the passing waitresses, who responded as though he’d called her by name. “More decaf here, and some of them hash browns with the onions.”

She wrote it down, poured the coffee, and yelled, “Scattered on one!” to a short-order cook who was standing at the grill five feet away.

Sonny had the coffee cup at his lips when the O’Jays sprang forth from his pocket again. He jerked, and burned himself. This sparked another torrent of “fucks” that got the attention of every soul in the restaurant. A man in his fifties trying to have a quiet after-church meal with his family slid

out of his booth and took two steps toward Sonny. "If you don't mind," the man said.

"I do mind, piss-ant," Sonny said. "Now, sit the fuck down."

"Please, the children," the man said.

Sonny would have loved nothing more than to pop this jackass in the mouth, but he had to answer the phone. Jorge handled the situation by stabbing a piece of ham with his steak knife, eating it, and then using the knife as a pointer. "You should sit down, amigo," he said. "This one is not for you."

Something in Jorge's eyes spooked the man. He scurried back to his table where his wife patted and rubbed his back in reward for his bravery.

The call came from a 704 number: Charlotte. Sonny answered with his typical growl. The conversation was short, but it seemed to improve his mood. When he hung up, he said, "We need to head out. Our boy's going to plead out tomorrow."

"Is that good?"

"It is for us. If he keeps his trap shut until tomorrow, we should be home free."

"That it?"

Sonny shook his head as he wiped the coffee from his chin with a paper napkin. "Got the name of the guy who had the little tussle with our friend last night." He let that tidbit linger a moment before dropping the best news. "Got an address for him, too," he said.

Jorge smiled and motioned for Sweet-ass to bring the check. They had a busy couple of days ahead.

"He wants to do what?"

Robert didn't think it was possible for Dumbrowski to look stupider, but when the big agent heard the details of

Troy Slackherd's call, he cocked his head and drooped his lower lip, which gave him the appearance of a confused Cro-Magnon.

"So, he's ready to deal, but without the lawyer," Withers said.

"Looks that way."

"Why?" Ty asked.

"He was a little vague on that point."

"No," Ty said, covering his heart as if shocked, shocked! that Troy might lack clarity in his reasoning.

Robert shrugged and said, "He went on about some guys coming after him, although he wouldn't name names on the phone. Once he's safe and sound, he assures me he'll yak up a storm."

"And the lawyer?" Dumbrowski asked. He wrinkled his forehead and curled up his mouth as if smelling something rancid.

"On that point, Mr. Slackherd left no doubt," Robert said. "Smith's out. He didn't say it out loud, but Troy overtly implied that Smith is either involved or closely connected with the bad guys on this one."

"You believe him?" Ty asked.

"I believe he believes it."

"So, where does that leave us?" Johnny Pea asked.

Robert shook his head and said, "It leaves you sitting here eating scones, Johnny Pea, unless you want to join in while Agent Dumbrowski calls his superiors in Georgetown and interrupts Sunday brunch."

"It's Special Agent," Dumbrowski said.

"God almighty," Robert said as he hung his head.

"So, do we cut him loose or not?" Ty asked.

Robert looked up at Dumbrowski and Withers. "Up to you," he said.

After a second or two of uneasy glances, Special Agent

Withers cleared his throat and said, "Mind if we use your phone?"

As Robert suspected, the muckety-mucks at Justice weren't thrilled to hear from Special Agents Withers and Dumbrowski on a weekend, or so everyone assumed from the raised defensive voices emanating from Robert's study. When they came back into the kitchen, Withers had the wide-eyed look of a man caught in oncoming traffic.

"Went well, huh?" Ty said. He just couldn't help sticking it to these two.

"Mr. Redding, I'm authorized to formally request your assistance in turning Troy Slackherd over to the FBI and Department of Justice," Dumbrowski said.

"Woo," Ty said. "So formal. How long you been practicing that one?"

Dumbrowski cut a cold glance through Ty. Had they been anywhere but Melissa's kitchen, physical contact might have ensued.

"You want to go down and get him?" Robert asked, ignoring the interplay between his trusty assistant and the special agent.

"It's a little more complicated than that," Withers said.

"Complicated." Robert rubbed his eyes again.

"We would like to keep the fact that Mr. Slackherd has agreed to cooperate with us quiet for a while. If it becomes obvious that he has been released into our custody, the Delacroixs will go to ground. And if, Mr. Slackherd's lawyer is also involved—"

"It's his mother's lawyer," Robert said.

They all stared.

"Sorry, Troy was insistent on that point."

"Anyway," Withers continued. "Assuming we can come to an agreement with Mr. Slackherd, we're hoping to come up with a way to make the charges against him disappear,

so that he is free to resume his contacts with the Delacroixs.”

“Disappear.”

“Exactly,” Dumbrowski said. “Bail won’t work. Eddie Delacroix is too smart to reach out when charges are pending.”

“We’ve seen it before,” Withers added. “No high-ranking member of the Delacroixs will go down on the testimony of a screw-up like Troy Slackherd. We need concrete evidence. If we use Mr. Slackherd in a sting operation, then we’ve got a shot at some convictions.”

“You want to use Troy as a lure.”

“Better than using him as a star witness.”

Robert had to agree on that point. “So, you want me to drop the charges?”

“Yes, but we’d like you to keep it inconspicuous,” Withers said.

Robert raised his hands and said, “What the hell does that mean?”

“We just need you to mask the dismissal somehow. If the charges, and Mr. Slackherd, magically disappear, the Delacroixs will know something’s up. We’re hoping you can make the state case go away without tipping our hand.”

“This came from Washington,” Dumbrowski added, as if a suggestion from D.C. carried some imprimatur of invincibility.

“Oh, that’s very comforting,” Robert said. “Did ‘D.C.’ have any suggestions about how to pull off this ruse?”

The special agents answered with grunts and shrugs.

Just great. Now Robert had to come up with a way of making Troy’s arrest look like one giant misunderstanding, not likely given the fact that one of Troy’s accomplices was singing like Celine Dion, and the other was on a slab in the morgue with a state trooper’s bullet in his brain. So, how could Robert make Troy’s case inconspicuously disappear?

He looked up and saw Katie in the sunroom. She was watching a DVD of the movie *Seabiscuit*. The volume was off, but that didn't stop her from following the story, including dialogue. Her condition, where the outer and inner ear canals fail to fully form before birth, wasn't that uncommon, even though she presented the only case in Charlotte her doctors had seen. Robert had worried himself sick about the life she might live as a fully deaf person. He had looked into experimental surgery to create artificial canals, procedures that were gaining more and more acceptance as they became more common. The downside was that man-made canals didn't produce wax or grow the tiny hair follicles essential in keeping dust, dirt, water, and bacteria out of the inner ear. Katie might hear, but she'd never swim or play soccer again. So Robert became an expert on cochlear implants, learning that people who have been deaf from birth reject the brain stimuli more often than they accept it. There was a chance she might hear perfectly with the implants, but there was a bigger chance that quiet sounds like whispers and birds chirping would sound like a Metallica concert. Finally, after Robert had worried himself to near panic, Katie told him to "Cut it out. I'm fine. There's nothing I want to do that I can't do, and if I want to experiment with an implant or surgery in a few years, I'll let you know."

Watching Katie follow the movie with the skill of a hearing person made Robert smile at all the sleepless nights he'd spent worrying for her. She made straight As, loved basketball and soccer, and enjoyed all the things a girl her age should enjoy, including movies, television shows, and videos.

That's when Robert's answer came to him.

"I think I know how to get Troy released," he said.

"How's that?" Ty asked.

Robert answered with a question of his own. "What do

any of you know about the digital video surveillance used in jails?"

"Not much to it," Ty said. "It's like your TiVo. Image is stored on a hard drive. You want see what happened on the yard or on a particular cell block at a specific time, you type in a time and location code, and the image comes up. It's just like video except easier to store and access."

"Very good," Robert said as he broke into a smile. "Now, what do you know about the law on jailhouse recordings?"

Ty shrugged. "I know it hasn't caught up to technology. The dumbest of the dumb still confess during pickup basketball games or strolls around the yard when they think they're out of earshot. I read about one case in Maryland where a guy bragged about three killings when he was lifting weights a hundred yards from the nearest guard. Microphone picked it up clear as a church soprano. The guy's lawyer ranted and blustered, but they got the guy cold. Put him away for life with his own words."

Robert's smile increased. Then he told them what he planned to do.

"You think Hibiscus will buy it?" Withers asked.

"It's Hybill, and I have no idea."

Dumbrowski chuckled. "A lawyer named Hybill. Go figure."

"Hybill's too arrogant to suspect anything," Robert said. "He believes all prosecutors are morons, and all police are inept. This fits his view of the world."

"You think our troopers will go along?" Ty asked.

"They won't have a choice," Robert said. "The judge will make the call, and I'm sure he'll make the right one."

Chapter 9

They checked into the Hampton Inn on Speedway Boulevard and Sonny got a receipt with CIA printed across the bottom. He loved those things. More than once he'd left the receipts lying around the studio and clubs for all to see. He'd even picked up a bimbo or two by implying that he was a secret agent. None of the idiots Sonny hung around with knew that it stood for "cash in advance," which was how he paid for everything, including the two rooms at this hotel. Sonny thought about getting one room with two queen-sized beds, but he'd already seen Jorge's manhood once today. It was worth an extra ninety bucks not to share a bathroom with him.

His phone went off again, which prompted the blond desk clerk to say, "Oh, cool song." The Charlotte number appeared on the display screen. He was growing damn tired of hearing from this one. It was one thing to have Uncle Eddie checking up on his every move. Having this one call every hour was raising his blood pressure. He'd gotten a little lightheaded after the Aldomet overdose this morning. Calls like this didn't help.

"Yeah," he yelled into the phone. "We just got in . . . Yeah . . . Yeah . . . I got it . . . I said I got it, that means, I got it."

Jorge leaned on the counter and attempted to flirt with the desk clerk by staring down her blouse. She was having none of it. When Sonny hung up he kicked Jorge's leg with the side of his boot. "Got to go," he said. "We need to be out of here by seven in the morning."

"¿*Por que temprano?* Why so early?"

"We ain't here for vacation, Jorge. The sooner we start, the sooner we finish and get the fuck outta here. And stop using that Espanola shit. I don't like what I don't understand."

Jorge turned and smiled at the clerk. "*Me amigo es un kulo,*" he said.

She giggled, which meant that the big fuck had made another joke at Sonny's expense. God, he needed a drink.

Five hours after Sonny fell asleep to the glow of *Star Whores Episode 17: Revenge of the Nymphs* on his in-room television, Special Agents Withers and Dumbrowski waltzed into the Mecklenburg County Jail and roused Troy Slackherd out of a hard, snore-filled sleep.

"Rise and shine, sleeping beauty, your prince charmings have arrived," Dumbrowski yelled as he tossed the cheap polyester blanket off of Troy's prone body.

"Get up, Slackherd," Withers added. "As Oral Roberts says: 'Something good is going to happen to you this very day!'"

"Who the fuck is Robert Oral?" Troy said as he opened one eye and slid his legs off the bunk.

"Oral Roberts you dipshit. You never been televangelized?"

Dumbrowski punched Withers on the shoulder and said, "Better not say 'Oral' too loud in here."

Both agents slapped their thighs while laughing at that one.

"Are you two gonna get me outta here?" Troy said as he hoisted himself to a seated position and ran his hands through mats of red hair.

"Depends on what you're prepared to do for us," Dumbrowski said. Then he patted the leather case he had slung over his shoulder. "I got your walking papers right here. You say the right things, and you'll be out of here before lunch."

Troy stood and stretched, raising his arms to the ceiling. Then he shuffled to the rear of the cell, unzipped his orange jumpsuit and relieved himself in the metal toilet. Withers and Dumbrowski rocked on their toes and looked at everything but Troy as sounds of urine hitting tin echoed off the bare concrete walls.

"You want me to turn in Eddie Delacroix, don't you?"

Dumbrowski almost keeled over. He'd been trying to build a case on the Delacroixs for five years, but the few times he'd gotten close witnesses disappeared, or resources were snatched away. Now, out of the blue, a skinny hillbilly was offering up the golden chalice as casually as he might invite them out for barbeque. Dumbrowski tried to block the sound of Troy's piss hitting the pot. This could be the break he'd been waiting for his entire career.

"How do you know Eddie Delacroix?" Dumbrowski asked in the calmest voice he could muster.

"I'm the star of his fuck flicks," Troy said.

The agents stared at each other.

"Just kidding. Damn, you boys need to get a sense of humor. I'm the one in jail."

"Mr. Slackherd, we don't have much time. You are the one who called offering information in exchange for immunity."

"Yeah, I know Eddie. I've run some dope for him and snuck some stuff around on my old stepdad's plane."

"That's the late Junior Senior, not your current stepfather, Phil Cheney," Withers said, notepad and tape recorder at the ready.

"No, I call Phil my daddy," Troy said. "He don't know nothing. None of his folks do. I hooked up with Eddie and them at the race in Vegas when I was down about ten grand at the poker table. They made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Said they'd bail me out with the casino, keep Joe Pesci from burying me alive in the desert, if I'd take a couple of extra bags back to Charlotte. I did, and I've been working with them ever since."

"Who made the offer?"

"Eddie."

Dumbrowski felt a tingle in his groin. This could be the one, baby!

"Did you have any other contact with Eddie Delacroix?"

"What, you boys think I drug you out here for nothing? Course I had contact with him. I was there the last time somebody fucked up like we did last night. It was in Virginia Beach, a kid helped himself to a little product and flipped a speedboat carrying twenty ki's."

"I remember that bust," Withers said. "The case never went to trial."

"Damn right it didn't," Troy said. "Boy was shanked in the shower his second night."

"You saw this?" Dumbrowski asked.

"I was there when Eddie give the order. One phone call, man. Poor kid never had a chance."

Dumbrowski pulled on his pant leg to hide his erection. This was definitely the big one.

"So, you think Eddie would do the same to you?"

"Damn straight," Troy said. "That's why I got to get out of here."

"Mr. Slackherd, I think we're going to be able to do business."

"I ain't never been to Arizona," Troy said.

"Arizona?"

"Ain't that where you send all the witness protection folks? Sammy the Bull's there, ain't he?"

"Sammy's back in prison," Dumbrowski said.

"Oh." Troy pointed at Dumbrowski's crotch. "Hey, you gotta take a leak or you just happy to see me?"

Dumbrowski buttoned his jacket and sucked in his gut to give his slacks a little more room.

"You won't be going to Arizona," Withers said.

"No?"

"We've got a slightly different plan," Dumbrowski added.

"What's that?"

Withers smiled. "Mr. Slackherd, have you ever done any acting?"

"I was the ass end of a horse in my fifth-grade play. Folks say that don't count, but it was tough keeping yourself steady hunched over in that costume. I thought I was going to faint from the heat. Then Brad Dorsey farted and I damn near got ex-fixated."

"You mean asphyxiated," Withers said.

"That thing where you die from being farted on under a twenty-pound wool horse's costume."

"We had a different kind of acting in mind," Dumbrowski said.

"Well, I could sure give it a go. What'd you boys have in mind?"

Withers smiled. "Mr. Slackherd, have you ever worn a wire?"

Chapter 10

Trooper Todd Padgett hadn't slept well for two consecutive nights. The first was understandable. After filling out the paperwork, surrendering his weapon, and going through the internal affairs interview, he'd rolled into his driveway around sunrise on Sunday too keyed up to stop moving. You don't shoot a man dead, go home, and fall asleep like a baby. Todd spent Sunday morning calling his mom, dad, girlfriend, preacher, and union representative. Of those, the union rep had been the most understanding and helpful. Trooper Padgett could expect to have nightmares for a couple of months, or so the union guy had said, but they would soften with time. Then the questions and self-doubt would creep in. That was why any officer involved in a shooting was placed on mandatory leave. The last thing anybody needed was a trooper second-guessing himself in the field.

Todd also learned that even if it was ruled a clean shoot, which everyone had assured him was a slam-dunk, he would still have to deal with the fallout of being a white cop who'd shot a Mexican national in the face. The union man told him to expect a lawsuit by the end of the week, and at least one protest march where he would be called names his mother might find offensive. It went with the territory. You just had to ride it out.

Todd spent Sunday afternoon and evening Googling cases similar to his own. His findings weren't promising. One such case involved a white cop in Atlanta who had shot a black drug dealer wielding a razor. The subsequent protests almost shut down the city. The cop was suspended with pay pending an investigation, which sparked a second round of protests. One prominent rabble-rouser had said, "The man gets paid for sending our brother to the grave." Todd had found that quote in no fewer than twenty stories. That was six months ago. He could find no update on the officer.

The story out of Lukeville, Arizona, was worse. A park ranger at Organ Pipe Cactus National Park was patrolling the border when a pickup truck crashed the fence. He'd attempted to wave down the border crashers, and even fired a shot in the air. It wasn't until the grill of the truck closed to within ten feet of his chest that the ranger fired three shots into the windshield. The shots hit their mark, killing the driver and two other illegals who died when the truck flipped at seventy miles an hour. It took the Latin American Freedom Foundation less than twenty-four hours to file a hundred-million-dollar wrongful death suit against the ranger and the Park Service. Then the ranger's name and address were leaked to Spanish language radio stations from Yuma to El Paso. The last story Todd found stated that the ranger had retired from the service and moved his family out of the state. The suit was still pending.

After half a day on the Internet, Todd broke out the Jim Beam bottle and tried to drink himself to sleep. All he got was a headache and a case of the munchies. Sunday night was spent nibbling on Doritos and watching a *M*A*S*H* marathon on TBS. When he finally dozed off, he dreamed about Jose Hietus and the look on his face as he charged Todd for the final time.

The dogs woke him a little after seven. Todd had bought a prefab house on three acres in Locus for the peace and

quiet. He hadn't counted on a beagle breeder moving in across the road. Any time a rabbit ran through the neighborhood, the dogs opened up like a bullhorn orchestra.

The television was still on. *M*A*S*H* had run its course. Now the Superstation was in the middle of back-to-back-to-back episodes of *Dawson's Creek*. Todd rolled onto the floor on his hands and knees. Even during his hardest partying days at Davidson College, he had never felt this bad. After a minute of heavy breathing and listening to the beagles yelp and howl in the distance, he forced himself upright and stumbled into the kitchen where he put on a pot of coffee and grabbed a slice of pepperoni pizza from the refrigerator. Nothing drained the poison from your system like cold pizza.

When the barking intensified, Todd walked to the window and pulled back the blinds. Sunlight hit him like a strap to the face. He squinted and blinked until his eyes adjusted.

He heard the thud of a slamming car door before he saw the vehicle, a black Mercedes sedan. A man in a blue jacket and white cotton shirt walked slowly toward the house. "What the hell?" Todd said.

Thank god he had on sweatpants. Todd opened the front door and met the stranger ten feet into his front yard.

"Can I help you?" Todd said.

"Man, I hope so," the man said with a wide smile. "I've got a meeting this morning at Barber Scotia College. I was driving up from Florence, and a guy told me this was a shortcut. I've got no idea where I am."

Todd stared to the northwest, toward the sound of the dogs. "You need to go back out this road till you hit state route two hundred. You take that north about five miles to six-o-one in Concord. You don't go but maybe two miles on six-o-one till you hit an intersection, that's highway forty-nine . . ."

“So, it’s two hundred, to six-o-one, to forty-nine,” the man said.

“Right,” Todd said. It was the last word he would utter.

The bullet entered from the back and clipped the lower chamber of his heart before mushrooming against the back of his sternum.

Todd fell to his knees, and rolled to his side. He turned his head and looked up. Another man, taller and darker, had joined the stranger. For an instant, Todd thought it was Jose back from the dead to exact vengeance.

“Jesus, Jorge,” the stranger said. “What the fuck were you waiting on? I’m out here reading the fucking phone book to this guy. He walks out; you shoot him. How tough is that? Christ, I thought I was going to have to get him to draw me a fucking map.”

The big one ignored the man in the jacket. He knelt down and looked into Todd’s face. “*Muera lento, romero,*” the big one said softly.

“Come on, Jorge,” the other one said. “Quit fucking around. We’ve got to be at the courthouse in an hour.”

Todd felt the big man step over him. Then he felt the unmistakable chill of a gun barrel pressed against the side of his skull.

His last thought was: at least I won’t have to worry about the lawsuits.

They had drawn Judge Curtis Mattson for the arraignment, a former prosecutor in his early sixties and in his twentieth year on the bench. Robert couldn’t have chosen a better jurist if he’d been given pick of the litter. Mattson, a syrupy native of historic Wilmington who wore bow ties everyday and seersuckers in the summer, was a letter-of-the-law stickler for detail. Defense attorneys knew better than to attempt to make law in his courtroom, and prosecutors knew to have their cases nailed down before the gavel fell. Judge

Mattson was tough and demanding on both sides, and not above slapping substantial fines on lawyers who behaved foolishly before him. J. Smith Hybill was not one of the judge's favorites, which should work in Robert's favor.

As Robert suspected, the racing press had sobered up enough to make an appearance. He had run into one of the reporters from *Racing Daily* in the hallway, and had seen beat reporters from the *Charlotte Observer*, *Greensboro News-Record*, and *Winston-Salem Journal* in the smoking pit in front of the building. There were also a handful of the area's more notorious freelance photographers skulking around the help desk. Their biggest hope was that Junior Senior Jr. would show up to support his stepbrother so they could get a quote, a no-comment, or at the very least a picture. None of that seemed likely. Junior was probably as far away from Charlotte as possible with his cell phone off.

The same could not be said for Mrs. Dolores Senior and her current husband, used-car magnet Phil Cheney. When Robert peeked into Judge Mattson's courtroom he saw Dolores and Phil seated front and center in the gallery. That must have made the reporters' day.

Dolores and Phil had no idea what the morning held in store. They hadn't been privy to Troy's late-night meeting with Dumbrowski and Withers, and they hadn't seen the statement the two FBI agents gleefully delivered to Robert's office before seven A.M.

Troy was officially onboard. It had been a hard sell. He had screamed that the Delacroixs would get their money, their truck, or his hide, but Dumbrowski convinced Troy that the family would keep him alive as long as he was useful. According to the deal he had signed, once sprung, Troy would contact Christian Delacroix, an attorney with offices in Washington, D.C., who also happened to be the nephew of mob boss Eddie Delacroix. Troy would tell Christian Delacroix that the Saturday-night bust was a setup and that

the family had a mole burrowed somewhere deep inside. He was to weave a fantastic tale of how Trooper Burley Hamrick knew exactly what they were doing and when they were doing it, that he knew about specific drug shipments and when certain deals were going down. In the process, Troy would get Christian to discuss as many nefarious activities as the good lawyer would allow. Then Troy would finagle an audience with Eddie Delacroix and as many Delacroix chieftains as would see him, all under the watchful eyes and attentive ears of an FBI surveillance team.

“Hey, sorry I’m late,” Johnny Pea said as he put his hand on Robert’s shoulder.

“Late for what, Johnny Pea? There’s no reason for you to be here.” It wasn’t like Robert was up for a cabinet nomination. Christ, the attorney general didn’t get this kind of round-the-clock assistance.

“I’m supposed to aid you in the confirmation process,” Johnny Pea said in a wounded tone.

“So you show up at my house on Sunday, and here on Monday? You don’t have to follow me every minute of the day. It’s been a while, but I can still handle an arraignment.”

Robert rightly suspected that John Paul Westport was bored out of his mind in North Carolina, and that he hung around Robert for the company, and to justify his government stipend.

“I know, I know,” Johnny Pea said. “After yesterday, I just wanted to be here. Hey, isn’t that Jett Jordan?”

Robert looked up and saw Jett enter the courtroom amid a flutter of clicking cameras that sounded like a swarm of crickets.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Robert said. “You wouldn’t know a racecar if you got run over by one. How do you know Jett Jordan?”

“I’ve seen his picture in the paper,” Johnny Pea said.

“Stockcar’s not big in New York, but we love our celebrity divorces.”

Jett Jordan, stockcar’s most successful active driver and chiseled-chin model for GAP and Ray-Ban, was the man who had replaced the great Redball Redding as the number one driver for Don Healey Motorsports. In his first five years behind the wheel, Jett had won three Salem Cup championships and had been heralded for the squeaky-clean image he brought to the sport. Then came his divorce from the former Miss North Carolina, Brandy Spears. Jett’s pensive mug had appeared on every tabloid cover in the country, along with headlines that ran the gambit. Two of Robert’s favorites were, “Jett and Brandy Blow a Gasket” and “Vroom, Vroom for STOCKCAR’s Bride and Groom.”

“Is it true he paid her ten million?” Johnny Pea asked.

“Nope, fifteen, plus another two to her lawyers. Best money he ever spent.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Let’s just say the moral of the story is, never marry someone who wears a tiara to work.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Brandy was great when they were dating. The minute he said ‘I do’ she turned into a manipulative gold digger.”

“He had to pay her lawyers?”

“Until the presiding judge said enough was enough. Once they got a ruling that he no longer had to pay their hourly rate, her counselors couldn’t settle fast enough.”

“Bloodsuckers.”

“That’s what they call us.”

“What about the Atlanta story? Is that one true?”

“You do know your stockcar trivia,” Robert said. “I get the distinct impression you’ve been holding out on me, Agent Westport.”

“So, is it true?”

According to published reports, Brandy Jordan’s law-

yers had requested tickets to the season-ending race in Atlanta as part of their compensation arrangement. After screaming about the chutzpah of such a request, Jett's lawyers acquiesced and gave up four tickets to the U.S. Air Force 500, which Brandy's lawyers used as a license to serve subpoenas to other drivers, crew chiefs, and team owners. The subpoenas demanded comparative financials, the hope being that Brandy could expose Jett undervaluing his assets, or embarrass him into signing an unfavorable settlement.

Jett got the last laugh. About a hundred laps into the race, a message went up on the giant infield screen: GO SAY "HI" TO BRANDY'S LAWYERS—SEC. 118, ROW 25, SEATS E THROUGH H. All four counselors were doused with beer and pummeled with U.S. Air Force beanbags as they tried to escape. One was tripped, purely by accident, as he trotted up the stairs toward the exit. All had their mothers' heritage questioned.

A week later the judge cut the purse strings, and Jett's divorce was finalized.

"So, true or false?"

"Jett looks good. Not be too banged up from hitting the wall Saturday night," Robert said.

"I take that as a 'true.'"

"I didn't say that."

"Wonder why he's here? He related to Slackherd, too?"

"No, he's here representing the victims," Robert said.

Johnny Pea cocked his head and raised a single brow.

"Jett and Don Healey, his car owner, are the two largest shareholders in Trackside Sports."

"The toy company?"

"They're officially licensed die casts," Robert said with a grin. "And they make shirts, jackets, license plates, decals, prints; if it's stockcar merchandise, Trackside's in it."

"And Jett's a stockholder."

“Between Jett and Don, they own something like eighteen percent, pretty hefty for a publicly traded company.”

“And the victims he’s representing here today?”

“The shareholders who had their truck stolen Saturday night by Mr. Troy Slackherd.”

Stirring in the courtroom interrupted their conversation. A deputy walked through a side door escorting a group of jumpsuit-clad jailbirds. Troy was third in line. His hair was one shade lighter orange than the outfit, and it looked like he hadn’t come close to a comb since Saturday night. He stole a quick glance at his mother and Phil in the back, and then gave Robert a wide-eyed, open-mouthed, unmistakable nod.

Robert looked down at the railing and hoped nobody else saw Troy’s gesture.

If Dolores had seen, she didn’t show it. Her expression remained unchanged, which was not unusual. She always looked like she was sitting for a Grant Wood painting.

Phil, on the other hand, smiled and gave his stepson a feeble wave. Robert read his lips as he said, “He looks good, Dolores. He looks okay.” How pitiful.

It took a minute for the defendants to settle in. Then Robert saw J. Smith slink into the courtroom. He sat directly behind Troy, and barely looked up from his notebook, leading Robert to wonder what on earth he could be reading. Pleading out didn’t require a lot of prep work.

A door at the rear of the chamber creaked open, which brought the bailiff to attention. He stood and said, “All rise,” as Judge Mattson walked in carrying a laptop, which he put on the bench before settling into his overstuffed leather chair.

Ty Johnson stood at the prosecution table. He had three stacks of manila file folders lined in front of him, and would handle all the cases except one.

The morning docket moved quickly. Various defendants rose as the clerk read the charges. Ty requested obscenely high bails or no bail at all, and the defense lawyers screamed in outrage. Lawyers bickered until Judge Mattson stepped in and ended debate. This went on for twenty minutes until the clerk called, "The State of North Carolina versus Troy Eucalyptus Slackherd."

The charges of breaking and entering, hijacking, and larceny were read aloud as Robert maneuvered to the prosecution table. He didn't have a chance to say anything. The clerk had barely finished when Smith leaped forward. "J. Smith Hybill for the defense, Your Honor," he said.

This caught Mattson off-guard. He gazed over the glasses, and said, "Yes, you are, Mr. Hybill." Then he looked at Robert. "And I see Mr. Redding on the other side. What brings you out this morning?"

Robert cleared his throat. It was time to drop the big one. "Your honor, I apologize, but if it please the Court, the people will withdraw the charges against Mr. Slackherd at this time, but request the opportunity to refile."

"What?" J. Smith yelled. "Your honor, my client has reached a plea agreement. We're here to plead."

"That's enough, Mr. Hybill," Mattson said. "I will pretend I didn't hear that, but you are not to interrupt again. I'll get to you in a minute. Now, Mr. Redding, what's this all about?"

"Your Honor, I'm afraid we have a problem. Unbeknownst to anyone in my office, and, obviously to Mr. Hybill, the conversations he had with his client at the jail were digitally recorded by the police."

"Recorded how?" Mattson said, his tone stern.

"Standard digital, Your Honor," Robert said. "The jail has monitors in all rooms. The one in the room where Mr. Hybill and Mr. Slackherd were discussing their case was on, and a recording was made during their discussions."

We are currently investigating who viewed the recording after the fact, and if attorney-client privilege was violated as a result. We request the right, after our investigation, to refile.”

“If there was no audio, what’s the problem?” Hybill jumped in. “Jails record everything.”

Mattson cut him off with the wave of a hand. “I said I’ll get to you in a minute, Mr. Hybill.”

Robert took a step toward the judge and gave a what-are-you-gonna-do shrug. “Your Honor, this wasn’t video surveillance of a common area, or even a cell. The recording was of an interview room where attorneys and defendants have an expectation of privacy. The conversation between Mr. Hybill and his client was stored on the jail’s system for some number of hours, and we simply need to investigate who viewed it before proceeding.”

“But if there’s no sound . . .” Hybill said again.

“That just cost you two hundred dollars, Mr. Hybill,” Mattson said. “Your next outburst will be a thousand.”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Now, Mr. Redding,” Mattson said, staring over the top of his glasses and putting on his most scornful frown. “If there is no audio, what are the people investigating?”

“Lip readers, and lip-reading programs, Your Honor.”

“Come again?”

“Because the recording remained on the jail’s hard drive for some time, we need to determine if any lip readers viewed the recording, and if the computer system itself is capable of lip reading.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” Hybill said.

“That’s it,” the Judge said, leaning across the bench as far as he could without falling on his face. “Get out your checkbook, Mr. Hybill. Twelve hundred dollars. And if that doesn’t get your attention, I’m sure some time in a holding cell will.”

“Yes, Your Honor. Sorry, Your Honor. It’s just that my client has a deal. For this to come up here, now—”

The judge slammed the gavel, which hushed even the whisperers. His voice reverberated off the oak-paneled walls. “Mr. Hybill, am I correct in my reading here: aren’t you counsel for the *defense* in this matter?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Then it would appear to me that you have earned your hefty fee for the day. Now be quiet while I sort this out.”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Now, Counselor Redding, I respect your prosecutorial discretion, but this courtroom is no place for this. When did you become aware of this so-called recording?”

“Just recently, Your Honor,” Robert said looking at his watch as if he’d just gotten the news minutes ago. He hadn’t lied, technically, but he hadn’t answered the question, either.

“And what’s this business about a lip-reading program?”

“Yes, Your Honor, many systems have them these days. A user isolates the pixels around the face and mouth, and the program makes educated guesses as to what’s being said. Most are at least as accurate as expert lip readers.”

“HMMMMM,” Mattson hummed low and loud, stroking his chin as he absorbed this new wrinkle. Tapes of lawyers and clients weren’t new, even in areas where the lawyer-client privilege applied. Audio was against the rules, as was having lip readers analyze the tapes. Since no police force Robert knew of had on-staff lip readers, the point was moot. But the prospect of a lip-reading computer program presented a new dimension. Could lawyers and clients reasonably expect to have their images run through such a program? The legislature and appellate courts had never taken up the matter, so Mattson was stuck setting precedent, unless he dumped the case, which was exactly what Robert was requesting.

"Your Honor, if I may," Hybill said.

"You may not, Mr. Hybill," the judge said. "Now, Mr. Redding, if, as Mr. Hybill insists on saying, you have entered a plea agreement with this defendant—"

"Our office has entered no agreement, Your Honor," Robert said, having split hairs for the second time in under a minute. The FBI had, indeed, cut a deal with Troy, but Robert and the State of North Carolina had not.

Mattson closed the monitor of his laptop and shuffled in his chair. The silence couldn't have lasted more than five seconds, but it felt like a year. "You mean, Mr."—Mattson checked his notes—"Mr. Slackherd . . . Am I saying that right? Slack . . . herd?"

"Yeah, that's it," Troy said. He had been standing the whole time, watching the show like everyone else.

"Mr. Slackherd has reached no agreement with the prosecutor's office."

"Nothing with our office, Your Honor," Robert said a bit too quickly. "Mr. Hybill and I had preliminary discussions, before we became aware of the suspect recording, of course, but we entered no agreement. "

Mattson made a face like something smelly had gotten stuck to his shoe. Robert knew he had him. The judge wasn't about to make law this morning, especially with his docket this full.

"Mr. Redding, I'm afraid if you've discussed a plea, I will be forced to attach jeopardy if this matter is dismissed. Are you sure the people do not wish to proceed?"

"Yes, Your Honor, I'm afraid, under the circumstances, we cannot."

Mattson gave a quick nod before picking up the gavel and saying, "Mr. Slackherd, you are free to go."

Troy looked around the courtroom with the goofiest grin Robert had ever seen. Then, the idiot stuck out his tongue at Hybill, who was too busy chewing his jaw and staring at

his legal pad to notice. The veins on the lawyer's neck and forehead appeared ready to rupture. He never looked up as the deputy led Troy out the side exit and began unlocking the handcuffs before the door closed.

Troy would be carted back to the jail where he would shed the orange jumpsuit and change into his dirty clothes. Then he would sign a few papers, collect his belongings, and be sent on his way, just as Withers and Dumbrowski had requested.

"Next case," the judge said.

Ty reclaimed his spot at the prosecution table. Robert walked toward the rear doors, but J. Smith blocked his path.

"What the hell was that?" Hybill said.

"It was the chief state's attorney protecting attorney-client privilege," Robert said. "Now, you want to tell me what the hell's going on?"

"I just offered you the biggest gift of your life, Redball, and you threw it back in my face."

Robert cocked his head and wrinkled his brow. "You do realize that your client is walking out of here, don't you?"

"That's not the point."

"Just what is the point, Smith?" Robert said in a voice that earned him some glares from the court observers. "Because, your actions yesterday and today seem very suspicious. Should I be suspicious, Smith?"

Robert bit his upper lip. The ruse had worked, but if this conversation went much farther, he risked tipping Smith off. Robert still wanted to believe Hybill wasn't involved. The guy was a dick, but from what Robert had seen, he wasn't a crook. Maybe there was a logical explanation for Counselor Hybill's out-to-lunch behavior the last couple of days. At least Robert hoped so.

Anyway, J. Smith was the feds problem now, along with Troy. The FBI wanted Troy Slackherd as an informant,

and now they had him, along with all the headaches he invariably brought. Robert could wash his hands of the whole thing.

"I won't forget this," Smith said.

"Neither will I," Robert answered.

"Whatever."

That was exactly the word Robert would have used. This entire episode had been one giant Whatever. Now that it was done, Robert could get back to his normal routine. He had already informed his office that he planned to take the rest of the day off; an unusual decision for a Monday, but he'd worked most of the weekend, and had some family fences to mend. The sooner he put Troy Slackherd behind him and got back to his family, the better he would feel.

"Well, that went well," Johnny Pea said.

"Well enough. He's Withers and Dumbrowski's problem now."

"I'm sure they'll thank you when they see you."

"Hopefully no time soon," Robert said. "No offense, but I've had my fill of federal agents for a while."

"None taken. You heading back to the office?"

"Nope. I'm heading home."

"Taking a day?"

"After the weekend I just had, I think I deserve one."

"Hey, no argument from me."

Robert started to tell Johnny Pea to leave him alone for at least the next twenty-four hours, but he held his tongue. Despite tripping over him at every turn, Robert was beginning to take a shinning to Agent Westport.

Robert looked over his shoulder as he reached the rear exit and smiled when he saw that Johnny Pea wasn't following him. Then, as he turned to go, Robert noticed two men sitting on the back row. They were an odd pair, one well dressed and groomed, his black hair slicked back on his head; the other a Latino in jeans with hard eyes and

acne scars on his cheeks and neck. Robert wouldn't have noticed them if not for the animated discussion they were having. The well-dressed one seemed almost in a panic.

“What the fuck just happened?” Robert heard him say.
“What the fuck did we just see?”

Chapter 11

Beagle breeder Esau Bugg used some of the choicer curse words he'd brought home from the Navy as he clawed his way out of a briar patch. Pup, the temporary name Esau had assigned to the pick of his hunting bitch's latest litter, had been missing all day, and the search was entering its seventh hour. A few years ago, he would have given up and let Pup fend for himself, but all the bankers, doctors, lawyers, and computer programmers who had moved to Charlotte in the last few years had driven the value of a purebred hunting beagle past the seven-hundred-dollar mark. For that kind of money, Esau would stay out all night if he had to.

Once he freed himself of the briars and dusted a few clinging twigs from his jeans, Esau stood in the middle of county road 1106, just across from Trooper Todd Padgett's place, and yelled, "Heya, Pup. Heya, Pup," for the thousandth time.

He listened for a distant bark, but instead heard a nearby whimper followed by a low, quiet growl.

"What the hell are you doing over there, Pup?" Esau said as he waved the beam of his flashlight toward the sounds. "I've been looking all . . ."

Esau stopped in mid-sentence when the light found his lost puppy, and the heap on the ground the dog was lick-

ing. When responding officers arrived on the scene, they found Esau squatting beside Trooper Padgett's body saying, "It's okay, Pup, it's okay."

Cause of death was easily determined. Blood from two bullet holes had pooled around the body, turning the dirt a gooey black. The only thing left for the medical examiner to do was remove the bullets so they could be tested in the hopes of someday matching them with a weapon. There were also some tire prints in the gravel driveway. A forensic team was dispatched to take casts, and scour the scene in search of microscopic clues. Nobody seemed hopeful. The body appeared to have been outside for twelve to eighteen hours. In that time, rabbits, squirrels, foxes, and at least one beagle had traipsed over the corpse and the crime scene. Unless the killer was foolish enough to leave prints in Todd's house, this one wasn't likely to turn on physical evidence.

That didn't stop the attending officers from drawing their own conclusions. Within minutes of Esau's frantic cell-phone call to 911, Trooper Padgett's yard could have been the sight of a state patrol convention. Word that one of their own had been gunned down in his own yard raced through the North Carolina law enforcement community. Todd's three-acre track soon housed no fewer than a hundred vehicles.

Halogen lights illuminated a one-acre perimeter, and all roads leading to the property were sealed off. Every cop in the state knew about Todd's incident at the hospital, and all suspected Jose's compadres in this murder. Unfortunately, none of the locals knew much about Jose Hietus, or his friends, so all they could do was fuss and fume, and yell at anybody who tried to encroach on their crime scene.

Thirty minutes after Esau discovered Trooper Padgett, Joshua Pratt Jr., age fifteen, struggled with the clasp of his girlfriend's bra as the two of them succumbed to tempta-

tion on the aft cushions of the family's Sea Sprinter in the Pratt's boathouse on Lake Norman.

"Can you . . . *hah, hah, mmmm* . . . get it?"

"Oh yeah, oh yeah. I think I've got it."

A few fumbles later, the girl pulled away and reached behind her back, flicking the clasp open with one subtle flip of the wrist.

That's when the body bobbed to the surface inside the boathouse and banged against the starboard side of the pair's love nest. The elder Pratts weren't home, but the girl's screams woke up neighbors on both sides. Before the police arrived, gawkers stood on every board of the Pratt's dock.

Neighbors dragged the bloated carcass out of the water after one of them took some rope off the boat and lassoed the dead man's neck. It took less than thirty seconds for the crowd to wrongly identify the body. Within five minutes, rumors that Junior Senior Jr. had been murdered hit the Internet. Fox Radio was the first national outlet to broadcast the erroneous report.

Once again, the cause of death was no mystery. Troy Eucalyptus Slackherd, thirteen hours after being released from jail and disappearing from the FBI agents who were waiting for him, had been shot twice in the back of the head from close range. The ME would later determine that Troy had been in the water approximately eight hours, but that he had been dead before taking the plunge.

Water temperature had cooled his skin quicker than the air, giving Troy a glistening purple sheen. It appeared as though a few largemouth bass had nibbled on his nose, ears and fingers, but the body had not deteriorated beyond recognition. A few of the spectators took pictures with their camera phones. Those, too, made it to the Internet before police took control of the situation.

The first responders also assumed they were dealing with the body of Junior Senior Jr. It was an honest mistake.

Dolores had trouble telling them apart from a distance. With the damage to the skull from the gunshots, and the natural degrading that came with spending twelve hours underwater, anybody who had seen Junior in person or on television would have come to the same conclusion. It wasn't until the reporters arrived that the identity was cleared up. At one thirty A.M., one of the *Action News Six* guys reached Junior's publicist, a smarmy brownnoser named Billy Bunch.

"Not only is he not dead, he's not even in Charlotte," Billy said. "We're testing in Chicago. What the hell time is it?"

When informed of the time, and the situation, including the rumors and accompanying photos flying through cyberspace, Billy shook the sleep from his noggin and became a good deal more lucid. "Junior Senior Jr. is most certainly not in Charlotte," he said. "And as of two hours ago, when I saw him walk into his hotel room, he was not dead."

The reporter, standing on Joshua Pratt's lawn, glanced up at camera three while reading Billy's quote verbatim. He finished his report by saying: "This leaves those investigating this brutal crime with one huge unanswered question: If the body discovered here tonight is not that of Junior Senior Jr., then who is it?"

Special Agent George Dumbrowski knew exactly who it was. He had spent the previous twelve hours in something resembling a blind panic after losing the man who was supposed to rendezvous with him outside the gates of Junior Senior Racing. The plan had been simple: since Troy had arrived at the jail in an unmarked North Carolina State Patrol vehicle, and since it might raise a few suspicions if another unmarked government vehicle picked him up outside the gates, he would call his mother's race shop from the jail, and, within earshot of as many deputies and detainees as

possible, ask somebody at the shop to pick him up. Withers confirmed that Troy had, indeed, followed through with that part of the agreement. Five minutes after slipping on his jeans and signing a ledger to claim his watch and wallet, Troy phoned Junior Senior Racing, spoke to the shop foreman, and was assured that one of the mechanics would be there to pick him up in a matter of minutes.

Dumbrowski was to meet him in the back parking lot of JSR after Troy had sprinkled a few tales of “beating the law” throughout the halls of his mother and stepbrother’s business. Not only would this give Troy some cover if, indeed, his mother’s lawyer was involved, it would also give Withers time to install all the necessary surveillance equipment in and around Troy’s apartment, including digital recording and transmission devices on his phones and in his car. The microphones and transmitters for his clothes would come later, after Troy called Christian Delacroix.

The idea that Troy might run never came up. Freedom provided an intoxicating incentive for most. Given the choice between cooperating and, thus, having your slate washed clean, and living the rest of your life as a federal fugitive, most snitches did whatever their blue-suited handlers asked, and then some. Dumbrowski had informants who called three and four times a day just to check in. In ten years with the bureau, he’d never had one snitch disappear on him. The thought that Troy Slackherd might be the first never entered his mind.

Troy appeared eager to play. He made his call, wished his jailers a good day, and waltzed out the front door of the jail where he stood on the sidewalk for no more than a couple of minutes. When the duty officer, a man Dumbrowski had vetted himself, saw Troy climb into the passenger seat of a burgundy Expedition, he called Dumbrowski. The package was en route.

It wasn’t until Trick Sanders, suspension specialist on

Junior Senior's Jack Daniel's Chevrolet, showed up looking for Troy that anyone realized there was a problem. If Trick was there to pick up Troy, who was driving the burgundy Expedition? And where the hell was Troy?

Dumbrowski and Withers spent the rest of the day searching, assuming the dumbass had reneged on their deal and was trying some lame-brained escape. They went to Troy's home, the homes of his drinking buddies, the Junior Senior Racing offices, and the Foxy Lady Dance Club where Troy had been known to drop a week's pay in one night. Nobody had seen him since his arrest on Saturday.

They also got surveillance footage from outside the jail. Troy had, indeed, climbed into a 2004 Ford Expedition with tinted windows. If his expression were any indication, he knew the driver well. There was no hesitation or concern. He nodded and spoke to whoever was behind the wheel, opened the door, and got in without flinching. There was also no way to identify the vehicle. The windows were tinted, and the cameras failed to capture any portion of the license plate.

After three hours of searching, Dumbrowski and Withers were forced to call their bosses and admit to losing the man they had signed a deal with earlier that morning. The honchos at the Hoover Building were not amused. The assistant director went into full-blown meltdown, screaming, sputtering, and threatening the agents with all the career-ending bluster he could come up with off the top of his head. Not following Slackherd's every move, while not technically a breach of bureau protocol, was, in the words of the assistant director, "retarded."

Dumbrowski didn't help his cause by saying they were "trying to keep a tight circle on this one." The fact that murderers, rapists, kidnappers, swindlers, tax evaders, and the occasional Islamakook slipped through the FBI's fingers on an almost daily basis wasn't much of an excuse either.

Late in the day, the special agents called a truce with their bosses. Everyone agreed that Troy's disappearance would reflect badly on the bureau. They should do everything in their power to reacquire contact, starting with running checks on all of Troy's known associates to see if any of them owned a burgundy Expedition. The bureau's finest also agreed to keep this little problem to themselves, at least for the time being.

Now, with photos of Troy's bloated blue body popping up on STOCKCAR chat rooms all over the world, Dumbrowski and Withers knew their days as rising special agents were all but over. They had to call Washington. Locals would notify the family. Both agents agreed to wait until sunrise to contact Robert Redding. No reason to wake him up two days in a row.

Robert had picked up his messages, given a few instructions to his staff, and then driven home where he spent a good chunk of the afternoon working on bathroom projects he'd put off for six months. The towel racks in the master proved more of a pain than he'd expected. Bead board made it tough, and he wasn't about to run out and buy a stud finder just to put up a couple of fixtures. His father had built the house Robert and his sisters grew up in, pounding every nail and drilling every screw without any fancy gadgets. The least Robert could do was hang a brass rod.

After one abysmal failure where the whole project came tumbling down, and a second try where the rack sloped at a twenty-degree angle, Robert realized that the holes he had drilled were now too large and deep for the hardware. So he kicked the trash can, and tried a third location, this time securing a level rack to his bathroom wall.

Then he had to fix the holes from his earlier failures. A dab of putty here and there, and the holes became four un-

sightly marks, like two pair of snake eyes staring out at whomever happened to be taking a breather on his Kohler toilet. This shouldn't have been much of a problem. A little touchup paint, and no one would ever know. Except that the touchup paint in the basement didn't match what was on his wall. It was close. The sample on the can looked exact. But once applied anyone could see that he had misjudged the color by a fraction of a shade. Now his snake eyes had faces, and then large round heads. Two hours later, Robert had repainted half his bathroom. In order to finish the job, he had to remove the towel rack he had just installed, paint the wall, let it dry, and put the rack back up again. When his thirty-minute job ran into its fourth hour, Robert threw down the tools and marched into the kitchen.

"How's it going?" Melissa asked.

"Dandy."

"Is that paint on your hands?"

"Ah . . . no?"

"What are you doing?"

"Don't worry, you'll love it."

"I could always call Pablo and Amelia. They need the work."

"No, you'll love it. Really."

He squirted some dish soap on his hands and scrubbed them under the warm water in the kitchen sink.

"Are you okay?" Melissa asked.

"Yeah," he said, still scrubbing. "Look, I'm sorry about the weekend. I know it wasn't what you'd expected."

"Which part? You running off the jail in the middle of the night, or the FBI agents in my house all day?"

"Both."

"Umhmm."

"What do you want me to say? Do I wish Troy hadn't stolen a truck? Do I wish he hadn't gotten involved with gangsters? Sure. But he did—"

“So what?” she interrupted. “What does that moron have to do with you? What does he have to do with us?”

“It’s my—”

“I know, I know, it’s your job. Going racing was your job. Now this is your job. Next month, the federal job will be your job.”

“Are we going to fight about this? Because I’ve got paint on my hands right now. I’m not sure I can fight about this with paint on my hands.”

“No, we’re not going to fight. What’s there to fight about? You’re going to do what you’re going to do.”

“Oh yeah? Do you think I want to be painting a bathroom? I took off from work the better part of a Monday because I felt guilty about this weekend. I plan to pick the kids up from school this afternoon, and I’ve got to finish painting the bathroom.”

“No, Robert, you don’t. You don’t have to do any of it. You don’t have to go to the office. You don’t have to go to god-knows-where in the middle of the night. You don’t have to do anything. You’ve done enough. You don’t have anything else to prove.”

He shut off the water, realizing that he had scrubbed his hands a bright shade of pink. Two deep breaths later, he realized that she had her hands on his shoulders.

“I’m sorry, baby. It’s just, when is it going to be enough? I mean, Michael’s about to turn eleven. That’s how long you’ve been at this. He’s never known you as anything but this. I’m sorry, but . . .”

He turned and took her hands in his, pulling her close to him. “No, I’m the one who should be apologizing. This whole thing with Troy . . . I don’t know . . . I just . . . for the first time, I just didn’t care. I didn’t care what he did, or who was involved. I didn’t care about the money in the bus locker, or the mobbed-up drug peddler who got himself shot at the hospital. I didn’t care about any of it. I was

thrilled at the thought of cutting Troy loose and throwing him to the feds. The only problem is, in a few months, I'm going to be the guy those federal agents call when they've nabbed somebody like Troy. I'll be the guy telling them to flip the little fish to get to the shark. I'll be the guy they call on a Sunday morning. I don't know . . . I'm ten years into this, and I feel like I've gone in one big circle.

"Most of all, I'm worried that I just didn't care. That's not a feeling I want to have."

She hugged him. "Why don't I pick up the kids," she said.

He nodded. "Yeah, I need to finish painting."

"I can still call Pablo and Amelia."

"No, I've got it."

"Uh-huh. By the way, why are you painting the bathroom?"

"You're going to love it."

"I'm sure I will."

The bathroom became a complete disaster. Paint ran down the grooves in the woodwork and pooled at the baseboards; it ran onto the marble backsplash, and into the grooves of the tile floor; it ran to the base of the window molding. When he got paint all over two of the etched windowpanes, he called it quits without putting the towel rack back up. Pablo could finish. Melissa was right. He needed the work.

After cleaning up, he completed his day-off-at-home duties by grilling salmon steaks, Melissa's favorite.

Michael told a story at dinner about a kid at school who had gotten suspended for cursing. Turns out one of the other kids had been trying to repeat a popular rap song on the playground, but had gotten the lyrics wrong. Rather than saying, "Smack my bitches," the kid had said, "Smack my britches," which made perfect sense to a ten-year-old. The first kid, who would now be spending some time at home, couldn't stand the malapropism any longer. "It's 'bitches,'

you dumb-butt,” he’d said. “‘Smack my bitches,’ not ‘Smack my britches.’” The kid was correct, and got three days suspension for it.

Melissa tried to act outraged that Michael would repeat such a story, but she couldn’t hide her smile. Soon everyone at the table was laughing. “At least I don’t have to worry about that?” Katie signed. “I can sign anything. Only a couple of people in school can understand me.”

“I don’t think I want to know about this,” Robert said.

After dinner, the family watched a *Law and Order* re-run on TNT, and Katie asked Robert to point out the parts that didn’t jibe with reality. He didn’t know much about the New York criminal code, but he knew that Jack McCoy would never get away with testifying from the prosecution table the way he did every week. Of course, if they made it too real, nobody would watch. Most criminal proceedings, even the ones where the crime was sensational, were so boring the jurors, lawyers, and judges had trouble staying awake, just as Robert was struggling to keep his eyes open now.

After the show, he put both kids to bed. Michael still liked having a toy or two with him at night, although he didn’t want Robert or Melissa to know it. He snuck the Incredible Hulk, G.I Joe, and a stuffed Spinosaurus under the comforter, and Robert pretended not to notice. Michael also asked that his door be left ajar, not because he was frightened or anything, in case Robert was harboring such ridiculous thoughts. No, he just wanted to make sure he could get out quickly in case of an emergency.

Michael was at that age where Robert could still shoot hoops with him, tussle his hair, and give him a hug as he tucked him in at night. In twenty-four months that would all go away. The boy would discover girls, and friends, and adolescent mischief. Robert would stop being the man who tucked him in, and become the dumbest geek in history. It

had already started in small degrees. Six months earlier, Michael had asked about the origins of the name Redball. When Robert told the story, his son had said, "What if you'd driven into a pile of elephant dung? What would they call you then?"

Katie had stopped kissing him a year ago, even on the cheek. She still hugged him, and had even incorporated a series of "there, there" back-pats into their good-night ritual, but that was it. These days, she spent much of her spare time reading or hanging out with a small but loyal group of friends. Her maturity and ability to work through problems on her own seemed unnatural for a girl in her early teens. There was no drama, no histrionics about boys, or makeup, or the to-die-for new outfit at Abercrombie & Fitch. Robert felt silly worrying about her, but that didn't stop him from wondering if she might be suppressing something: rage, insecurity, or, god forbid, hopelessness. Melissa had told him not to invent problems that didn't exist, but he still wished his little girl would come to him with just one pubescent crisis.

Maybe she had tried. Maybe she had wanted to pour her heart out to him one morning when he was locked in the study going over a summation, or working through a cross. Maybe there had been a boy drama. Maybe she had been dying to tell him about a puppy crush, and the insecurities and inevitable heartache that went with it. Maybe he'd been in court that day, or speaking at a Rotary luncheon, or campaigning for office, or being whisked up to Washington to hobnob and glad hand. Maybe he hadn't been there when his little girl needed him. Maybe he didn't even know it.

Maybe Melissa was right.

After everyone was down, and the house was quiet he made love to his wife again, which was unusual given their three A.M. romp on Sunday morning. But they needed to show their love for each other after the week they'd had.

When both were spent, she stroked his hair and ran her nails along the lines of his forehead.

"I'm sorry I snapped today," she said.

"Don't," he said, putting his finger onto her lips. "Don't apologize for being right."

"So, you'll think about what I said?"

He nodded and kissed the palm of her hand. He didn't have to tell her that he had been thinking about it all day.

The phone rang at 6:05. Robert grabbed the receiver on the first ring, hoping beyond hope that Melissa slept through it.

"Mr. Redding?" the voice said. Robert immediately recognized the caller.

"Special Agent Dumbrowski, there had better be a good reason for this call. A toy heist won't cut it this time."

"Would you mind if we come in?"

"Come in. Who's 'we'?"

"I have Agent Withers with me."

"What a surprise. Can you meet me at the office? God, what time is it?"

"It's six-o-five, sir. We would prefer to talk to you now, before."

"Before what?"

"Before you hear . . ." Dumbrowski paused, and then said, "Mr. Redding may we come in?"

"Where are you?"

"We're at your front door . . ." Dumbrowski's voice trailed off like the ending to a sad song.

Robert sighed and walked into his foyer in his underwear, knowing full well that his day was about to be turned upside down, again.

Chapter 12

“How in god’s name did you lose him?” Robert’s voice echoed off the high ceilings. If Melissa and the kids weren’t awake before, they certainly were now.

“We didn’t lose him,” Withers said. “Technically, we never had him.”

“Oh, well, that makes all the difference.”

“Look,” Dumbrowski jumped in. “The last thing we expected him to do was run. I’ve been doing this for a decade, and I’ve never lost anybody I flipped.”

“Well, I guess that record just got blown to smithereens,” Robert said.

“I can’t believe he ran,” Withers said, more to himself than to the others. “Where the hell did he think he could go? We’re the FBI for chrissake.”

“I’m sure those were the last thoughts that ran through ole Troy’s mind,” Robert said. “He probably told the fellow who killed him, ‘Hey, I’m dead, but at least I fooled those morons at the FBI.’”

“Maybe he was kidnapped,” Dumbrowski said. “Maybe somebody leaked our deal. Maybe the person who picked him up pulled a gun or something.”

“Or maybe he decided to blow you two off and take his chances,” Robert said. “I know it’s a novel concept, but

you might at least consider it. Didn't he tell you that Eddie Delacroix was going to kill him?"

"We worked through that," Withers said. "He knew the plan. It would have worked. We all agreed it would have worked."

"So would the boys at the bureau categorize this as a tactical or strategic failure?" Robert said.

"Strictly tactical," Dumbrowski said. "The plan was solid."

"I was being sarcastic, you buffoon!" Robert shouted.

"I can't believe he ran," Withers said. "Where the hell did he think he could go?"

"So, what did he say, specifically, about who was going to kill him and why?" Robert asked.

"He just said Eddie would kill him for screwing up the drop. It didn't matter whose fault it was, the Delacroixs are big on setting examples. Troy thought he was going to be the example."

"And how did J. Smith Hybill fit in?"

"Who?" Dumbrowski said.

"His mother's lawyer, Mr. Hybill," Robert said slowly, closing his eyes. "Please tell me you questioned him about Mr. Hybill."

"It wasn't part of our initial discussions," Withers said.

"We had to remain pretty core in the beginning," Dumbrowski added. "Feel him out . . . you know . . . get the basics. We would have talked about Hybill and the money later."

"You didn't ask him about the money, either!"

"It wasn't core."

Robert put his fingers on the bridge of his nose and pressed as hard as he could. These were the agents charged with defending the homeland.

"Assuming he ran," Withers said, "who picked him up at the jail?"

"Picked him up, hell," Dumbrowski said. "Who killed him?"

"Oh, that one's easy," Robert said.

They both stared at him.

Robert wagged his finger between them. "We killed him."

In the ten years that Myrna Dungleder had been pouring coffee and cooking grits at Gobblers Diner, she'd never seen an odder looking pair. Her daddy would have called them "quar," which was how people of another generation in the south pronounced "queer," which, in itself, had nothing to do with homosexuality. "Quar" meant "uncomfortably peculiar," exactly the description Myrna would have used for the well-dressed pudgy guy with the dark slicked hair and his partner, a mean-looking Mexican in jeans with a ruddy face and black eyes.

The Mexican had ordered the chicken-plate special with buttermilk gravy and sausages. The white guy had gone with wheat toast and coffee. Myrna couldn't put her finger on exactly what made them so unique. The black Mercedes was unusual, but not unprecedented. They had gotten more luxury cars since the Tried & Tru Truck Stop opened next door. Just last week she'd seen her first Bentley, and those folks, a nice couple on their way to Lake Hartwell, hadn't seemed the least bit out of the ordinary. These two were different. Maybe it was the way they dressed. The one guy looked like he'd just stepped out of a disco, while the other could have gone out back and plowed a field. Still, she'd seen all kinds. Truck drivers were the worst. They came in wearing everything from pajamas to Navaho chieftain outfits, and nobody batted an eye. So, why did these guys give Myrna the heebie-jeebies?

"You want some more coffee?" she asked the dark one.

"Yeah, and one of them danishes," he said, pointing at the pastry display with his knife.

Myrna felt a chill run up her back. He flipped that knife a little too freely for her liking.

"You eat like a fucking elephant," the white one said as Myrna poured the coffee. Yet another reason to be suspicious: even the truck drivers weren't that vulgar in front of her.

He swore again when his cell phone went off. Myrna bobbed her head to the tune. It was a song from one of those colored bands she remembered from grade school. She couldn't quite place it, but she wouldn't be asking. The man dropped the F-bomb again when he saw the number, and directed yet another one at the caller when he answered.

"The fuck?" he said into the little phone, followed by, "We got it done . . . No problem," and then, "Hey, not on this phone," and "I'll call you right back."

This concerned Myrna enough to follow him to the end of the counter where the restaurant's only pay phone hung on a concrete-block wall. Why would someone with a cell phone plop two-dollars worth of quarters into a pay phone? Myrna grabbed a handful of silverware and a towel, and kept her head down as she polished and listened.

"We took care of it," disco-man said. "No problem . . . yeah . . . yeah . . . driving back to Savannah . . . Hey, the fuckin' money's your problem. We put up two-fifty. My uncle expects his standard return . . . not my problem . . . Look, we cleaned up one big fuckin' mess for you already. The rest of this shit is on you."

A few more obscenities and a grunt or two and disco-man hung up. Myrna kept her head down until she heard the coins clang in the pay phone chamber. Then she put the silverware away and started a fresh pot of decaf. It was probably nothing. They were probably time-share salesmen. She and her first husband had been rooked into buying one of

those damn things at one of the ski slopes in Banner Elk where the salesman made it sound like the greatest real estate deal since the Louisiana Purchase. They could either use their week in the mountains, or swap it for sandy beaches and tropical drinks at some exotic Caribbean resort. What the smarmy bastard didn't tell them was that the good spots were spoken for, and their "investment" in Banner Elk was about as valuable as a discount card at Motel 6. It had taken her seven years to get the foreclosure off her record, which was two years longer than her marriage had lasted. The realtor who had taken her for that little ride looked a lot like disco-man. Maybe that was why she'd been eyeing them all morning.

"So, where you boys headed?" she asked as she poured more coffee.

The black-eyed migrant gave her a scary stare and said, "Out."

"Okay," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "Can I get you anything else?"

"Just the check, tits," disco-man said. Had he just called her "tits?" What was that about?

Myrna didn't ask any more questions. She put the check on the table and went back to her silverware. These guys were spooky, but she didn't want to read too much into it. She would tell Roy the Cop about them the next time he came in to drink coffee and flirt. In the meantime, she hoped they tipped well. They'd taken up her best table for almost an hour, not to mention the name-calling and cursing she'd had to put up with. Three bucks should be the minimum, especially from folks that quar.

Johnny Pea only hooted once from the passenger seat of the Corvette, but he held on to the handle above the door until his knuckles turned white. Robert couldn't have cared less. He hadn't asked for an escort on this trip, and he was

growing weary of the Justice Department. Robert knew that John Paul Westport had nothing do with what had happened in the last three days, but at this point he was a symbol of the intrusions into Robert's life. Johnny Pea had arrived at the house knowing everything, and sharing little. Typical tight-lipped Justice crap, just the kind of thing Robert abhorred about the system. Which was why he didn't mind it if his driving made Johnny Pea pucker. The boy could use a good jolt.

Dumbrowski and Wither's blue Ford sedan had disappeared in the rearview several miles back. Fuck them, too. They could find the place on their own. They were, after all, special agents.

Phil Cheney and Dolores Diggs-Slackherd-Senior-Cheney lived in Mooresville, a fifteen-minute drive from the Redding residence. Robert made it in less than ten. Knot Spackle, a member of the over-the-wall pit crew for Junior Sr. and now Junior Jr., and an all-purpose mechanic at JSR who got his nickname from the golf-ball-sized cyst in the center of his forehead, guarded the gate outside the Senior compound.

Robert rolled down the window as he pulled the Corvette up to the entrance.

"Hey, Redball," Knot said. "Didn't expect you this morning."

"Just felt like I had to come by," Robert said. Another half-truth, but Knot didn't need to know the investigative side of this visit. "How's Dolores holding up?" Robert asked.

"Pretty good. Phil's the one tore up. He never had no kids of his own, so Troy was like his boy. Damn shame. It's just killing him. How you getting along?"

"Fine. Everything's fine." Robert realized that Knot was staring past him at the pale-faced passenger with his hands still clinched around the handles. "Knot, this is John Paul

Westport. He's with me." Not much of an introduction or explanation, but it seemed to suffice. Knot nodded and opened the gate.

"Just pull down to the right," Knot said. "There should be some room down there. What crew ain't in Chicago are already here. Phil's folks are here, too. It's pretty crowded in there."

"All right, then," Robert said. "Another couple of fellows named Withers and Dumbrowski will be along shortly. They're with me, too."

"Anyways," Knot said, lowering his eyes and rocking his head.

"We won't be long."

Knot was still nodding and mumbling to himself as they pulled through the gate and up the brick drive.

"Did you call that guy, Knot?" Johnny Pea asked.

"Yeah. I bet there aren't a dozen guys in stockcar that know his name's Elmer. That's one of the reasons he's never gotten his cyst removed. Nobody would know what to call him."

"What does he do?"

"He's Junior's catch-can man."

"Is that like a gopher?"

"No, not catch-as-catch-can man, catch-can man. You really should buy a book or something."

"Okay, what's a catch-can man?"

"He's the guy who goes over the wall during pits stops and holds a special can to catch fuel overflow. Pretty important when you consider how flammable that fuel can be, and how quickly the cars are in and out of the pits."

"That's all he does?"

"It's no small thing," Robert said, cutting Johnny Pea a hard glance. "Those over-the-wall guys work their butts off. The timing of a pit stop is like a dance. Everybody has to be in the right place at the right time, or—"

“Or somebody gets run over?”

“It doesn’t happen often, but guys do get hit. There were more accidents when the over-the-wall crews were part-timers. Now, most teams use mechanics and other full-time guys in the pits.”

“So, Knot is a multitask kind of guy.”

“You could say that.”

The trees thinned as the driveway crested and the Senior-Cheney mansion came into view. It was a massive Tudor design, complete with imported ivy on the antique brick exterior. At seventeen thousand square feet, it housed an indoor gymnasium, swimming pool, racquetball court, billiard and snooker room, and twenty-seat movie theater, along with the standard complement of bedrooms, baths, dining and cooking facilities. Dolores had hired two architect professors from Vanderbilt to design it not long after she and Junior Sr. were married, which seemed fine when Troy, Junior Jr., Megan, and Chester all lived there. It was too much for two people. Phil had wanted Dolores to move into his equally palatial estate when they were married, but she wouldn’t have it. The house was her baby.

From the looks of the front courtyard they would need every square inch of space for the next couple of days. Six cars and three vans were parked at various angles around the hedges, leaving little room for additional guests. Withers and Dumbrowski would have to park on the street, which suited Robert just fine.

Robert counted seven members of the JSR staff milling around outside, probably the smokers. Dolores had put her foot down about tobacco in the house, even though Salem and B&W dollars had paid for most of it. Robert figured there had to be another fourteen or fifteen folks inside comforting the grieving family. This visit would have to be quick.

Robert had underestimated the indoor visitation roster. The phones must have been turned off at JSR, because it looked like every employee from the shop and front office was either standing in the kitchen or sitting in the living room and den. Phil Cheney Automotive was more than adequately represented as well. Robert didn't know many of Phil's people, but he recognized the showroom managers from two of his Charlotte dealerships and one of the guys from his Greensboro lot. They were huddled near the parlor with a dozen equally well-groomed men and women who might as well have had "used car salespeople" stamped on their foreheads. Robert answered to Redball no fewer than ten times in five minutes as he spoke to everyone and shared his shock and outrage at poor Troy's terrible fate.

The room fell silent when Dolores came out of the back bedroom. She stood tall, fully five feet, ten inches, and her straight back and runway stride made her seem even taller. She was still a beautiful woman, dark and fit, with high cheeks and a strong set jaw. Rumor around the track was that she'd spent twenty-five grand on plastic surgery in the past three years, but nobody knew for sure. If she had gone under the knife, the surgeon had been worth every penny. Nothing in her face or on her frame looked out of place. Even in the throes of grief, she put forth a commanding air, the strength of a woman who had seen hard times before, and survived.

"Redball Redding," she said, extending her thin, strong hand. Even today the nails and cuticles were perfect. "I didn't expect to see you today."

"Dolores, I'm so sorry," he said. "Melissa and I have just been sick since we heard. If there's anything we can do . . ."

"Anything we can do" was the standard catchall for gatherings of this sort. Robert had heard it several hundred

times in the days and weeks after his father's death. Hearing them come out of his mouth brought back a flood of painful memories. The words also reminded him, again, why he was here, and why he continued to work.

Robert's father, Freddy Redding, had been the best mechanic in Burlington, North Carolina, and one of the town's best citizens. At one time he had been president of the local Optimist club, a leader in the Rotary, and one of the spokesmen Chamber of Commerce officials used to sell the town's wholesome hardworking image. At its peak, Redding Auto Repair employed twenty people and won civic pride awards for its sparkling clean storefront every year. The company had taken the blue ribbon four years in a row at the annual Fourth of July parade for its "Sensitive Side of Muscle Cars" float, featuring a pink GTO in a tutu, and a weeping Chevy Nova playing Helen Reddy on its stereo.

Freddy's murder had stunned the community. It happened in broad daylight on Good Friday around one P.M. Freddy had let his employees go home early to be with family on Easter weekend. He would stay around and clean up a few loose ends before heading home. Nobody wanted a tune-up on Good Friday, and if there were any emergencies, the answering service knew how to find him. He'd worked on Christmas and the Fourth of July in the past, but never on Easter, only because he'd never been called. If a family in distress needed a timing chain or alternator replaced on their way to grandma's, Freddy would come out and do the work himself. This Friday, he planned to finish one brake job before sweeping the shop floor and calling it a day.

The intruders entered through a side door near the Dumpsters. Through pure dumb luck, they came in at the exact moment Freddy was raising the hydraulic lift, which kept him from hearing the door. They were on him before

he knew they were there, two of them, armed with a rope, a bat, and an unloaded thirty-eight revolver. They hadn't meant to kill him, or so they said later. They wanted money and a car.

Drugs were the excuse. They were both looped on speed, high on ether, and itching for some cash and a ride when they came upon Redding Auto Repair. The place looked deserted, so they jimmied the side door. If they'd bothered to check the front, they would have seen the Open sign in the window and noticed that the front door was unlocked. Instead they broke into an open establishment and ran headlong into Freddy Redding.

According to the junkies' sworn statements, they panicked and hit Freddy from behind with the bat. Freddy didn't go down without a fight. He swung a wrench, catching one of them above the eye and opening a healthy gash that spewed DNA all over the shop floor. The other one hit Freddy in the head with the bat a total of ten times, although he only admitted to "three or four" of the blows. They then tied Freddy up, which was wholly unnecessary. He died ten minutes later. They got away with three hundred dollars from the cash drawer and a fire engine red 1967 Plymouth Belvedere with a freshly tuned 426 Hemi under the hood.

At three that afternoon, fourteen-year-old Robbie Redding bounded into his father's shop carrying a copy of *Racing* magazine. When Ms. Pooley's lecture on the symbolism of *The Scarlet Letter* had gotten too boring to handle, Robbie broke out the magazine and discovered a great article on a cool new racing head. He couldn't wait to share his find with Freddy, even though his dad might wonder why young Robbie was reading a magazine at school. That was a risk he was willing to take. The story was too good not to share.

Robbie found his father lying on the shop floor with his hands and feet bound behind him like a lassoed steer. Freddy had been dead for almost two hours.

Robbie locked the front door, placed the Closed sign in the window, untied his father and placed a wet cloth on his cold forehead. He then sat on the floor and cradled Freddy's head in his lap as he read the *Racing* magazine story aloud. He read two more stories, one a profile of Parnelli Jones, and the other an update on sprint-car racing, all while rocking Freddy's head in his lap. He would periodically stop reading and ask his father questions, unaffected when Freddy failed to respond.

At four-thirty, Lucy Redding got worried and called the shop. When no one answered, she called one of Freddy's employees. Then she called the police. They had to break the front door to get in where cops found Robbie cradling Freddy's head in his lap and saying, "Come on, Daddy, wake up now."

The killers made it as far as Danville, Virginia. A local police officer stopped them for smoking a joint while driving north on U.S. 29. Once the idiots were in custody, the Danville PD made a few calls and realized that their DUI and possession collars doubled as stone-cold killers. When the boys arrived back in Burlington, they looked like they'd been thrown from a bucking Brahma and trampled for good measure. Cops attributed the black eyes and bruises to tripping in the holding area. Nobody in North Carolina would have minded if Danville's Finest had finished the job.

Once the killers made it home, what should have been an open and shut case got murkier. It took Burlington police a half hour to correctly surmise that Joey Mecklin, the druggie who had left several vials of his own blood on the floor at Redding Auto Repair, was the son of Roger Mecklin, the textile giant, and one of the leading employers in the state. Joey had always been trouble, which was one of the reasons Mr. Mecklin had cut off his allowance and put him on the road. But he was still the Old Man's son, staring straight at a date with the electric chair if something wasn't done.

Meetings ensued. Negotiations followed. When the doors finally opened, Joey Mecklin had agreed to plead guilty to manslaughter in exchange for testimony against his partner in crime, a two-time loser named Dickey Beat.

With the prospect of Mecklin giving him up as the guy who'd swung the bat, Beat pled guilty to second-degree aggravated homicide to take the death penalty off the table. He was sentenced to twenty-five to life, and sent off to Boone never to be heard from again. Joey Mecklin, however, was given five years and allowed to serve his time in Eden (the town, not the garden) where his father had arranged for a private cell with all the comforts of home, drug treatment from the finest counselors money could buy, and a job on the grounds crew at one of Mecklin Industries' factories.

Locals in Burlington were quietly outraged, but nobody uttered a peep. Mecklin money had bought a cushy vacation for a confessed murderer. And nobody in town had the courage to stand up and say it was wrong.

Within a week of the plea agreements, Robbie Redding announced to his family that he would spend the rest of his life avenging his father. First, he would win a Salem Cup title, a dream his father had talked about since the first day Robbie had climbed into a go-kart. Then, he would go to law school and become a prosecutor—a rich prosecutor—who would cow to no one, someone who would never be pressured into letting a murderer off easy. Lucy had praised her boy for his confidence and his grasp of right and wrong, but no one in the Redding family expected Robbie to follow through with one, let alone both, of those promises.

But then they hadn't been the ones to find Freddy lying in a pool of his own blood. Robert had.

He looked at Dolores and tried to imagine the wealth of emotions pinned up inside her. He had lost a father under

the most brutal of circumstances, but children were somehow wired to eventually lose their parents. He couldn't imagine what it must be like to lose a child. For that, he cursed what he had to do next.

"How's Phil?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not well. He . . ." she stared out the large glass enclosure leading to the rear courtyard and garden, and for a moment, the only sound was flowing water from the marble fountain. "Phil's never lost anyone," she finally said. "He's an only child, and his parents are still alive. Other than an aunt or grandparent, he's never dealt with this." The unstated message being, "But I have."

"May I speak to him?"

She lifted her chin and stared at him for a second before saying: "Sure. I'll get him."

A minute later, Phil Cheney lumbered out of the bedroom looking a damn sight worse than most of the prisoners Robert had interviewed. His face was puffy and scrubbed, his eyes swollen and red. If Robert hadn't known better, he would have guessed that Phil had been on the wrong end of a brawl. When he looked at Robert, his lip quivered and his shoulders sagged. Robert wasn't the only one who thought Phil might collapse. One of Phil's trusty salesmen rushed to his side and put a steadying hand on his arm, leading him to a nearby sofa.

"Phil, I'm so sorry," Robert said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Thanks for coming, Redball," Phil said. "He . . . why would they do that to my boy? How could anybody do that?"

Robert never pretended to have those kinds of answers. He sat next to Phil and put a hand on the grieving man's knee. "Phil . . . Dolores, I know this is hard, but I have to ask you a couple of questions."

"The police have already been here," Dolores said, her voice taking on an indignant clip.

"I understand, but we are pursuing some different leads."

"Since when does the chief state's attorney run down leads?" Dolores asked.

A good question, and one he couldn't answer off the top of his head. Fortunately, Dumbrowski and Withers wandered through the front door at that moment looking like lost sheep. Robert hadn't been able to lose them, so he might as well use them. The special agents made a beeline for Robert, as did Johnny Pea, who had been helping himself to the Vienna sausages and Saltines on a silver serving tray in the corner.

"These men are from the FBI and Department of Justice," Robert said.

"FBI?" Phil said.

"Our sympathies," Withers said.

Then Dumbrowski jumped right to it. "What can you tell us about any unusual contacts Troy might have made in the last year or so."

"Unusual?" Phil said.

"You know, anybody that you might consider, different."

"Hell, I thought all of Troy's friends were unusual," Dolores said.

Withers and Dumbrowski exchanged uncomfortable glances. This was not the response they expected from a grieving mother.

"Phil, I know you were close to Troy," Robert said, putting his hand on Phil's sagging shoulder. "Did you ever hear him mention the name Delacroix?"

Phil was shaking his head before Robert finished the question. "I don't know what he was into. That mishap with the Trackside truck . . . I don't know what he was doing."

"Are you sure he never mentioned Delacroix, Eddie Delacroix?"

"What's this about?" Dolores interrupted. "We've already talked to the detectives. Can't you talk to them?"

"I will," Robert said. "But in the meantime . . . Delacroix?"

Phil shook his head, and then put his hands over his face and sobbed.

Dolores cradled his head in her arms, and whispered, "Let it out."

Robert waited a good ninety seconds before asking the question he had dreaded since he pulled up the driveway. "I'm sorry," he said. "But I have to ask one more thing."

"What?" Dolores snapped.

"Whose idea was it to have Smith Hybill represent Troy?"

"I called Charlie Morris," Phil said.

"He handles all the JSR business contracts," Dolores interrupted.

"Right," Phil said, nodding. "I knew he didn't handle criminal stuff, but I didn't know who else to call."

"But you knew Smith handled criminal litigation at Morris, Leggett," Robert said.

Phil shrugged and stared out into space. "I assumed Charlie would send somebody, but I didn't know it'd be Smith."

"Did Troy have any previous dealings with Smith Hybill?"

"Not to my knowledge." Phil turned to Dolores and said, "Do you know, hun?"

Dolores shook her head. "None. Why would he? Why are you asking about Smith? He's obviously a good lawyer. He got Troy's case dismissed."

Now it was Robert's turn to stare out into space. "That he did," he finally said. Then Robert shook Phil's hand and

gave Dolores a perfunctory social hug where their bodies never actually touched.

“I just want you to know that I’m going to be handling this investigation personally,” he said. “We’re going to find the people who did this. You can count on it.”

“Thank you,” Dolores said without making eye contact. “I’m sure Troy will rest easier knowing that.”

As Robert led Johnny Pea and the two special agents out the front door, Withers asked, “What was that about?”

“It was about paying respects, Agent Withers,” Robert said.

“And?”

Robert waited until they were several paces out the door before answering. “And it was about confirming a few suspicions.”

“The lawyer?” Johnny Pea asked.

“Yep. I think it’s time I had a private conversation with J. Smith Hybill.”

Chapter 13

For Trooper Todd Padgett and Troy Slackherd, like all victims of violent death, the first seventy-two are the magic hours of any murder investigation. During those first three days, most homicides were either solved, or the suspect list narrowed and the investigations became tightly focused. Criminal masterminds usually turned themselves in and wallowed in their own sorrowful confessions, or they left a trail of evidence a kindergartener could follow.irate husbands killing wives, jealous boyfriends taking out their competition, jacked-up adolescents popping their homeboys for a car: the stories were all the same. Murders were rarely premeditated, and murderers were anything but geniuses. Most still had their victims' blood on them when they were arrested. On those rare occasions when a suspect didn't stand out, there was always enough physical evidence to connect the dots in a matter of hours. Murder weapons were found in dresser drawers or kitchen cabinets. Fibers, footprints, hair, or other traceable debris were collected and matched. Cops throughout North Carolina cleared upward of 85 percent of the homicides in the state, not because of brilliant detective work, but because criminals tended to skew toward the lower end of the IQ scale. Homicide cases weren't rocket science, and rarely did they be-

come as complicated as TV made them seem. Only when a killing was random, or in those once-in-a-million cases when the murderer actually knew what he was doing, did the police run into trouble.

It was still early, but the “Charlotte Murders” as *Good Morning America* dubbed them, were shaping up to be among those once-in-a-blue-moon kind of killings. These killers seemed to have known what they were doing. Physical evidence was almost nonexistent, but that didn’t stop the media from rampant and contradictory speculation: *These were mob hits—The murders were local and random. The victims knew each other—There appeared to be no connection. Insiders called the corpses “grisly”—Officials would not comment on the state of the bodies.* About the only facts the reports got right were that Padgett had been killed with a nine-millimeter while Troy’s injuries had come from a thirty-eight. Padgett took one shot in the back and one in the head; Troy had taken two to the skull from close range. No slugs. No prints. No fibers. The only thing they’d found so far were some Michelin tire prints, and a witness near Trooper Padgett’s spread who’d seen “a big black *see-dan*” the morning of the murders. That vehicle description didn’t jibe with the tape of Troy climbing into the passenger seat of a burgundy Expedition, so unless they were dealing with someone who had two cars and two guns, there was more than one killer.

Every cop in the state knew the murders were connected. Three men, all associated with the Saturday-night toy heist, were dead, two of them executed within hours of each other. Odds of that being a coincidence fell somewhere between a one-ticket Powerball win and a meteor hitting the earth. How they were connected had Robert and half the North Carolina law enforcement community in a quandary.

Trooper Padgett’s murder had galvanized the uniformed brethren to a point where walking through the halls at the

state's attorney's office had become near impossible because of the added police presence. The same was true for Charlotte PD headquarters, and all the local stations of the state patrol and the North Carolina Bureau of Investigation. If manpower would solve this one, they had plenty. Every cop in the state wanted to nail Padgett's killer. Even the governor had gotten involved. Within minutes of the story going national, His Excellency had been on the front porch of his Victorian mansion in Raleigh giving his standard "outrage" and "every available resource" speech. Resources were in great supply: suspects were not.

Robert considered the Delacroixs the most likely candidates. He knew some of the stories about Louisiana's First Family of crime—every court official and law enforcement official in the south knew the Delacroix name—but Robert had never spent much time reading about them. In two hours of perusing the FBI online data bank and doing a little Internet research, he'd uncovered archived stories stretching all the way back to World War II when the Delacroix family patriarch, a brash young Cajun named Francois Delacroix, murdered his way into power on the Louisiana loading docks. His weapon of choice in the old days had been a deer-bone skinning knife, which he'd used to murder two union bosses and four longshoremen. Through fear and intimidation Francois rose to the top of Louisiana's crime heap, and a year after the union murders he was earning a healthy tax on every off-loaded crate from New Orleans to Natchez.

In addition to being a brutal and ruthless killer, Francois Delacroix had also displayed some impressive business skills. According to five decades worth of FBI reports, Francois diversified his interests so that his empire never depended on one heist or scam. He also never allowed greed to disrupt any of his enterprises. When the shipping industry went through hard times, Francois cut his off-load

tax and made up the difference by putting a tariff on gasoline and propane trucks. He was ahead of the curve when cocaine hit the big-time in the seventies, controlling distribution in the lucrative French Quarter, and on the campuses of Tulane and LSU. And when crack burst onto the scene, he put dealers on every corner of Terrytown and Scotlandville.

In four decades, Francois had only been arrested twice, and had beaten the rap both times. He was one of the “colorful characters” Louisianans prided themselves on. He was also very popular in the right circles, having paid handsomely for the services of two governors, a dozen mayors, and countless cops and judges. By the time he died in the early nineties, Francois Delacroix was the most influential figure in Louisiana politics, and one of the richest crooks in America.

Francois married twice and kept at least six mistresses during his reign as King of Cajun Crime. But he wasn’t as lucky with women as he had been in business. None of his wives or concubines seemed capable of bearing children. He refused to have himself checked, opting instead to blame the “sterile whores.” As he entered his fifties, this became a source of great concern. He’d worked hard and spilled a lot of blood (other people’s, of course) to build his criminal empire. Not being able to leave that legacy to his own offspring, particularly in the only state governed by the Napoleonic code, worried him to a point where he was hospitalized for anxiety.

With his own health in question, and a son nowhere in sight, Francois took a shine to his brother’s boy, Eddie, who appeared to suffer from Francois’s same malady. No matter whom Eddie married—and the list of Mrs. Eddies was long and less than distinguished—she just couldn’t give him children. This didn’t bother Eddie as much as it did Francois, but it did give the younger Delacroix plenty

of time to devote to the family business. Six months before Francois died, he passed the mantle of Boss to Eddie, forty-eight years old at the time, who set about growing and expanding the Delacroix influence nationwide.

The Internet fascinated Eddie Delacroix. He was by no means a techno-geek, and he certainly didn't get caught up in the dot.com bubble, but Eddie had enough vision to see the medium as a tool for nefarious activity. It was easier and faster to steal through cyberspace than to peddle pills on the street, and the online porn potential was staggering. Identity theft, wire-transfer fraud, counterfeit cell phones, the market for online scams seemed endless. Eddie saw potential for the Delacroix family to become black-market dot.com zillionaires.

Within five years of Eddie's ascension to power, the Delacroix family had cash flowing so fast they could barely launder it all. Eddie expanded operations to California, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Virginia, and the Carolinas. He avoided New York because of the competition, and stayed out of Texas because of the crazy Rangers with their six-shooters and big hats. He also remained loyal to Uncle Francois's philosophy about diversified revenue streams. As long as he never relied too heavily on any single operation, the Delacroix enterprises never saw the serious peaks and valleys other criminals experienced.

Because Eddie, like Francois, had no children of his own, he took another page out of his uncle's playbook by putting his nephews in charge. Eddie's sister's kids, Richey and Sammy Dubose took care of Tunica, Biloxi, Gulfport, Pascagoula, Mobile, and Pensacola. A cousin, one of Francois's sister's sons, handled the West Coast, while Eddie's favorite nephew, Christian Delacroix, a lawyer in Washington, ran the family businesses from D.C. to Charleston.

Then there was Sonny, the bastard son of Eddie's throw-back hippie sister, Estelle. Sonny had been christened Sun-

shine Francis Delacroix the day Nixon resigned from office. Since Estelle had no idea who the boy's father was, she gave little Sunshine the Delacroix family name. Eddie had been the first to call him Sonny.

Uncle Francois seemed to like the kid, even though he had been a hard child, prone to fights, tantrums, and sickness. Little Sonny suffered from high cholesterol and blood pressure when he was barely into his teens. Estelle tried to help him with natural herbal supplements supplied by a yoga instructor she was screwing, but Sonny's condition required more attention than his poor flighty mother could muster. Soon, he was a ward of the family, shuffling back and forth between Uncle Francois, Uncle Eddie, and any other Delacroix who would have him.

When Francois died, Sonny became Eddie's problem. The new boss packed him off to Richmond, where he almost got himself killed running a strip club. Then he spent a year in Los Angeles, where he ran a stolen car into a sinkhole. Now he was in Savannah, where he seemed to have found his niche. Sonny had come into his own, running the dock, drug, porn, and grand theft operations out of Georgia's First City without so much as a single hiccup. If he remained on this pace, he would become a captain soon.

Robert found a large recent photo of Eddie Delacroix in the FBI database. It appeared to have been taken in a casino in either New Orleans or Biloxi, where Eddie was enjoying food and spirits with three of the delta's hottest honeys. He looked young for his fifty-seven years, with jet-black hair that Robert assumed was dyed, and tanned, tight skin that screamed Botox. Wealth had its privileges.

Also in the file, Robert found a grainy photo of the late, great Francois Delacroix, who had obviously come along before the hair-care and cosmetic surgery revolution. Francois looked like an old wrinkled gangster in a suit and fedora, with a hard, mean expression permanently

plastered on his face. The lawyer, Christian Delacroix, also captured in the eight-by-ten glossy in the FBI files, could have been a K Street lobbyist. He certainly had a better personal trainer than Uncle Eddie.

There were no other family photos in the file. Robert put in a request at Justice. Hopefully someone would email additional info to him before the end of the next budget cycle.

In the meantime, Robert didn't plan to sit on his hands. He had another attorney-at-law to visit. He was barely out of the Senior-Cheney driveway when he put in a call to Mr. J. Smith Hybill, Esquire, summoning the good counselor to the conference room at the state attorney's office. Robert had made sure the secretary knew that the meeting was not a request. If J. Smith didn't want to come, Robert would happily storm the offices of Morris, Leggett, Polaski, and Hybill, making as much noise as possible in front of as many clients as he could. Either way, Robert was going to have a powwow with J. Smith today, preferably around noon. Smith showed up at 11:58.

The conference room where they met wasn't the kind of place a high-priced lawyer like Smith enjoyed spending his lunch hour, but it was just the place Robert wanted to hold this little chat. The room screamed State Government: sterile, bland, and depressingly cheap. One lone, dying plant drooped in the corner, and the art on the walls consisted of a couple of watercolors of the office's star, Redball Redding, wearing a race suit and a smile as he hoisted various racing trophies. They were the kind of paintings you expected to find in a bar with half-priced Buffalo wings before six P.M., not in the conference room at the state attorney's office.

Taking up most of the room stood a conference table that wasn't a conference table at all, but a series of square tables cobbled together into a rectangle that was too long for the

space. It was surrounded by mauve chairs that had been ergonomically designed by some committee in Raleigh with input from back, neck, spine, and management productivity specialists at U.N.C. and N.C. State. The fruits of their efforts were chairs that looked like claymation props from a Gumby cartoon. J. Smith Hybill started squirming the moment he sat down.

Robert had arranged the Gumby seats so that Smith was facing the windows. A noon sun in Charlotte was always bright and hot, even from ground level. When beaming through a tempered glass fourth-floor window, the heat became almost unbearable.

“Thanks for coming, Smith,” Robert said.

“Well,” Smith said, shrugging as if to say, Get on with it.

Robert casually opened his folder. There wasn’t much in there, a copy of the police and coroner’s report, the inventory from the bus locker, including the sheet of numbers, a couple of photos, and the copy of the written agreement between Troy and the FBI, the one Troy had signed an hour before the spectacle of his arraignment. Robert would spring the agreement on Smith as a last resort. This meeting was about extracting information, not debating the legalities of Robert’s actions as they related to Troy’s plea deal.

“Can I get you some coffee?”

It was only 85 degrees where Smith was sitting. Coffee was the last thing he would want. The lawyer politely declined.

With pleasantries behind them, Robert sat a little straighter and cleared his throat before saying: “Smith, I asked you up here to talk about Troy Slackherd.”

“Not much to talk about,” Hybill said, as he crossed his legs and tried to get comfortable in the Gumby chair. “You let him go. Now he’s dead. That about sums it up, doesn’t it?”

Smith couldn’t help it. Asshole was just part of his DNA.

It wouldn't have mattered if Robert had asked him about baseball or a Broadway show, he still would have been a prick. Robert expected as much. The court officer in Robert still hoped that Smith wasn't mobbed up, but, if he was, the man in Robert would love hauling this little dick out in cuffs.

"That's not exactly everything," Robert said.

"So, you're hot on the trail of the killer, I presume."

Robert ignored the remark and studied a meaningless section of a police report. "What can you tell me about Eddie Delacroix?" he asked.

"Just what I've read," Smith said. "He's rather famous, or infamous, you know." The tremble in Smith's voice betrayed him. Robert knew he was on the right track.

"Have you ever met him?"

"Me?" Smith peeped out a nervous laugh. "Don't be silly."

"How about Troy Slackherd? Did he know Mr. Delacroix?"

"How would I know?"

"He was your client."

"And anything he and I discussed on that, or any other matter, would be privileged."

"Let's talk about that for a second," Robert said. "As I suggested in court, I was a little surprised by your client's eagerness to plead out. I was just wondering why a skilled defense attorney such as yourself would advise his client to cop a plea so early? Does that make any sense to you? Because I've asked around, and it doesn't make sense to anyone around here."

"Is that what you called me up here to discuss? Because if that's what we're here to discuss, I can't help you."

"Oh, sure you can, Smith. Why were you so hell-bent on Troy Slackherd pleading? What's going on that we don't know?"

Smith's jaw actually dropped. "Redball, did you skip the class on privilege? You know I can't talk about that."

"Your client's dead."

"But the privilege lives on. You know that. What are we doing here?"

"Two people have been murdered."

"I know."

"And you are sure that you have never had any contact with Eddie Delacroix or any member of the so-called Delacroix family?"

Smith leaned forward on the table, and Robert saw sweat beads pooling around his eyebrows. It was hard to tell if Smith was fat or just thick. His neck and head were wide like those of a pit bull, and his body was broad and soft. A crease ran horizontally along the length of his forehead, curving downward at the temples until it meshed with the lines around his cheeks and jowls. When he furrowed his brow his eyes almost disappeared, which was what happened when he considered his answer.

"I hope you are not insinuating that I have been engaged in any unethical conduct," he said. "I have done nothing more than protect the interests of my clients. Any suggestion to the contrary . . ."

Robert had heard enough. He had been rubbing his finger on the signature page of the immunity agreement in his folder, the one Troy had signed a couple of hours before his arraignment. Robert slid the contract across the table while Smith was in mid-sentence.

"What's this?"

"Read it," Robert said.

Smith did just that, and Robert took great pleasure in watching the counselor fail in his attempt to hide his emotions. "You met with my client outside my presence?" he finally said. He sounded like a kid who had just been turned down by his prom date.

"Your client considered you a threat," Robert said. "Troy agreed to cooperate under the condition that you not be informed."

"But—you—can't—do—that!" Smith slapped the table to punch each word.

"Sure we can, Smith. Just as we can look into the reasons for your client's paranoia."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, given this document and your bizarre behavior, this office has ample reason to look into your role in the murders of Troy Slackherd and Trooper Todd Padgett."

"What the hell?" Smith was almost on top of the table now as the starched collar of his shirt turned a dark blue from sweat running into the Egyptian cotton stitching.

"I will leave no stone unturned, Smith. If you or any member of your firm had any prior knowledge—"

"Nobody—"

"Or if you have hindered this investigation in any way—"

"Nobody knew anything."

"For your sake, I hope so."

"For chrissake, Redball. I didn't kill him. I was trying to . . ."

"Trying to what, Smith?"

"Nothing. I was trying to represent him."

Robert could tell Smith wanted to snatch the words back the moment they came out of his mouth.

"Why don't you tell me about it?"

He shook his head. "No member of our firm, myself included, had anything to do with what happened to Mr. Slackherd."

"And the Delacroixs?"

He crossed his arms and gave an exaggerated shake of the head. "I don't know anything about them."

"That's good to hear, because the full force of this of-

fice is coming after those involved, no matter who they are. Your client was a screw-up, but he didn't deserve two to the head."

Robert went back to the folder and removed a glossy close-up photo of Troy's lifeless blue face, complete with bite marks from the bass. He tossed the photo across the table to Smith who looked like he might pass out.

"A cop's been killed as well," Robert said as he took out another photo, this one of Trooper Padgett lying in a pool of his own blood. "The locals are restless, and the media are having a field day with this. It won't take long before you're answering some of the same questions I've asked here today. If I were you, I'd think long and hard about how I played this."

The gauntlet had been thrown. Robert had verbalized a threat more dangerous to Smith and his firm than any state investigation: the media. A state trooper and member of a famous racing family slain—the story had legs. It would stay front and center for weeks, maybe months. J. Smith Hybill and his lofty firm could be seen as cooperating witnesses, or as "persons of interest," the tarnishing title the FBI liked to throw around like tar and feathers. Smith obviously knew more than he was saying. Any moron who knew his reputation could see that. The plea had been a terrible idea, one he'd fought hard against, but one that had been foisted upon him. He hadn't worried too much. He'd figured a chronic lowlife like Troy Slackherd would turn on his cohorts and then slip off to jail without anyone noticing. Smith never suspected Troy to be a backstabbing turncoat, even though that was exactly what Smith had tried to get him to do with his plea. Because of the stupid little twerp, CNN, Fox, and Court TV were camped outside the door of Morris, Leggett, Polaski, and Hybill, and Redball was threatening to throw Smith and his partners into the middle of the scrum like meat to hyenas.

Smith wriggled in his seat and pulled on his collar, which was growing darker by the second. "I . . . ah . . . I really want to help you out here, Redball. I really do."

"I know you do, Smith. We all want to do the right thing here."

"Let me talk to my partners," he said. "I'm sure there is some way we can cooperate without breaching our ethical obligations."

"I'm sure there is," Robert said.

Smith glanced down at Troy's signature on the FBI agreement, and at the photos. Sweat poured off his face now, and the crease on his forehead looked like the Suez Canal. His shirt, a custom job from Brioni, was beyond the redemption of dry cleaning.

"I'll get back to you first thing tomorrow, if that's acceptable."

"The sooner the better," Robert said. "As you can imagine, I'm under a lot of pressure to close this one."

"Sure, sure. I understand, fully. But . . . uh . . . until we have a chance to respond, you won't mention this to . . . anyone."

He just couldn't come out and say, "Don't give my name to the reporters," but the message was clear.

"I have no intention of speaking to anyone who is not involved in our investigation," Robert said. "Of course, the story's already national. Did you see *Good Morning America*?"

Smith gave the collar one final yank. The top button popped leaving his two-hundred-forty-dollar Kiton tie dangling at an odd angle. "No, but I heard about it," he said. "A producer has been calling all morning."

Robert nodded and attempted to look concerned by this revelation. "The yokel reporters won't dig too deep, but now that it's national . . ." Robert raised his hands and shrugged *What are you going to do?*

"I'll get back with you," Smith said, standing so abruptly the Gumby chair tipped over.

"Thank you, Smith. I'll be waiting for your call."

He didn't walk Smith to the elevator. The little shit had found his way in; he could find his way out. The copy of the FBI document with Troy's signature in big, black, unmistakable letters had produced the desired result. Things were likely to get testy at Smith's partners' meeting this afternoon. The last thing Charlotte's leading law firm needed was the FBI, the state's attorney, and Rita Cosby breathing down their necks. Robert would have loved a seat around the conference table at Morris, Leggett, Polaski and Hybill this afternoon.

That thought brought a smile to his face as he rounded the corner and headed back toward his office. His secretary of eight years, Nannette Pettitte, intercepted him beside the water cooler. "Robert," she said, "Don Healey called."

"Oh?"

"He said he'd like to meet with you. Something about Troy Slackherd."

"When does he want to meet?"

"He was hoping you would come to the track."

"Here? Charlotte?"

"Yeah. He said they're testing. He wanted you to come out. It sounded important."

Robert looked at his watch. Even before rush hour, the track was at least thirty minutes away, and he only had a hundred things he needed to do. But Don Healey had been the best car owner Redball Reddings could have ever asked to work for. Hell, he was the man who had made Robert rich. He knew Don well enough to know that this wouldn't be a waste of time.

Robert reversed course and headed back toward the elevators.

“Do you want me to call Don and tell him you’re on the way?” Nannette asked.

“No, I’ll call him from the car. Tell Ty where I’ll be. He can reach me on my cell.”

“What about that agent, John Paul Westport?”

“Don’t tell him anything. Hopefully I’ll be back before he knows I’m gone.”

Chapter 14

Testing sessions are the blocking-and-tackling drills of auto racing. Everybody tests, or at least everybody who wants to be competitive, but nobody loves it. It's a necessary fundamental, gritty and unglamorous, but it makes a big difference. Those who test well run well on race day; those who don't test well struggle. And those who don't, test crash within the first fifty laps. Payoff doesn't make the sessions any more enjoyable. Even when the cars put out great horsepower and lap times, drivers never say, "Boy, that testing session was fun!" They might call tests "productive" or even "good," but none of them pretend to love it. With no crowds, testing usually consists of four or five hot laps in a primary car, followed by an equal number of laps in a backup while the crew tweaks car one. This process is repeated until the team has squeezed as much as they can out of a complex setup.

Robert had found the process tedious, which made him wonder why he was so excited about sitting in on Jett's test this afternoon. Back in the day, Redball Redding and his crew chief, Joe Cummings, had been like an old married couple during tests. They would bitch, moan, and pick at each other until they got the right aerodynamic, suspension,

tire, and engine package. In those days Redball had only had to say “hitch,” and Joe knew that the car felt like it had a hitch and fully loaded horse trailer attached to its rear, or “nosey” which was his code for a car pushing its nose up the track as it entered a turn, or “rail” for those rare and cherished occasions when it was perfect, as in “it feels like it’s running on rails.” Of course that was before everybody employed a team of engineers and aerodynamic specialists, and long before garages housed thirty cars, two for every track on the circuit. Today’s drivers had to be a little more specific than Robert and Joe had been during their testing days.

Still, some things never changed. The smells of burning fuel and hot rubber were the same today as they had been when he went racing for the first and last times. The sounds hadn’t changed, either: the loud flutter of an air jack, clanging wrenches on concrete, and the rumble of an eight-hundred-horsepower race engine exploding to life. The cars were sleeker, more modern, and a lot more sophisticated than the ones he’d raced, but they were still racecars, and this was still racing. He felt himself rubbing his fingers against sweaty palms as he walked through the infield garage area. He didn’t feel this way often. But today he missed it.

Jett was in the backup car, so noted by the big red 2 painted on what would have been a door if racecars had doors. The cars hadn’t been painted yet. No logos, or bright colors, no flames or signatures, just a coat of gray primer and the numbers 1 and 2 on the sides.

Robert took note of Jett’s speed as he entered turn three on what was probably his second full-speed lap of this run. He took a higher line than Robert had on this track, but that was to be expected. Suspensions today were stiff enough to hold up a freight train, and the chassis had enough aerodynamic downforce to keep cars glued to the track. Jett could

take a high entry into turn three and slingshot the car into four and down the front straightaway without so much as a wiggle, which is exactly what he did. Robert had been watching hot laps—cars going at absolute top speeds—for most of his life. He figured Jett was bumping the edge of this track's record. The smile he could see on Joe Cummings's face, even from this distance, told him he was right.

Standing on the roof of the transporter rig, Joe looked a little heavier than Robert remembered. That was good. His color was better, too. There was a straightness about him, an air of confidence that Robert hadn't seen in too many years. It was good to have him back. The last time they'd spoken, Joe had broken down as he apologized to Robert for all the miserable things he'd done, all the lies he'd told, all the ill-will he'd caused. "It was the booze," he'd said. "It made me do things I never dreamed I would do." Apologizing was one of the steps in Joe's recovery. Robert had been the second name on the apology tour. Don Healey had been first.

"He looks good, doesn't he?"

Robert jumped. Don had snuck up behind him, and was standing only few inches from his right shoulder.

Don motioned toward the transporter and the track. "What do you think?"

Robert wasn't sure if he was talking about Joe or the car. "That last lap looked pretty fast," he said.

"It was. We might have a new track record."

"I thought he might be close. Car looked solid on drive-off."

"The driver's no slouch, either. Best I've ever seen with one exception."

Robert didn't ask the natural follow-up. He knew Don was talking about him.

"How's Joe doing?"

“Great. Better than ever. He’s just as smart as he was when you two were together, but without the bad stuff.”

“Hasn’t lost his edge?”

“He did for a while. Hell, he lost everything. He’s still pretty humble off the track, but when he puts on that headset, he’s the same old Joe.”

“None better.”

“Well, he’s had some pretty good help behind the wheel.”

Another compliment Robert ignored. Jett was the only active driver to have won four Salem Cup championships, tying him with the great Redball Redding. Junior Senior Sr. held the overall record with six. But Redball was retired and Junior Sr. was dead, while Jett was only thirty-four years old.

The pitch of the engine changed as Jett came out of the throttle—or let up on the gas. Amazing how your vernacular changed once you got out of racing. Robert glanced up and saw Joe climbing down the aluminum ladder on the side of the transporter. This run was over. If they were smart, they would commit this setup to memory and park the backup. It would be hard to beat a track record.

“You wanted to talk to me?” Robert said.

Don nodded as he watched Jett bring the car in. Several crew members ran out of the garage to give him the thumb’s up sign.

“Looks like you’ve had a tough couple of days,” Don said.

“You think?”

“Look, I asked you out here, because—”

Don didn’t get to finish his sentence. “Well, well,” a voice from behind them interrupted. “Did somebody get lost on his way to the office?”

Robert turned around in time for Joe Cummings to grab him in a full-body embrace. “How are you, Joe?” he said.

Hugs were Joe's standard greeting now that he was on the straight and narrow, which made Robert a little uncomfortable. It was one thing for men to hug when celebrating a win, but as a standard everyday greeting, the handshake still worked. But something about sobriety made Joe want to hug the world, so Robert played along.

"I'm blessed," Joe said, yet another response he would never have used back in his boozing days. "How are you? How are Melissa and the kids?"

"Great. Thanks for asking."

"What brings you out here?"

"I asked him to come out," Don said. "Joe, would you mind asking Randy to come over here and join us?"

"The new kid?" Joe asked.

"Please."

"Sure, let me get him." Joe trotted toward the garage where the crew had just lowered the hood on the primary car. Jett had just pulled the backup in the second bay and was climbing out of the driver's window.

"He looks great," Robert said.

"Just had his seventh birthday."

"Has it been that long?"

Don nodded and smiled. "I know. Seems like yesterday we were at the hospital. He wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

"Or you," Robert said. "I don't think you would have let him go."

"It wasn't up to me. It was up to him. He had to want it. And you made him want it."

"He made himself want it. I was just there to help."

Both men knew it was a good deal more than that. Robert had been at Joe's side when doctors told him his drinking had affected his platelet count, and that he would die if he drank again. It was Robert who had asked Joe if he was ready to accept help. When the answer came back,

good old Redball had chartered the jet, made the calls, and pulled the strings to get his crew chief into Betty Ford.

“So, who’s Randy?” Robert asked.

“New kid I just hired from JSR,” Don said. “Helluva mechanic. He could squeeze a hundred horsepower out of a kiddy car.”

“You asked me out here to meet your new mechanic?”

“Yeah, I thought you might want him to tune up your minivan.”

“Sorry.”

“Hell, Redball.”

“Sorry.” Robert knew that Don had a good reason for calling. He always did.

“You been away too long,” Don said. “Maybe you and Melissa need to come out to the house. We’re having a pig pull the Monday after Martinsville. You should come. Bring the kids. How’s Katie, by the way?”

“She’s doing great. Honor roll every semester.”

“Still thinking about surgery?”

“We’re still going to wait a couple of years and let her make the decision,” Robert said. “The artificial canals don’t produce wax or grow hair. You need both of those to keep water and bacteria out.”

“My ears grow enough hair for her and me combined.”

“I know what you mean,” Robert said.

“Give everybody my love,” Don said.

“I’ll do that.”

The conversation was interrupted when a thin, well-groomed kid in his late teens or early twenties stepped between them. He was wearing jeans and a Healy Racing broadcloth shirt with a wrench in the breast pocket. “You needed me, Don?” the kid said.

Everybody called him Don. The boss insisted on it.

“Yeah, Randy, I want you to meet Robert Redding.”

“Randy McGoogle,” Randy said, shaking Robert’s hand viciously. “Good to finally meet you, Redball.”

“Nice to meet you, Randy,” Robert said.

Don put his hand on the kid’s shoulder. “Randy, I want you to tell Mr. Redding what you told me about your last days at JSR.”

Just as Randy opened his mouth to speak, Jett got hard into the throttle of the primary car on the front straight-away. Robert felt himself twitching as the young driver worked through the gears. The throaty roar of the engine pierced the air as Jett got the engine up to seven thousand rpm.

Don motioned for them to walk into a corner room at the end of the garage. Once the closed door muffled the engine noise, Randy said, “Anyways.”

“Just tell him what you told me, son,” Don said.

“Well, I was planning on leaving anyway. Joe and me’d been talking for ’bout a month. I figured it was as good a time as any, so I give my notice.”

“No, no,” Don said. “Tell him about Phil and Troy.”

“Oh, that part,” Randy said. “Yeah, well, Phil and Troy’s been thicker than blood ever since I come on with ’em. I must have been there going on a couple of months before I learnt that they wasn’t father and son. But I figured, hey, good enough for ’em. Phil ain’t never had children, and Troy ain’t never had a daddy to speak of, so good for ’em.”

“Tell him about your last day there,” Don said, prodding his new star mechanic to move the story along.

“Yeah, anywho, Troy was a good boy where Phil was concerned. Hell, Phil even made him a vice president of his car dealerships, and ole Troy didn’t do nothing without telling Phil about it. The boy’d call him fifty times a day just to check in. We’d kid that Troy couldn’t take a piss without asking Phil which hand to use to hold it. So, my last day, Troy’s milling around the shop floor, nervous as a whore in

church, when Phil shows up. The two of them take to yelling and fighting like I never seen.”

“What were they yelling about?” Robert asked, suddenly intrigued by the story of Randy’s last day at JSR.

“Something about a truck. I couldn’t hear ever detail, since I wasn’t supposed to be listening, but Phil’s voice was cracking and his eyes was tearing up, whatever it was. He kept saying, ‘I’m not going to do it, and you’re not going to do it, neither.’”

“Do what?” Robert asked.

“Couldn’t tell. Troy was saying something about them having to get a truck, and Phil said they didn’t.”

“What kind of truck?”

“Don’t know. I figured it was something for one of Phil’s lots. But then Troy gets clipped for stealing a rig.”

“Randy asked to meet with me yesterday afternoon,” Don said. “He told me the whole story. When we heard about Troy this morning, I called you.”

Robert rubbed his chin. “Are you saying that Phil Cheney, one of the largest car dealers in the world, knew that his stepson was going to hijack a truck full of toys?”

“No, sir,” Randy said, shaking his head. “All I’m saying’s what I heard. Hell, they could have been fighting over a pickup for all I know. I just figured I should tell somebody, given, you know, what happened.”

Robert nodded. He hadn’t meant to grill the kid, but the prosecutor in him needed to dig out the details. Insinuating that Phil, who ran a thriving used car business, was somehow involved in hijacking a truck full of toys seemed far-fetched, but an argument about a truck that took place a couple of days before Troy hijacked a truck seemed way too coincidental.

Randy spilled a few more background details about Troy’s loyalty and devotion to his stepfather, and the reciprocal affection Phil showed for Troy. According to JSR

shop gossip, Troy had taken Phil's side in a family squabble over use of the company jet. Not long after, Troy's name disappeared from the active payroll at JSR and appeared on the rolls at Phil Cheney Automotive where Vice President Slackherd even made the masthead on the stationery.

"You can take all this for what it's worth," Don said. "We're just passing it along."

Robert nodded, and watched as Jett pushed the primary car through turn two. It looked a little nosey on entry. He seemed to have trouble getting into the turn early enough to hold his line. Amazing how two cars, set up the same way on the same track, could behave so differently. Sort of like twins, he guessed.

The Phil Cheney angle was one Robert would explore when he got back to the office. Motive was a big question mark since Phil needed die casts like the Saudis needed sand. Why would Phil be involved in any of this?

Robert would ask as soon as he got another audience with Phil. He would also pose the question to his new best friend: J. Smith Hybill.

"You mind if I make a quick call?" Robert asked Don.

"Sure, go ahead."

Robert found the quietest corner he could, given where he was, and placed a call to Ty Johnson, who answered on the first ring. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the track."

"The racetrack? Here?"

"Yeah, yeah, listen it doesn't matter."

"Sure it matters," Ty said. "I've had a dozen calls already. You've probably had twenty. The guys at Leggett, Hybill are going ape shit. What the hell did you say to Smith?"

"I told him we'd be investigating him if he didn't violate privilege and give us everything he had on Troy."

"Oh, is that all?"

"No, I also showed him Troy's signature on the cooperation agreement with Dumbrowski."

"Bet that went over well."

"About like I expected. Smith didn't take kindly to being told his client fired him without his knowledge."

"Was it the being fired part, or the not knowing that set him off?"

"Hard to say. I'd have to go with not being told. 'Course I didn't give him much of a chance to protest. He looked like he'd been hit with a hammer when I mentioned Eddie Delacroix."

"Well, at least you didn't hold anything back."

"I was shaking the tree."

"Something fell out. Judge Mattson's office is looking for you, and I've dodged six calls from our friends in Raleigh. According to Wanda, they're breathing fire up there."

"Let them," Robert said. "Smith's got answers. We've just got to know how to get him to share."

"Think he's involved?"

"He knows more than he's saying." Robert relayed the high points of his conversation with Randy McGoogle, formerly of Junior Senior Racing.

"This gets better by the second," Ty said. "What do you plan to do?"

"I need you to call Hybill as soon as we hang up. No, even better, walk over to his office and deliver a message."

"Okay." Ty fumbled for a pen. "What's the message?"

"Tell Smith, we're expanding our investigation to include conspiracy. We'll be looking into his connections to Phil Cheney, and any contacts either of them have had with any associate of the Delacroixs. Throw a RICO threat in there as well."

"Are you trying to give him a heart attack?"

"No, just hoping he'll see the light. I need to know whose idea it was to plead Troy out."

"You don't think that was a Hybill original?"

"Yeah, right. Smith's ego is so big he would have slapped his own mother before pleading out on a case like that."

"You think Smith has a mother?"

"Sorry, figure of speech."

"You think Hybill's in on murder?"

"I hope the hell not. But, hey, you sleep with whores, you wake up with crabs."

"Can I print that out and hang it in the break room next to the Teamwork poster?"

"How quickly can you get over to Morris, Leggett?"

"Five minutes," Ty said. "You know, Smith's going to want to know our basis for investigating him, especially since he's already called everybody but the governor."

Robert cupped his phone as Jett fired up one of the cars. The rumble of the engine shook the building.

"Jesus, what's going on out there?"

"Testing. No big deal."

"There are cars out there?"

"One."

"Sounds like a thunderstorm."

"Anyway, tell Smith we believe the orders to plead Troy out came from the Delacroixs. For whatever reason, they wanted the case to end quickly and quietly, and having Troy turn on his idiot accomplices seemed like the best way to make that happen. Unfortunately, Troy didn't care too much for the plan."

"So Troy and Hybill argued about it."

"On the recording the deputy saw," Robert said, completing Ty's thought. "I figure Troy knew where the idea came from. That's why he called me. He figured he was better off hitching his wagon to Dumbrowski than taking it in the keister from Smith Hybill and the Delacroixs."

"That's why Smith was so pissed when the charges were dismissed," Ty said.

“Mobsters have a tough time grasping nuance. Smith was going to have to explain why he couldn’t get a plea deal done.”

“But Troy walked. The case went away. Why kill him and bring every cop in the city into it?”

“I don’t have all the answers.”

“I’m not sure we have all the questions.”

“That’s why I want you to rattle Smith’s cage. He might be up to his knees with the Delacroixs, but I don’t think he’s up for being named in a murder investigation.”

“I’ll walk over right now,” Ty said. “What should I say about Phil Cheney?”

“Just tell Smith that we’re investigating connections between him, Cheney, and the Delacroixs. Don’t go into any more detail.”

“Do we have more detail?”

“Seat of the pants, Mr. Johnson. I know you’re up to it.”

Ty chuckled. “What should I tell Judge Mattson?”

“I’ll call him when I get in the office.”

“When will that be?”

“I have no idea.”

“Oh,” Ty said. “I almost forgot. That Westport fellow has been running around here like a fucked goat. What do you want me to tell him?”

Having never seen a freshly fucked goat, it took Robert a moment to clear his head of the image. “Tell Johnny Pea to go to a park and enjoy the afternoon. I’ll be there when I can. But don’t tell him where I am. He’s the last person I need to see. He’d probably walk across the track during a run.”

“I’ll send Westport to the zoo.”

“And Ty.”

“Yeah?”

“Be menacing with Smith.”

“Big scary black man?”

"I know you're up to it."

Robert hung up and walked back outside. He saw his old crew chief, Joe Cummings, walking toward him with a healthy spring in his step. Don trotted a couple of steps behind.

"Hey, Big'un," Joe said, falling back into his standard handle for Robert. "Jett's got a couple of commercial shoots he's got to knock out. Don and I were just wondering if you'd be kind enough to turn a couple of laps in that primary car, let us know what you think."

"Are you kidding?" Robert said.

Don finally caught up, grinning like a circus clown. "I would really like your opinion," he said, hardly able to contain himself.

"Come on," Joe said, "turn a couple of hot laps for us."

Robert looked at Don and Joe, and realized that they were serious. He also realized, in that instant, what his answer was going to be.

Chapter 15

Even though he'd served in the state attorney's office since graduating from law school five years ago, Ty Johnson received exactly the kind of reception he expected when he entered the mahogany-paneled offices of Morris, Leggett, Polaski, and Hybill. The receptionist, whose large backside barely fit beneath her stately Confederate desk, looked at Ty like he was a goblin. The wide-eyed once-over and apprehensive, "Can I help you?" told him she wasn't sure if he was there to rob her or just take out the trash. When he explained his mission, the woman's panic turned to insolence. How dare this boy march into their offices and make demands!

"I'm sorry," she said in a tone that was anything but. "Mr. Hybill is in conference this afternoon. I'm afraid you'll have to reschedule."

"Oh, I'm not on his schedule," Ty said. "But he'll want to see me."

"You must have misunderstood." She spoke more deliberately, as if Ty were not only dark, but also slow. "He's unavailable this afternoon."

"Tell him I'm here."

"I'm sorry, I can't—"

"You can also tell him that I have a message from Mr.

Redding. Now we can either deliver it today, in person, as I'm attempting to do here, or we can give it to one of those pesky reporters who have been calling all day. It's up to you. . . . I'm sorry what's your name?"

"I'll see what I can do," she said.

"'I'll See What I Can Do.' That's a peculiar name. Were you born with it, or did you take it for religious reasons?"

She lifted her plus-sized hips out of the comfy chair and actually huffed as she waddled through a heart-pine door and into the inner sanctum.

The answer didn't take long. J. Smith Hybill looked haggard, but ready to fight when he stormed into the lobby and stood toe-to-toe with Ty. He had obviously recovered from the shock of Redball's ambush earlier in the day. "What's this all about?" he shouted.

"Robert has a message for you."

Smith's jaw and cheek muscles went into overdrive as he stared holes through Ty. "What's the message?"

Ty nodded toward I'll See What I Can Do, who had re-deposited her behind in the stuffed chair. "You sure you want to talk about it out here?"

With a grunt and a curt nod, Smith motioned Ty to follow him. They walked through the pine door, down a richly appointed corridor, and into an oak-paneled office with Civil War art adorning the walls. Just the kind of the thing to make the great-great grandson of slaves feel right at home. Smith folded his arms across his chest and plopped one butt cheek on the corner of his cherry desk.

"Well," he said. "What's so important?"

When Ty told him, Smith almost fell to the floor. Ty had heard about people being deflated by bad news, but he'd always considered it a metaphor. He'd never seen someone physically shrivel the way Smith did upon hearing Redball's message. Funny how somebody could be such a rabid bulldog when defending other people, but shrink like a

slashed whitewall when the accusations shifted his way. The words “paper tiger” came instantly to mind.

“I’m appalled that Redball would think I had anything to do with such a heinous crime,” he said without much conviction.

Ty said nothing. He knew Smith wanted to say more. Silence was the best way to get it out of him.

Finally, Smith said, “Please tell Counselor Redding I’ll get back to him no later than close of business tomorrow. I’d like to discuss this investigation further, and see if there isn’t some way we can work together.”

“We appreciate anything you can do,” Ty said.

“Anything else?” Smith didn’t try to hide his desire to get Ty out of his office.

Ty shook his head. “I’ll pass along the message. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

Smith didn’t respond. His eyes focused on the carpet, and his head slumped toward his chest. Secrets were weighty things, and Ty had questioned enough suspects to know when someone was hiding a heavy truth. Whatever had reduced the great J. Smith Hybill to such a pitiful hulk had to be juicy. Ty couldn’t wait until tomorrow.

Taking a racecar out for a couple of laps was a little different than test-driving a Monte Carlo at the local Chevy dealership. For starters there was the matter of a license. Tracks required a current racing license, which could be obtained at the track in a matter of minutes, but in Robert’s case, it also meant undergoing a physical, including an eye and ear exam, by a physician. Luckily, most tracks never let a car anywhere near the start-finish line, even for testing, without medical staff on hand. The trackside doctor at Charlotte was an old friend. He gave Redball the once-over and passed him with a wink and a nod.

Then there was the issue of liability. Even though the

average first grader knew that driving a racecar was inherently dangerous, track owners, auto companies, soft-wall manufacturers, and the folks who made seat belts and neck restraints had to protect themselves from sue-happy lawyers. Redball had to sign a total of six forms, each in triplicate, absolving everybody under the sun from responsibility if he took a header into the wall. Most of the forms were boilerplate legal jargon, with one exception: in bold letters at the bottom of each page was the clause: **I UNDERSTAND THAT EVEN IF ALL PROCEDURES ARE FOLLOWED CORRECTLY, SERIOUS INJURY AND/OR DEATH MAY STILL OCCUR.**

Drivers never thought about this. Crashes were a part of the sport, but serious injury and death were what happened to the other guy. To stay competitive, you had to believe it could never happen to you. Robert had been out of the sport long enough to know better. He took a deep breath as he read the line for the umpteenth time before signing.

Outfitting him in a racesuit had been easy. Being in Charlotte, a couple of miles from every garage in racing, and within spitting distance of all the stockcar support companies, Joe and Don had the perfect-sized racesuit, complete with helmet, shoes, and gloves, on the premises in a matter of minutes.

The practice of noncompetitors taking a few hot laps had become more common since the advent of fantasy driving schools, behind-the-wheel vacations for fans with more money than sense. JSR was a leader in this new enterprise, hustling as many as five hundred people a year through weeklong sessions that ended with the overweight amateurs turning a few moderate-speed laps around Charlotte or Rockingham. Even politicians and celebrities got into the act, suiting up and driving for various campaign and PR events. Robert considered it a catastrophe waiting to happen, but he'd kept that opinion to himself. Good thing,

since he was about to suit up and turn a couple of hot ones himself.

“Soft walls are new,” Joe said as Redball tied his racing shoes.

“You mean new since I drove here.”

Joe nodded. “I guess a lot’s new to you.”

“They haven’t moved the throttle, have they?”

“No, it’s still under your right foot. And the brake is in the same place, too. You might consider using it.”

“How ’bout the tires?”

“A little softer than when we ran. Start your entry a little earlier with this new chassis. If you take it deep in the corner, it’ll push you right out, and you’ll get a rude introduction to those soft walls.”

“High and early, huh?”

“That’ll do it. Track temp’s good, so you ought to be able to drive off pretty hard.”

Robert was amazed by how quickly they had fallen into their familiar banter. It was like the past dozen years hadn’t happened. “Looked a little nosey on that last run,” he said.

Joe smiled. “Jett calls it tight, but, yeah, that’s what we’re fighting.”

“Well, let’s give her a go.”

With that, Redball Redding dropped the netting and climbed into the seat of a Don Healey racecar for the first time in more than a decade. Two crew members handed him the gloves, and the steering wheel, which he attached to the column. They didn’t bother with the hose that vented air into the helmet and racesuit. Temperatures inside a racecar could reach a 150 degrees. The hose kept fresh air flowing, which was pretty important during a five-hundred-mile race, but wouldn’t do much during his three or four quick turns.

The five-point seat belt and head-and-neck harness were vital regardless of how many laps he turned. Another me-

chanic reached inside the cockpit and helped him with the harnesses. Once secured the straps were drawn taut, snuggling him tight in the hard molded polystyrene and aluminum seat. The earplugs and helmet were next. He didn't plan on having any lengthy conversations with Joe on this short run, but the soft earphones acted as both a communications tool and a muffle for the engine noise, which could get pretty intense.

He'd also never driven with the mandatory head-and-neck harness. At first he didn't like it. He couldn't turn his head left or right. Then he realized he didn't need to move his head. He was the only car on the track. Seeing behind him wasn't that important, but he would have had a hard time racing with this thing. Junior Sr. would have had a fit. He'd never liked seat belts, and often loosened them in the waning laps of a race. Junior had been known to finish a race with his elbow propped in the window. He would have called this newfangled device a "pussy strap," which was what he'd called every safety device since the shoulder harness. Redball and Junior had been on different sides of stockcar's safety innovations. Now Junior was gone, and Robert was daydreaming about how his friend would have criticized this latest "pussy strap."

"What do you think?" Don leaned in and patted him on the shoulder. The grin hadn't faded from his face, and probably wouldn't for the remainder of the day.

"A little constricting, but I'll manage," Redball said.

Don laughed, and stepped back. Then a fourth mechanic stepped forward and helped Redball attach the mesh netting over the window. All four crew members assumed their positions around the car, two on the left and right front fenders, and two at the windows. On three, they pushed the car out of the garage.

The dash hadn't changed much while he was away. A tach, water and oil temp gauges, a voltmeter, and a series

of toggle switches. Nothing fancy. He did make a visual check of the fire extinguishers, just as anyone who'd earned the name Redball would. As the crew pushed him backward, Robert flipped the toggle switch for the battery, and the one for the tachometer. Then came the voltage meter switch. He didn't bother with a few of the fan switches—he wouldn't be out that long. When the crew stopped pushing, he hit the crank switch. The car didn't fire, but the engine turned over like a laboring generator. Finally, he flipped the last toggle: the start switch. The chassis shuddered as the engine roared to life.

Sex, suckling, riding a bike, and in Redball's case, driving a racecar were instinctive. He rolled through the gears on his first lap as smoothly and effortlessly as he might walk to the fridge and get a beer. The car shot down the back straightaway, and Robert felt his heart rate jump a notch as turn three bore down on him. This was the first true test. He'd built momentum and rpms in the first three-quarters of the track. Turn three was his first chance to feel the car at race speed.

He had to fight the instinct to delay his entry. With the ancient cigar-box Monte Carlos he had raced, the fastest line on this track was low through the turns. Joe had said to start turning early and keep it high, which was exactly what he did. The car tilted at a 20-degree angle as it rode up the banking. Steady. Steady. He held it high through the heart of the turn before getting hard in the throttle on drive-off.

Gravity, horsepower, and loads of momentum shot the car out of turn four like a fighter jet. He held it hard through the front stretch, even though he came within inches of the outside wall. This was the lap. The car would either come to him or move away from him right now.

The downforce, the downward push caused by air rushing over the chassis, was good. There wasn't a lot of drag,

but the car hugged the track. He hit his mark in turn one, starting his entry earlier than his brain told him he should. That's when he felt it. The car should have been turning, but the nose shimmied toward the outside wall. He got out of the throttle quickly and fought the temptation to oversteer.

This was where a rookie could put one in the wall. The natural reaction when a car was tight and pushy, when the front end didn't want to turn, even though the wheels were facing down the banking, was to jerk the steering wheel to get the nose back on line. More often than not this resulted in the rear end turning loose. Once the rear wheels lost traction and slid up the bank, all a driver could do was hang on and say, "Damn, this is gonna hurt." You were in the middle of a spinout.

Robert fought the temptation to oversteer. He held his line, and pulled the car gently back into position. This was the same problem Jett had earlier. For reasons unknown, the primary car was tighter than the backup.

Armed with that knowledge, he got out of the throttle on the entry into two, and then put the pedal flat on the floor at the apex of the turn. The result was a smooth transition into the back straightaway. Repeating the process in turns three and four produced similar results. He wasn't staying out long enough for the tires to heat up, but he figured that a car this tight on the first full-speed lap would only get tighter—nosier—as the tires wore out and lost their grip.

By lap three, he was feeling it: the puddle of sweat that always formed in the small of his back nestled and cooled just above his hips. His hands relaxed; his vision focused on his marks. This was how it was supposed to be. A fast car never felt fast. When the driver was fighting the car, the marks came quickly and the sense of speed was all around him. But when driver and car found their mutual sweet spot, it felt like a Sunday afternoon tootle around the park. The

sense of speed was gone. Everything seemed natural. Only when a driver tried to bring the car to a stop, and realized how long that process took, did the sense of speed return. This car was a little nosey, but he wasn't fighting it now.

Redball allowed his mind to wander as he started his fourth lap. He wanted to dismiss Randy McGoogle's race-shop gossip out of hand. Sure, Troy and Phil were close, but a heated conversation about an unidentified truck didn't put Phil in the middle of these murders. And why would Phil soil himself in a half-assed hijacking? What would he do with a truck full of toys anyway?

As Robert took the car down the high line into turn one he thought about what Troy and Phil had in common. Both were outsiders in an insider's world. Neither of them had driven racecars, or worked in race shops. Neither was from racing blood. Unlike Dolores, they hadn't married into royalty, nor had they embraced the culture. Phil still ran his dealerships, and missed more races than he saw. Troy couldn't have cared less if his stepbrother ever won again. They were two black peas in a white bean stew. It was no wonder they took so well to each other.

The car remained tight through turn one. He backed out of the throttle early, but kept his high line, getting his rpms back up at the apex of the turn. The steering wheel kept jerking to the right as the tires tried to shimmy up the banking. He held fast, and picked his next mark. Sweat ran down to his coccyx and pooled in the hinter region of his seat. A couple of more turns.

Then there was Troy's Sunday afternoon phone call and the fire drill Dumbrowski and Withers had gone through to get him an immunity deal. That had sure gone well. If the boys in blue at the FBI had just taken a little extra time to follow their newly signed charge out of his jail cell, none of this would be happening and Robert would be sitting behind his desk tying up a few loose ends before bidding his

state job a fond farewell. If only Troy had been a good boy and done what he was told, Withers and Dumbrowski would be logging overtime hours on the Delacroix case, while J. Smith Hybill annoyed some other prosecutor. But mostly, two people who were now dead would probably be alive.

The car ran great on the straightaways, but most of them did. The work for any stockcar driver was the turns. Three was on him in a flash. He hit his mark on entry, but had to get into the brake when the car wobbled up the banking. Four laps in and the car was already tighter. Joe had some problems with this one.

Assuming the Delacroixs were behind the murders of Troy Slackherd and Trooper Padgett, which seemed the only viable theory at this point, the question that kept nagging Robert was, why would anyone go to all this trouble over toy cars? The underlying crime was so trivial it barely registered. Murdering a state trooper was a declaration of war. Why would anybody risk the wrath of every law enforcement agent in the state for a bunch of die casts?

As he crossed the start-finish line a final time, Redball decided he needed to dive a little further into the underlying crime. They had been spending time and energy on the Delacroix connection, but no one had focused on the original crime. Robert had seen more than his share of criminal nitwits in the past fourteen years, but none of them would gun down two people over a shipment of toys. There was something more to this, something bigger that they were all missing.

Redball rolled out of the throttle and brought the rpms down quickly, checking the temperature gauges as the car all but coasted around the track. He entered pit road as he came out of turn four, and was in the garage within a minute.

"How was it?" Don asked before the netting came down.

He took off the helmet and gloves, and unstrapped himself from the seat before answering. "Nosey on entry. I had to back out early, and get in it hard in the middle. Drive-off was pretty solid, but getting there was a bitch."

"That's exactly what Jett said."

"Well, he's right. You should look at the data from that backup car. Whatever you've got in that car isn't translating into this one."

Don nodded and rubbed his chin, pondering the thousands of variables that could make one car drive like a dream, and cause its identical twin to be thorny. Maybe, as was often the case in their sport, there was no reason. Maybe it just was.

Redball was out of the car by the time Joe came down from the transporter. "Good run," Joe said.

He shrugged. "It was okay for an old codger."

"I'll still take you," Joe said.

Robert shook his head. "I'm done, but thanks for letting me out there. It felt good." It felt great, but he didn't want to overdo it.

"Don't forget about our pig pull," Don said. "I expect you to bring Melissa."

"I will. Are you coming to the funeral tomorrow?"

Both men frowned and nodded. "We'll be there," Don said.

"Then I'll see you tomorrow," Robert said in a tone that conveyed everyone's mood. The funeral of Troy Eucalyptus Slackherd was an event they would all prefer to skip.

Chapter 16

Not much real estate separated Savannah's charming historic district from the grim realities of a city with one of the highest unemployment and poverty rates in the country. Sonny's warehouse was in the bleaker section, less than a mile from the family's Internet movie studio, and an easy horse-drawn carriage ride from the river. It might as well have been on a different planet. The roof looked like it might cave in at any moment, and none of the neighbors would have cared if it did. To call the section blighted was an insult to blight. The nearest residence was the brick shell of a burned out drugstore where as many as twenty homeless addicts huddled in the corners, burrowing nests in the garbage.

Sonny didn't think about them. They had long since ceased to be customers. Most were too brain dead to venture outdoors. Only one ranting fool had threatened to hail the cops and file a complaint about the ruckus in the warehouse all hours of the night. Jose Hietus, god rest his soul, had beaten the derelict to death with a sledgehammer in plain view of his housemates. Since then, Sonny hadn't heard a peep out of the neighbors.

When the sliding doors opened, the whole building shook, but nobody inside seemed to notice. They were busy

deconstructing the latest shipment of Toyotas. The new Tundra was a hot item. Not only was it one of the most popular trucks on the market, it was one of the easiest to chop. One group of workers could remove, catalog, and store the engine block, radiator, generator, manifold, and transmission in thirty minutes, while another team removed the wheels, seats, interior electronics, and airbags. They even removed the ashtrays. Within forty-five minutes, an hour tops, the shell of the truck was on its way out the door to be deposited in one of a half dozen conspicuous locations.

Tonight, as the doors slid up and the car carrier backed in, the shipment was from Lexus. Those cars took a little longer, but the payoff was better. The yield on one vehicle could reach as high as forty grand. For that kind of money, Sonny didn't mind working the crew overtime.

"Hey, hey, what the fuck you doing?" he shouted to one of the guys taking seats out of a Camry. "Cover the leather before you take it out. You rip that and it's coming out of your end. Got me?"

The man nodded and retreated to the rear of the warehouse where rolls of plastic were mounted on the wall.

"Come on," Sonny shouted to the truck driver, "back it in. You get your license today, or what?"

The truck shuddered and shook as the driver inched it back onto the concrete floor. Once the carrier was inside, the crew descended on the cab, detaching it from the trailer in a matter of minutes. With the trailer cut loose, the driver pulled the cab out into the darkness, and the warehouse doors came down. No windows. No neighbors. No cops within miles. They could take their time with these ten luxury sedans. The shells would go out before sunrise.

If it hadn't been for the rig, Sonny never would have heard his phone. The hammers and air jacks had stopped while the crew attacked the new shipment. That's when the O'Jays sang to him.

“Jesus fucking lunatic Christ, can’t a man get a moment’s peace?” He looked at the number and hung his head. This couldn’t be good news. “Now what?” he said to the caller.

Upon hearing the latest saga from the Piedmont, Sonny remained surprisingly calm. His hand shook, and his face turned red, but he didn’t erupt. He thanked the caller, and said he would take care of it. Then he hung up, took a breath, and hustled toward the exit. When he got there, he skipped once, and planted the toe of his boot into the metal warehouse door as if he were kicking a forty-yard field goal. He even raised his arms for balance. The motion looked graceful until his boot stuck in one of the door’s hinges. Sonny danced on one foot while two crew members yanked and pulled until his foot came out of the boot. All three men stumbled back and hit the floor.

Sonny spewed a torrent of obscenities as he pushed himself up and dusted the seat of his trousers. “Where is Jorge?” he finally managed to say.

“He’s at home,” said one of the men. “You gave him the night off.”

“Well, go wake his sorry ass up,” Sonny said. “Tell him to get down here and pack another fucking bag. He’s going back to North Carolina.”

Chapter 17

June Smith Hybill had been christened with both the first and last names of his maternal grandfather, and had suffered at the hands of every bully at W.C. Winches Prep School because of it. When he was seven, Smith had been bound to the school jungle gym with his own tie; at ten he'd been placed upside down in the school Dumpster; and in the eighth grade the words "pussy boy" had been scrawled on his locker. None of those atrocities would have befallen a kid named Nick or Bud. Even his older and far more effeminate brother Randy had escaped such malice. The name June Smith Hybill had been a big burden for a small child, but it had ultimately made him stronger. It had forced him to fight back, to become a bulldog who would yield no quarter.

That background made the events of the last three days even more stressful. First there had been the frantic call in the middle of the night, a Saturday night no less, after several healthy doses of single-malt whisky. Then had come the loony idea that he, the best damn criminal defense attorney in the state, should plead out his client on a case he, Smith, could have won in a drunken stupor. That had been especially taxing. Pleading without so much as a fight defied every instinct in his being. Throw in the fact that Redball had dismissed the charges, setting the Slackherd idiot

free and embarrassing Smith in open court, and it was easy to see why the good counselor now scrambled for the Advil bottle. He hadn't felt this helpless and exposed since the kids at polo camp stripped him naked and chained him to the shower in the girl's locker room.

Then the Slackherd fool had gotten himself killed, which turned the spotlight squarely on J. Smith and his cohorts at Morris, Leggett, Polaski, and Hybill. His partners, loyalty-challenged sharks one and all, were none too pleased. They had all but ordered Smith to give Redball Redding whatever the bounds of the law and his ethical obligations to the client allowed. What a mess. If that weren't enough, Estella Hybill, Smith's high-maintenance second wife, couldn't stop bitching about his failure to get her car detailed yesterday.

"One simple thing," she screeched in a voice that sounded like a rake being dragged across a windowpane, "you can't do one simple thing that I ask, can you?"

She always did this. Ending every rant with a question forced him to remain engaged. He couldn't tune her out. She had learned this trick early in their marriage, and perfected it through years of arduous practice. But for her glaring intellectual shortcomings, Estella might have made a great courtroom lawyer. She certainly had the combative questioning down, and never asked a question she didn't already have answered. Smith hung his head and tried to wish her back into the genie bottle. Those big vacant smiles and innocent displays of ignorance had been a turn-on in the early days, especially when she'd worn that black spaghetti-strap dress or the sexy lingerie. But Estella was the kind of woman who looked better after dark. Coffee, bagels, the harsh light of morning exposed her as a petty, spoiled shrew. This morning she'd even had the gall to follow him into his oak-paneled study, the one sanctuary where he thought he could rub his temples and think without this sort of insidious interruption.

"Look," he snapped. "I got a little tied up yesterday."

"That's always it, isn't it? You're always too busy for me, aren't you?"

"I'm not too busy for you—"

"Well, is this any way of showing it? What did I say, yesterday? Please, would you please take my car in and have it detailed? Didn't I say that? Was that too much to ask?"

She'd actually said, "Take my car. It's a fucking mess," but this was no time to argue over semantics. Estella had been appropriately thrilled when he'd bought her the first BMW 735i as a wedding gift. Now, he was expected to buy one every year and keep it spotless for the twelve months she would be behind the wheel. This was her sixth seven-series sedan with thirty-grand worth of upgrades. He was a five-diamond hero at the local BMW dealership. But today, the damn thing just wasn't clean enough.

"I'll take it in this morning," Smith said. "We had a crisis yesterday. I couldn't get away."

"You know you can't do it today, don't you?" she yelled. "Why can't you do it today?"

He had no frigging idea, but he knew he was about to find out.

"Tennis? Ring any bells?"

Nothing.

"I'm driving Martina and Julie Ann to our match this morning, remember?"

Even her statements came out as questions. At least he knew her agenda. While he was scrambling to recover from a potential career-ending crisis, she would be prancing around the clay courts at the Piper Glen tennis club, sipping tea, giggling, and showing off her short skirt and bloomers to whatever young pro happened to be on duty. That answered one of his questions: Smith would be going to Troy Slackherd's funeral alone.

"Okay," he said. "I'll take care of the car tomorrow."

"That does me a lot of good this morning, doesn't it?"

He pressed his thumb and index finger against his eyelids and rubbed hard. "It's the best I can do," he said.

"I'll pass that along to Martina and Julie Ann."

Of that he was certain.

Once Estella stormed off to her two-hundred-square-foot closet, Smith gathered the files he'd been staring at but not reading, threw his briefcase behind the passenger seat of the Z-8, and put the top down as he backed out of the garage. He never saw the gray Dodge Caravan parked on the shoulder at the bottom of his drive.

Smith was fiddling with the radio and fuming about all the zingers now popping into his brain that he didn't use on Estella when the van moved into position. The driver passed him with ease, cutting the van in front of the sports car, and forcing Smith, who had been jolted to attention by the van's proximity, to slam the brakes. German engineering kept him from sliding into the back of the van, or the ditch that separated his neighbor's estate from the public road. The abrupt stop did stall the engine. Smith slammed against the seat belt, his eyes wide and his hands clasped in a vise grip on the steering wheel.

Sliding doors on both sides of the Caravan opened at the same time the rear hatch swung up. Two men piled out of the right, one out of the left, while another leaped from the rear. Smith recognized the automatic weapons as Uzis. He'd seen one as an exhibit in a drug trial. They looked a lot more menacing when pointed in his direction.

The men from the front flanked the corners of his car, while the one who had come out of the rear raised his automatic and pointed it at Smith's head. Instinct told him to get down, but he couldn't. He froze. His hands were stuck on the steering wheel, his butt firmly implanted in the leather seat.

He had graduated tops in the class at Vanderbilt Law,

been a mock court and debating champion, and become well known in Charlotte legal circles for his extensive vocabulary and oratory skills. But none of that mattered. Just before the goons opened up, the last words J. Smith Hybill ever spoke on earth were, "Oh shit!"

The memorial was held at New Providence Baptist Church in Concord at ten A.M., an odd time for a funeral unless you were going racing that weekend. Thursdays were travel days. Drivers took Mondays off. Tuesdays they spent in their shops. Wednesdays were for sponsors and fan club meetings. After lunch on Thursdays the jets rolled onto the tarmac, ready to deliver drivers and crews to the track of the week. Top-tier drivers either owned planes outright, or had timeshares in Lear, Falcon, or Gulfstream. By three P.M., the flight line at the Concord Regional Airport, a noncommercial strip five miles from the Charlotte Speedway, would look like a business jet fly-in. But at ten A.M., STOCKCAR's finest could rearrange their schedules to pay their respects.

A decent crowd showed up. Robert had never been good at crowd estimates, but he put the number at four hundred, about four thousand less than the crowd at Junior Senior Sr.'s memorial. That one had been a zoo. The flowers alone took up a street block. One fan built a memorial that included a Chevrolet painted to look like Junior's racecar surrounded by a herd of plastic toga-clad angels suspended by fishing wire and PVC scaffolding. Within an hour, that shrine had been littered with flowers, photos, posters, and beer cans. Church officials were less than thrilled, especially considering that more than a thousand people camped out in tents and motor homes before the service.

Thankfully, Troy's service appeared a little more subdued. Jett Jordan was the first driver to make an appearance, arriving thirty minutes early and taking a seat near the front in an obscure corner. Veteran driver Piston Stack-

heus and one of the sport's "young guns," Bobby Camber arrived a few minutes later and sat in the same pew. Soon, all the drivers were there. Danny Whitehead sat behind Jett. Mudfish Dupree parked himself with Rusty Twain and other members of his team on the opposite side of the church. Tony Swagger, the driver most in need of a personality transplant, arrived late and sat alone in the back. A fair number of mourners wouldn't have known Troy Slackherd if he'd slapped them. Robert was sure a few were there to catch a glimpse of their favorite drivers. Most had come to pay respects to Dolores and Phil Cheney. Melissa and Robert were among those.

Johnny Pea brought Special Agents Dumbrowski and Withers to pay their respects, a gratuitous political act on the part of the nation's attorney general, but the Charlotte murders were big news, and if Justice and the FBI could be shown in a compassionate and cooperative light, so much the better. All three federal agents wriggled into the pew beside Robert and Melissa. Within a minute, Robert saw Withers slide his right index finger up his nostril.

"How many people here do you know?" Johnny Pea asked.

"About half," Robert said. "I can't call them all by name. That guy over there," he pointed to an overweight man with greasy hair and an ill-fitting suit, "he's Mudfish Dupree's jackman. I don't know his name. The fellow with the fish tie two rows behind us works in Rusty Twain's engine shop."

Before Robert could get his poking elbow in gear, Johnny Pea had turned around to gawk at the engine builder in the fish tie.

"Stop it," Robert said.

"Sorry. Just curious. I've never been to anything like this."

"You've never been to a funeral?"

"I've never been in a Baptist church. They're not going to break out the snakes are they?"

"Now, now," Melissa said.

"The people in the second row are from Jack Daniel's, Junior's primary sponsor," Robert said.

"Will they be catering the wake?"

"Unlikely. The folks in the third and fourth rows on the right are from Phil's dealerships. I don't know them, either."

"Never bought a used car?"

"It's been a few years."

The organ crescendo interrupted their conversation just in time. Melissa's cheeks had flushed from the unwarranted chatter.

The crowd hushed, and every head turned when the family entered from the rear. Junior led the way, holding his stepmother's arm even though she didn't appear to be in need of assistance. The two strode arm-in-arm to the front, making eye contact with no one. A few camera shutters could be heard from the middle pews. Starfuckers had no shame.

Chester Senior and Megan Senior-Wobbly were next, along with Megan's husband, Dexter Wobbly. A couple of Dolores's sisters and a few of Troy's aunts and uncles, followed them. Robert had heard reports that Clave Slackherd hadn't taken his son's death well. Clave hadn't had much contact with his family since turning to Islam in prison and changing his name to Ibrahim Abu Everett, a real head-scratcher even for the Islamic scholars in the Allah Ahkbar penitentiary gang. Ibrahim (Clave) was now engaged in some self-described mourning ritual, lying face down on his cell floor chanting something about handing over a few of his virgins to his son, who would surely be well sated by the time Clave joined him in the sweet by and by. Ibrahim Abu Everett's request for a one-day hardship release to attend his son's funeral had been denied.

The final mourner to enter New Providence sanctuary was Phil Cheney, who appeared to have shrunk six inches in two days. Even with his head down, Phil couldn't hide the splotches on his face or the swelling around his eyes. He was a mess. When he stubbed his toe on the carpet and almost took a spill in the aisle, a member of Mudfish's crew hopped up and grabbed his arm, helping Phil find his seat in the front row, as far away from his wife as he could get and remain in the same pew.

Robert wondered if anyone else found this odd. Some of the strangers in the crowd—the ones with cameras—probably thought Phil was the father and Dolores was the step-mother instead of the other way around. Junior kept his head cocked at an angle so no one could see his face. He probably didn't want anybody making comparisons with the smiling photo of Troy positioned on an easel at the altar. Robert couldn't blame him. Bearing such a striking resemblance to your dead stepbrother had to be tough, especially if you were paying a publicist six thousand dollars a month to brand your name and likeness.

The organ prelude ended with a blast that seemed to go a few measures longer than the composer intended. When the pipes died down, Reverend Dr. Howard Natterly placed his open bible on the pulpit lectern and began the solemn task of officiating Troy Slackherd's funeral.

Robert paid attention for about five minutes. When Dr. Natterly incorporated some analogy about "stiff-necked ancestors of Jerusalem" out of the book of Ezra, Robert started going through the pieces of the investigation in his mind. The hijacked truck wasn't as important at this stage as the money and the odd list of numbers and letters found in the duffel bag at the bus station. Code breakers were working on the numbers at that very moment, and Robert was sure the Feds were trying to trace the history of the Ben Franklins in the bag. Investigators, at Robert's request,

were also diving a little deeper into the public records of Phil Cheney Automotive. If Don Healey's new mechanic had been right—if Troy and Phil had, indeed, been arguing over the truck that Troy eventually hijacked—then Phil needed to be scrutinized a bit more closely. Robert wanted to believe Phil wasn't involved, but after seeing Phil this morning and pondering Randy McGoogle's story about the raceshop argument, Robert got the feeling that Phil knew more about this than he was letting on. Something was weighing him down, and it appeared to be more than just the death of his stepson.

J. Smith Hybill was another avenue worthy of exploration. He might not know everything, but he knew enough to steer them in the right direction. Morris, Leggett had always represented Phil, and if Phil knew something, Smith would know. He would bluster and cite privilege (and be correct in doing so), but he would also point Robert where he needed to go while skirting ethical edges. Smith was a master at bending the rules. Doing so this time should be a piece of cake.

"If you will all please stand, take the hand of the person next to you, and join me in singing the Doxology." Dr. Natterly knew he'd lost the crowd. He attempted to reclaim his audience by having them hold hands and sing. It worked. Nothing jolted you back to the present like the sweaty palms of a perfect stranger. Robert grabbed Melissa's left hand with his right, and put his left hand on Johnny Pea's hairy fingers. Thank goodness this was almost over. One graveside prayer, and Robert would be ready to get back to work. Dolores had invited Robert and Melissa to the private graveside service immediately following Dr. Natterly's church eulogy. All the other drivers would be there. He couldn't say no.

Chapter 18

Ty took the call a little before eleven A.M. Burley Hamrick, who had successfully injected himself into every facet of the Slackherd-Padgett investigation, delivered the sorry news. According to his wife, J. Smith Hybill had pulled out of his driveway on his way to work around 7:45. A thousand feet into the trip he had been shot dead in the driver's seat. Mrs. Hybill found her husband around 9:15 A.M. as she was heading to a tennis match. By then the crows had done a number on his head and neck, and the pool of blood in which he was sitting had hardened and begun to stink. According to the responding officers, Mr. Hybill's body was riddled with no fewer than thirty slugs. Shell casings littered the ground in four different locations indicating multiple shooters. Initial reads on the tire tracks led detectives to believe that a truck or van had intercepted Hybill and forced him to stop. The shooters jumped from that vehicle and blasted away. Poor guy never stood a chance.

"Witnesses?" Ty asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"We're canvassing the area, but it's not promising," Burley said. "The street's pretty remote. Commando-style raid. We're dealing with pros."

"Do your best, and keep me in the loop," Ty said.

“Roger.”

Ty hung up wondering what the hell they had stumbled on to. He also wondered who, other than Burley Hamrick, said “roger” over the telephone.

Robert and Melissa stood in the back during the graveside service, a prime location for those who wanted to make a quick getaway, which appeared to include most of the drivers. Jett stood next to them and tried to add a little levity before they put Troy in the ground.

“That car wasn’t the same after you drove it yesterday,” Jett said. “You didn’t rub the wall with it, did you?”

Robert closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and dropped his head.

“What are you talking about?” Melissa said.

Jett gave them both an “oops” stare before saying, “I’m just giving your husband some grief about one of my cars.” What could he say? It wasn’t Jett’s fault Redball had forgotten to share his on-track escapades with his wife.

“A car! Did you drive a racecar, yesterday?” she asked.

“A little one,” he said.

“How little?”

He stared at the ground for a second, and then looked up at the funeral-home tent covering the open grave. “My, my, this is an awfully nice tent, isn’t it?”

“Robert?”

He sighed. “Okay, I drove one of the cars Jett was testing yesterday.”

“Testing, as in, testing a Salem Cup car at Charlotte?”

This was bad, but what could he do? Thankfully, no reporters were present at the test. The only thing worse than being nabbed at a funeral would have been if Melissa had read about it in the paper.

“Yes,” he said. “Don and Joe asked me to take one of the cars out for a few laps, and I did.”

"You drove a racecar, yesterday?" Johnny Pea interrupted.

"Probably best if you stay out of this," Robert said.

Johnny Pea moved away from the crowd and took out his cell phone. Word of Redball's antics would hit Washington before the first spade of dirt hit Troy's coffin.

Melissa looked at her husband as if she'd never seen him before. "I don't know what to say." Then she turned to Jett and said, "Where were you during all of this?"

"I—"

"Jett was at a commercial shoot," Robert interrupted. "He didn't have anything to do with it. It was Don's idea, and I agreed."

"When did you plan on telling me?"

"I wasn't trying to hide it from you . . ."

"No? Testing a racecar just slipped your mind?"

The volume of Melissa's voice caused a handful of heads to turn. She realized she was making a scene, turned her back on her husband, and kept her mouth shut. Boy, was he in deep.

Dr. Natterly made this one short and sweet. The twenty-third Psalm and a few "everlasting life" references were about all the crowd could stand. Tony Swagger was the first to look at his watch. Other drivers soon followed. Respects had been paid. It was time to plant the stupid fucker so they could fly to Pennsylvania. Pocono was the closest stockcar track to New York, so most of them had meetings or dinner plans in the city.

Robert heard a heavy sigh from his wife as they bowed their heads for a final prayer. He had a lot of explaining and making up to do. She didn't believe it, but he really didn't mean to keep his afternoon from her. He had become so preoccupied with the case that he had thought of little else, even at home. To say this hadn't been a good week for the Reddings was underselling the situation by

a mile. A few episodes like this and they might end up on *Dr. Phil*.

Melissa walked two steps ahead of him back to the car after offering her condolences to Dolores. Her march alone was enough to announce to the world that she was pissed.

"I'm sorry," he said when they got to the Corvette.

No response. He opened the door for her, but she refused to make eye contact. Even after pulling out of the graveyard, they were silent. Neither saw the gray van pull out of the Exxon station across the street.

"Look, I didn't mean to keep this from you. I really didn't. I wasn't thinking."

"Obviously," she said. That was a start. At least she was talking.

"I didn't think it was a huge deal—"

"No, of course not. Risking your life at a hundred eighty miles an hour is nothing. Why should it even come up?"

This was going to take a while. "I'm really sorry," he said.

"I don't know what's going on with you. You act like we're—Oh shit!"

The van came out of nowhere. It cut in front of them and slid to a stop, the same tactic used earlier that morning, although Robert and Melissa knew nothing about that. His phone had been off during the funeral. He hadn't seen the three voice and two text messages from Ty. The van had looked like any other vehicle on the road until it came barreling toward them. Even then Robert assumed it was a hotrod teenager taking mom's carpool vehicle out for a spin. When it stopped in front of them, Robert hit the brakes and jerked the nose of the Corvette to the left. They skidded to a halt a couple of feet from the van's bumper.

"What the hell?"

For a second Robert thought the driver was in trouble. Maybe this was a heart attack or some other medical emer-

gency. Then the rear and side doors opened. He knew instantly that they were under attack.

“Oh god, Robert!”

He didn’t answer. He floored the accelerator. The wheels spun and the rear end of the car came around as he pulled the steering wheel away from the van. A man jumped out of the back as the rear quarter-panel of the Corvette swung around. Melissa saw the gun. Robert did not. Both heard and felt the thud as the rear wheel and fender clipped the man, slamming him back against the van’s bumper.

Two more men had leaped from an open side door. Robert saw them, and the Uzis they held. He aimed his right headlight at the lead assassin and kept the accelerator pressed to the floor. This was not the reaction the bad guys expected. A normal driver would have slowed down and veered away from them. Redball Redding was heading right at them and getting faster by the millisecond.

The second man out of the van fell backward and avoided being hit, although his left foot clipped the Vette’s door. The first man wasn’t so lucky.

Corvettes have fiberglass bodies, but the bumpers are sturdy. Redball’s car wasn’t a standard production model. Chevrolet had customized his first one while he was still an active driver. They had given him another as a retirement gift. Since then he had purchased three new custom Vettes, each with the latest bells and whistles. This one had an extra-tight suspension package, an engine that would move it from zero to sixty in less than three seconds, and a reinforced front end, which came in handy.

The bumper hit the gunman just below the knee, snapping his leg and sending him soaring over the hood. He cracked the windshield when he hit. Melissa screamed. Robert pulled the car to the left. The man fell to the pavement.

“Oh god, Robert, what’s happening?”

Robert didn't have time to answer. A sound that could have been mistaken for firecrackers went off behind them. More men had come out the right side of the van and were firing their machine guns. The rear of the Corvette swerved and fishtailed. For a brief instant they left the pavement and a cloud of dust flew as Robert tacked the wheels into the loose gravel and sand.

"Here they come," Melissa yelled again, but Robert had already seen. The van was chasing them, the rear hatch flapping like a sail.

This was a race he knew he could win. He hit a hundred miles an hour with relative ease. The van followed, but he could see it wobbling like a boat on rough water. Their first traffic light was a half mile ahead. He hoped the intersection was empty.

More gunfire erupted from the van. This time the driver was firing from the window. The shots weren't coming close, but they had to be going somewhere. Robert needed to get away from these people and keep them away from any innocent motorists.

The light ahead was red, and traffic was moderately heavy. Lunch hour was upon them. This had all the makings of a Hollywood crash scene. Robert couldn't have that.

"Open the glove box!" he yelled at his wife.

"What?"

"The glove box. Open it, now!"

She did. He had carried a concealed handgun since he was old enough to get a permit, not an unusual occurrence in North Carolina, especially for someone whose father had been murdered. But this was the first time Robert had ever taken it out when he wasn't at a shooting range. He hit the window button.

"What are you doing?" Melissa asked. "You're slowing down!"

He hit the brakes, but kept his foot on the accelerator, and jerked the wheel to the left. The Corvette nosed forward and spun. It didn't come to a stop as quickly as it accelerated, but he got it turned around fast enough. The van fishtailed and pitched at an odd angle as the driver slammed the brakes. Robert saw an Uzi fall from a window. As he'd hoped, the driver had to drop it to put both hands on the wheel.

Robert released the brake and sped toward the van.

"Get down!" he yelled at Melissa, who didn't have to be told twice. She put her hands over her head and ducked under the dash.

By the time the driver regained control of the van they were on him. Redball kept the left side of the Corvette trained on the driver as he propped the pistol on the mirror and fired. He knew what the standard reflex should be, and he wasn't disappointed. The driver of the van jerked the wheel to the right, sending it onto two wheels. It teetered for a moment before falling on its side and rolling twice. To Robert's amazement the van came to rest in an upright position, still running. The driver must have remained conscious. He drove away, back toward the traffic light, away from Robert and Melissa.

That was the last they saw of him. Robert floored the accelerator again, and made a hard right at the first intersection he could find.

"It's okay," he said to Melissa. "Call nine-one-one. It's okay."

"Oh my god," she said as she came out of her crouch and grabbed the phone from her Burberry purse that had bounced around the floorboard like a ping pong ball. Her dress was torn as well. But she wasn't hurt. Scared and battered, but not injured.

"What was that?" she yelled. "Who were those people?"

He didn't know the answer for sure, but he had a good

idea. As he'd passed within inches of the van, he'd gotten a good look at the driver. The ruddy face, the hard, dark eyes: it was the man he'd seen in the courtroom at Troy's arraignment, the one with the well-dressed, foul-mouthed friend, the one that seemed so out of place. The one, Robert now assumed, who was there to scope out prey.

"Robert," Melissa said. "Who's trying to hurt us?"

His own eyes hardened at the thought of what had just transpired. "That," he said to Melissa, "was the man who killed Troy Slackherd."

Chapter 19

Uncle Eddie was not pleased. His Gulfstream IV was out of service, waiting on parts, but Eddie was so unhappy he took the last available seat on the first commercial nonstop from New Orleans to Savannah, seat 40-C, middle, between a college kid who hadn't bathed since Groundhog Day and an obese black woman who had never flown before. The only way his mood could have gotten any fouler would have been if Sonny forgot to pick him up at the airport, which was exactly what happened. Eddie Delacroix stood at baggage claim for forty minutes while Sonny, who'd had a pretty rough morning himself, scrambled up Interstate 16. The lame-brain faked some excuse about traffic, and filling his blood pressure prescription, without which, Sonny said with conviction more than once, "my fucking head would explode, I kid you not." Eddie wasn't buying. He didn't like traveling, especially on short notice. Having the little shit forget him only added to Eddie's rank disposition.

Once Sonny loaded his uncle's overnight bag in the Mercedes, Eddie got right to the point. "Sonny, tell me what you're doing down here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you did a sloppy job with the kid, and then you

did that thing with the cop. Now I hear something's happened to the lawyer." Eddie had perfected the art of saying everything by saying nothing. He always spoke as if his words were being recorded, even in the confines of a car traveling seventy miles an hour down the interstate. Sonny knew what he meant.

"I got calls from our friend. Whatdafuck, the cop was payback for Jose. Our friend says the lawyer was about to spill his guts, just like the kid. And the prosecutor's just a pain in the ass."

"What prosecutor?"

"You know, the guy."

Eddie stared darts through his nephew.

"That racecar fuck. You know."

"Oh, Sonny, what have you done?"

"Nothing. They didn't get the guy. I mean they tried, but . . ."

"You mean you tried that thing on the prosecutor too? *Vous l'idiot!*"

Sonny had never learned Cajun, but that one didn't require much translation. "Uncle Eddie, whatdafuck? You want me to take care of the kid, so I do what you ask."

"No, Sonny, you didn't." Eddie slapped his nephew in the back of the head. "Since when do you do that thing and leave the guy to float up in the middle of a fucking party. The kid should have never been seen again! Don't you get it, you moron? If the kid disappears, everybody thinks he's skipped, gone, vanished, *poof*, like the girl in the magic act."

"The one with the tight little bod," Sonny said smiling.

Eddie slapped him again. "Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

"Sure, sure," Sonny said as he fidgeted in the driver's seat and pulled on his collar. "You think I should have done the kid different, and maybe laid off on the prosecutor."

“No, you nincompoop! You should have made the kid disappear off the fucking planet, and left everybody else alone! A state trooper? A lawyer? Were you planning on doing the governor, too?”

“What, is he in on it?”

This time Eddie slapped Sonny in the mouth, which caused Sonny to bleep in pain and take both hands off the wheel. The Mercedes swerved into the left lane, coming perilously close to an onion truck heading south out of Vidalia.

“I told you to clean up a mess,” Eddie shouted. “Not only did you make it worse, you’ve put our whole fucking thing at risk.”

“What was I supposed to do?”

“You weren’t supposed to take out a cop! And a prosecutor? Jesus, Sonny, are you trying to bring the whole world down on us?”

“We didn’t take out the prosecutor.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

The remaining ten minutes of the trip involved much of the same. Sonny prattled on about events of the morning, trying his best to downplay the quagmire he had lurched the family into, while playing up his personal successes. Their potential short-term problem had been eliminated, albeit not in the quietest fashion. The money was gone, but he’d made it clear to their friends that this wasn’t the Delacroix’s problem. The family had delivered the goods as they always did, and expected a return on their investment. The setbacks from killing the lawyer and making a failed attempt at the prosecutor were minimal, or so he claimed, even though one of Sonny’s hired guns had been injured or killed in a car chase or gun battle. Details were sketchy. But to hear Sonny tell it, this was no big deal. Sonny could fix any lingering loose ends. No reason at all for Uncle Eddie to trouble himself with such a last-minute journey.

And, by the way, how was his colon polyp problem working out?

Uncle Eddie chewed his jaw, and injected an occasional spat of vulgarity. Why did Sonny have to be so trigger-happy? The hammerhead thought upping the body count solved every problem. Why not just invite all the news networks down for a press conference? Show them the porn studios and the chop shops; give them a tour of the docks. Might as well. The Delacroixs were about to be inundated with publicity anyway. Eddie had built the family business into a conglomerate that made the Tyco crooks look like shoplifters by keeping a low profile and cutting sanctioned hits by a factor of ten. Had Sonny learned nothing from his tutelage? Had he paid no attention at all to Uncle Francois? Did he know nothing of their family's history? And more importantly, did he care?

Killing a state trooper and one of the most recognized criminal defense attorneys in the state was beyond reckless. As for the attempted hit on the prosecutor, Sonny had not only blown it, he had successfully taken the Delacroixs, a below-the-radar syndicate with friends in high places, and turned them into the Taliban. Every politician in America would decry these acts of violence, and pledge every resource to bringing the killers to justice. Feds would be coming in hard and hot. Eddie needed to evaluate the damage and take appropriate action.

He cursed himself for thinking Sonny had changed. The family had invested too much in Savannah to leave it all in Sunshine's inept hands. There were the cars, the movies, and more important, the money. They had worked for years to build a cash-flow web so intricate and complicated that Treasury and Justice could never track it. Now that was at risk. It was time for Eddie to intervene. He had to move the operations, and everyone involved with them, into a bunker.

Everyone but Sonny. That little asshole had screwed up for the last time. He didn't know it yet, but Sonny had just punched his own ticket. Uncle Francois had loved the kid, and Eddie had tolerated him in deference to the old man's memory. But enough was enough. When the white hats rode into Georgia, as Eddie was sure they would, they would get their man. And nothing more.

Paramedics wrapped Melissa in a blanket and put her on a stretcher even though her most severe injuries appeared to be a bruise on her right shoulder and a chipped nail on her left pinky. The first responders, an earnest young man and woman, swore they had to take her to the hospital anyway, "just as a precaution." She complained, but the tremor in her voice assured the crew that they were making the right call. Robert hugged her, apologized, shared a tear or two, and affirmed the paramedics' judgment. He would meet her at the hospital.

"The kids," she said, a look of terror in her eyes.

"Officers are on the way to get them now," he said. This was confirmed by the nodding heads of serious-looking men in blue suits standing behind him. "I want Johnny Pea to ride with you."

"No," she said. "I feel silly enough as it is."

"It's not for you," Robert said. "It's for me. I'll rest a little easier knowing he's with you."

"What are you going to do?"

He pointed to the dozens of cops scurrying along the street. "I'm going to give these men a little information, and I'll be right behind you."

"Okay," she said. "But check on the kids. Make sure they're all right."

"I will."

"And Robert."

"Yeah?"

"Make sure you tell these gentlemen about the guns."

"I will."

"I've never seen guns like that."

"I know. I love you."

"I love you, too."

With that he turned to Johnny Pea, who had his cell phone to his ear. "Would you ride with Melissa?"

Johnny Pea nodded, and held up a finger. "Get them down here," Robert heard him say to whomever was on the receiving end of the call. "All of them . . . I don't give a shit if it costs a trillion dollars, get them down here now." He slapped the phone shut.

Robert looked at him with a note of surprise. Agent Westport was growing on him.

"You coming?" Johnny Pea asked as he heaved himself into the back of the ambulance.

"As soon as I finish here, and check on my kids."

The Justice agent nodded and disappeared as the paramedics slammed the doors.

Cops roamed the street like ants. They'd blocked the road for more than a mile, all the way from the spot where the injured shooter had been laid out unconscious and bleeding to the stretch of street where the van had flipped. In between, teams of T-shirt clad officers gathered automatic weapons casings, measured skid marks, bagged wrecked pieces of chrome, steel, and fiberglass from both the van and Robert's Corvette, and interviewed witnesses. Robert was the most important witness of them all, and thus earned the rapt attention of the lead detective.

He told all he could, which wasn't much. The van had come out of nowhere, or so it seemed. It was a gray Dodge, fairly new, but not right off the lot. The shooters consisted of three white men, one black man, and two Hispanics. The only one he'd recognized was the driver, but he didn't know his name. Robert had seen him once, in court, not

as a defendant, but as a spectator during Troy Slackherd's arraignment.

After a brief explanation of how all this tied together, Robert learned of J. Smith Hybill's woeful fate. He shouldn't have been shocked, but he was anyway. Maybe it was the fact that he'd come so close to sharing a slab at the morgue with Smith, or that he'd never seen criminals quite this brazen, but Robert couldn't stop shaking his head at the enormity of it all. Katie and Michael had come within a nanosecond of being orphans. For a few minutes that thought left him dizzy and breathless. Then it made him furious.

A forensic team scooped up the Uzi and placed it in an oversized baggie after photographing it from every angle. They would run prints and attempt to trace ownership—a dead end, and everybody knew it. Unfortunately, Robert might have killed the best piece of evidence they had. According to early reports a compound leg fracture was the least of the shooter's worries. Fluid was building on his brain when emergency medical technicians strapped him into a life-flight helicopter for the trip to Carolinas Medical Center. Cops on the scene didn't give him much of a chance.

Withers and Dumbrowski hung around to make sure the bureau had a presence, but they stayed uncharacteristically quiet, with their cell phones glued to their ears. Their chatter was crisp and terribly important. Robert paid them as little attention as possible. His only interest was his kids.

The call came twenty minutes after Melissa and Johnny Pea sped away, sirens blaring. The irrepressible Sergeant Burley Hamrick, who had waited his whole life for a week like this, had volunteered to make the pickups. A team of troopers swooped down on Katie and Michael's schools, snatching the two from their classrooms with Special Forces efficiency. "Operation complete," Burley had said.

"In and out in three minutes, forty." Robert knew he meant well, but damn.

He surrendered his own pistol, the one he'd fired in the general direction of the van, and answered a couple of banal questions before excusing himself. Withers had offered him a ride. His Vette still ran, but the cops weren't thrilled about releasing it from the scene. They would tow it to his house later in the day. He was too drained to put up a fight, so he threatened the lead detective with bodily harm if anything happened to his prize ride. The cop couldn't tell if he was kidding. They both let it go.

"Let's get my kids," Robert said to Withers and Dumbrowski. They nodded, put away their cell phones, got in the their car, and headed toward the roadblock. When they got to the barricade, Robert saw Jett, Mudfish, Rusty, Tony, Piston, Danny, Joe, Don Healey, and a half dozen other crew members from various teams raising hell with the poor uniformed officers blocking their passage. Word had spread that Redball was in trouble. If Robert didn't step in and defuse this situation, there would no doubt be a bench-clearing brawl.

"There he is," Danny Whitehead shouted, pointing toward the agents' car.

"Stop the car," Robert said. Withers complied, and Robert jumped out.

"You all right, Redball?" Rusty Twain shouted.

"Better than I should be," he said.

"Is it true?" Don said. "Somebody tried to shoot you and Melissa?"

"We were ambushed. They knew where we'd be and what we'd be driving."

"Son of a bitches," Mudfish said.

"It's sons of bitches," Tony Swagger corrected.

"Shut up, Tony. Goddamn it."

"Where's Melissa?" Don asked.

"They took her to the hospital."

"Oh, no. Was she hit?"

"Melissa was hit," shouted one of the crew members.

"How bad is it, Redball?"

"She's not hit. She's not even hurt."

"She's hurt?"

"No. Listen. She's not hit, and she's not hurt. They took her in as a precaution. She's pretty shook up. That's all."

"You want some of us to go sit with her?" Don asked.

"Thanks, but I'm on my way. I'm going to pick up the kids and go right over."

"I'm right behind you," Jett said.

"Me too," Piston jumped in.

A general chorus of agreement sprang up among them.

Robert had to look away and take a couple of deep breaths. Some friendships lasted forever. This was what he missed most about racing.

Chapter 20

Sonny gave his uncle the Chamber of Commerce tour of the Delacroix business interests in Savannah, throwing in a few side visits to spots Sonny hoped to add to the stable of family ventures, like Sucker's Liquors, where the gay owners would happily pay a couple of percentage points for protection. Eddie showed no interest in the package store or in his nephew's newfound entrepreneurial spirit. He had other things to accomplish on this trip.

They arrived at Gopher's digital studio in time to catch the cum-shot of a threesome scene that was being fed live to a couple of hundred paying customers. A thousand juveniles and another five hundred bored and desperate old men would view the upload before nightfall. Once he posted the stills on the free site, those numbers would quadruple.

"What's your name," Uncle Eddie shouted to the girl who'd just had every orifice stuffed by two well-endowed young Creatine freaks.

"Amber," she said, giggling and fondling her nipple in a perfunctory way.

"Your real name, dipshit," Sonny shouted.

"Oh, it's Honey, Honey Cream."

"Your real name is Honey Cream and you changed it to

Amber?" Sonny said. The irony of porn never ceased to amaze.

"I wanted a stage name."

"Who hired you?"

"You did last month. Remember? Art school?"

Sonny hired a dozen girls a month from various schools in south Georgia, coastal South Carolina, and north Florida. Most were attractive human voids like Honey (Amber) Cream who didn't want their friends to know they'd flunked out. They would rather jack off two guys on camera than return home to dad's midlife crisis, or mom and her bitter attitude. The fact that he couldn't remember hiring Honey (Amber) didn't surprise him. Letting her change her name was a big mistake, one now being exposed in front of Uncle Eddie.

"I remember now," Sonny lied. "Just answer my uncle's questions. Go ahead Uncle Eddie, ask away."

Eddie's eyes narrowed to slits as he cut a stare at his nephew. "We pay you well?" Eddie asked Honey (Amber).

"Okay," she said. "I could pull more gigs, but I don't want to cut any of the other girls out, you know? We could all use more money."

"Everybody here treat you well?"

Sonny wanted to say "What the fuck?" but at this stage, keeping his mouth shut made a lot more sense. Uncle Eddie was on the warpath. The sooner they finished this little tour and Sonny got Eddie back to the airport, the happier everyone would be.

"They treat me all right," Honey (Amber) said. "Nothing special."

Eddie nodded as if this were just another day at the office. Sonny figured his uncle must have read too many books by Peter Trucker, or Drucker, or Fucker, or whatever the hell the guy's name was. Now Eddie was acting like he was researching a book on how to manage a gangbang and

other principles of the porn industry. Everybody treating you well? Jesus!

The tour continued. Sonny showed Eddie the docks and introduced him to a few of his people. Homeland Security had put the squeeze on the family's longshoremen, so much of the cargo business had to be worked away from the docks. Sonny explained this as if Eddie were a graduate student doing a thesis on organized crime in the new millennium. The longer he talked, the quieter and angrier Eddie appeared.

At last they arrived at the chop shop, one of four in the area, but the only one completely enclosed. This was where the luxury vehicles were stripped and where the parts from the other three shops were warehoused for shipping. Eddie took a keen interest in all the comings and goings in this shop. He asked Sonny about the time it took to chop a car and return the hull to the street. He wanted to know how many people it took to strip one car, and how many cars could be chopped in a single night working at full capacity. Sonny answered all the questions, feeling pretty good about this leg of the tour.

Then Eddie spotted Gilberto, one of a half dozen Guatemalans who had come to Savannah via New Orleans. "Gilberto," Eddie shouted. "*¿Como está?*"

"*Muy bien, Señor Delacroix,*" Gilberto said.

"How is your family?"

"*Bien, muy bien. Gracias.*"

"Tell me about them," Eddie said as he put a hand on Gilberto's shoulder and walked him into a corner of the warehouse. Sonny left them alone. If Eddie wanted to wander the shop floor like that grape juice guy, Jack Welch, or whatever, so be it, but this was getting fucking ridiculous.

What Sonny couldn't have known was how critical to his future the conversation between Eddie and Gilberto was. Eddie couldn't have cared less how Honey (Amber) Cream

was being treated by the jackoffs at the studio. He had only asked the questions so it wouldn't seem odd now when he pulled Gilberto aside for a little employer-employee conference.

After five minutes of what appeared to be serious discussion with a lot of nodding and frowning from Gilberto, Sonny heard Eddie say, "I'm counting on you. Your family is counting on you."

Then he heard Gilberto reply: "*Si, Señor Delacroix. Haré el trabajo.* You can count on me."

Robert couldn't wait to hug his little girl, especially when he saw her tear-stained cheeks. Confirmation from Burley Hamrick that the kids were, indeed, safe was a lot different than seeing and touching them. He grabbed Katie in a bear hug, and kissed her head, running his fingers through her hair. To his surprise, she kissed him back and rubbed her tear-streaked cheek on his shoulder. Even Michael hugged him, not the "yeah, yeah, good night" hugs he still felt compelled to offer up to his father, but a genuine, hold-tight-and-don't-let-go hug that brought tears to Robert's eyes.

When Katie signed to him, his joy at seeing them sank to the pit of his stomach. "Is this about the man in the van?" Katie signed.

"What man? What van?" he signed.

"He was outside the school this morning. I thought he was a delivery guy or something, but he kept staring at me. Then I saw him say, 'There she is. That's her,' to somebody else in the van. I couldn't see who."

"What did he look like?"

"Dark hair and eyes with a hooked nose. Hispanic or Native American. I couldn't tell. A rough face. He looked spooky."

Robert looked at Michael. "Did you see anybody?"

“Like who?”

“Did you notice anybody watching you this morning? Anybody unusual?”

“Yeah.”

“Who? What did he look like?”

“It was Amy Lighter. I think she wants me to hook up with her or something. She was being all goo-goo eyed and stuff. It was pretty lame.”

“Michael.” He didn’t quite shout, but his tone was loud and serious. He grabbed his son’s shoulders. “Did you see anyone or anything else unusual this morning?”

“No. Nothing happened.”

He hugged them both again and kissed their hair. Then he turned his attention to Withers and Dumbrowski. “We need to get back to the hospital,” Robert said. “I need to get these kids to their mother.”

Chapter 21

The arrival of the legendary Redball Redding rounded out the drivers' convention at Carolinas Medical. Jett Jordan, Mudfish Dupree, Don Healey, Rusty Twain had been keeping Melissa company, and indulging the emergency room staff with a few autographs and pictures. By the time Robert walked through the automatic doors, every STOCKCAR fan in the hospital had come up with some excuse to visit the trauma center. Some acted cool, standing near the wall and glancing up without a care in the world, as though they had much better things to do than eye a racing icon. Others showed no such restraint. One nurse intercepted Robert before he was fully in the door. She handed him a hat, a mouse pad, an ancient copy of *Sports Illustrated* with Robert's very young face on the cover, and a black Sharpie. At least she'd said "please," and "thank you." An older man had simply wanted to shake his hand and tell him how much he missed seeing him on Sundays. Two more hospital staffers wanted pictures. He was as accommodating as he could be. Finally, a young doctor with a stern face broke up the show, and led Robert and the kids to the rear of the ER where Melissa and her gaggle of guests shared a nervous laugh.

"Looks like everybody's fine here," Robert said.

Melissa jumped to her feet and embraced the kids.

"Hey, Redball," Don said. The rest of the gang spoke, nodded, or mumbled. Their presence had been appreciated, but it was time to move along. They still had a race to run this weekend. The jets were on the tarmac.

"They just released her," Johnny Pea said.

"Everything okay?"

"I'm fine," Melissa said. Then turning her attention to Katie and Michael she asked, "How are you guys?"

"Okay," Katie signed. "Mom, a man in a van was outside the school this morning."

"What?"

"A man in the van. Dad says it's the same man who did this to you." She buried her head in her mother's shoulder and cried quietly.

Melissa did her best to keep her composure. She patted her daughter's back and said, "Shhh, it's okay, now. Everything's fine now."

"I think it's time the three of you took some of our FBI friends down to St. Croix for a few days," Robert said. "An overdue vacation."

"Cool!" Michael said. "Can I go diving?"

"We'll talk about it later," Melissa said.

"Come on, Mom."

"I said we'll discuss it later. When do we leave?"

"Soon as I call the pilots," he said.

This earned him a few sideways glances from the law enforcement agents in the crowd. Not many government civil servants had jet services loaded in their speed dials.

"Can we go home now?" Melissa asked.

"Sure, babe," Robert said as he joined the group family hug and kissed his wife on the forehead. "I'm so sorry about all of this."

"Just find them. Find them, and put them someplace where they can't hurt us anymore."

"That's the idea," he said.

"Redball," Withers said.

"Yes." It had taken awhile, but even the tightest of the FBI boys was now calling him by his racing name.

"I've got something I need you to see."

The agent handed his phone to Robert. It was one of those PDAs with email and Internet access. When Robert looked at the screen he saw what Withers and Dumbrowski had been doing with their phones all morning. A series of photographs appeared on the screen in slideshow format. "Just hit the End key when you see somebody you recognize."

Image four was the man who had tried to kill them. The black eyes and ruddy face looked even more menacing on the small, grainy screen. "Honey," he said to Katie, holding the phone where she could see it, "is that the man you saw this morning?"

"That's him," she signed. "Who is he?"

"Who is he?" Robert asked aloud.

"Jorge Gonzales," Dumbrowski announced proudly.

"The Delacroixs?"

"One of their men from Guadalupe."

"Would somebody mind telling me what's going on?" Melissa asked.

Robert held out the phone so she could see the face. Her hand went to her mouth, and her eyes grew wide. She'd seen that scowling mug one too many times already today. "Oh god, Robert."

"It's okay," he said. "Now that we know who he is, it's only a matter of time."

"There are a couple of more," Withers said.

Robert hit the tiny arrow button to restart the slideshow. Two pictures later he hit the End button again. "Well, I'll be damned."

"What is it?"

He showed Dumbrowski the photo of a slightly over-

weight man in his thirties with jet-black hair and a bulldog frown. "That's the other man I saw at Troy's bail hearing."

"Sonny Delacroix," the agent said. "At least we know where this is coming from."

Sonny had volunteered to see Uncle Eddie to the gate, and stick around the airport until his flight left, but Eddie was having none of it. If he spent another minute with the moron, Eddie feared what he might do. This entire Savannah experiment had been a complete disaster. Sonny was killing people left, right, and center, and relying on Eddie and the family to clean up behind him. Make the guy who had been pinched in a hijacking disappear, that was all Eddie had asked. Now Sonny had killed a cop, a lawyer, and tried to hit a famous prosecutor. The idiot couldn't have screwed up any worse if he'd been trying to sabotage the family. Eddie should have walked away from Sunshine and his dopey mother long ago. Now he would have to clean the slate and start over in Georgia.

He couldn't walk away. Savannah was the busiest East Coast port south of New Jersey. More automobiles came into this one Georgia port than rolled through any other point-of-entry east of the Mississippi. Throw that in with the gold mine they'd discovered with the Internet porn studios and the lovely Georgia peaches like Honey Cream (a.k.a. Amber), who would strip naked and engage in all manner of lascivious conduct for fifty bucks and an ounce of toot, and Eddie could kick himself silly for leaving Savannah in the hands of such a dimwitted goon.

Another reason to shoo Sonny away from the airport was the fact that Eddie wasn't going straight home to New Orleans. He wanted to. He would have loved nothing more than to be back home in time for his nightly shot of bourbon and a little homemade étouffé. But Sonny had screwed that up, too. Instead of being serenaded to sleep by cicadas

and katydid, Eddie would be fighting Beltway traffic going back to his suburban D.C. hotel. He never cared much for Washington, but that's where his nephew Christian was, and Eddie needed a conference with Christian before Savannah collapsed under the weight of Sonny's shit.

The flight to Dulles boarded in thirty minutes. Eddie kept his bag with him, and lumbered through security like the rest of the traveling public. He took off his shoes and his belt and put a dollar seventy-five in coins into a plastic bowl before walking through the magnetometer. The TSA guard never gave him a second look. He was just another middle-aged, weary-eyed white guy trying to get from one business meeting to the next.

He grabbed his bag and put the change in his pocket. The gate was twenty yards away, and he still had a few minutes before boarding was announced, so he stepped into a bar for a beer. That's when he saw the television. CNN had a talking head blabbing about something. But the caption at the bottom of the screen made Eddie lose his appetite. It said: "Charlotte Gangland Murder." The crawl underneath the caption said, "Lawyer killed in mafia-style ambush . . . Local prosecutor and former STOCKCAR driver narrowly escape similar ambush . . . FBI on the scene . . . Attorney General promises every necessary resource . . . White House offers no comment."

Only Sonny could get a no comment from the fucking president.

Chapter 22

Despite extraordinary efforts from the surgeons at Carolinas Medical Center, the unidentified male who had lost the battle of gross tonnage with Redball's Corvette, died from intracranial hematoma. Neurosurgeons had done everything but remove his skullcap in an effort to relieve the pressure, but the damage was too great. By sunrise on Friday the man toe-tagged John Doe #6 lay covered on a slab in the hospital basement. He represented the fifth death tied to the original Slackherd hijacking. Twenty-four-hour news coverage of the killings along with retired "experts" second-guessing everybody involved only intensified the investigation.

Swarms of federal agents had descended on Charlotte. One team of code breakers and forensic document experts had studied the napkin and sheet of typing paper from the bus station duffel bag, the ones with the series of seemingly random numbers and letters. Another team was assigned to Jorge Gonzalez and Sonny Delacroix. Where had they been for the last week or two? Where were they now? Within a couple of hours of the team's arrival, a cyber dragnet was out for Jorge and Sonny. If they used a credit card, or walked into a bank, federal building, airport, bus station, or rental car counter the FBI would be notified in a matter of minutes. A rapid response team, complete with helicopters and

riot gear, was ready to move out the second the call came in. Another team reviewed the digital recording of Troy and Smith's jailhouse conversation with surprising results. The FBI did, indeed, have lip-reading software. So far, agents had confirmed that Troy Slackherd and Smith Hybill discussed Phil Cheney, the truck, Troy's accomplices, the money, and someone they had called "our friend." It didn't take a gargantuan leap to conclude that they were discussing the Delacroixs.

On the local front, Judge Mattson was handing out search warrants like they were lollipops. He'd been embarrassed by the Troy Slackherd debacle, especially after some New York judge on one of the cable shows questioned his reasoning in attaching prejudice while dismissing the initial hijacking charges. The blowhard made it sound like Mattson's actions set off some sort of chain reaction, as if he alone had brought gangland down on his community. Some producer had even dragged out an old photo of Mattson with his hair askew and his jowls hanging longer and larger than they did in real life. The photo flashed on the screen at every mention of Mattson's name. His Honor didn't take this lightly. After calling Ty Johnson into chambers for a royal ass-chewing, Mattson began his own inquiry into how Slackherd's mischief a week ago tied to the OK Corral scene in Concord yesterday. Fully immersed in the matter, Mattson stayed up Thursday night into Friday morning signing document warrants for every person or business Troy Slackherd had ever frequented, including the main office and all dealerships of Phil Cheney Automotive. On the hearsay from Don's mechanic, Randy McGoogle, and the partial transcripts from the lip-reading software, Mattson signed search warrants for the garage and offices at Junior Senior Racing, and any extension thereof, all the way down to the pit cart currently parked at Pocono Speedway.

Agents from Customs, Justice, DEA, FBI, NCBI, and

North Carolina State Patrol papered the city with search warrants, including those for Phil's offices and dealerships. A team of forensic accountants flew in from New York, and they, along with a team of armed agents, showed up at the reception desk at Cheney Automotive just before eight A.M. Within minutes they were standing in front of a wide-eyed female office manager and a trembling assistant comptroller. By nine, all the shredders and desktop computers had been confiscated while piles of documents were lugged into the conference room.

Phil couldn't be located. This prompted a watch alert. He owned a Falcon 500 corporate jet, which meant he could fly anywhere within a three-thousand-mile radius with relative ease. A team of troopers scurried over to Concord airport to guard the plane, while another group set out to find Phil. He was discovered in his pool house, hung over and despondent, but very much alive and available for questioning. Ty Johnson led the team of government lawyers and field agents to the Senior-Cheney estate.

In the midst of this activity, Phil's office manager called the law offices of Morris, Leggett, Polaski, and Hybill where a curt receptionist told her that under no circumstances was Ronny Leggett to be interrupted from his partner's meeting. And, no, Mr. Morris wasn't available either. Dick Polaski was in the same conference as Mr. Leggett, and, as they all knew, Mr. Hybill wouldn't be coming in. Official word wouldn't come down until early the next week, but unofficially the message was clear: Morris Leggett, Polaski, and Hybill had just resigned as attorneys for Phil Cheney. Their relationship with JSR would come under review in the days ahead. Killing a partner, it seemed, did little for the attorney/client relationship.

Additional agents swarmed Phil's dealerships on Harris Boulevard and Mount Holly. They didn't lock the doors, but they might as well have. FBI agents trolling the grounds

put a damper on sales. Managers tried to carry on as if nothing were wrong, but potential customers knew better. Most of the staff gave voluntary interviews. The handful of salesmen that didn't turned out to be the ones with criminal records. These were quickly verified and emailed to Charlotte. Faced with exposure as ex-cons, the holdouts hopped on the cooperation train before noon.

A different tact was taken at Junior Senior Racing. The racing teams had the most to lose from this kind of publicity—sponsors hated multiple homicides. At Robert's urging, agents from the Justice Department acted discreetly. Nothing was unplugged or put in a box until the business manager and a lawyer showed up. The attorney blustered and bitched to no avail. The warrants were solid. The manager's big concern was the financial information, especially as it related to sponsorships and the costs of putting a racecar on the track. In the hands of the competition, that kind of information could put JSR at a competitive disadvantage. When one of the agents explained that having your ass hauled to jail for obstruction might put you at a bigger disadvantage, the manager changed his tune. Everyone at JSR welcomed the agents with a warm southern embrace. They even offered them Coke, Jack Daniel's, or any combination of the two. The officers politely declined.

The mystery of the two hundred fifty thousand dollars continued through the day, even with massive manpower and all the resources of the federal government trying to track it. None of the serial numbers on the hundreds could be traced to nefarious activity, the fingerprints on the bundles were too numerous to be of much use. Residue on the bills included pollen, pine rosin, and sheetrock dust, typical of older currency that might have been in the pockets of carpenters, farmers, bankers, or priests before ending up in a duffel bag in a Greyhound locker. There had been no

large currency transactions in the Delacroix's bank accounts, at least the ones the feds monitored.

Luck was even worse with the mysterious papers with all the numbers. Two sheets of paper—one a napkin with two hundred numbers ranging from six to 669 handwritten in no discernable order, and the other a typed sheet with more than three thousand numerals and letters, small type, zero spacing—baffled the best code breakers in government. They had cross-referenced the numbers with every bank routing and transit code in the country, as well as banks in Grand Cayman, Geneva, Zurich, and Bermuda. Nothing came back. On the surface the numbers appeared meaningless. Cryptographers were still hard at work.

The interviewees at Cheney Automotive and Junior Senior Racing weren't much help. The car salesmen had never seen a quarter of a million dollars, but they would have given up their mothers to get their hands on some of it. The mechanics at the JSR shop had no knowledge of the money either. If it didn't make a car go faster, these guys didn't want to know about it. They thought Afghanistan was a crocheted blanket on the back of a Barcalounger. But they could wax on for hours about the effects of today's soft tires on the downforce ratio at short tracks. The world outside of racing was strange and inhospitable for them. As for the numbers, the only guess came from an engineer in the shop who said they looked like fuel mileage readouts.

With that theory quickly dismissed, attention turned to Phil, who vomited twice before settling in for questioning. Ty proceeded cautiously. The best way to get answers from Phil was to appeal to his nature as a salesman. Let him think he was helping them out, giving them a deal, selling them on his version of events. Only then could Ty and his brigade of stone-faced Justice Department agents expect to glean useful information from this session.

The tactic worked well for a while. Of course Phil

wanted to help. Troy had meant so much to him. Finding the killers was his top priority. By the way, how was Redball? And what exactly happened after the graveside service? They were all best friends for about an hour. During that time, Phil told at least a dozen provable lies. He even lied when the truth would have served him better. At one point he claimed not to have called Smith Hybill the night of Troy's arrest.

"I called Charlie Morris," he said. "I didn't call Smith."

Ty frowned and pulled a copy of the phone records from Phil and Dolores's home. "Phil, I've got your phone records right here. You called Charlie Morris at two minutes past midnight. That call lasted four minutes. At twelve thirty, you called Smith Hybill. That call lasted sixteen minutes. I'm guessing you didn't talk to his voice mail."

"Smith?"

"Got his number right here." Ty pointed to Hybill's home phone number on the log sheet.

Phil looked at the number, rubbed his chin, furrowed his brow as if in deep contemplation, and said, "Oh, *that* call. Well . . . yeah . . . sure, sure, I called Smith, but I didn't talk to him about Troy."

"You had to, Phil," Ty said. "Troy called you from jail. You told him to sit tight, that you would get a lawyer down to him. We've got it on tape. The jail records all outgoing calls."

This seemed to shake Phil, who was about as bad a liar as some of Ty's fishing buddies. "Oh . . . well . . . come to think of it, you're right," he said. "Sure. I was . . . you know . . . I was trying to help my boy. But I didn't know what this was all about, not at that time."

"Why did you lie to Robert Redding when he first asked if you had talked to Smith?"

"What?"

"When Robert visited your house the day Troy's body

was found, he asked you whose idea it was to call Smith. You told him you didn't know, that you hadn't talked to Smith."

"Oh . . ." He rubbed his chin hard. "Smith Hybill," he said again aloud. "I . . . I guess I was . . . that was just a rough day. You know how it is. I talked to Charlie Morris, and then Smith, but I wasn't sure what Robert was talking about. You know how it is."

"Yeah, Phil, I know how it is." Then Ty brought out the signed agreement between Troy and the FBI, along with the transcripts from Smith and Troy's recorded conversation. "Seems your boy wasn't thrilled by your choice of lawyers. He agreed to tell all in return for immunity. It's all there."

Phil looked like he might keel over.

Ty kept up the pressure, pointing to the transcripts, and saying: "Did you know the FBI has computers now that read lips? Fascinating stuff. It took less than an hour for the computers to spit out these."

Phil tried to look incredulous, but his darting eyes gave him away. "Isn't that a violation of lawyer-client pilferage?" he asked.

Ty told him that "attorney-client *privilege*" no longer existed since both parties were dead. Then he said, "Why do you care, Phil? I thought you wanted us to catch the people who did this to Troy?"

This sent Phil reeling into a blubbing sob-fest. He put his head in his hands and wept until the floor shook. When he gathered himself enough to catch his breath, Phil ended the interview with seven simple words. "You need to talk to my lawyer," he said.

Ty couldn't help himself. "I'd love to, Phil," he said, "but the son of a bitch is in a freezer. He's full of more holes than your story."

Phil wiped his watering eyes. "You know I loved my stepson," he said, choking on the last words.

"I'm sure you did, Phil. That's why you told Smith to have him plead out, isn't it? You wanted him to do whatever the Delacroixs wanted, even if it meant going to jail, not for them, but for him. You wanted to keep him safe by cooperating. But it didn't work out. Troy wasn't so excited about the prospects of prison. Now we've got five people dead. If I were you, I'd think long and hard about my role in that."

Phil cried again. "I just want a lawyer," he managed to say. "Please."

Robert conducted the interviews at Pocono, a track where he'd won three Salem Cup races and where he knew every security guard by name. Friday morning at five A.M., Robert, Johnny Pea, Dumbrowski and Withers took a charter from Concord into Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, where a black Suburban with tinted windows and government plates picked them up and whisked them twenty minutes west to Pocono International Speedway.

Even though this was the closest STOCKCAR race to New York City, the Pocono speedway was stuck out in the middle of nowhere. Scranton was the largest town, and it was twenty-five miles away. That didn't stop the hardcore race fans from making the Friday afternoon trek. When the Suburban made the turn onto Speedway Boulevard, the motor-coach lot was more than three-quarters full. Johnny Pea saw a million dollar Prevost motorcoach parked next to a converted Blue Bird school bus with a plywood viewing platform anchored to its roof by bungee cords and four-by-fours. Both vehicles had flagpoles attached to their rears. The Prevost's owner had run up a red and blue flag with 22 emblazoned in white on both sides just below the American flag. American Stars and Stripes adorned the top of the Blue Bird's pole as well. But the second flag in the bus's rotation was the Confederate stars and bars, followed closely

by a black, white, and whisky-brown banner with the cursive numeral 7 flapping in the breeze. The owners of the vehicles seemed to be engaged in some heated discussion, each holding a Budweiser in one hand while waving and pointing with the other.

“What’s going on there?” Johnny Pea asked.

“Typical fan stuff. Twenty-two is Jett’s car.”

“Oh.” Johnny Pea saw a shoe-polish message on the rear window of the bus that read: “Jordan is a Fudge Packer.” He didn’t know exactly what that meant, but he had enough of an idea to let it go. “Bad blood between brooding camps, huh?”

“Just a touch.”

“So seven is Junior?”

“How’d you know?”

“Color scheme. Plus the font is the same as the Jack Daniel’s bottle.”

“You must have been paying attention at Columbia.”

“I’ve seen my share of Old No. Seven’s.”

“So has the guy in the bus.”

“Is it like a college football rivalry?”

“A lot worse. Junior fans hate Jett. It’s stupid, but nobody said this stuff was supposed to make sense.”

“Did Jett screw his wife or something?”

Withers glared at Johnny Pea for that comment. Officers of the United States Government didn’t speak that way. This one had obviously been in North Carolina too long.

“Far worse than that,” Robert said. “He won.”

“That makes sense.”

“It does in stockcar racing. When you pick your driver, you pick your rivalry. Once you decide you’re a Junior fan, you’re duty-bound to hate Jett.”

“How do Jett and Junior feel about that?”

“They’re friends. You saw them at the funeral yesterday.

I mean, they're not hunting buddies, but they've always gotten along well. Jett helped Junior learn some drafting techniques when he first came out, just like Junior Sr. helped Jett. Hell, those two were business partners."

"Jett and Junior Sr.?"

Robert nodded. "They did several deals. I think Junior made the introductions between Jett and the Trackside people."

Johnny Pea noticed a Winnebago with a 44 flag and a Viva Las Vegas poster in the windshield. He wouldn't have known these were Rusty Twain fans were it not for the life-sized board of Rusty standing in Vegas with a white lion over his shoulder and Elvis at his side. The face of Elvis was missing so that passing fans could stop by, stick their heads in the cutout, and have pictures taken beside their racing hero.

Two rows down, Johnny Pea saw another anti-Jordan sign. This one read: "Queer Jett for the Straight Set," with the obligatory Jack Daniel's No. 7 flag flying high above the campsite.

"When is this race again?" Johnny Pea asked.

"Sunday."

"It's Friday. What do these people do for a living?"

"Whatever they can to follow their sport. This is nothing. By Sunday morning, if this track were a city, it would be the sixth largest in the state."

"Unbelievable."

Once inside the gates, the agents saw a steady stream of fans working their way into the towering bleachers along the front straightaway. Many were carrying twenty-four-ounce beers, even though it wouldn't hit ten A.M. for another fifteen minutes. It was noon somewhere, or so a younger John Paul Westport had told himself on more than a few occasions.

Inside the garage area stood two rows of eighteen-wheelers, perfectly aligned no more than three feet apart. Each was painted in the bright neon colors of the team's sponsor, and each had logos on the front, back, top, and sides. It didn't take long for them to find Junior's rig.

They were expected. Billy Bunch, public relations sconce for Junior Senior Jr., stood outside the rear of the transporter wearing a black leather jacket and sunglasses. He had an IFB earpiece in his right ear with a cord discreetly hidden under his hairline and jacket collar. The microphone was clipped to the inside of his lapel. He looked more like a government agent than the men with badges.

A young lawyer stood on Billy's right. None of the group knew him, but the shoes and legal pad gave him away. He was probably a local, called in at the last minute to keep the peace and protect Dolores and Junior's rights. If he couldn't, Miles Hinton, STOCKCAR's chief operating officer, could. Miles stood on Billy's left and dwarfed everyone in the group. At six-six and a solid three hundred pounds, Miles was the man who calmed flaring tempers on race day. He could certainly protect STOCKCAR's interests in these proceedings.

"Miles, how are you?" Robert said, extending his hand as if this were a church picnic.

"Dandy, Redball. How you?"

"Had better weeks, but getting along."

"How's Melissa?"

"Good. She and kids are taking a few days."

"They all right?"

"Fine, thanks. How are your folks?"

"Right as rain."

The agents looked at each other and back at Robert. This was like watching a tribal ritual. Withers started to interrupt, but Johnny Pea put a hand on the special agent's forearm. Johnny Pea hadn't been around long enough to

understand all the procedural nuances, but he knew this was part of a process.

"Billy," Robert said, nodding.

"Redball. I guess we need to get to it."

"Whenever you boys are ready."

"Dolores is inside," Billy said. "Junior will be in after the track closes."

"Closes?" Dumbrowski asked.

"Practice," Robert said. "The track's hot from ten till eleven thirty. Then they close it and get ready for qualifying."

"Junior will be in after practice," Billy said. "By the way, I'm Billy Bunch, Junior's PR representative." He extended his hand and the agents introduced themselves. They also met the lawyer, a doe-eyed lad named Allan Whiz. Robert had been correct in his first impression: Whiz was a junior associate at one of Scranton's larger law firms. He had been sent because some partner had a friend of a friend who'd made a call, and Whiz had nothing better to do on a Friday morning.

"I'm not completely up to speed on this, but I understand you want to question a woman who just buried her son?" Whiz asked.

"We have a warrant," Dumbrowski said in a more aggressive tone that was needed.

"For a woman who just lost a child?"

"We simply need to talk to Dolores about a few of the matters we're investigating," Robert interjected.

"Great timing," Whiz said.

Just as things were at their most tense, Mudfish Dupree hit the crank switch of his Browning 55 Ford. The engine fired with a volcanic intensity that could be felt as well as heard. "Holy shit!" Withers shouted, jerking his hands to his ears and jumping a foot off the concrete. Miles openly chuckled. Bunch put a hand over his mouth, but his eyes

gave away his smile. Redball joined them in a laugh at the special agent's expense. The only person who didn't see the humor was Whiz.

"You boys ready to get this thing going?" Miles asked.

"Ready when you are," Robert said.

Bunch led them into the rear of the transporter. The agents were shocked by how cramped the truck seemed. Both walls were lined with drawers, cabinets, and closets. A sink, refrigerator, microwave, and toaster were compressed into a four-by-five area on the left next to an open closet where a half dozen racing uniforms hung. It reminded Johnny Pea of the galley on a 747. On the right the drawers were marked with the names of various parts: shocks, carb gaskets, wrenches, and the like.

Toward the front, Johnny Pea saw an opening in the ceiling and what appeared to be the bottom rungs of a ladder. As they shuffled single-file past the opening, he glanced up and saw the undercarriage of a car. "Hey, there's a car up there," he said, pointing to the hole. The other agents looked up as they walked past. Miles lowered his head and tried to hide a smile.

"That's the backup," Robert said.

"That's how they get the cars here? Both of them?"

"They don't strap them to the roof," Robert said.

The parade made a sharp right and a quick left at the front of the trailer. Two stairs and a door were ahead. They were over the rig's front wheels. This must be where they would be conducting their meetings. Bunch knocked on the door. "Dolores, they're here."

The door opened, and a tall angular figure in tight jeans and a poplin button-down appeared in the frame. She looked like an Indian princess standing on a pedestal before her people. The hair was long, dark, combed, and perfect; her jaw strong and jutting at just the right angle to accentuate her piercing green eyes. A twinge of hurt flick-

ered from those eyes, along with a sharp spark of defiance. This was not how Dolores Cheney expected to spend the day immediately following her son's funeral. "Please, come in," she said. "I hope we have room for everyone."

"We don't need everyone," Robert said, looking at Dumbrowski. "Why don't you stay down here with Billy. Let him show you around."

Dumbrowski looked hurt. Withers nodded and tapped Billy Bunch on the arm. "We'd appreciate a tour," he said. Before Billy could object, Robert had ushered the procession of Miles Hinton, Johnny Pea, Dolores and Whiz into the small lounge and closed the door.

An L-shaped couch took up two walls opposite a long counter with two small office chairs. Above the counter was a line of cabinets with a television in the corner and a laptop computer mounted on an angular bracket. Robert and Johnny Pea took the chairs. They were the least comfortable seats in the lounge. Dolores sat in the center of the sofa, her tiny behind sinking into the soft leather. Miles sat on her right, displacing a fair amount of leather. Whiz took up residence on his new client's left, sitting just close enough to give lawyerly aid and comfort if needed.

Robert tried easing into this as much as possible. They were sorry about the timing, but, as anyone would tell her, an investigation of this nature requires quick and attentive action when new information arises. They were also sorry about the warrants, but they were necessary. And did she understand that her offices and residence were being searched? And did she also understand that anything she said during this interview could be used against her in court? Since Whiz was at her side taking copious notes, the spiel dealing with an attorney was unnecessary.

"I hope you don't think this poor woman had anything to do with the death of her own son," Whiz jumped in.

“Because if that’s where we’re headed, this is going to be a short interview.”

Robert wanted to say “down boy,” but he held his tongue. “We believe we know who killed Troy,” he said.

“Oh?” Whiz said. “Then why aren’t you arresting them?”

Robert ignored Whiz and stared at Dolores. She didn’t flinch, didn’t offer an inkling of emotion. More importantly, she didn’t ask the reflexive question any parent would ask upon hearing that their child’s killer had been identified: Who did it? She said nothing.

“Well?” Whiz said.

“We believe that Troy was killed by men named Jorge Gonzalez and Sonny Delacroix.”

Still no reaction. How much Dolores knew had yet to be determined, but the name “Delacroix” obviously didn’t surprise her.

“Why do I know that name?” Whiz asked, genuinely puzzled.

“You probably heard it in your second-year criminal class,” Johnny Pea offered.

A light of recognition went off in Whiz’s head. “Those Delacroixs?” he said. When Robert nodded, the boy sank in his seat. He’d just been thrown in over his depth with only a counterfeit Mont Blanc pen and legal pad from Staples as a life raft.

The questioning continued with little progress. Dolores had no idea what Troy was doing the night he was caught with the Trackside truck. No, she didn’t know that Phil had called J. Smith Hybill, and she had no idea what they had discussed, although she was not surprised to hear that her husband had come to her son’s rescue. Phil and Troy were close, much closer than her boy had ever been with Junior Sr. or with his real father for that matter. Phil didn’t have kids. He had problems in that department, or so she claimed

for the record. "So, he took to Troy like a bitch to her pups," she said. Johnny Pea glanced at Robert with a look that said, "Did she just say that?" but he kept his comments to himself.

"You know we are examining documents from your home and office, as well as that of your husband. Given that fact, are you aware of any contact Troy, Phil, or anyone else in your family or business might have had with any member of the Delacroix organization?" This was the kind of question you normally saved for deposition. But after seeing Dolores's face, he knew he had to take a different tack. Maybe she would give up Phil. Maybe there was some other connection. Either way, the question was not who killed Troy, but why?

"I don't know anything about those people," she said. "And I doubt anyone in my family or business knows anything, either."

"Troy knew something," he said.

She said nothing, and gave nothing, her face a statue.

"He was cooperating with the FBI," Robert said as he removed a copy of Troy's immunity agreement and handed it to Dolores. Whiz intercepted the document before it touched his client's hands. The lawyer scanned it quickly holding it so that Dolores could have a peek as well, although she seemed curiously disinterested.

"Well, what do you know," she said. "Looks like Troy fell in with a bad crowd. I'm shocked."

It was all Johnny Pea could do not to shout, "He was your son, you bitch!"

"You know we found a quarter of a million dollars in a locker at the bus station," Robert said. "Troy had the key."

She nodded. "I know that happened, but I don't know anything about it. I guess that money was payment for whatever he stole."

"An awful lot of money for a truckload of toys."

“You’d know more about that than me.”

“Any idea what Troy was going to do with the money?”

“Waste it, I reckon. That’s what he did with every cent he ever earned. Just like his daddy.”

The sound of thunder roared outside the transporter. The track went hot at exactly ten A.M. and a dozen cars got out for practice.

“We also found this,” Robert said, handing over a copy of the single sheet with all the numbers, the elusive “toy code” as it was now being called. “Any idea what those numbers mean?”

She looked at the paper for a couple of seconds, and shook her head. “Afraid not. Looks like a bunch of gibberish.”

Whiz stole a glance at the toy code as well. “Could be a code of some kind,” he offered.

“Could be,” Robert said. “Thanks for that insight.”

Ten minutes later the questions and answers lost most of their steam. No, she didn’t know Eddie Delacroix. She’d never heard of Francois Delacroix. She had been to New Orleans on several occasions, even lost a few thousand gambling in one of the riverfront casinos, but had no business interests in the city and no suppliers, sponsors, vendors, or partners who resided there. After a couple more repetitive questions, Whiz said, “Are we done?”

“Almost.”

This caused Miles to stir. He’d been still and quiet throughout this interview, and rightly so. STOCKCAR didn’t need any scandals. His job was to keep all negative spotlights away from the sport. A few years ago that meant paying off a group of black activists who had threatened protests and boycotts because of a lack of African American drivers, mechanics, and team owners. Never mind that every owner out there would put a Ugandan pygmy behind the wheel if that’s what it took to win. It was Miles’s job to

quash controversy. For half a million, the black reverend and his merry band moved on to their next shakedown. Now, he had a murder investigation and mob connection in his midst. This would require some serious strategic planning with his team of public relations experts. The sooner he got out of this meeting, the better.

“One final question,” Robert said. “Any idea how Jorge Gonzalez found Smith Hybill?”

She looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“Smith was a stickler for privacy. Nobody had his address. Even the receptionist at his firm didn’t know where he lived. He never threw parties at his house. I know this because his wife complained about it for several hours at a dinner last year. Melissa and I were at the table. So, if even his receptionist didn’t know where he lived, how did a mobster from Guadelupe find his place?”

“Followed him from work, I guess,” she said.

“That would make sense if they had hit him coming home. Smith’s place is pretty isolated. Anybody following him home from work would have had plenty of time to ambush him on the way in. Waiting all night and hitting him on the way out doesn’t make a lot of sense, does it?”

“Not my area of expertise,” she said. “I guess you’ll have to ask Mr. Mobster.”

“Yeah, I guess I will.”

Whiz and Miles leaned forward in an attempt to heave themselves from the couch.

“I’m sorry, one more thing.”

“You said that was the last question,” Whiz said.

“We’ll call this one a follow-up.”

Heavy sighs all around.

“Even if Gonzalez somehow found Smith’s address, how did he know that Melissa and I were going to Troy’s graveside service?”

Her head cocked to one side. “I’m sorry?”

“Troy’s service—which was beautiful by the way—how did Gonzalez know I was there? I didn’t know I was going to the graveside until that morning. How did he know where to find me?”

“Again, you’ll have to ask Mr. Gonzalez—”

“Because, I’ve been thinking about it since yesterday.”

“I know it’s been tough on you,” she said, failing to mask her sarcasm. “Of course, I was a little busy burying my only son, so I didn’t have a lot of time to ponder who might have followed you to the graveyard. The procession was only a mile long.”

He nodded. “Of course,” he said. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

With that, they marched back down the narrow trailer and out the sliding rear doors. “Well, at least we got a nice plane ride up here,” Johnny Pea said as they walked along the concrete road between the trailers and the garage.

“There’s still Junior.”

“Think he knows anything?”

“I doubt it,” Robert said. He glanced up at the track in time to see Junior move inside and pass Piston Stackheus in turn two. They both appeared to have good cars, but Junior’s was slightly faster. A scent of burning fuel and hot rubber filled his nostrils as they walked. “Junior’s a driver,” he said, turning his attention back to Johnny Pea’s original question. “That’s all he knows and all he cares about knowing.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“When the first Gulf War broke out we were in Texas. It was late. The car was noseey as hell. Pure junk. We couldn’t get it loosened up to save our lives. I was sitting on a crate late that night when one of the Rangers guarding the place came over and told us we were at war. You know what I said?”

Johnny Pea shook his head.

“I said, ‘That doesn’t mean you’re locking the garages

early does it?" The country had just gone to war, and I was worried about having the lights turned off before we got the car ready. I never thought twice about it. You never realize how one-dimensional your life can get until you step back and look at things from a different angle."

As they walked to Junior's garage, Robert looked again at the "toy code." He'd stared at the numbers so many times they were beginning to run together. Maybe if the light hit the paper a certain way, he'd see something he hadn't seen before. He didn't notice Junior's catch-can man, Knot Spackle, walk out of the garage wiping his hands on a grease towel. Knot's cist was even more pronounced when he wore a radio headset. He looked like a human unicorn in jeans and a Jack Daniel's shirt.

"Hey, Redball, what you got there?" Knot said.

"Oh, hey, Knot," Robert said. "Just something from a case I'm working on." He waved the sheet.

Knot leaned over his shoulder and took a peek. "What kind of case has all them VIN numbers?"

Robert looked at Knot, then at Johnny Pea, and then to Knot again. "What did you say?"

"I said it must be some wild-ass case with that many VIN numbers."

"VIN numbers?"

"Yeah," Knot said, pointing to the first series of numbers. "That one's a Nissan of some kind. That second one looks like a Lexus or a Toyota. They're sometimes hard to tell apart."

"What are you talking about?" Johnny Pea said as he crowded next to Robert and Knot.

"You don't know what a VIN number is?" Knot said

"He's from New York," Robert said.

"They don't have cars up there?"

"Will somebody tell me what's going on?" Johnny Pea said a little louder.

“Every car has an identification number,” Knot said. “VIN stands for Vehicle Identification Number. It’s seventeen digits and letters. They don’t run sequentially or nothing, but if you know what to look for, you can usually tell the manufacturer.” Knot leaned over and pointed to another cluster of numbers on the page. “That one there’s an Audi. This is a little confusing ’cause there ain’t no spaces between them or nothing. They don’t normally run together like that.”

Robert and Johnny Pea stared at each other. It took both of them a second to realize that their mouths were open. Could it be that Knot Spackle, whose education ended at East Lumpkin Middle School, had just solved the most perplexing puzzle in this investigation?

“Knot, are you sure about this?”

“Sure about what?”

“Are you sure these are VINs?”

“You mean you been carrying that thing around all day and didn’t know they were VINs? Damn, Redball, you need to get back in the seat of a racecar. What the hell do you boys do in the daytime?”

That was exactly the question Robert intended to ask the FBI cryptographers who had been working on the toy code for the better part of a week.

Chapter 23

Junior's interview yielded little. As Redball expected, he was more concerned about the weather forecast and how the car's setup would respond if the track cooled on Sunday. Junior had never been close to his stepbrother. He didn't even know Troy was on Phil's payroll. "What the hell was he doing? The dumb shit couldn't even check the air pressure in a tire," he said.

"So, what did you have him doing at the race in Vegas?" Robert asked.

"He wasn't at Vegas," Junior said.

"He wasn't?"

"Least not with us. I love that track. Would have won there if we'd caught a break on some of our late pit stops. The last thing I'd have wanted was that screw-up there jinxing us."

This conversation took place in the back of the transporter as Junior wolfed down a chicken biscuit and chased it with a Red Bull. He unzipped his racesuit down to his underwear revealing a chest that was either shaved clean or hairless by nature. Robert didn't ask. A half-naked man with a mouthful of fried white meat wasn't Robert's ideal interview subject. But it didn't matter. When Robert shifted

gears and asked about the Delacroixs, Junior said, "Don't they run that barbecue place in Martinsville?"

Not only was he clueless, Junior, unlike his stepmother, seemed more than happy to help as long as it didn't interfere with racing. They came in with a good racecar, or so he claimed, but the track had gone away from them late in the morning session. Junior and his crew chief, T-Bone Bennett, so named after he t-boned a cop car outside St. Elmo's steakhouse in Indianapolis the night before he was to drive in the 500, were at odds on whether or not to make any adjustments before qualifying. Junior wanted more right-rear air pressure, and a trackbar adjustment. T-Bone wanted to leave the car the way it was, and let the sun bring the track back to them. It was a tough call, one Robert appreciated. It also provided the perfect excuse for Robert and Johnny Pea to excuse themselves and let the crew get back to work.

Before wishing Junior well, Robert showed him the toy code, and got the same blank stare he'd gotten from almost everyone else who'd seen it. Robert prompted him. "Think about street cars," he said.

Junior shook his head.

Then Robert took a pen and circled the first seventeen characters.

"Oh, they're VINs," Junior said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Hell, there must be a couple hundred of 'em here. Reckon why somebody ran 'em all together like that?"

Robert didn't have an answer. He thanked Junior, and turned down his fried chicken offer before he, Johnny Pea, and the two special agents trotted back to the Suburban. All were on their phones before they got out of the infield.

Robert called Ty first and gave him the breaking news.

"You're shitting me," Ty said. "VINs?"

"We're not sure, yet. It makes as much sense as anything else."

"So, who broke the code?"

"There is no code. That's why nobody could break it. We were looking right at the answer and couldn't see it because we were looking for something else. Everybody tried to complicate it. Looks like it's just a bunch of VINs. We couldn't see it because there aren't any spaces between the numbers. They're all run together on the page."

"You're shitting me. How many feds are working on this?"

"Too many."

"Who realized what they were?"

"Knot Spackle."

"Who?"

"One of Junior's mechanics. You know, the guy with the forehead."

Ty paused for a second before finally saying, "You have got to be shitting me."

After directing Ty to coordinate with the DMV and National Auto Registry, Robert hung up and made another call. The phone rang a dozen times before a harried voice finally answered.

"Were you on the beach?" he asked.

"Just bringing in some groceries from the Pueblo," Melissa said.

"How is it?"

"Beautiful. It's been too long."

"The kids?"

"Michael's bugging the life out of me to go snorkeling. I'd rather you were here when he does something like that, but who knows when that's going to happen."

"Tell him I'll see him in a few days."

"I'm sure that'll pacify him."

"I'm sorry. Right now it's the best I can do."

"How's it going there?"

"We might have caught a break. I think Knot Spackle just gave us the answer we've been missing."

"I'm sorry, you must have broken up. It sounded like you said Knot Spackle gave you the break you've been needing."

"That's what I said."

"Knot Spackle," she said. "The guy who refers to me as 'Redball's girlie.'"

"One and the same."

"How did . . . never mind," she said.

"Let's just call it another red-letter day for the FBI," Robert said. That earned him a couple of glances from Withers and Dunbrowski.

"Please hurry," Melissa said.

"Kiss the kids for me," he said.

"I will. Come soon."

When he hung up Johnny Pea said, "Everything all right?"

"They're fine."

"You okay?"

"I'll be a damn sight better when I can join my family."

"Interstate Crimes is running the numbers now," Withers said as he flipped his phone shut. "If these really are VINs, we'll have the vehicles identified before we land."

Given the bang-up job they'd done so far, Robert wasn't holding his breath.

Sonny hated being out of the loop. Something big and unpleasant was happening before his very eyes, but he couldn't see it. And he sure as hell couldn't hear it. The silence had driven his blood pressure to stroke point. He'd spent his morning at the docks where some of his best contacts had given him the cold shoulder. A few of the longshoremen looked at him like he was a walking ghost. If that weren't

enough, one of the bar owners on the river asked him when he might possibly pay his tab. Pay his tab! Like he was some fucking deadbeat trying to skip out on a bar bill! He'd come within a five-count of shooting the guy in the head. But he controlled his urges, telling the bartender in a soft, calm voice that the next time he broached such a sensitive subject he'd be pouring drinks in hell while the gators on Cumberland Island fought over what was left of his gonads.

Everything around him was going to shit. Import skims were off by half. The automotive network had all but shut down. Last week a dozen luxury cars had come through one shop in the warehouse district. Next week, he'd be lucky to get three Hondas. Cars were still being shipped in; people still drove gold-trimmed gas-guzzlers they couldn't afford; dealers continued to overestimate demand and overstock their inventories; but for reasons he could neither explain nor comprehend, someone or something had clamped the artery on the flow of stolen vehicles. Sonny wanted to discuss this problem with Uncle Eddie, but the old man wouldn't return his calls.

Sonny pulled the Mercedes down an alley between two historic homes, and tugged on the lapel of his poplin sportscoat. His vision blurred and his heart thumped like a snare drum as he ran his hand through his hair and gnawed on his lower lip. He'd just taken a double dose of Aldomet, but the stuff hadn't done much for his mood. He needed a few minutes to relax and reflect, to get his bearings, and figure out how he'd ended up in this pile of shit. The studio was only three blocks north. A blowjob from one of the teenyboppers should do the trick.

The phone rang as he pulled the car into the tabby driveway behind the warehouse. He checked the number and cursed. What could this one want now? On top of everything else, dealing with all this North Carolina nonsense might put him in the hospital. "What?" he said as a

greeting. He listened as he stopped the car near an ancient carriage house. "You've got to be fucking kidding me," he shouted. "No! . . . No! For fuck's sake, no!" Then, "Don't tell them anything. Let me get back to you . . . I'll work it out . . . No! . . . We'll handle it."

Sonny rubbed his temples as he walked around the corner of the warehouse and into the side door of the studio. Feds had swarmed Charlotte like termites. It was only a matter of time before some bedwetter broke down and gave a tearful confession. This whole thing was spiraling out of control. He needed to get a handle on it quickly. Where the fuck was Jorge?

When he stepped inside, he opened his eyes and said, "What the fuck?" to no one. His arms fell to his side, and his knees wobbled for an instant. He didn't realize his mouth was open and his breathing shallow. The warehouse was empty. Completely empty! The sets were gone. The lights were gone. The cameras, props, cheap wardrobe dollies with nurse uniforms and French maid costumes all gone, along with the computers, mattresses, beds, couches, chairs, and sheets. Even the stools were missing. The place was vacant, a shell. Who had done this? When had it happened? And where were Gopher and the whores? They'd better be dead. All of them had better be lying face down in their own blood. If they weren't, they would be when he found them.

His phone sang again. "Christ almighty!" he screamed as he removed it from his pocket. It was a 404 number. Who could be calling him from Atlanta? "Yeah," he yelled into the phone.

"Sonny, it's Christian."

His cousin always sounded so cool and together. Hanging around Washington did that for you. The family couldn't stop talking about him: Christian went to the White House Correspondents' Dinner; Christian had lunch last week with the Senator Schmucko. Christian, Christian,

Christian. Sonny hated the little fucker. He was always the smartest guy at the party, the slickest character at every meeting. He was also the guy who got the most pussy. With his chiseled looks, his Sports Club L.A. body, his fancy Hong Kong suits, and the best skin money could buy, the women spread for him the moment he walked into a room. The lawyer thing didn't hurt, either. He was as smooth as a ten-year-old ass. What more could the hot chicks want?

"Christian? You in Atlanta?" Sonny asked.

"Yeah, listen Sonny . . ."

"We just got hit," Sonny interrupted. "The fucking studio's empty. Gone! Everything! The cameras, the sets, the edit bays, everything! It's all gone."

"Nobody hit us," Christian said.

"What?"

"We've had to move things around a little."

"What the fuck you talking about?"

"Just sit tight," Christian said. "I'm coming down to see you. I'll explain everything when I get there."

Sonny would have protested, but the click cut him off. Christian was coming down? Move things around a little? He stared at the vacant paint-chipped walls and warped pine floor that echoed when he dropped the phone. His mouth went dry and he could feel his pulse surging in his throat. Licking his lips, he asked the nagging question aloud again:

"What the fuck?"

Jorge Gonzalez waited outside the Shop-N-Go for the right moment. There was a security camera at the gas pumps, so he had to be patient. His goal was to get a new vehicle and get away. He knew his face was plastered on every watch list in the country by now accompanied by a description of the van. But the van was at the bottom of Lake Norman, along with the bodies of his accomplices. Now he needed

another ride. If he was going to finish the job and kill the son of a bitch prosecutor who had humiliated him and given him the nasty gash on his forehead, he had to move undetected.

The Uzis were at the bottom of the lake with the van, but he kept his nine-millimeter. He'd also procured a roll of duct tape and a twenty-ounce plastic bottle of Coke at a local bait shop. As he stood behind the Dumpster at the rear corner of the store, he taped the empty plastic bottle to the barrel of the pistol, a perfect homemade silencer, cheap, easy, and as quiet as the expensive spy models. With his gun ready, Jorge lit a cigarette. He had to choose his next victim wisely.

The fat man in the Ford Expedition would do just fine. He parked on the side of the store, waddled in with his head down, and five minutes later, came out with a twenty-four-ounce Slushy in one hand and his keys in the other.

Jorge looked around and saw no one else. He moved quickly, darting from his position behind the Dumpster with a pistol trained on the fat man's head.

The guy turned when he saw Jorge's reflection in his window. "Jesus," he shouted as he spilled the Slushy down his shirt. Then he threw the keys at Jorge and shielded his face with his hand. "Here, take it, take it." He fumbled in his pocket for his wallet. "Take the money, too."

Jorge grabbed the keys. A smile crossed his face as the fat man held out his wallet. "Gracias," Jorge said a second before shooting the man in the eye.

The bottle popped as the slug passed through it, but the silencer worked. Jorge looked around to see if the shot had attracted any attention. Seeing no one, he grabbed the dead man's feet and dragged him behind the Dumpster. With any luck, he wouldn't be missed for many hours, long enough for Jorge to submit retribution on the gringo with his pretty red racecar. Sonny would likely disapprove, but

this was no longer about Sonny. Honor had to be restored, and Jorge, who had been the one who had flipped a van and been made to look like a fool by the lawyer and his fancy driving, had to be the one to restore it.

He hopped in the Expedition and drove away, turning north toward the residence of the one they called “Red-ball.”

Chapter 24

The state attorney's office and federal building in Charlotte were overrun. A second wave of agents stretched the infrastructure to the max. Agents were working on card tables and TV trays in the hallways of both buildings, and all the break rooms had been converted to conference suites. One team actually moved into two of the basement holding cells in the federal building, a development that sent waves of consternation through the local bureaucracy. There was, after all, other business to attend to in the city.

Robert didn't bother going into his office. He could work better from home anyway. He also offered his home to several of the agents, who leaped at the offer like lions after raw meat. The Redding house was spacious and peaceful, and with Melissa and the kids soaking up the sun in the Caribbean, it seemed the perfect spot for a makeshift command center. Plus, Robert was under protective watch by federal agents anyway. No harm having a few more blue suits hanging around. The only downside was all the wireless faxes and laptops that now adorned his kitchen counter.

"Looks like we got a hit on the numbers," said Special Agent Withers who, along with Special Agent Dumbrowski, was working hard to redeem himself after losing Troy Slackherd in a most public of ways.

Wither's announcement rallied the troops. They gathered in the kitchen and sunroom for a post-Knot-Spackle-embarrassment update. Cars, kidnappings, and bad checks were supposed to be FBI specialties. How they'd let Knot get the jump on them was a question they'd be asking for years.

"What do we have?" Robert asked, joining the gaggle of agents standing near his trash compactor.

Withers waved a sheet of fax paper over his head before snapping it out in front of him with both hands as if it were a decree from Caesar. "We have exactly two hundred vehicles listed here. The oldest is a nineteen ninety-nine BMW M-five. Most are o-threes or younger. Thirty of them are brand spanking new. And they all have one thing in common."

Everybody leaned a little closer. "Well?" Robert said.

"They're all stolen reclamations."

They all sat on that for a moment before someone let out a slow, soft whistle.

"You mean all these vehicles were stolen?" Robert asked.

"Stolen, stripped, abandoned, and reclaimed," Withers said with a smile. "Insurance paid off on all of them. But that's not the best part."

"Okay, I'll bite," Robert said. "What's the best part?"

"The entire batch is being auctioned off tomorrow."

"What do you mean?" Johnny Pea asked.

"Once an insurance company pays off a claim, if they subsequently find any portion of the car, which is usually just the shell, they turn it over to an auction company. The good chop shops even take the doors and hoods. Auction companies sell what's left for spare parts and scrap."

"You've never seen an auto auction?" Robert asked Johnny Pea.

"This is getting a little old," Johnny Pea answered.

"Where are the cars on the list being auctioned?" Dumbrowski asked.

Withers checked his fax. "One's in Gastonia, which is . . ."

"About twenty miles west of here," Robert said.

"Two others are in Georgia, and another one's in Magnolia Springs, Alabama. An interesting point: our guy asked how much they expected to get for this batch. According to the insurance people, the cars are in pretty good shape for chop jobs. They're hoping to get a thousand to fifteen hundred a car."

"So?" Dumbrowski said.

"That's an average of twelve fifty a car," Withers said.

"Yeah?" Dumbrowski waved his hands in the universal signal for "keep going."

"Twelve fifty times two hundred cars . . ."

"Is two hundred fifty thousand dollars," Robert said, stealing the agent's kicker.

"How about that," Johnny Pea said.

"So, the money in the duffel bag is going to buy a bunch of stripped cars?" Dumbrowski asked.

"Don't know," Robert said. "But it's the only piece that seems to fit at this point. Any chance Phil Cheney Automotive buyers will be at these auctions?"

Withers smiled. "According to our source, they never miss one."

For decades, automotive auction houses had been the highest performing and most profitable businesses in their class. In one morning, one automotive auction could generate more dollar-volume sales than Christie's and Sotheby's grossed in a month. The best car auctions outperformed eBay by margins that would make executives at Exxon Mobil blink, and the most successful houses were one notch below "blue chip" on the trading boards. Other auto auc-

tions remained closely held cash cows for a fortunate few. Southern Auto Auctions was one of those.

The owners were the Strickland brothers, who got into auto auctions when they inherited their father's Plymouth dealership in Gadsden, Alabama. One of the brothers was a banker, the other an insurance adjuster. They knew little about selling cars, but a lot about financing and insuring them. One thing led to another, and within a few months Strickland Automotive was selling repossessions from the Farmers & Merchants Bank, as well as totaled pickups, Trans Ams, and Datsun 240Zs from Alabama Union Insurance. The brothers began holding monthly auctions on Euley Pinker's alpaca farm, and within five years Southern Automotive Auctions was one of the largest in the nation, handling over a billion in annual transactions from Charleston to Corpus Christi.

This week, they hosted six auctions: Magnolia Springs, Alabama; Newnan and Valdosta, Georgia; Philadelphia, Mississippi; Murfreesboro, Tennessee; and Gastonia, North Carolina. Two hundred of the cars being auctioned at four of those sites corresponded to VINs found in Troy Slackherd's duffel bag.

Insurance investigators took a keen interest in the calls they got late Friday night. Most of the claims had been paid without much investigating. If there was insurance fraud involved, or if they could aid in catching anyone involved in stealing the cars in the first place, the insurance companies wanted in on it. Armed investigators from twelve insurers presented themselves at four auctions. FBI agents from Atlanta, Charlotte, and Birmingham also spent Saturday morning listening to auctioneers rattle off bids.

Redball Redding, John Paul Westport, Ty Johnson, along with FBI agents Withers and Dumbrowski arrived at Southern Auto Auction's twenty-acre lot in Gastonia at about seven thirty. The auction started at nine, but the lot was

already packed. Dealers from as far away as Chicago came to Southern auctions. Bottom-feeding brokers from New Hampshire to California made the trek in the hopes of finding unprecedented deals. Mechanics trolled the lot like treasure hunters. Hoods were opened and shut; interiors were inspected with magnifying glasses; portable diagnostic devices were passed around like Geiger counters; and conversations were conducted in hushed whispers. Some of the dealers covered their mouths to talk with their mechanics. You could never be too careful at a car auction. Robert counted seven car-carrying eighteen-wheelers in the lot. By the time bidding started, that number would double.

Happy LaSalle showed up a few minutes before eight. He was in his tenth year with Phil Cheney Automotive, according to the file Robert had read that morning. The file also said Happy, whose real name was Alfred, was on his second wife, his third girlfriend, and his fourth mortgage. A devoted grandmother sending him a few grand three or four times a year was the only thing keeping personal bankruptcy at bay. He carried thirty thousand in credit card debt, a nine-hundred-a-month mortgage on a place he'd be lucky to sell for a hundred thousand, and a three-hundred-dollar-a-month lease on a shiny new Dodge Ram double-cab. He'd had one conviction for DUI, and one arrest for dragging his first wife around the yard by her hair after she'd confronted him with evidence of infidelity. Those charges were dropped when the wife refused to testify, but Happy volunteered for counseling immediately afterward. That told Robert all he needed to know.

Johnny Pea took a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Robert. It was a driver's license photo from the file. Happy LaSalle had put on a few pounds, but there was no doubt about his identity. Even wearing Wranglers and a Quail Hollow golf shirt, his appearance screamed "car salesman." Robert counted twenty people he'd glad

handed in his first five minutes on the lot. Not one of them stuck around to chat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’re about to get started,” a voice said from the giant speakers erected on either side of a tented platform. Auction staff roamed the lot handing out numbered paddles and inventory sheets. Southern auctions had numbered each of the vehicles being auctioned. The sheet being handed out by eager young auction-house employees had the assigned number next to a brief description of the vehicle, or what was left of it. This cut down on confusion once the bidding got under way. The last thing the auctioneers needed was some yahoo saying, “Not that piece of shit, I thought we were bidding on that other El Camino.”

Robert took the inventory sheet from a bright-eyed girl who looked to be in her early twenties. “Thanks,” he said, just to be polite. He gave the sheet a cursory glance, and started to fold it and put it in a pocket.

Then he noticed something strangely familiar about the inventory roster. He straightened the paper and studied the numbers and vehicle descriptions a little more closely. He also looked at the sheet of VINs and the corresponding vehicle descriptions the FBI had pulled together.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said aloud.

“What?” Ty asked.

“Does anybody have a copy of our mystery napkin?”

Special Agent Withers did, indeed, have a manila folder with a copy of Troy’s hand-numbered napkin. Robert studied the copy along with the other two sheets he now held. His eyes shifted back and forth between the three documents. When the first number correctly corresponded to a car on the inventory sheet, he quickly moved to the next, and the next, until it became obvious that all the numbers on Troy’s napkin would directly correspond to the Southern Auction inventory sheet.

“What do you know about that?” Robert said.

“What is it?” Ty said.

All the agents were looking at Robert now. “I just figured out the numbers on the napkin.”

“The hell you say,” Dumbrowski said, elbowing his way next to Robert so he could look over his shoulder. It wasn’t clear from his tone whether Dumbrowski was happy, skeptical, or depressed that the FBI code breakers might be shown up again. With each new embarrassment Dumbrowski and Withers saw their careers tumble further into the abyss. It was symbolically ironic that they, the two agents who had failed to even ask Troy Slackherd about the money, the numbers, the napkin, his stepfather, or the connection between the Delacroixs and the dearly departed J. Smith Hybill, would now be standing in a barren field as stripped hunks of what were once powerful machines were auctioned off as scrap. What would the two of them do when they returned home to Washington?

“No doubt about it,” Robert said as he checked the last number. “I just cracked the napkin code.”

He handed the two sheets to Ty, who immediately saw the connection. The numbers on Troy’s napkin corresponded to thirty of the cars on the inventory sheet.

“I guess having the VINs wasn’t enough,” Robert said. “Somebody wanted to make sure there were no screw-ups.”

“So, Troy had the auction numbers in his pocket,” Ty said. “He was on his way to pick up the VINs and the cash.”

“That’s the theory.”

“Any idea why?” Johnny Pea asked.

“That’s why we’re here, Agent Westport. Look, listen, and learn.”

“We’ll get started,” the auctioneer said, and he did. The first thing Johnny Pea learned about automobile auctions

was that time was a precious commodity. The auctioneer opened with a 2003 Mercedes 560 SL that had thirty-thousand-dollar rims—a DEA seizure according to the info sheet. Three minutes later the car sold for thirty-five thousand, cash. All sales were spot cash: no checks, no credit cards, no thirty-day-same-as-cash financing. Wholesale car dealers were far worse credit risks than the customers they sold to. Auctioneers had no way of verifying who was who at an auction. If you showed up with a tax ID number, you could bid on a car as long as you had the cash to back it up. That accounted for all the large stainless steel cases being carried around. Johnny Pea wondered how many of the two hundred of so bidders were armed.

Fifteen minutes and a half dozen sales later, the first car on their list came up for bid. It was a new Lexus LS 430 without an engine block, radiator, computer, transmission, wheels, seats, steering wheel, radio, air bag, or driver's side door. Bids opened at five hundred dollars. A couple of paddles went up early, but fell off when bidding hit a grand. To the surprise of none of the agents, Happy LaSalle bought the car for a thousand dollars, two hundred fifty below his ceiling, or so Robert assumed.

A few more cars were bought and sold before the next one on the list came up, a BMW 740i stripped to the bone. Happy was the only bidder at seven hundred fifty dollars. So far he was two for two. By eleven A.M., Happy had bought ten cars, all from the list. His per-car average was one thousand twenty dollars. Robert could tell from his grin this was good news.

"How's he going to transport them?" Johnny Pea asked. "Most of them don't have wheels."

Robert pointed to the flatbed tow trucks lining the chain-link fence along the lot's perimeter. "Same way they got here," he said. "Southern will happily deliver them for a price."

Dumbrowski scratched his head in a way that made him look dumber than he was. "So," he said, "the theory is, Slackherd's bag full of money had nothing to do with the toy cars or the truck he'd hijacked."

"He was just picking up cash and inventory sheets to buy some used cars," Robert said.

"You're guessing there was a backup list?" Dumbrowski asked, pointing a finger in the direction of Happy La-Salle.

"Would you give Troy the only copy?"

"Good point, but I wouldn't have trusted him with a quarter mil, either."

Robert cocked his head and stared at Special Agent Dumbrowski. "You trusted him to come strolling out of jail and meet you after he'd lied to you about everything but his height, weight, and name."

"What?" Dumbrowski said raising his hands in defense.

"You two bought that story about the drugs without batting an eye."

"Troy didn't run drugs?" Dumbrowski said.

"He sure as hell didn't do it in his stepbrother's jet."

"And you know this because . . ."

"Because Troy's never been to Vegas, at least not during race week, which means he couldn't have carried any packages back to Charlotte on the JSR plane."

"Bullshit." Dumbrowski puffed up like a cartoon villain.

"Bullshit, it's bullshit," Robert said. "I checked the flight manifests. Troy's been on that plane exactly one time in the last two years and that was a trip to St. Martin with Dolores and Phil. The boy knew what you wanted to hear, and you two bit like a couple of bigmouth bass."

"How . . ." but Dumbrowski stopped himself. At this point, he didn't want to know the answer.

The auction kept rolling along. When the next car from

their VIN list came up, Ty asked, "You sure Happy's going to buy all thirty?"

"Let's see," Robert said.

He moved forward in the crowd just as the auctioneer announced another vehicle on their list: the skeletal remains of an Audi A3 Quattro.

"Bid starts at seven hundred fifty," the auctioneer said. "Seven fifty, do I hear seven fifty. Got seven fifty," he said, pointing to Happy, who had raised his paddle. "Do I hear a thousand? Seven fifty looking for one."

Robert raised a paddle.

"One thousand. New bidder."

"What are you doing?" Johnny Pea asked.

"Gauging Happy's seriousness."

"One thousand looking for fifteen hundred. One looking for fifteen."

The auctioneer pointed to Happy, whose frown could be seen from twenty yards away.

"Fifteen. Got fifteen looking for two."

Robert raised his paddle.

The auctioneer's voice went up an octave as he said, "Two looking for twenty-five."

This was getting good. The car shouldn't have gone for a dime more than a thousand. "Two looking for twenty-five. Twenty-five," he shouted, almost jumping from the stage as Happy raised a paddle.

"Twenty-five looking for three. Got twenty-five looking for three." His gaze shifted immediately to Robert, who calmly nodded, smiled, and raised the bid to three thousand dollars.

"Got three thousand looking for thirty-five hundred. Three looking for thirty-five. Thirty-five. Needing thirty-five." He swung a finger at Happy's upturned paddle like Ed Sullivan introducing the Beatles. "Thirty-five hundred

dollars,” he shouted. “Bid is thirty-five hundred, seeking four thousand. Thirty-five looking for four.”

Robert’s paddle flew up.

“Four thousand dollars!” the auctioneer shouted. He sounded like he was either on the verge of a heart attack or an orgasm. “Do I hear four-five. Four’s the bid, looking for forty-five.”

Happy’s face had turned Tuscaloosa crimson. This was not part of the plan. He chewed his jaw and rubbed his nose before raising the paddle again, upping the bid to forty-five hundred dollars.

By this time a Southern Auto Auction official had taken a position next to Robert. Between bids, he’d asked if the bidder understood what he was doing, and realized that all transactions were cash. Five or six grand was lowball by car auction standards, but considering the piece of shit up for bid, the Southern people wanted to be sure they weren’t wasting time. “Do you know who I am?” Robert asked, not a question he liked using, but this was a great place to make an exception.

It took the functionary a second or two before his eyes widened. “Oh, Jesus, Redball, I’m sorry. Good luck to you. Jesus, I’m sorry.” The man raised a hand to the auctioneer and nodded profusely. The bidder could, indeed, cover his debts.

“How high will he go?” Johnny Pea asked Ty.

“High as he wants to. He’s richer than two feet up a bull’s ass.”

Johnny Pea cocked his head and chewed on that last comparison.

“Do I hear five? Forty-five going once—”

“Let’s make it ten,” Robert shouted.

Now even the auctioneer gave a constipated scowl. It was a car auction, so bad deals came by the bushel, but this was an insane turn of events. The car on the block couldn’t

bring more than three grand in parts and scrap. Hauling it off the lot would cost three hundred. That made any price north of a thousand a poor business decision. The dude with all the uptight buddies had just upped the ante to ten thousand. That put the auctioneer in an awkward spot. If he accepted the bid, he could be sued for taking advantage of a retard. If he rejected the bid, he could be sued for discriminating against an idiot. The profit for the auction company was great, but nothing was worth dealing with a bunch of tort whores. Plus, this was taking a lot of time. There were cars on the lot that would bring thirty to forty grand, and he was pissing around with a piece of junk. In a moment of indecision, the man said, "Mister, you seen the car you're bidding on?"

Robert nodded.

"Okay," the auctioneer said, raising his hands and shrugging as if to absolve himself. "Ten thousand. Does anybody want to go ten five?"

All eyes turned to Happy, who was anything but. Sweat poured off his thick chin, and his hands fidgeted with the pencil he'd used to mark his purchases. Happy hadn't spent a lot of time looking at his competition. He'd assumed it was some asshole wanting to screw up the bidding. But when the number went to four thousand, Happy moved a little closer and realized he was bidding against Redball Redding. He hadn't looked back since, but he'd gnawed the eraser off his pencil.

"Ten going once—"

"How much money do you have?" Ty asked.

"I left the house with fifty bucks. Krispy Kreme was two and change, so let's see . . ." He reached into his pocket and pulled out some wadded bills and a few coins. "Looks like forty-seven thirty-one."

"Hmmm."

"Not to worry."

"Me, worry?"

"Ten going twice . . ."

"Did you bring your sidearm, Agent Dumbrowski?" Robert asked.

"Sure. Never leave home without it."

"Good. Don't hesitate to use it if we get in a bind here."

A long pause as the auctioneer raised his hand toward Robert.

In the nick of time, Happy raised his paddle and yelled, "Ten-five," in a voice so high he could have passed for a church soprano.

The auctioneer shook his head and frowned. "Looks like we're at ten-five. Do I hear eleven?"

"Maybe you should let this one go," Ty said.

"Maybe you're right. Wouldn't want Special Agent Dumbrowski to have to shoot his way out of here." Robert waved off the auctioneer. "That's it," he said to the Southern employee next to him.

"Sold! Ten thousand five hundred," the auctioneer said with a wide grin.

Happy took great interest in his notes, tapping the pencil on his papers. He did everything possible to keep from looking up.

"Why would Phil spend ten thousand five hundred on a chopped Audi?" Ty asked.

"Let's ask Happy," Robert said.

Sonny could only come up with a couple of hundred things he'd rather do than beat another path to the Savannah airport. He felt like some gum-chewing cabbie working for minimum wage and tips. To make matters worse, he was speeding up I-16 to pick up his cousin Christian, the superstar of the family. Christian knew all about the abandonment of Sonny's porn studio, and Sonny wanted answers. He deserved answers. This was his town, and he'd done a

good job. Not like before. This was not like L.A. Sure the last week had been tough, but Sonny hadn't asked for trouble. It wasn't like he woke up last Sunday and said, "Gee, I think I'll drive to bumfuck North Carolina and kill a cop or two." *They* had called *him*. Didn't that count for something?

Christian knew the skinny on all of this, but, as Sonny could attest from a long and sordid history with his cousin, the likelihood of gleaning much useful info from this visit was somewhere south of slim. When they were both thirteen-year-old kids, Christian had set Sonny up in his first dope-dealing operation, supplying the family bastard with dime bags of Jamaican Red. Only when DEA agents raided the middle school, it was Sonny who took the fall and spent six months in juvey. Christian was never questioned. Three years later, Christian taught Sonny how to jimmy a car lock and hotwire a starter. The sixteen-year-olds stole a Grand Am one Friday night, and Christian insisted on letting little Sunshine drive. When the local cops pulled them over, Christian convinced the officers that the car belonged to a family friend who had given them blanket permission to joy ride (a fact that became true once Uncle Eddie chatted with the owner). What Christian couldn't explain away was the .18 alcohol content in Sonny's bloodstream. Sonny spent the night in jail and lost his license while Christian went to the prom with Juliet Thibodeux. That was how it had gone their whole lives: Christian Superstar got the girls, the grades, and the good graces of the family while Sonny got refried shit. One night in a Tupelo jail cell, Sonny came to the conclusion that these hardships weren't accidental. Whenever bad things happened to him, Christian Superstar was always nearby. This amazing coincidence couldn't be luck or fate. Sonny's misfortune had a face: the same face now staring at him across the conveyer belt at the Savannah baggage claim.

“Sonny,” Christian yelled as he waved. He had one of those space-age ear-pieces with the tiny clear-plastic microphones, and appeared to be talking to someone as Sonny marched across the room. Christian said, “hang on a second,” to the person on the other end of his Jetson phone. Then he pointed to a large black Samsonite bag. “That one,” he said, “and the one coming out now.”

Christian expected him to fetch his luggage! “Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Sonny said, a little too loud.

A woman in a pink flowered dress grabbed a boy of about seven or eight by the shoulders and pulled him closer. “Do you mind?” she said to Sonny.

“Yeah, I mind,” he snapped. “I mind my own business, and you should, too, cunt.”

This prompted more stares. Christian frowned, snapped his fingers at Sonny, and pointed at the bag again with an expression that said, “hop to it.”

Sonny’s ears turned red. Did Christian Superstar just snap his fingers? Sonny couldn’t believe it, even after he grabbed two Samsonites off the carriage and slammed them on the carpet at Christian’s feet.

His cousin seemed unmoved. The conversation with whomever on the other end of the space phone continued unabated. Christian even laughed as he said, “I’ll have to get back to you on that. I’m in Savannah cleaning up a few things.” What an insolent fucker.

When the call finally ended, Christian said, “You parked out front?” Not hello, or how are you, cousin, just an immediate inquisition of Sonny’s ground transportation skills.

“Yeah, you want to tell me what the fuck’s going on?”

“Let’s go,” Christian said, ignoring the question. They turned toward the door, leaving the luggage on the carpet. Christian stopped, looked back at the luggage, and then stared at Sonny. The message was clear: Sonny was a

porter, pure and simple. God, what he wouldn't give to shoot his cousin right between the eyes.

Once in the car, Sonny got down to business. "Where the fuck is my studio?" he said.

"If a profitable operation is threatened, and you can easily move it, doesn't it make sense to relocate?"

Typical Christian. He'd never answered a question in his life. All he did was throw a different question back.

"Relocate!" Sonny erupted. "I built that place. I brought those people in. What fucking threat? I ain't seen no threats, and I'm closer to this than anybody."

"Do you think that might be the problem?"

"What?"

"Do you think you might be too close to see the big picture?"

Oh, of course, of course, of course. Only someone as bright and together as Christian Superstar could see the Big Picture. Functionaries like Sonny could only see small things, close things, things like the screwing he was taking for the fiasco in North Carolina that was not, in any way, his fucking fault.

"So where's Gopher and my girls?"

Christian stared out the window at the glistening waters of the river. "Let's take a tour of the docks," he said. "It's a good morning for a walk."

As predicted, Happy bought all thirty of the cars on the list. He spent fifty thousand and change, more than his budget, but, then, he hadn't expected a bidding war with Redball Redding. Robert made two more bids during the morning when it looked like Happy was getting a little too comfortable. After purchasing the final car on the list—a Mitsubishi Gallant with nothing left but the frame and fenders—Happy escorted a couple of hefty, frowning Southern Auction representatives to his pickup where he opened

a steel box and handed over eight bundles of hundreds plus thirty-two hundred-dollar bills. Five minutes later, he was given clear title to thirty junk cars that would have fit perfectly in front of some of Charlotte's finer trailer parks. He paid another twenty-five hundred to one of the subcontractors to have the cars transported to a garage in Locus owned by Phil Cheney Automotive. By the time he completed that transaction, the smile had returned to Happy's face. There had been a momentary scare with Redball, but that was behind him now. He was back to his old self: smiling, glad handing, back-slapping, and selling, even though he had nothing to sell. It wasn't until Agent Dumbrowski tapped him on the shoulder and flashed an ID that Happy's face fell.

Redball, Ty, Johnny Pea, and the special agents accompanied Happy to the FBI field office in Charlotte for what proved to be a fruitful round of questioning.

"Phil ponies up the money every month," Happy said. After a few perfunctory questions, Happy seemed thrilled that Dumbrowski, Withers, and the gang were more interested in Phil than in Happy's finances or infidelities. Anything he could do to help.

"How many cars are you charged with buying?" Robert asked.

"Depends. Sometimes as few as five or ten, sometimes as many as fifty."

"Chop jobs?"

"Always," Happy said nodding his head. "Routine's always the same, too. I get a list of VINs the night before, and pick up the cash the morning of the auction."

"How do you know how much cash to bring?"

"I don't. The VIN list always has prices, but the cash I pick up is at least twenty grand more than the amount on the list. My job is to buy the cars."

"No matter what."

"Buy the cars," Happy said, punching the air with his finger to make his point. "If I overpay, Phil might bitch and moan, but I'd lose my job if I lost one of the cars to a higher bidder. That's why I was shocked to see you there today. Boy, *heehee*, I thought for sure you were gonna bust me on that Audi."

Happy had no idea why he was buying all these cars, nor was he privy to what happened to them afterward. He did, however, know that he had been under his allotted payout budget by an average of two hundred dollars a car for the last twenty-four months. For that, Happy had received a handsome bonus at Christmas, which he'd promptly spent on Nevada prostitutes and some high-rolling hours at Harrah's roulette wheel.

The edict about buying all the cars on the list, no matter what, matched the info Robert and the boys were getting from the field. Reports from Valdosta, Newnan, and Magnolia Springs confirmed that employees of Phil Cheney Automotive had purchased all two hundred cars on the list. Preliminary calculations put the total amount paid at 210 thousand. That left forty for transport.

"All roads led back to Cheney," Dumbrowski said. "He's got to be in Eddie Delacroix's pocket."

"Easy there, Sluggo," Ty said. "That's the same kind of thinking that had you springing Troy Slackherd on a wing and a prayer."

Dumbrowski squared his shoulders for a fight, but didn't get the chance. A forensic accountant charged into the office and demanded a meeting with the team.

Robert patted Happy on the back of the hand and said: "Don't go anywhere now."

"No problem, Redball. Anything I can do to help. You know me, Happy's always happy. That's my motto. Just ask anybody . . ."

Ty slammed the door with Happy still jabbering away.

In the short hallway walk between the interview suite and the conference room they had to step around a half dozen makeshift offices consisting of card tables covered with laptop computers and reams of files.

"I guess we need to add the Knot Spackle wing to this building, huh?" Johnny Pea said with a grin.

Withers and Dumbrowski didn't respond. Both failed to see the humor.

Johnny Pea drove the needle a little deeper. "You think the director would put that in next year's budget? I'm sure Knot would be available for a ribbon-cutting ceremony."

"Whose side are you on?" Dumbrowski said.

"Our side," Johnny Pea said.

"Now, now," Robert said. "There'll be plenty of time for blame."

The accountant opened the conference room door and waved them all in with a grand hand gesture that accentuated the fact that his suit was too small. Inside, Robert noticed a table covered with sales printouts, tax receipts, and title transfers.

"The first thing that jumped out was the margins," the accountant said. "The P and E's were all out of whack for a car dealer."

"The what?" Ty asked.

"Profit-to-equity ratio," Johnny Pea offered.

"Whoa, look at the brain on our man Johnny Pea," Ty said.

"Just doing my part."

"Ahum." The accountant didn't even pretend to be actually clearing his throat.

"Sorry," Ty said.

"Anyway," the accountant continued, "usually, you look for the profit-to-equity ratio number to decrease over time. The dealer buys more than he sells—we call that inventory creep—and he builds buildings too big for his sales

volume. Before you know it, he's got a lot of money tied up in hard assets, but his profits haven't gone up accordingly."

They all nodded as though they knew this, and such an elementary explanation was unnecessary. But, no, no, he should continue for the benefit of the others.

"With Phil, we found exactly the opposite," he said. "Even though he's continued to add fixed long-term depreciable assets . . ."

"Long what?" Dumbrowski whispered to Robert.

"New buildings," Robert said.

The accountant didn't miss a beat. "He's averaged two new dealerships a year for the past six years, even through the recession. That's a lot of brick-and-mortar. Plus he's kept them fully stocked. You'd expect that to put a serious drain on profits."

"But it hasn't?" Robert said.

"No. Cheney Automotive's profit-to-equity ratio has gone up."

They all looked at each other. Nobody wanted to ask what that meant, although they were all thinking it.

Their blank expressions must have spoken for them. The accountant jumped in with a quick explanation. "Phil's dealerships show a higher profit margin per dollar of investment than any retail automotive operation in the world," he said. "And it ain't because he's Lee Iacocca." The accountant gave a wry smile after that last comment.

"Phil spends more and makes more," Ty said.

"Exactly," the accountant said. "That can work for a year or two, but capital investment eventually puts a drain on profits, even if your sales continue to increase."

"Think on a small scale," Robert said to the group. He'd gotten it, and wanted to put the accounting jargon in laymen's terms. "If a store adds a wing, even if sales go up, the cash for the expansion puts a drain on profits."

“Right,” the accountant jumped in. “But in the case of Cheney Automotive, the company added three to six dealerships a year while profits continued to rise.”

“So, do we know where Phil’s profit comes from?” Ty asked.

“I think we do now.” The accountant passed copies of a spreadsheet around the table. “We ran title reports and vehicle histories of a random sample of cars sold through Cheney Automotive. The sample was large enough to all but eliminate any margin for error. Here’s what we found.”

Robert read the report twice. The room was silent for a full minute. Finally, Robert said, “Is this right?”

The accountant smiled. “Beautiful when it all comes together, isn’t it?”

Chapter 25

They waited until midday on Sunday, a date and time when they knew exactly where Phil Cheney could be found. It was Robert's second trip to Pocono speedway in three days after having been away from the place for almost ten years. That kind of travel schedule had driven him crazy when he was racing. Back and forth, up and down, living out of a duffel bag and Dopp kit, wondering if your toothbrush was in the motor coach, the hotel room, or sitting on the vanity at home. Chartered jets made it easier, but it was still travel. No matter how nice the accommodations, it wasn't home. The year he retired, the stockcar season ran from Valentine's Day to the last weekend in September with Easter and Mother's Day off. Now they raced until Thanksgiving. That meant traveling thirty-odd weekends a year, out on Thursday, back on Sunday night, in the shop on Tuesday, and off to sponsors' events on Wednesday. The fame was great, and he wasn't about to complain about the obscene sums of money he'd earned, but days like today reminded him why he'd hung up the race suit.

Going anywhere near a racetrack on a stockcar Sunday was like trying to get close to the pope. Two hundred thousand people would filter into the Pocono speedway before noon. A quarter of them would be three sheets to the wind

before the green flag fell. The carnival had come to town, and every fan from Altoona, Pennsylvania, to Elmira, New York, was there to see it.

Johnny Pea had never been to a race. Withers would neither confirm nor deny any previous attendance. Ty had been to Charlotte Speedway several times, but this was his first away game. It was an experience none of them would soon forget. Nobody spoke as Robert wove the Suburban through the parade of cars and campers, past the tents, the giant beer-can balloons, the hand-painted signs, and checkered-flag-waving vendors selling everything from customized sunglasses to condoms.

The first utterance came from Dumbrowski who said, "Oh . . . my . . . god." He was looking at the hairiest back he'd ever seen. The man had long hair, a beard, and a black forest of hair on every square centimeter of his torso except for one small, shaved area on his back where someone had shaved the number seven. The man, like a large percentage of the patrons meandering toward the gates, carried a Salem Cup cooler in one hand and an open adult beverage in the other. In the case of the partially shaved Junior fan, the beverage of choice was a pint can of Pabst Blue Ribbon. Others carried Budweiser and Miller Lite, a few Buschs and a Schlitz or two. This was not a Heineken crowd.

Partisanship among the faithful became more evident as they crept closer to the infield entrance. Three couples sporting Junior Senior Jr. attire engaged in some verbal jousting with a family of Jett Jordan fans. The wife, who had her hand on the shoulder of a wide-eyed prepubescent boy, seemed none too pleased by this development or by the fact that her choice of a red and blue 22 blouse had contributed to the verbal confrontation. Her husband, on the other hand, reveled in the battle, shouting things like "Just win baby" and "jealousy's an ugly thing, but so is your wife" at his opponents, who were a little more colorful, if

less creative, in their language. A few fans of other denominations joined in with less enthusiasm. The big rift seemed to be between Junior and Jett fans, who were distinct in both their loyalty and backgrounds. Jett's people looked like they'd driven their minivans to the race after spending Saturday at youth soccer. No shaved backs here. Junior's folks had piled into whatever truck wasn't on blocks in front of the trailer.

To get to the infield gate, Redball had to maneuver the Suburban along the outskirts of the official merchandising area, a virtual mall of customized trailers, hinged on one side like sideshow acts at the local fair. Like a majority of vehicles on the immediate outskirts of the track, the trailers screamed allegiance to one driver or another. Paint schemes, flags, and merchandise displays that would have made Nieman Marcus blush with envy removed all doubt about which driver the shoppers at a particular trailer would be supporting. STOCKCAR also had a couple of trailers. The league logo had become almost as popular as some of the drivers. Dodge had a tent as well. A good crowd gathered in front of a small tent with a giant neon blue pill turning on an overhead pole like a rotisserie chicken. This was the marketing booth for the latest erectile dysfunction medication. Fans would be disappointed to learn that free samples were not available.

The most popular trailer was one sporting a portrait none of the agents recognized. "Who's that?" Withers asked.

"That is Junior Senior Sr.," Robert said.

"Isn't he dead?"

"Yep."

"And they still sell his stuff?"

"To the tune of about a million dollars a weekend."

"Sort of macabre, isn't it?"

"Some might call it loyal," Robert said. "Most drivers

today have between six and twelve licensing deals—you know, shirts, cars, sunglasses, that sort of thing. My last three years, I had five licensing contracts, and that was considered huge. When Junior died, he had a total of fifty-three licensing agreements. The only people in history who have had more are Elvis Presley, Arnold Palmer, and Babe Ruth.”

Redball turned the Suburban onto the incline leading to the infield tunnel. Security made a cursory check of the vehicle and handed out “hot” passes to the agents. These were all-access credentials, something their badges and federal IDs wouldn’t get them at a stockcar race. The credentials were housed in clear plastic sleeves with STOCK-CAR-logoed straps to be placed around the holder’s neck. Miles Hinton had taken care of them. Robert still had his “hard card,” a permanent credential given out to team members, media, wives (assuming the driver’s approved) and ex-drivers who still garnered VIP status. Redball Redding qualified.

“Great to see you again, Redball,” the security guard said as he waved them through.

“Thanks,” Robert said as he drove down the ramp, under the track, and into the infield of the Pocono speedway.

The scene inside was a compressed version of what they’d witnessed on the road. Motor coaches of every size, shape, and configuration lined the grass portions of the infield in rows too numerous to count. One such coach had concert-sized speakers mounted at the front and rear blaring steel guitars, fiddles, and a county singer who belted the words: “*Titties and beer . . . titties and beer . . . thank god I’m not queer . . . titties and beer.*”

“Is he singing what I think he’s singing?” Johnny Pea asked. Perhaps he was missing something in the twang.

“Sounds pretty clear to me,” Ty said. “And they give the brothers a hard time for rap.”

A verse extolling the virtues of wet T-shirts and kegs faded into the background as the Suburban wove through the mass of humanity in the infield. A horseshoe game could be seen near a row of Winnebagos, and some college-aged kids were throwing a football over a line of Sea Breezes. Robert dodged all pedestrians—a feat that would become more difficult as the day progressed and the alcohol consumption increased. This time of day it wasn't that tough to follow the directions of the red-vested attendants pointing toward the parking lot adjacent to the garages. Once parked, the agents hung their credentials around their necks and followed Robert to the STOCKCAR trailer where Miles Hinton awaited their arrival.

Miles bulldog expression hadn't changed in ten years. He glared at the FBI agents with the same contemptuous scowl he gave to a stumbling drunk. "I'm concerned about a perp-walk out here," he said. "We've only handed out three hundred media credentials."

Robert assured him they would be discreet. "If things go the way we hope, the press won't even know we're here," he said.

With that bit of business out of the way, Miles walked them out to the pits where driver introductions were under way for the ThermaCare 500. As each driver's name was called, a Toyota Tundra rolled down the front straightaway with said driver waving from the back like a beauty queen on the Fourth of July. Most were cheered. A few were booed. Jett got a lot of both. Junior brought the house down. But when the track announcer said, "In the thirty-six Band-Aid Chevrolet, please give a Pocono welcome to your points leader, Piston Stackheus," the boo-birds flew their coops.

"What the hell did this guy do?" Withers asked.

"He's leading the points race," Robert said.

"Fans don't want him to win?"

"It's not that. He's a good guy. Most people like him. It's just that Junior is in second place."

"Ah," Withers said. "It's like Sox fans booing the Yankees even if the stripes are playing the Cuban All-Stars."

"Pretty close. It wouldn't matter who was leading; if Junior was close, this crowd would boo anybody standing between their fair-haired boy and his first championship."

"His name is Piston?" Withers asked.

"Peter," Robert said, "but even his mother calls him Piston."

"Anybody shorten it to Piss?" Johnny Pea asked.

"Not unless they want a wrench in the temple."

The boos died down after Piston Stackheus rounded turn one, and the announcer introduced Bo Pickett in the number two Smucker's Fruit Jelly Ford. While this was going on, crew chiefs and pit crews stacked tires, checked hoses, put the finishing touches on their fire-retardant over-the-wall suits, and otherwise prepared the pit boxes for the start of another race.

Miles said: "Phil will stay out of here until the race starts. He usually goes to the motor coach sometime in the first ten laps."

"And in the meantime, you want us to be as inconspicuous as possible," Robert said.

"No need to draw any unnecessary attention," Miles said.

"I couldn't agree more."

Robert led his entourage to a spot of asphalt behind Jett's pit. Don Healey and Joe Cummings were chatting up a gaggle of Japanese businessmen wearing white Healey Motor Sports shirts that still had the creases from their freshly opened packages. When Joe saw Robert, it was like he'd found a long-lost brother. He hopped over the small chain barrier segregating the pit stall from the common area be-

hind pit road, and gave Robert his third hug in ten minutes. "What are you doing up here?" Joe said.

"Rescuing you," Robert said, nodding to the Japanese gentleman still hanging on Don's every word.

"Fuji Motors," Joe said. "They're breaking into F-1 race engines. Hoping to make the jump over here."

"Any chance of that happening?"

"Yeah, the same day hell hosts a snowboard race."

"Glad I could be of service," Robert said.

"Me too. Now, what are you doing up here?"

"Came to see a race."

"You know better than to pull that on me."

"Got a little business up here," he said, hoping Joe would drop the subject.

"That mess at Troy's funeral?"

Robert nodded.

"Keep an eye in your mirror this time. I've been to enough hospitals and funerals for a while."

"So have I."

With that Joe stepped back across the chain just in time for the track announcer to ask everyone to rise for the Reverend Braxton Muck's invocation followed by Sheryl Crow singing the National Anthem. Sheryl was touring the country promoting some new pay-per-download service. Stock-car was a great vehicle to drum home the message. She did a magnificent job with the Star Spangled Banner right after Braxton thanked God for the weather, salvation, and the blessings of living in America. As Sheryl hit the "Home of the Brave" notes, a squadron of F-22s from the Pennsylvania Air National Guard screamed overhead in a low-level flyby.

Twenty seconds later, Hall of Fame third baseman Mike Schmidt got things under way with the words they'd all come to hear: "Gentlemen, start . . . your . . . engines!"

Thunder analogies had become almost clichéd in

stockcar racing. But it wasn't until you stood on pit road as forty-three cars fired their engines that the comparison began to make sense. Johnny Pea screamed, "Holy Sh—" but nobody heard the ending. The rest of the agents were too busy covering their ears, and hunching forward as the throaty roar of the engines vibrated through their chests.

Ten minutes later they got another dose when the pace car scurried off the track and the green flag fell. The decibel level doubled.

Withers's eyes were the size of golf balls as the cars entered turn one for the first lap of the race. Johnny Pea and Dumbrowski were too stunned to move.

Robert rubbed his nose as the pungent aroma of high-octane exhaust wafted through the pits. Five laps in, he waved his arms to get everyone's attention. He twirled a finger overhead. Time to move out. They had some unpleasant business ahead.

"Pole sitter Rusty Twain remains your early leader, but he's got some serious challengers. Jett Jordan was almost four-tenths of a second faster on that last lap. At that pace, Jordan should catch Twain in the next couple of laps.

"Another car to watch is the thirty-four car of Bobby Camber. The Healey cars are fast early. Jett Jordan and his teammate Bobby Camber are moving up the pack, even though Camber did not run well in practice yesterday. Camber's got it working today as he passes Mudfish Dupree and Tony Swagger to take over the fifth spot."

Dirk Manley's exited voice could be heard from any of a thousand radios in the infield. The black-and-white custom Marathon motor coach owned by Junior Senior Racing was no exception. Bose cube speakers belted out Dirk in all his glory as Redball and company made their way under the canopy and through the side door of the million-dollar

house-on-wheels. Miles led the way. As expected, Phil was sitting in one of the captain's chairs with a tumbler in his hand and a scowling lawyer at his side. He had been expecting them.

After a couple of strained introductions, Dumbrowski set the tone by invading the attorney's space. He stood six inches from his side, hovering over him like a nun at Catholic school. Withers joined the fray by pulling a folding chair directly in front of Phil and sitting in a way that their knees almost touched.

"Is this really necessary," the lawyer said.

"You betcha," Dumbrowski said.

"You know why we're here, don't you, Mr. Cheney?" Withers asked.

Phil rattled the ice in his drink, and licked his lips. "I don't know if I need to say anything," he finally managed to squeak.

"Doesn't really matter," Dumbrowski said. "You're going out of here in cuffs one way or the other. We have you on so many counts of insurance fraud and conspiracy that you'll be the lead on every national newscast. The only thing you can do now is improve our mood."

"Don't be so melodramatic," the lawyer said. "If you're going to charge him, get it over with so we can organize a surrender and move this along."

"There won't be any organized surrender," Robert said. "Not this time."

"But common courtesy would dictate . . ."

"Common courtesy went out the window when someone tried to kill my wife," Robert snapped.

"I had nothing to do with—"

"Shut up, Phil," his own lawyer yelled, putting a hand on Phil's trembling knee.

"Yeah, Phil, shut up," Robert said. "There's nothing I'd love more than to parade your sorry ass out of here in

handcuffs, me on one arm and Agent Dumbrowski on the other. The media center is right around the corner. I can have cameras rolling in a matter of minutes.”

Robert saw Miles wince at mention of the media, but the big man kept his mouth shut. He was playing along.

Phil missed the cup holder and spilled his drink all over his leg and the plush carpet. “Oh, Christ Jesus.”

For a moment the only sounds in the motor coach were the roar of the cars as they entered turn three, and Dirk’s excitable voice proclaiming a “three-wide race for fourth as they enter the back straightaway.”

Then Withers opened his briefcase and removed a stack of documents. One was a warrant for Phil’s arrest. The others were documents the forensic accountants had prepared late Saturday night for this meeting.

“Let me tell you what we know,” Robert said. He rocked on his toes and casually put his arm on one of the custom walnut cabinets. “We know that an extraordinary number of cars sold and financed through Phil Cheney Automotive end up being stolen. Some are stolen off the lot; some are stolen from your happy customers’ driveways; and some are hijacked off car carriers before they ever make it through your gates. But the theft rate of cars that have connections to your dealerships approaches fifty times the national average. Now, if all of these cars had been stolen directly from your lots, our FBI buddies would have grown suspicious, wouldn’t you FBI buddies?”

Withers nodded.

Dumbrowski jutted his jaw and said, “Damn right we would.”

“But the cars don’t vanish from your property, Phil. A happy couple in Toledo has their car boosted; a stockbroker in Manhattan comes out of 21 to find his Lexus missing; and nobody connects the dots, because nobody sees that both vehicles were purchased from Phil Cheney Au-

tomotive, especially if they've come from dealerships in different states. Feel free to fill in any blanks, Phil."

Phil squirmed and said nothing. He looked like he was dying to pee, which suited Robert just fine. The more uncomfortable Phil Cheney was, the better.

"So, anyway," Robert continued, crossing his legs and propping up against the kitchen table. "All these cars that you have either sold or are about to sell end up stolen. The insurance companies pay off, but they don't draw the connection either, because none of the claimants seem to have anything in common. The stockbroker doesn't even know the nice couple in Toledo. What the victims—the folks who've had their cars snatched—and the insurance companies didn't realize was that all of these cars were financed through a dozen or so holding companies that trace back to you, Phil. You were the financing agent, so when the insurance paid off, any outstanding balance owed on the cars went to you."

"Where are we going here, Mr. Redding?" Phil's lawyer was obviously being paid hourly, and a few shrill bleats were necessary to keep up appearances.

"We're going to the next piece in this elaborate jigsaw puzzle, which is the miraculous reappearance of all of these stolen cars. Every month, Phil, you send an army of well-funded buyers to car auctions around the country. But you don't buy just any cars. You only buy those cars you already owned once, cars that were stolen, stripped, and reclaimed. Again, this doesn't raise any red flags, because you're a car dealer. You're supposed to buy cars at auction. Nobody bothers to check the vehicle histories to see that you owned all these cars once before, because nobody cares. The insurance companies are so thrilled to get the cars off their books, they don't look twice at who's buying them."

"So far I haven't heard any accusation that is outside the bounds of lawful business practices," the lawyer said.

“Sit tight, F. Lee, we’re getting there,” Robert said. “So, Phil, your lawyer’s right: if all you did was buy cars you had once owned, cars that, through the worst luck known to man, were all stolen out from under their owners’ noses, then you would be well within the law. We wouldn’t be up here disrupting your race-day experience. But that’s not all that happened, is it?”

Again Phil said nothing. The wet pants leg started shaking.

“Ty, would you hand me one of those sales reports,” Robert said.

“Why sure,” Ty said. He whipped out the report as if he were unsheathing a sword, and handed it to Robert.

“Gee, Phil, it says right here in this sales report—your sales report, from your office—that you’ve sold the same Volkswagen Jetta four times. Darn the luck, each time you sold it, the car was stolen within a couple of months. The first time, a secretary at Wachovia had just paid for a month’s worth of parking at a downtown garage when the car was stolen from the upper deck. Time two, it was a college student who went in to Kentucky Fried Chicken for one of those breast-and-two-veggie meals. When the kid came out, the car was gone. Third time, a doctor from Bali doing his residency at Charlotte Medical had the Jetta stolen from the street outside the hospital. The fourth time . . . this one a real beauty . . . the fourth time the car was snatched out of the parking lot of a retirement home from a seventy-year-old grandmother. Each time, you bought it back at auction for pennies on the dollar. The first time, you bought it back for four hundred dollars. Oddly enough, you sold it a month later for eleven thousand dollars. It was stolen again; you bought it again, this time for three hundred fifty dollars; and within three months, you sold it again for ninety-nine hundred dollars. How is that possible Phil?”

"I'm going to have to advise my client not to answer that," the lawyer said.

"Are you sure?" Robert said. "Because this has happened hundreds, maybe thousands, of times, if our numbers are accurate. Surely, Phil would like to expound on the secret of his unbelievable success."

"Better not," Phil mumbled as he rocked back and forth in the captain's chair.

"Good," Withers said. "Racketeering, conspiracy, and fraud are slam-dunks. Multiple counts of each, you're looking at ninety years, Federal. Mr. Redding and Mr. Johnson are here for the murders. With a law enforcement officer dead, old Phil here needs to pick a vein for the needle."

"What?" Phil said, suddenly sitting more upright.

"You can't be serious," the lawyer jumped in. "You can't believe my client killed a police officer."

"He didn't pull the trigger," Robert said, "but he killed him."

"No," Phil said as he dropped his chin and shook his head. "No . . . I . . . didn't know . . . Oh, Jesus."

"Tell us what you do know, Phil," Robert said.

"In exchange for what?" the lawyer interrupted again.

"In exchange for I-don't-know. It depends on what he says. But the decision makers are sitting in this room. It's now or never, Phil. Your choice."

Tears flowed in gushing waves from Phil Cheney's puffy fat eyes. His whole body shook as he gulped sobs. "You gotta know I didn't know . . . Redball . . . You gotta know . . . My poor boy . . . My poor Troy . . . You gotta know."

Robert put a hand on Phil's shoulder. "Just let it all out, Phil. Tell us what happened. We can't help you until you tell us what you know."

They sat pensively as Phil took several deep breaths and

tried to control his sobs. In the background, a smooth voice hit a fever pitch.

“Jett Jordan is your new race leader! After battling Rusty Twain for almost ten laps, Jordan gets by him coming out of turn four for our first lead change of the day. Let’s pause for ten seconds for station identification. You’re listening to the STOCKCAR Racing Network!”

Chapter 26

Despite some half-hearted protests from his lawyer, Phil sang like Shania Twain on Super Bowl Sunday. His first utterances, after gulping a few sobs, were the words 90 percent of lawbreakers used when faced with the inevitability of their guilt: “I didn’t mean it,” he said. “I swear to god, I didn’t mean for it to get like this.”

As in most cases of fraud involving seemingly reputable businessmen, Phil Cheney’s foray into the underworld sprouted from the seeds of desperation. He wasn’t really a crook—or so he convinced himself—not in the classic stick-up sense, anyway. Even today, years after his first scam, he thought of himself as a legitimate, hard-working, self-made, blood-and-guts entrepreneur who had been forced to take a temporary detour off the ethical pavement. Deep down, he knew he would do the right thing and make good on his indiscretions, someday. It was just a matter of time.

“The whole thing started with that damned recession in the early nineties, the one Saddam had caused by annexing Kuwait the same month half the S&L’s in America spiraled down the toilet,” Phil said, his indignation rising with each word. “I couldn’t control those events, and they certainly shouldn’t drive me out of business. I busted my rump getting where I got. I’m a mill worker’s son from

Cowpens, South Carolina, and I built a damn good business by working my ass off. My cousins sold a strip of their peach orchard to the state for a new highway and subdivided the rest to an outlet mall, a Dairy Queen, and a Flying J Truck Stop. They used to laugh at me, telling me a bullshitter would never do nothing but shovel bullshit. Well, I showed them. I could buy their goddamn farm twenty times over. Hell, I even got asked back to speak at Cowpens High School, the same school my teachers swore I'd be mopping someday. It was not my fault the S&L that financed half my inventory was run by a bunch of shysters. And it sure as hell wasn't my fault when the economy tanked and yuppies stopped buying used Saab 900 Turbos."

Robert nodded and tried to appear sympathetic. Yes, yes, Phil, you poor pitiful victim, it wasn't at all your fault. Saddam and those evil savings-and-loan crooks forced you to into committing fraud and racketeering.

No telling how many hours of sleep ole Phil had lost during that difficult six-month period. Notes were coming due; collectors were calling all hours of the day and night; the phone company had cut service to one of his lots on two separate occasions; and the loan officers he'd counted on to work out his cash flow issues were standing before grand juries and taking the Fifth. He would have sold a lot or two if he could have found a buyer, but the world had crawled into a bunker. Those who hadn't lost their jobs were scared shitless that they might be next. Consumer confidence had tanked. Oil prices were on the rise. Money was tighter than Dick's hatband. The last thing consumers wanted was another used car.

"You gotta understand what I was going through," he said. "I'd stopped answering my phone. We couldn't make payroll. I was ruined."

Robert tried to pay attention, but the sounds of engines

slowing in unison distracted him. The race was under caution. Probably a spinout in the tunnel turn, a narrow 80-degree curve with only 8 degrees of banking. Robert had crumpled his share of right front fenders on the outside wall of that turn. Every driver who pushed himself on this track had wrecked in that turn at one time or another.

"I was less than a week from bankruptcy," Phil said. "To call me desperate would have been underselling it by a good bit."

Then Phil's story got interesting. "I was at the end of the line one night at Joe Don's Western Tavern. I had my thirty-eight in the car. All I needed was a little liquid courage, and I was going to pack it in."

He didn't because, like a phoenix in the night, Phil's salvation came to him in the dingy light of that dirty bar. He was on his third shot of Maker's Mark when a tired forty-something woman with platinum hair and way-too-tight jeans bellied up next to him and asked if he'd buy her a drink. One thing led to another, and, either out of temptation or desperation, Phil took the woman named Lucinda to the Mountain View Motel where he spilled his guts to her between sweaty romps on the cheap, scaly sheets.

"What'll it take to turn it around?" Lucinda asked.

Phil laughed. "Shy of it raining money, I don't know," he said. "Maybe if I sold a dozen cars in the next couple of days, twenty in the next week, but hell I got inventory that's been on my lots for months."

"I got a brother who'll take a few cars off your hands," Lucinda said. Phil's heart leaped into his throat. Maybe Lucinda's brother was a wealthy rancher who needed a fleet of vehicles for his spread, or maybe he owned a software company and had sales reps in need of transportation.

His momentary euphoria gave way to familiar depression when Lucinda explained that her brother, Lee Jon, was a two-time loser who ran a chop shop in Greenville.

“He’ll steal as many as you want,” she said. “You collect the insurance, and Lee Jon strips the cars. Everybody wins.”

At first, Phil had turned her down flat, but after more shots of Maker’s Mark and more of Lucinda’s fellatio, the idea didn’t seem half bad. There were problems. Phil was so behind on his insurance premiums that his carrier probably wouldn’t pay. Even if they did, they’d turn the place upside down investigating.

“No sweat,” Lucinda said. “Just give the cars to me and a few friends.”

“How the hell’s that gonna work?”

“Easy,” she said. “You sell me and some of my running buddies the cars on a no-money-down financing deal. We get them insured, and then Lee Jon steals them. It’s easier for him, because he don’t have to break into one of your lots. We give him extra keys, and he just takes them out of drive-ways or parking lots or wherever. Insurance pays us, and we pay you. My gals split Lee Jon’s profits from the chop jobs.”

This could work, Phil thought. As long as Lucinda and her friends spread out their insurance coverage over four of five different carriers, nobody should figure this out.

After a few more protests from his lawyer and a formal Miranda warning from special agent Withers, Phil said, “I couldn’t believe how easy it was. A few dummy contracts, and we were rolling. We started out with twenty cars. Insurance paid blue book on every one. I made payroll and got current with the power company. But you got to understand, I never intended for this to become part of my business. It was supposed to be a stopgap, something to keep me afloat till the economy turned around.”

Lee Jon and Lucinda had different ideas. It seemed that a bad economy had an impact on illegal commerce as well. Lee Jon was having trouble finding a market for the parts

he'd stripped off Phil's cars. "I got too much inventory," he told Phil, who responded by saying, "Jesus, Lee Jon, it didn't cost you anything. What do you care?" Lee Jon complained about labor costs, and space, and Phil pointed out that he worked out of an abandoned chicken house. This Wharton School wrangling went on for an hour or so until Lee Jon proposed a new wrinkle to their arrangement, one that would seal Phil Cheney's fate.

Most of the scam remained unchanged. Phil would continue to sell cars to straw buyers in little towns throughout the south, who, in turn, would insure said vehicles through their local agents. The vehicles would then be stolen and stripped by Lee Jon and his band of bozos. But rather than burn and scrap the remains of his booty, Lee Jon's new plan required him to leave the shells of the stripped cars reasonably intact, and in locations where they would be spotted and identified. They had to make sure the cars were wiped clean of prints, but that was no big deal. The insurance companies would pay in full, and take possession of the stripped car bodies, which would be hauled off to auction. Phil, having already collected blue book value on the cars, would buy back the shells at auction. Lee Jon would reinstall the original parts his crew had removed, and just like that, Phil would have free and clear title to laundered stolen cars.

"Our first one was a Camero," he said. "I wasn't sure how it was going to work out, but shit it was easy. We financed the car to one of Lucinda's drinking buddies, a gal named Soozie Swoon. Lee Jon stole it within a week. Two weeks later, I got an insurance check for my sticker price. Lee Jon stripped the damn thing down to the frame, so when Southern Auctions put it up, I bought it back for a hundred fifty dollars. Lee Jon put all the parts back in the thing, and I was able to sell it a second time for fourteen thousand."

"Helluva profit," Dumbrowski said.

"You bet," Phil said. "Even after splitting it with Lee

Jon and Lucinda, there was no way I could ever turn those kinds of numbers selling cars straight up.”

“But you ran the same scam with the same cars,” Robert said. “The Volkswagen went through your system four times.”

“I’m not proud of that part,” Phil said, implying he was damn proud of the rest of it.

He initially feared that the insurance companies would catch on, especially if the same car showed up stolen two to three times. But those fears proved unfounded. Folks at the insurance companies weren’t nearly as smart as Phil had assumed. As long as he camouflaged the financing by using different corporate names, and sold the cars through different dealerships, nobody hinted at being suspicious. He and Lee Jon began laundering stolen cars so fast that Phil had trouble keeping up with the paperwork. They ran out of friends to front the straw purchases, so they had to turn on legitimate buyers. Phil financed cars to people who couldn’t have gotten conventional credit if they’d signed over their firstborn. Then he provided Lee Jon with master keys. Once Lee Jon absconded with the cars, Phil called in the notes. This was another part Phil wasn’t proud of. He felt horrible, especially when the poor slobs showed back up at his doorstep, on foot, with babies in their arms and tears in their eyes. He couldn’t pull the scam more than once on the same person, so he had to turn the bad debtors down the second time through. That was when he began to sense that things had gone too far. But by then it was too late.

The partnership with Lee Jon and Lucinda was tenuous at best. Both sides covered their expenses (which they both padded) and the remaining profits were split evenly. And they were huge. Less than a year after their new venture launched, the economy came roaring back, the Peace Dividend kicked in, the stock market took off, and good times

rolled once more. Volume at Phil Cheney Automotive tripled in a matter of months. Since insurers had already paid for a good portion of the cars, every penny Phil made was profit. He was able to pay off all his loans, and open three more dealerships debt free. By the end of the decade, Phil was the largest-volume used car dealer in the world.

He also had a new partner, one that made him pine for the good old days of Lee Jon and Lucinda.

It turned out Lee Jon had a few extracurricular activities that included plastic, rubber, leather, and multiple females of varying ages. All trails in the fulfillment of those needs led to the Delacroixs, who had their hands in every kinky sex-for-hire outfit east of Amarillo. It didn't take long for one of Eddie Delacroix's girls to uncover the source of Lee Jon's seemingly bottomless income. A week later, Lee Jon and his partner and sister, Lucinda, vanished from the face of the earth, leaving behind a small stack of unopened bills, a half-full liquor cabinet, a chicken house full of engine blocks, and one of the most profitable auto theft operations in the country.

Phil wasn't heartbroken over his partners' disappearance. This was a chance for him to straighten up, stop pressing his luck, and put the business back on the right side of the law. He was wealthy now, an icon in the industry, with his own airplane, real estate holdings, civic awards, and seats on various boards. He even had a new girlfriend; the widow of racing hero Junior Senior Sr. She didn't have the sexual imagination of someone like Lucinda, but she made up for it with an edge and carriage that swept Phil off his feet. Plus, Dolores Senior had a son from a far-off marriage, a boy Phil fell for the moment they met. He'd always wanted a son, an heir, someone who would watch baseball with him, sit in the office next to his and listen to his silly jokes—someone to carry on the legacy

Phil had worked so hard to create. Sometimes he wasn't sure if he'd married Dolores out of romantic love for her, or paternal love for Troy. Either way, his life was finally on track.

Then Sonny Delacroix showed up, and Phil's worries expanded exponentially. The Delacroixs had taken over Lee Jon and Lucinda's businesses, or so the pudgy, well-dressed dude with slick hair told Phil. That included the deal with Phil Cheney Automotive. Sonny would be running the chop shops, but the rules were changing again. In addition to stealing the cars sold by Phil Cheney Automotive, which was the nucleus of the scam, the Delacroixs planned to diversify. Inventory would now come from a variety of sources, including but not limited to: hijacked car carriers, "misplaced" cargo from loading docks, drive-ways, valet lots, and new and used dealerships from as far away as California and Canada. Phil's sales records would still be a valuable mining source, but the new partners would decide which vehicles made the list.

Some of Phil's cars would be placed on ships bound for exotic places in the Middle East. Of course, they would never arrive. The sheiks buying these cars didn't exist. It was just an elaborate expansion of the original scam. Lloyds and Prudential proved to be easier marks than Carolina Teachers and Farmer's Insurance and the other fly-by-nights he'd ripped off. His new partners created phony buyers, and handled the logistics of getting the cars on and off the boats. They also provided funding to buy the shells back at auction. As Sonny told Phil during one of their first meetings: "You got cars you need washed; we got cash we need washed."

Phil had been too terrified to protest. Soon, cars and cash were flowing like rain. He had no idea where the vehicles came from. He didn't want to know. The less he knew about his new partner the better. Sonny was a violent

man. Phil realized that the moment they first met. He had shark black eyes, and jaw muscles that twitched like a carnivore chewing its prey.

He also had a hair-trigger temper. Phil had only seen Sonny wig out once, but once was enough. It happened after a Saturday auction in Knoxville. The buyer had let two cars on his list go to other bidders after a bunch of drunks got in a pissing contest and ran the bids up to five and six thousand dollars on cars that shouldn't have gone for more than a grand. Sonny beat the buyer over the head with a tire iron, drew a nine-millimeter automatic from his belt, and shot the poor kid in the ass. Then he tracked down the fools who had been brazen enough to outbid his man. One was burned to death in his kitchen. A second was discovered in his garage with his mouth duct-taped to the exhaust pipe of a still-running Jeep Grand Cherokee. The third simply vanished, never to be seen or heard from again.

Ty jotted down the details of Phil's story. Chances were pretty good that those murders remained unsolved. He would check the database when he got back to the office.

"Seems extreme," Robert said.

"Ya think?" Phil's shaking leg went into overdrive. "This guy's a psycho in the first degree. I said to him, it's just three cars, why not just sell the parts and be done with it? He went nuts. I thought he was gonna strangle me on the spot. He said, 'We make thirty percent more on a running vehicle than we do on piecemeal parts. Plus, we might want to steal that one again. One car is an income stream. A single transaction don't cut it.' I think he'd read 'income stream' in a book or something, because he said it three or four times. Then he said, 'We don't let cars go.' After that, we didn't."

Withers pored over the sales records. So far every part of Phil's story checked out against the information the forensic accountants had put together. In hindsight, it was hard

to see how this had been missed. During one year, Phil's profits exceeded the book value of every car he had in inventory. In other words he was running at more than one hundred percent efficiency. As long as he paid his taxes, nobody blinked.

"Tell us about Troy," Robert said, getting to the meat of the matter from his perspective.

"I tried to keep Troy out of it," Phil said. The leg stopped shaking and he put folded hands in his lap. "He was my son, for god's sake. I didn't want him involved, especially with a nut job like Sonny Delacroix. But he was not the idiot his mother made him out to be. Once I made him a vice president, it took him two weeks to figure out what was going on."

"And?" Robert said.

"And, he wanted to help. He jumped in headfirst. I wanted to protect him, and it turned out he protected me. Within a month, he was dealing directly with Sonny. He wanted to take me out of the loop. He knew how much I hated talking to that crazy bastard."

"What did Troy and Sonny do together?" Dumbrowski asked. Troy's connection to the Delacroixs perked him up.

"Logistics mainly. Sonny would tell Troy which cars we were supposed to buy, and Troy would pick up the cash from Sonny. The last week of every month, Troy'd come into my office with a list of VINs and a bag of money. I would dole out the cash to my buyers and split up the list."

"So, Troy's connection to the Delacroixs came through you?" Dumbrowski said to Phil.

Phil hung his head and gave a slight nod.

"Was he also involved in their drug smuggling operations?" Dumbrowski was desperate for some portion of Troy's immunity statement to be true. So far he was striking out.

Phil looked up and frowned. "No, no way," he said.

"Troy was big-time opposed to drugs. His real father's in prison for life for running dope. I think Troy blamed a lot of his early hardships on dope. He even had one of my salesmen arrested once for having a joint in his desk drawer."

Dumbrowski chewed his lip and muttered something that sounded like, "lying little shit."

"So Troy became your middleman," Robert said.

"It wasn't my doing. Troy took the job and ran with it."

"Anyway, why did Troy steal a truckload of dye-cast cars from Trackside? Was Sonny Delacroix getting into the collectable business?"

"I told Troy not to," Phil said. "I told him Sonny was just screwing with us. I even told him I would buy a frigging truck."

"Whoa, whoa, back up," Robert said. "Why did Sonny want the die casts?"

"He didn't. This was never about toys. Sonny wanted a truck. He couldn't have cared less what was in the damn thing. Sonny needed another big rig in Charlotte to transport engine blocks and chopped cars from one garage to the other. He told Troy to steal one, which wasn't necessary. He was just testing the boy's loyalty."

Phil took a minute to cry over his dead stepson. When he regained his composure, he said: "I told Troy not to do it. I told him I would buy a damn truck. I could have paid cash for five of them, brand-new."

"That's the argument you had in Junior's shop," Robert said.

Phil cocked his head and stared up at Robert. "Yeah, how'd you know?"

"We're the FBI," Dumbrowski interjected without a hint of irony.

"So, Troy stole a truck from Trackside just to satisfy Sonny Delacroix's whim?" Robert asked.

"It was a test. Sonny did shit like that all the time. He would call sometimes and insist that I, personally, go to an auction. No reason. He just liked to remind you whose pleasure you served."

"So, Troy was looking for a truck and decided on Track-side?"

"He knew one of the drivers there. He knew that a truck would be on the lot all night, and he knew their security is for shit. I figure he was in and out in five minutes. The boy was no fool."

"Spoken like a proud papa," Withers said.

That brought on a torrent of tears. They were all growing a bit weary of Phil's blubbering.

"Why kill him?" Robert said.

"I don't know," Phil said. "Maybe Sonny thought he was going to roll on him, which, turns out, was right. I can't believe Troy would turn state's evidence on a connected guy like Sonny Delacroix."

Dumbrowski stared out the coach's window and rubbed his nose. Withers took an interest in Prevost's digital in-dash navigation system.

"But why kill Trooper Padgett and Smith Hybill? And why try to kill me?" Robert asked. "We weren't about to turn on anybody."

Phil raised his hands in a pronounced shrug. "Who knows with this guy? I'm telling you, he's a nut job. Look at him wrong, and he'll shoot your eyes out."

"I don't know how my client could be any more cooperative," the lawyer jumped in. He'd been mesmerized by Phil's story. Now it was time to do whatever he could for his poor client. "What's on the table?"

The agents looked at Robert. This was his call.

"Phil gives us Sonny Delacroix, serves five in federal, and goes into witness protection."

The lawyer knew that this was as good as it was likely

to get. He nodded before consulting with his client. "What does he need to do?"

Robert spent the next several minutes outlining a plan.

Phil nodded and bit his lip, mustering as much courage as his pitiful state would allow. "Whatever you need, Redball," he said. "I'll do whatever you need."

The agents whipped out their trusty cell phones and orchestrated more details. They all agreed that Withers would stay with Phil. The Philadelphia field office would send reinforcements to escort their star witness back to Charlotte. The others would fly back on the charter.

Miles Hinton, who had sat silently in the rear of the motor coach, stood to escort them out. He looked like he'd lost two pints of blood from his face. It wasn't every week that a STOCKCAR executive got this kind of inside look at the world of organized crime.

Robert hit the bottom that opened the hydraulic bus door and the coach filled with the sound of cheers as race engines slowed. The race must have just ended.

"Hey, Redball," Phil said.

"Yeah, Phil?"

"One more thing. I never called Smith Hybill. You might want to check your records on that one. I called Morris the night Troy was taken in, but I never called Hybill."

Robert squinted and tried to determine if Phil was telling him the truth. "Thanks, Phil," he said. "I'll check it out."

He would check a few more things out as well. There were still plenty of unanswered questions.

The sun was a lot brighter than it had been when they'd gone inside. The aroma from the race was stronger as well. And the voice from the Bose speakers was at a fever pitch.

"In another nail-biting finish, Jett Jordan wins the

*ThermaCare 500 by half-a-car-length! What a finish!
What a race!"*

"Hey, Jett won," Johnny Pea said.

Robert smiled. "Welcome to stockcar, Agent Westport. Glad we could convert another fan."

Chapter 27

Sonny took the call in what remained of his warehouse office behind the chop shop. Christian had done a whiz-bang job of gutting the place, citing “security and logistical concerns”—whatever the hell that meant—for removing the computers, file cabinets, and most of the furnishings, as well as the jacks, tools, and workbenches. He’d even taken the rolls of plastic. At an earlier time in his life, Sonny would have broken Christian’s legs and sent him back to Richmond with his jaw wired shut. But this was a kinder, gentler Sunshine Delacroix, a man who had learned to control his impulses and conduct his business in a more civilized manner. Case in point was the call. He’d only said “fuck” three times during his conversation with Phil Cheney, and his only real threat was a half-hearted reference to amputating Phil’s penis and inserting it in the car dealer’s bulbous, gin-spotted nose. That was downright tame given Sonny’s day.

“Who was that?” Christian asked after Sonny hung up.

Sonny closed his eyes and counted to five. It wasn’t enough that this asshole had shut down the porn studio without giving Sonny so much as a courtesy call, Christian Superstar then blew into town like royalty, held hush-hush meetings with all of Sonny’s contacts, and seemed dead set

on dismantling the family's automotive operations, which, Sonny might add, was the most successful of its kind in the world.

Uncle Eddie had put Sonny out front on the car laundering scam, and Sonny had done the best job of his life. The Savannah operation alone spun off millions. Now, Christian Superstar was in town, fucking it all up, just as he'd screwed Sonny so many times before. To top it off, the little shit wanted to know about every call Sonny took.

"Sonny?" Christian said. "The call?"

"Cheney," Sonny said, spitting the word as if it were an epithet.

"What did he want?"

"The stupid fuck wants to meet. Says, we got to talk about all the heat up there."

This either intrigued Christian, or the squint in his eye reflected some gaseous aftermath from the tasty Georgia barbecue he'd enjoyed early that afternoon. He rubbed his chin, and said, "Did he say when and where?"

"Oh, fuck, Christian, you don't expect me to drop everything and head back up there, do you?"

"That wasn't the question, Sonny. Did he suggest a meeting or not?"

"Yeah, he said I should come to Spartanburg with the parts—said the Feds were crawling up his ass, and that it was only a matter of time before bad shit happened."

"He's right," Christian said.

"The fuck," Sonny said.

"Maybe you should meet him. Wouldn't hurt to have you escort the parts up there anyway."

"Who fucking died and made you god?" Sonny yelled. This outburst attracted the attention of a handful of mechanics milling around the half-empty garage. "Where the fuck were you when I was beating a path back and forth to

North Carolina? I didn't see you down here, Christian. What were you doing, blowing some senator?"

"I was doing my job."

"And I was doing mine!"

"And look where we are now," Christian said, waving his arms around the half-empty warehouse.

"Don't put this on me," Sonny said, pointing a menacing finger at Christian's nose. "You're the one padlocking the fucking building. You know you can't shut down an operation like this, and crank it back up like that—" Sonny snapped his fingers to make his point. "You got any idea how hard it is to take the head off a motor? It ain't like popping a beer tab. That's some tedious shit. The guys in here can tear a car down and have it out of here in an hour. You can't shut that shit down and start it back up by flipping a switch."

Sonny slapped the leather top of his antique desk, one of the few remaining fixtures in the spartan office. "This is on you," he said. "Not me, you."

Christian stared at his cousin the way someone might examine a barking Chihuahua. After a moment, he answered in a voice as cold and dispassionate as any Sonny had heard in recent years. "You're right, Sonny," Christian said while staring into the back of Sonny's fluttering eyes. "Sorry for offending you. Eddie believes we should take a break until things settle down."

"A break," Sonny said, shaking his head and giving a sarcastic grin. "Exactly what the fuck are we supposed to do during this break?"

"I believe you should take Mr. Cheney up on his meeting."

"You gotta be fuckin' kidding me? Another trip?"

"We need someone to feel the man out, get a sense for what kind of threat we have here," Christian said. "You know him. You've had dealings. You're the only one who can gauge his disposition."

“Gauge his disposition.”

Christian nodded. “It’s important, Sonny. I know Eddie feels the same way, but we could call him if you’d like.”

“No,” Sonny said. The last thing he needed was another discussion with Uncle Eddie. “I’ll do it. But if the fucker flinches wrong, I’m putting him out of his misery. No more bullshit. Understood?”

“Of course,” Christian said, his mouth barely moving. Wax statues showed more expression, Sonny thought. Then Christian Superstar surprised him. “Take Gilberto with you,” he said.

“Gilberto?”

“Yeah, you’ve got a Guatemalan here named Gilberto, don’t you?”

“How the fuck you know Gilberto?” Sonny asked. Now it was his turn to give a pained, constipated look.

“Eddie speaks highly of him,” Christian said, his face finally revealing what might be loosely construed as a smile. “I think our uncle would be pleased if Gilberto went along.”

Only two *federales* remained in the house. The rest had either gone with the one they called Redball, or filtered out late in the afternoon. If he could catch a break, this might be Jorge’s chance. The gringos had to eat. There was a Hooters five miles away. Jorge had downed a few pitchers and pinched a couple of cute, tight butts there before being invited to leave. If he knew his *federales*, it wouldn’t take long for hunger and hormones to lure them away from the house. All he needed was a little more patience, something his time in Guadalajara had helped him perfect.

Jorge had killed his first man at the ripe old age of sixteen. He’d been a courier for a midlevel opium distributor when one of the dealers who worked for the distributor shortchanged the boss. A hit order went out to all employ-

ees, with a large bonus attached. But while his *compadres* were throwing back shots of tequila and competing over which one of them could tell the biggest lie, Jorge waited patiently across the street from the mud hut that housed his target's mother and siblings. One thing Jorge knew for sure: when a man was desperate and running for his life, sooner or later he would show up at *la casa de madre*. Four days later his patience paid off. The man arrived at his mother's door shortly before sunrise. Jorge had been the only assassin willing to sit in the dust, eating rabbit meat and drinking foul-smelling warm water, and he was the only one in position for the kill. He killed the dealer, the dealer's mother, and a male sibling who couldn't have been more than twelve. He left a six-year-old girl alive to confirm who had slaughtered her family. Jorge didn't want any arguments when he showed up to collect his bounty.

Fifteen years later, patience was still his trademark. He would wait behind the bushes in the Bronco as long as necessary. No need to rush. The *federales* would eventually go home. When that happened, Redball would be his. Honor would be restored.

He stirred in the seat of his truck. A moment later he slumped below the dash to avoid being seen by the driver of a dented old Town Car that lumbered up the road like an ancient battleship. Jorge sat up and took notice when the car turned into the Redding driveway.

He got out of the truck, making sure he remained unseen, and slipped across the street, through the trees, and up the small wooded embankment that segregated the Reddings from public passersby. At the top of the hill, Jorge slumped behind a poplar, and watched as a couple climbed from the front of the Town Car. They were Hispanic, either Dominican or Puerto Rican from their color and the way they dressed and walked. Jorge watched as they took out a painter's drop cloth along with some brushes, rollers, and a

small toolbox. They were maintenance workers or painters! This was his chance.

He slipped back down the hill to the foot of the drive and exposed himself, walking up the driveway with his hands in his pockets as if he'd just stumbled onto the area by accident.

"Hola," he yelled to the couple when he was a few yards away. "¿Como está?"

"¿Quien es usted?" the man said, moving anxiously toward Jorge.

"My name is Jesus," Jorge said. "*Necesito el trabajo . . .* I need work. I can do anything. Painter. Carpenter. Bricklayer. I work hard. I don't drink. You work here, for *Americanos ricos*?"

"Si," the man said. "*Soy Pablo, me esposa, Amelia.*"

"Hola," Amelia said, giving a meek wave.

"We work sometimes for *Señor y Señora Redding*. Today we paint."

"I can paint," Jorge said. "I paint *muy bien*."

"It's only one room, a bathroom," Pablo said. "*Señor Redding* tried to do it himself, but he got busy, so he called us. It's only a one-person job."

"I can come in with you? I see other things I can do? I can do anything." Jorge did his best to summon a couple of tears. He even pulled his lips taut as if trying to fight back a tremble. "Anything," he said again. "*Por favor. Necesito el trabajo, por favor.*"

Pablo and Amelia looked at each other with sad frowns. It hadn't been that long ago that they had been knocking on doors and begging for work. The man was hungry and proud, just as they had been. Pablo especially remembered the humiliation he'd felt as he'd pleaded with one housewife after another, begging to mow their lawns or tend their gardens while Amelia mopped their bathroom floors. They had been lucky to find a family like the Reddings,

who kept them busy and recommended them to enough of their friends that the family now lived in a modest brick apartment in Lowesville. They had food, drink, shelter, and, most importantly, their dignity and self-respect. This man called Jesus deserved no less.

"Come in and look around," Pablo said. "We can't use you today, but maybe soon."

"*Muchos gracias*," Jorge said.

Amelia smiled and patted her new friend Jesus on the back as they walked together through the Redding's front door. This wasn't exactly how Jorge had envisioned entering the house, but it would do. Now he had to figure out how to get back in once Redball returned home.

He pulled his cap down over his eyes and kept his chin down as they walked through the marble foyer. There were still *federales* inside. No doubt his picture had been circulated and memorized. He also knew they wouldn't pay much attention to a Hispanic house painter. Gringos never did.

"It is Pablo, here to paint the bath," Pablo announced to a seemingly empty house. His voice echoed off the stately walls and high ceilings. Redball lived better than many of the wealthy smugglers Jorge had served over the years. Another reason to kill the decadent bastard.

They heard footsteps approach from the rear of the house. A man in blue jogging shorts and a white golf shirt with the letters *F-B-I* embroidered on the chest marched toward them with a hand out like a traffic cop signally them to stop. "Hold it," the *federale* said. "Who are you?"

"I am Pablo," Pablo said. "My wife Amelia, and our friend Jesus."

Jorge nodded, thrilled to be listed a "friend" of the family.

"We are here for Mr. Redding's bathroom. He told us to come as soon as we could."

"It's all right," another voice yelled from somewhere in

the back. Then another man appeared wearing jeans and a similarly logoed FBI golf shirt. "Pablo, right?" the man asked.

Pablo nodded. "Yes, yes," he said.

"Redding said they'd be coming by," the second agent said to the first. "Something about that bathroom."

"The one with two different colors?" the first agent asked, not attempting to hide his smile.

"I guess."

"That's the one," Pablo said. "Mr. Redding, he try, but we have to help, you know?"

Agent Running Shorts nodded and put his hands on his hips. "You need anything?" he asked.

"No, thank you," Amelia said. "We know where everything is."

Jorge hadn't taken his eyes off the tile, and he certainly hadn't given the agents a good look at his face. With no suspicion in their voices, he assumed they hadn't recognized him, and he was home free, so he touched the bill of his cap and gave a little nod as he followed Pablo through the house.

They walked through a posh living area with deep Persian rugs covering wide, polished hardwood planks. The walls were littered with original artwork, some modern, and some traditional. None of it appeared to have been put there to match the furnishings. They meandered past a study that had large antique French doors with beveled leaded panes. Books overflowed from the roseleaf mahogany shelves along two walls, and some trinkets and large trophies lined several countertops on a third. Jorge noticed what appeared to be some toy cars, metal and painted bright colors on the counter in front of four large, gaudy wood and brass trophies that didn't seem to fit the rest of the decor. Also out of place were a fax machine and laptop perched on top of a cherry rolltop desk. Those items looked

government issue and temporary, belonging to the *federales*, or so Jorge assumed.

Beyond the study was a small room with a treadmill, a weight-lifting machine, a few dumbbells, a stationary bike, and a television, a sweat parlor for the idle rich. None of these gringos would survive a week in the fields of Mexico. They wanted to sweat in air conditioning. A quick glance to the rear of the room revealed a closet behind the bicycle that went nowhere. That would be the perfect spot.

"Here it is," Pablo announced as they walked into the bathroom.

"Oh," Amelia said, putting her hand on her mouth. She was laughing at Redball's paint job.

"This won't take long," Pablo announced loudly enough for the agents to hear. He too had a smile on his face. Then he turned his attention to the man he knew as Jesus. "You see, there isn't much for you to do today," he said.

"Si," Jorge said. "I think the yard is best. I saw some trees that need trimming."

"They could use some help there," Amelia said. "We do what we can, but we're usually so busy inside." She raised her hands and shrugged.

"Let me help you get your things inside," Jorge said. "Then you can give me your number."

"*Gracias*," Pablo said, smiling. Doing right by a brother in need warmed his heart. Hopefully, *Señor* Redding would agree to have Jesus trim the trees.

Jorge left the bathroom quickly. "I go out and get your things," he said.

Pablo nodded. But Jorge didn't go out immediately. He detoured through the home gym where he unlocked a lone window only six feet above the ground. He also nudged the window with his shoulder so that it cracked slightly. Then he hustled out to Pablo's car and pulled a drop cloth and toolbox from the backseat.

"*Muchos gracias*," Pablo said as he met Jorge in the driveway. He took out a business card and handed it to Jorge.

Jorge nodded, and took the card.

"Call next week. I will talk to *Señor* Redding when he returns."

"*Gracias*," Jorge said with a huge smile. "This should be perfect."

Redball reclined the seat, closed his eyes, and put his hands behind his head as the Lear leveled off at cruising altitude. The flight from Stroudsburg to Charlotte was a shade less than two hours, which would put him home in time to call the kids before dinner. He couldn't wait to wrap this up, so he could rejoin his family. He took a couple of deep breaths, and replayed the last couple of days in his mind. He was happy about the prospects of taking down the Delacroixs, but there wasn't the thrill he would have expected. All he could think about was Melissa and the kids, where they were, and what they were doing without him.

A little rest might perk him up. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift back to the attack on the road outside the cemetery, and the jolt he'd felt when he'd seen those men spring from the van. Robert had been lucky. The bad guys had the element of surprise, exactly the same asset Robert and his men would use tomorrow when Phil met face-to-face with Sonny Delacroix. But unlike the men in the van, Robert and his band of federal agents wanted to take Sonny alive. He was the key to bringing down the Delacroix family. If they could get him to flip, the entire operation could topple. Unlike the men in the van . . . the men in the van . . .

His eyes sprang open and he bolted upright in his seat. "Did Cheney say anything about speaking to Delacroix last Thursday?"

"What?" Ty asked. He was pecking away on his laptop,

while Johnny Pea and Dumbrowski stared aimlessly out the window.

“Did Phil Cheney call Delacroix on Thursday, the day of Troy’s funeral?”

Ty got out his briefcase and fumbled through some files. “Not from his office, home, or cell phone,” he said after checking the records.

“He wouldn’t have,” Dumbrowski offered. “He’s petrified of the guy. Unless he’s bullshitting us in a big way, he talks to the guy as infrequently as possible. I don’t see him making a call that morning.”

Robert nodded. He agreed with that assessment. Unless Phil was playing them, which wasn’t out of the realm of possibility, he hadn’t called Sonny Delacroix or anyone else the morning of Troy’s funeral. But somebody had. Somebody tipped the shooters off that Robert and Melissa were at the cemetery. Someone had not only called the bad guys, that same someone had done so from the church after Robert announced that he would be attending the graveside service. He had always assumed they would find the person when they found the connection between Troy and the men who’d killed him. But Phil was the connection, and if Phil didn’t make the call, who did?

“We’ve got to call Withers,” Robert said, reaching for the air phone.

“Why?” Dumbrowski asked.

“Either somebody else is involved in this, somebody we haven’t found yet . . .” He picked up the phone and punched a series of numbers.

“Or?” Dumbrowski asked.

“Or we’ve been played by another member of the Slackherd-Senior-Cheney clan.”

Chapter 28

“The lawyer’s gone,” Withers said. “I think he had to take a break and call in reinforcements. The poor guy looked like he’d been hit with a board. We’ve suspended all conversations until the legal cavalry arrives.”

“How many people are with you?” Robert asked.

“Three agents from Philly, and a couple of Penn State Troopers. Why?”

“We’re not sure if Phil fed us a line of crap.”

“Seemed pretty straight-up to me,” Withers said.

“So did Troy when you last met with him.”

Withers said nothing. Robert was right, but bringing it up again was like kicking a man in the teeth after he’d tripped.

Robert felt a little better after hanging up.

“Everything okay?” Ty asked.

“Appears to be.”

“You want to tell us what that was all about?” Dumbrowski asked.

“Has anybody else wondered how the Delacroixs have stayed one step ahead of us? The same morning we cut a deal with Troy Slackherd, they get to him and kill him. One day after we put the screws to J. Smith Hybill, he’s gunned down outside his driveway. A few hours later, Melissa and I

have our little run-in. We barely escape from armed thugs who couldn't have known our whereabouts unless they were tipped off that morning."

They all sat a little straighter, anticipating where Robert was headed.

"So, who knew we were cutting Troy loose, that we were squeezing Smith, and that Melissa and I were going to the graveyard?"

"Pretty small list," Ty said.

Dumbrowski chewed his jaw and said: "Phil Cheney's name stands out."

Sonny oversaw the loading of the trucks in both Savannah and Jacksonville. Engine blocks, radiators, hoses, generators, computers, batteries, transmissions, electronics, seats, wheels, doors, and hoods were tagged, wrapped, and hauled into trailers by a team of illegal immigrants who were paid handsomely to keep their mouths shut. Many wondered if it was worth it, especially on the days Sonny showed up. He ranted and bitched, swearing at everyone and stomping around the warehouses like a mule in heat. Once the trucks were loaded, Sonny cornered the drivers and made ominous threats to their lives and families if anything happened to the cargo. "I'm making this trip," he said. "I'll be watching."

The drivers nodded. A couple of them rolled their eyes. The meathead was driving to Spartanburg. Should make for a fun-filled convoy.

During his treks up and down I-95 between Jacksonville and Savannah, Sonny worked himself into a near frenzy over Christian's intrusions. The punk couldn't be bothered when the dirty work had to be done. He was nowhere to be found when Slackherd had to go, and he was probably stumbling home from some all-night black-tie Washington fuckathon while Jorge and his hired guns were taking out

the lawyer. Now, Christian Superstar was snapping his fingers and ordering Sonny around like some Haitian busboy. It was probably a good thing Sonny was going to Spartanburg. Another day with Christian Superstar and he might lose his model composure.

Gripping the wheel as he got off the Abercorn Expressway and pointed the Mercedes toward his riverfront apartment, Sonny decided that Phil Cheney, for better or worse, wasn't likely to draw another breath after their meeting tomorrow. Phil had been a pain in Sonny's ass since this whole thing started. Sure he owned the dealerships where they channeled the stolen cars, but they had made other arrangements on that front. With the Slackherd idiot out of the way, the only obstacle in completing those arrangements was Phil. They would meet, Sonny would listen to whatever the whiney piss-ant had to say, and then Sonny would kill him, pure and simple, quick and painless, on the spot. Phil was a liability. And one thing Sonny knew how to do was eliminate his liabilities.

He fumbled in his pocket until he found his cell phone. Jorge's number was easy. He'd only called it a hundred times in the last few days. This attempt proved no more fruitful than the others. Jorge didn't answer. He had to be dead. No other explanation. Yet another reason for Phil Cheney to be separated from his life: if it hadn't been for Phil, Jorge would have never set foot in Charlotte.

In fact, Jorge hadn't turned his phone on since parking behind the cluster of trees near the Redding residence. The last thing he wanted or needed at this stage was a distraction. He kept the radio to a minimum as well. He needed to formulate a plan. That required sleep, something he'd done without since beginning his stakeout. So, after scamming his way into the Redding residence as a "friend" of Pablo and Amelia, and unlocking a window for later entry, Jorge

rewarded himself with a healthy nap. When he awoke, his mind was clear and rejuvenated.

Entry would be easy, but when to enter, and what to do once inside still needed to be worked out. As he went through the house again in his mind, the closet in the gym, the room he would enter, stood out as the most functional hiding place. From there, he could get in and out without being seen, and access the master bedroom, bath, study, and kitchen quickly and quietly. Once the *federales* were out of the house, he would enter through the window, hide in the closet, and wait for an opportunity to strike.

He dozed off again as the late afternoon sun warmed the cab of his stolen truck, and the jerky he'd been nibbling nestled in the pit of his stomach. He jolted awake a second time when headlight beams splashed his face. Realizing he'd slept until sundown, Jorge slumped in the seat and watched as Redball and the *federales* returned from their day out. Hopefully it wouldn't be long now. The patient tiger always made the kill.

After a flurry of phone calls, and ad hoc strategy meetings, the team at Redding headquarters turned in for the night with a solid plan for the next morning. They would leave the house at two A.M. and be at Phil Cheney Spartanburg Automotive a few minutes after four. They were to be met there by a tactical operations team out of Columbia, South Carolina. Withers would be there, along with his team from the Philadelphia field office, and of course, the star of the show, Mr. Cheney, himself. The trucks with all the car parts were scheduled to roll in at six. Sonny should arrive about the same time.

Phil's job was to get Sonny to say something about the killings, especially that of Trooper Padgett and Counselor Hybill. Troy's life was no less valuable from a legal sense, but from a trial standpoint, killing a cop and assassinating

an officer of the court tended to outrage judges and jurors a little more than killing your average run-of-the-mill flunky, especially if said flunky had nefarious dealings with his killer. Hopefully, Phil would come through, and Sonny would spill the beans. If not, the stolen cars were enough to put young Mr. Delacroix away for a lot of years. Once they had him in handcuffs, who knew what kind of incriminating evidence they might find?

Four other raids were scheduled at the same time. Truckloads of stolen parts were in route to Phil Cheney Hartwell Automotive, Phil Cheney Asheville Automotive, and Phil's dealerships in Yulee, Florida, and Opp, Alabama. Once the trucks parked on the premises, agents from Birmingham, Atlanta, Tallahassee, and Charlotte would move in and arrest everyone in sight. By midday, the Delacroix-Cheney automotive partnership would be no more. And, if things went as planned, Sonny Delacroix would be listening to a tape of his own confession in a small, stale room provided by federal law enforcement authorities.

Robert would have loved to bring Sergeant Burley Hamrick and the North Carolina troopers in for this, but there was no time. Besides, crossing state lines required a lot of bureaucratic wrangling. The last thing he needed was more phone calls flying around. The fewer people who knew about this, the better.

The final call Robert made that evening was the one he looked forward to the most. Michael answered on the first ring.

"What are you doing up?" Robert asked.

"Hey, Dad. We're watching *The Italian Job*. Charlie, one of the agents, picked it up this afternoon. Have you seen it?"

"Afraid not."

"It's way cool. These guys steal this gold, and then one of them double-crosses the others and steals the gold from

them. But then he kills one of the other guys. Anyway, the rest of the guys hook up with the daughter of the guy who got killed—”

“And?”

“I don’t know. That’s where we are in the movie.”

“Is your mother there?”

“Yeah, she’s sitting right here.”

There was a brief pause while Michael passed the phone to Melissa, who seemed less interested in the movie and more intrigued by when she might see her husband again.

“A couple more days at the outside,” he said. “How are they?”

“Great. Extended vacation. Katie’s completed her school-work for the next three weeks. I can barely get Michael to download his assignments for tomorrow.”

“Pretty amazing they can keep up from down there.”

“Welcome to the future of education,” she said. “Click-click and you can take Algebra Two from a cabana a thousand miles from home.”

“Kiss them for me.”

“I always do.”

“See you in a couple of days.”

“Be safe.”

“I will.”

He hung up, and turned out the lamp beside his lonely king-sized bed, hoping he hadn’t just lied to his wife. Being safe was a primary objective, but very few battle plans survived first contact with the enemy. He could only hope that tomorrow was the exception to that rule.

Chapter 29

Sonny let Gilberto drive. If he had to bring the goon, he might as well put him to use. Gilberto had been another of Christian's little power plays, one that Sonny had agreed to in order to keep the peace, or so he told himself now that they were on the road. Fighting over Gilberto wasn't worth raising his blood pressure. Christian Superstar had been right about Uncle Eddie liking the big lug. During his last visit, Eddie had made a point of putting his arm around Gilberto, pulling him aside for some quality one-on-one time. Why shouldn't Sonny do the politically savvy thing and have the big spic come along? Besides, Sonny had done enough driving to last a year. He was beginning to hate the Mercedes, something he never thought possible.

Rather than sleep for an hour or two and feel like shit the rest of the trip, Sonny inhaled half an eightball of coke before they left. By the time they rolled through Atlanta at three thirty in the morning, he could feel every hair on the back of his neck, and sense every tingling blast of air inside the car. His sense of smell was better as well. He could pick up faint hints of stale salsa and cheap cologne wafting over from Gilberto's side, while the musky aroma of fine Corinthian leather still dominated the cockpit, as it should in a ninety-thousand-dollar automobile. He also liked the way

the streetlights in Atlanta reflected off his freshly polished black hood with its Benz star twinkling above the grill. The world looked better with a little coke in his system.

An hour later, he almost pulled his hair out. By the time they passed through Clemson, Sonny was sweating like a fat kid in gym class. His heart had to be churning out a hundred twenty beats a minute, and his head felt light and tingly, not quite dizzy, but not right, either. He couldn't stop running his tongue over his teeth and gums, and if he'd touched his nose once, he'd touched it a hundred times in the last thirty minutes.

"Step on it, all right? We're gonna be late."

"We're right on schedule," Gilberto said.

"You seen the trucks? If we're so fucking on schedule, why ain't we passed the trucks?"

"They're behind us," Gilberto said.

Sonny whirled in the seat. "Where?"

"Not right behind us. They're probably five or six miles back. We'll beat them by fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Oh." Sonny turned back around the rubbed his nose again before smoothing the crease in his slacks and pulling on the collar of his open cotton shirt. "It hot in here to you?"

Gilberto answered by turning up the fan and pointing a vent in Sonny's direction.

"Step on it anyway," Sonny said, his agitation rising. "I want to get out of this fucking car."

The lights awoke Jorge from his third nap of the day. A couple more and he would qualify as a cat. If his watch was right, the time was two A.M. Two vehicles exited the driveway, and Jorge counted five heads, three in the *federales* car and two in the red Corvette, the one that had eluded him three days before. He'd thought about that car as he was shooting the poor bastards he'd hired for the botched hit,

and he'd seen it in his mind as he threw the van in drive and watched it pitch forward and gurgle like a belching hound on its way to the bottom of Lake Norman. Now, the Corvette he couldn't catch looked brand-new. The body shop must have worked all weekend to get it back to the *Americano rico* in time for this little trip. Jorge decided at that moment that he would steal the car after killing Redball.

That moment might come quickly. Five people constituted the entire *federale* presence, which meant the house was empty. Jorge waited five minutes before slipping back up the hill to the front of the house. Nothing stirred. Even the birds and insects slept. The house stood dark, and quiet. He held the pistol in his right hand just in case he'd miscounted and a *federale* was asleep in one of the house's many bedrooms. There was an alarm as well, one of the silly in-home systems that gave rich white people a false sense of security. Entering an already open window meant there would be a very short delay if the alarm was set. He would have it disarmed ten to fifteen seconds before it sounded.

It took him a few seconds to find the right window in the dark. Once he was sure he was in the right spot, Jorge hoisted himself up onto the sill and wedged the finger of his right hand under the already cracked window. He was inside in five seconds. He scrambled to his feet and walked quickly and quietly to the keypad where he saw the alarm was unarmed. Typical gringos: it was the wife who needed the added sense of security.

Jorge made a quick tour of the house. Once he confirmed that he was alone, he hit a small light on the hood of the kitchen stove, just enough illumination to see without attracting any unnecessary attention from outside. He opened the fridge and rummaged around until he found a Miller Lite in one of the vegetable drawers. No reason not to have a treat. He could even watch a repeat of *Sports*

Center before crawling into his closet hideaway. Might as well enjoy himself. It wouldn't be long now.

By the time Robert arrived at Phil Cheney Spartanburg Automotive, an electronics team had placed video and audio monitors throughout the parts and service department. The old days of tape recorders and microphones were over. With a little notice—in this case about twelve hours—a room could be wired for digital pictures and sound with buffering devices to filter background noise and enhance quality. Juries loved the stuff. With a good prosecutor to set the scene, even the dimmest juror got caught up in the drama.

They should get some good pictures today. The garage was a three-thousand-square-foot steel building that housed every conceivable piece of automotive diagnostic and repair equipment. Phil even had his own paint rooms with boiler-sized paint dispensers and pressure nozzles that could change a car's color in a matter of minutes. A microphone was mounted to the top of one of those mixers so that it blended with the pipes and other gadgetry. By the time the team was done, every square inch of the room could be monitored on four tiny screens housed in a suitcase. As for audio, you could, in the words of one member of the task force, "hear a rat fart forty feet away."

The only unreliable piece of equipment was Phil Cheney. Robert didn't know what to think of Phil. He still looked like a lost orphan moping around the showroom, making coffee, and digging donuts out of the refrigerator. Withers and the agents from Philly had taken a charter flight to Spartanburg and met the electronics task force shortly after midnight. Phil had slept a couple of hours on a leather couch in the customer lounge, rumpling his clothes, and giving his hair the freshly teased look of a rooster's crown.

“Okay, Phil, let’s go over it again,” Robert said. “What are you going to say to him?”

“I tell him I’m getting a lot of heat.”

“Right. Who’s putting the heat on?”

“You.”

“Not me, specifically,” Robert said. “You’re getting heat from the FBI and attorney general’s office.”

“Right, right,” Phil said while nodding and looking down at his donut.

“Why are you getting this heat?”

“Because Sonny killed a cop, and a lawyer, and tried to take out a state’s attorney.”

Robert shook his head. “No, Phil. You’re getting heat because we’ve tied those murders back to Troy, and we’ve tied Troy back to you. That means it’s only a matter of time before we tie the killings back to Sonny. Got it?”

Phil nodded, but kept his head down. He appeared to be crying again at the mention of Troy’s name. Could he really be this weak?

Robert’s shoulders sank as he exhaled. “Are you going be able to do this, Phil?”

Phil nodded, still examining the gooey sugar on the edges of his fried dough ring.

“Look at me,” Robert said.

The red eyes finally came up.

“You look like shit, Phil. Go wash up. They’ll be here soon. You need to pull yourself together.”

“Okay.” Phil finished the last bite of pastry and missed the trash can with his napkin.

“You’re doing the right thing here, Phil,” Withers shouted from across the room. “Just act cool, and it’ll be over before you know it.”

By the time Gilberto pulled the Mercedes into the lot at Phil Cheney Spartanburg Automotive, Sonny’s agitation

and appearance had taken a turn for the worse. His face had turned red and blotchy outside Anderson. By the time they drove through Greenville, he looked like he might stroke out. Now he was rubbing his neck, squirming in the seat, and bitching at Gilberto about everything from the temperature in the car to where he chose to park.

"I got to piss," he said the second Gilberto put the car in park. Sonny relieved himself on the tire of a 2004 Acura Integra parked beneath a Priced to Move sign near the side entrance of the service area. "Ahhhhhhh," he said, throwing his head back in apparent ecstasy. A couple of waggles and one leg-shake later, he grabbed his sports coat out of the backseat of the Mercedes and said, "Let's go see what's so fucking important."

Sonny pounded on the side door, and was surprised when Phil opened it right away. "Jesus, you standing by the fucking door?" he asked

Phil shrugged and looked down. "Come in," he said.

"You look like shit."

"Sorry."

"For what?"

"What?"

"What are you sorry for?"

"You said I looked like shit. I'm sorry I don't look better."

"What is this, a fucking fashion show? I don't give a fuck what you look like."

"Sorry."

"Stop saying you're sorry, motherfucker," Sonny said as he slapped Phil hard on the cheek.

"Oh, shit," Withers said as he stared at the monitors from a standing position. He looked ready to bound into the garage.

"This is not off to a good start," Dumbrowski said.

Withers cued the mike on his headset. "Standby," he said.

"Wait," Robert said. "Let's see how he handles it." He still wasn't sure what side of the net Phil was playing. This whole scene could be for their benefit. The performance Phil had put on this morning didn't do much to waylay Robert's concerns. He wanted to give Phil a little more time.

"Wait for my signal," Albers said.

"What'd you do that for?" Phil said, holding his cheek.

"I'm sick of hearing how fucking sorry you are," Sonny yelled. He stood inches from Phil's face, hovering over him. "What the fuck are you sorry for, now? You sorry you called us up here in the middle of the fucking night? You sorry you couldn't take care of your own problems? Just what the fuck are you sorry for? Give me the list."

"I don't—"

"What?"

"I don't know—"

This precipitated another slap. "You don't know what, motherfucker? What don't you know?"

"I don't—"

Slap!

"Don't tell me you don't know."

Phil started to cry.

Sonny's face grew a deeper shade of red, and he clinched and opened his fists as if working out cramps. "Now, tell me what the fuck you're sorry for. And if you say 'I don't know again' I'm gonna cut your sack." He took a switchblade from the pocket of his slacks.

"We got a weapon," Withers said.

"What kind?" a voice said over his headset.

"Looks like a knife. Three or four inches. Switchblade."

"Roger."

"Don't do it," Robert said. "Not yet."

"He's gonna kill him," Withers said.

"Not yet."

After a sigh, Withers said, "Hold your position."

"Roger that."

Phil's breathing was rapid and his face was burning from the slaps. "I . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"What?" Sonny put a hand to his ear and leaned even closer. "What'd you say, fuckhead?"

"I'm sorry you had to drive up here."

"Then why the fuck did you call us? D'jew just miss my smiling face or what?"

"No."

"No, what? You didn't miss my smiling face?"

"Yes . . . I mean . . . no."

Sonny slapped Phil so hard his knees buckled and he fell to the floor. "You got three seconds to tell me what the fuck I'm doing here," Sonny yelled. "One . . ."

Phil righted himself and dusted off the seat of his pants. He looked at Sonny, who appeared to be having some sort of meltdown, and Gilberto, who was looking around the garage like an interior designer trying to decide what shade of mauve to paint the walls.

"Two . . ."

"Okay, Sonny, I'm sor . . . I feel badly about calling you up here, but I'm catching a lot of heat, and I need your help."

"Catching a lot of heat, huh?"

"The FBI and state attorney have been crawling up my ass since those murders. They've already tied them back to Troy. Why'd you kill him, Sonny? He wouldn't have made

a peep. He was already sprung on a technicality, and I would have made good on the money you lost. You know that. Why did you have to—”

Sonny knocked him to the ground again, this time with a fist. Phil expelled a small hoot before spanking the concrete with his belly. As Phil fell, Sonny reached down to his boot and pulled out a twenty-two from a small hand-tooled holster.

“Gun!” Withers shouted as he jumped toward the door.

“Do it,” Robert said.

“Go! Go! Go!”

“I didn’t kill that shithead to keep him quiet,” Sonny yelled at Phil, who was whimpering on the floor. “I killed him to keep *you* quiet.”

“What?” Phil said, looking up with sadness and wonder in his eyes.

“A message, you dumbass, one you obviously didn’t get. Fuck up, you pay a price. Like this.”

Sonny pointed the twenty-two at Phil’s head. That’s when the world exploded around him.

The word “gun” changed the strategy for the tactical operations team. Rather than enter with automatic weapons at the ready, which would have no doubt provoked a fire-fight, the leader of the unit led the insertion by tossing a concussion grenade a few feet from the three men. They waited behind the door for the blast, which came two seconds later. Then they charged, screaming “Get down! Federal agents! Get down!”

Gilberto instinctively went for his gun when he heard the click of the grenade hitting concrete. Now he was lying on the floor with the gun by his side, the ring of a thousand church bells clanging in his inner ear. Dazed, he grabbed the gun and crawled to his knees.

Eddie had warned him that this day would come. What had he said, exactly? Wasn't it: "Sonny is out of control. He might do anything." He had also said, "I need you to keep an eye on him, Gilberto. If you're with him when the Feds come, you are to kill Sonny on the spot. For this, your family will live a rich and proud life. I will see to it. I'm counting on you, Gilberto. Your family is counting on you."

Christian had also warned him, saying just yesterday, "You know what to do if anything goes wrong." Yes, Gilberto knew what to do.

The *federales* charged. He could see them with their vests and helmets with funny Plexiglas faceplates. Shotguns were their weapons of choice, twelve-gauge from the looks of them. He wouldn't get a chance to ask. He would go out with honor. And his family would live a life they could never have dreamed possible.

With more effort than he thought should be required, he lifted the gun. Sonny was writhing on the floor, rolling from side to side with his hands over his ears. Gilberto could read his lips as he shouted "fuck, fuck, fuck" over and over again. It seemed appropriate that this would be Sonny's final spoken word. Gilberto aimed the gun at Sonny's chest and pulled the trigger.

His ears were so damaged from the explosion Sonny never heard the shot. He felt a sharp stab in the abdomen, and he took his hand off his ear to swat whatever had stung him. When the pain intensified, he looked down and saw a small red dot expanding over his custom-tailored cotton shirt, the one Wong had promised would breathe without looking baggy. Sonny looked at the oncoming agents with a sense of confusion and wonder. Had they shot him?

Then he looked at Gilberto, and saw the thirty-eight still pointed in his direction. "What the fuck?" he said as

he closed his eyes for what would turn out to be the final time.

Gilberto heard one of the *federales* screaming, "Drop the weapon!" Of course that was what they would say. But he didn't drop it. Instead he raised the pistol, pointing it at the face on an onrushing *federale*. He got off one shot, although he had no idea if he hit anything. The shotgun blast was almost as loud as the grenade. The steel walls shook as the sound echoed through the fifty-yard-long building.

Twenty minutes later, Gilberto Juarez was pronounced dead on the scene.

When paramedics and crime scene investigators descended on the garage, Robert and Withers escorted Phil Cheney, who had been introduced to the new crop of cops as the "owner" of the facility, to the showroom where he could barely hold a cup of coffee. Robert paced the floor and ran his fingers through his hair. Another plan had gone awry. Instead of interrogating Sonny Delacroix, and coercing him to rat out his family, they were carting Sonny away in an ambulance with a sheet over his head. Then there was the dead Hispanic, victim number six of this sorry and sordid affair. What the hell had he been thinking? Why kill Sonny and then kill himself? Surely he hadn't believed he could outgun a dozen agents with shotguns and riot gear.

"I killed him," Phil said through quivering lips.

"What's that?" Robert asked.

"I killed him," he repeated. "I killed Troy."

"Sonny killed Troy," Withers said. "We've got a recorded confession. Not that it'll do much good."

"He killed Troy because he was afraid I was pulling away," Phil said. "He killed Troy to keep me in line, under his thumb."

They said nothing. That was when Robert realized that Phil hadn't tipped off the shooters at the funeral. Phil was a low-rent shyster who'd gotten in over his head, nothing more.

That left only one option, one he hadn't wanted to consider, but that now seemed so obvious he wondered why he hadn't looked into it before.

"Hey, Redball."

It was one of the agents on the tactical squad. The name followed him wherever he went.

"Yeah," Robert said.

The agent handed over a two-gallon plastic bag that held a twenty-two caliber pistol, a leather ankle holster with Navaho carvings, a bottle of prescription blood pressure medication with instructions to take one pill twice daily, a small bag of cocaine, and a cell phone. "Paramedics removed these before taking him," he said.

"Thanks," he said to the agent.

"Sure thing. Hey, you know I saw you win at Darlington when I was a kid. You passed Elliot Jackson on a bump-and-run with two to go. Man, that was sweet."

Robert cocked his head and stared for a second. "Thanks for bringing this," he said, holding up the bag.

The agent nodded and walked back into the garage.

"What was that all about?" Withers asked.

Robert didn't get a chance to answer. From the baggie emanated a high-pitched, and somewhat tinny rendition of "For the Love of Money."

"What the hell?" Robert said.

"O'Jay's," Dumbrowski said. "Either seventy-three or seventy-four. Classic R and B."

Robert opened the plastic bag and retrieved the phone. He looked at the display screen and saw a number he recognized. That's when he realized he had been right. He

hadn't wanted it to be true, had tried to believe that it couldn't be true, but the incoming call confirmed it.

He pressed the Send key on the phone and listened, saying nothing. When he heard the word "Hello," he closed his eyes and shut the phone off for good. All remaining questions had just been answered.

Chapter 30

Phil's service supervisor in Hartwell, a retired army major who collected classic muscle cars, pleaded complete ignorance when federal marshals surrounded his desk. The parts trucks were also surrounded. Engine blocks, transmissions, wheels, brakes, drive shafts, seats, doors, dashes, and airbags for thirty-three cars were confiscated at this one location.

The haul was even better at the other raids. Managers at the Florida and Alabama dealerships failed to cooperate. The one in Yulee had an outstanding bench warrant from an identity theft charge in Arizona, while the lame-brain Phil had put in charge of his Opp, Alabama, store kept two kilos of heroin hidden beneath a stack of *Car and Driver* magazines in his credenza. Agents arrested the managers, as well as the truck drivers who delivered parts for 112 vehicles.

The only thing resembling excitement came in Asheville where one of the truck drivers tried to make a run for it, but his rig stalled when he drove it into a grease pit near the rear gate. Officers were laughing so hard they had difficulty cuffing him. Counting the mechanics who showed up to put the cars back together in Spartanburg, law enforcement took a total of forty-nine people into custody. Phil made it an even fifty.

He continued to cooperate, providing them the documentation they needed, and answering questions when he could. Sonny had been his only Delacroix contact. He'd never met or spoken with Eddie Delacroix, and had never heard of Christian Delacroix. He knew their headquarters was in New Orleans, but Sonny lived in Savannah, or so he'd been told.

When FBI investigators from the Savannah field office arrived at the apartment registered to Sunshine Delacroix, they found a freshly painted, mopped, bleached, and totally vacant three-room flat with a great view of the river. The landlord, who might be in a position to explain, had gone on vacation, a sudden trip according to his secretary—"just came up, and he flew out of here," she'd said—Cancun, she'd heard.

The warehouses where Sonny ran his operations were much the same. A few people remembered seeing Sonny come and go from a now vacant building off Barnard. A man dressed in an Ann Taylor chiffon sundress, red wig, and Manolo Blahnick pumps told them that Sonny bought all his booze at Sucker's Liquors, and ran a porn studio in the old warehouse, but there was no evidence to support either of those claims. At the other building where Sonny supposedly operated a thriving concern, a toothless crack whore that local cops called Smutty said that men in trucks had been coming and going all night, but they were gone now. She also told them about a murder in the yard of the abandoned drugstore next door, a killing that no one noticed and fewer cared about. One of theirs, a member of the fraternal order of forgotten people, had been beaten to death by a man "them others called Jose Hyena or Hiatus or some shit like 'at." The agents wrote up her story and emailed it to all the necessary departments.

By late afternoon, Robert had come to the conclusion that the Delacroixs had cut their losses. It was a big hit, no

doubt, but they would survive. "Strategic realignment," one of Robert's old sponsors had called it. Only that sponsor had sold sponges and soap. Still, business was business. Something told him he would cross paths with the Delacroixs again. He wasn't looking forward to the experience.

What he was looking forward to was closing the book on the homicides that had CNN camping outside his office. Armed with a briefcase full of relevant documents, and with Johnny Pea, Ty Johnson, Special Agents Withers and Dumbrowski and Phil Cheney at his side, Redball marched past the twenty-foot fountain, the brilliant reflecting pool, the perfectly manicured hedges, and through the giant tinted glass doors of Junior Senior Racing, Incorporated.

The first thing they all noticed was the giant painting of The Man himself, hiding behind wraparound sunglasses and wearing the scowl that made him famous. That image of Junior Senior Sr., captured in what appeared to be an eight-by-ten-foot oil on canvas, had become an icon, even though Robert had known the man for years and had never seen him look like that. The Junior Robert knew always had a goofy grin on his face and a dirty joke on his tongue. He only wore sunglasses when he was driving, and the only time he scowled like that was when somebody cut the cheese at a driver's meeting. But image was everything, and this bad-boy frown would be Junior's forever.

Junior Sr. and Junior Jr.'s cars were on display as well. Show cars were a part of every shop, and JSR played the concept to the hilt, putting both cars on rotating pedestals like something out of a Monty Hall game show. Above Junior Sr.'s car was a well-lit trophy case filled with six Salem Cup trophies. Behind Junior Jr.'s car was a single trophy for Rookie of the Year, and a smaller oil painting of a smiling Junior Senior Jr. The contrast between father and son was striking.

"Why, hey, Redball." The receptionist, a pudgy girl

named Candy Dupree (sister-in-law of Mudfish Dupree) jumped from her seat and trotted around her desk to hug Robert's neck. Then she saw Phil, and her gaze turned quizzical. "What are ya'll doing here?"

"We need to see Dolores," Redball said, smiling at Candy as if it was not the least bit unusual for two prosecutors and two FBI agents to come waltzing in with her boss's husband.

Candy shrugged, and smiled back. Phil was with them, so it must be okay. Besides, it wasn't like Redball wasn't part of the family. "She's in the shop with T-Bone," Candy said. "The transporter just got back. I think they're finishing up their weekly staff meeting so they can get the cars unloaded."

"Can we go back?" Robert asked.

"Sure." Candy went behind her desk and hit a buzzer that unlocked a heavy metal door.

Phil led the way. They walked down a bright corridor lined with framed photos of races. One was of Junior Senior Sr. crossing the finish line in Talladega a half-a-car-length ahead of Redball Redding. Another showed Junior Sr. hosing down his team with a giant bottle of Cristal after locking up one of his championships. Junior Jr. was adequately represented as well. One frame housed a four-shot sequence of Junior diving off his car into the outstretched arms of his teammates like a rock star jumping off stage. Another showed Junior's car crossing the finish line ahead of Jett and Rusty at Daytona.

The hallway ended at a pair of clear glass doors. Phil pushed his way through and led them into a massive garage.

"Wow, is it always this clean?" Johnny Pea asked.

"It isn't your local Sinclair station Agent Westport," Robert said. "The mechanics in here are the best of the best."

"I've eaten off dirtier floors."

"I'd love to hear that story."

"Another time."

"What's that?" Withers said, pointing to a separate room that appeared to be a garage within the garage.

"Wind tunnel," Robert said. "They test aerodynamics on every car." He didn't add that he and Don were the first driver and owner to use wind-tunnel testing, hauling cars to the Lockheed Martin plant in Marietta, Georgia, amid much ridicule from the racing establishment. Now every team put cars in tunnels. The most successful, like JSR, had wind tunnels in their shops.

"Jesus, this place looks like NASA," Albers said.

Having visited NASA's Redstone facility in Huntsville, Alabama, Robert had to agree. He would have said so aloud, but a ruckus behind them ended their little chat. The staff meeting had broken up, and mechanics, foremen, fabricators, and engineers spilled onto the shop floor. The unmistakable clanging of a large track door could be heard near the back. Within seconds, the cars from the previous race were being pushed onto the shop floor. It would take the rest of the afternoon for the engine, transmissions, and other parts of the car to be stripped and catalogued. Engineers and metallurgists stood by to test each part for stress and wear.

"Remind you of anything?" Ty said to Phil.

Phil hung his head and rubbed his nose.

"Now, now," Robert said.

"Well, Redball Redding. What are you doing here, boy?"

Robert turned in time to catch the giant hand of T-Bone Bennett, fresh out of a staff meeting after another top-five finish at Pocono. "Hey, T-Bone," Robert said, trying to avoid the original question. "Good to see you."

"Phil," T-Bone said, nodding to his boss's husband. He wagged his meaty finger at Ty, Albers, and Johnny Pea. "Who are these fellers?"

"They're with me," Robert said. "Hey, good run this weekend."

"Not bad. We lost a little horsepower toward the end. Need to figure out what's happening on our long runs. But overall it wasn't bad."

"You'll get it right," Robert said. "Is Dolores back there?"

T-Bone turned at the same time Dolores Senior-Cheney walked into the shop. "There she is now," he said.

She was just as statuesque in jeans and a sleeveless cotton shirt as she had been in her long, sleek funeral dress. The tan and hair were perfect, and the tight denim accentuated her long legs and the tight behind that propelled them. It was easy to see how Clave Slackherd, Junior Senior, and Phil Cheney had all been smitten.

"Phil? Redball? What's going on?" she said.

Phil looked at his wife with a mixture of sadness, guilt, and disbelief.

"May we sit down and talk to you, Dolores?" Robert asked.

"Sure. Let's go upstairs to the conference room."

They followed her up the escalator, through another waiting area, past another reception desk, through more doors, and down yet another corridor. On the right were row upon row of cubicles manned by young clean-cut marketing graduates. On first glance, it appeared as though the licensing department employed about twenty people, none over the age of thirty-five. A little farther down the corridor were the website and fan club offices, again staffed with clean-cut, effervescent twenty-somethings. Next to the fan club was the autograph room, a twenty-by-ten windowless cocoon filled with die-cast cars, posters, photographs, pennants, hats, shirts, jackets, flags, books, magazines, even special-edition bottles of Jack Daniel's sourmash whisky, all awaiting the signature of Junior Se-

nior Jr. Robert had signed his name enough to know that Junior had a serious backlog. If he did nothing but sign autographs for ten hours a day, two days a week, he was still a couple of months from catching up. Finally, Dolores led them into a bright, wood-paneled conference room with a twelve-seat walnut table in the center.

"Please, have a seat," she said.

They obliged.

Robert opened his bag and removed a file, which he began reading. He spoke without looking up. "We've had quite a busy day, Dolores."

"So have I," she said.

"Uh-huh. Only yours didn't involve two people being shot, and forty-nine being taken into custody."

She sat a little straighter and folded her hands on the table, but said nothing. Her chin hardened, and her lips grew smaller. He definitely had her attention.

"With the cooperation of Phil here, agents from the FBI and Department of Justice were able to break a complicated grand theft auto ring run by a Mr. Sunshine Delacroix."

"Sunshine," she said with a note of surprise in her voice. She'd obviously never known Sonny's real name.

"In the process of making these arrests, Mr. Delacroix was wounded by gunfire." Robert could tell from her anxious expression that she wanted to ask, "How wounded," but that question would spark too many others. Dolores remained cool.

He closed the file folder, put his forearms on the table, and leaned in toward Dolores. "You know what had me baffled this whole time?" he asked, not expecting an answer. "I could never figure out how the men who killed Smith Hybill and tried to kill me knew where to find us. I mean, Smith lived out in the boondocks—I don't think his partners knew where his house was—and no more than a handful of people knew that Melissa and I would be at the

graveyard for Troy's service. Heck, we didn't know we were going until that morning."

Dolores shrugged. "Good questions, I guess."

"They are," he said. "But there was something else: I could never come to grips with why Troy would get in the car with his killers. He knew he was at risk. He agreed to cooperate with these gentlemen," he pointed to Withers and Dumbrowski, "for that very reason."

This seemed to shake her. Troy agreeing to cooperate was news.

"If Troy knew he was a target, why did he look so at ease when he left the jail? Why jump into that burgundy Expedition within plain view of the jail's cameras if you're fearful for your life?"

She seemed even more shaken by the mention of the color and make of the car that picked Troy up. "I wish he were here to answer," she said.

"But you see, the answer is simple," Robert said. "He knew the driver, and felt safe."

"If you say so."

"Sure," Robert said. "Troy called here to ask for a ride home. We have that on tape. T-Bone sent one of the guys from the shop to pick him up, but when the mechanic got here, Troy was already gone. He'd gotten into the Expedition, because he knew the driver, and assumed it was the ride he'd requested."

"Is this going anywhere?" Dolores said, irritation evident in her voice.

"I'm afraid it is," Robert said. "I don't know why I didn't see it sooner. All the pieces fit so perfectly, but if you didn't know what the picture was supposed to look like . . . Anyway, I guess I just couldn't believe the obvious."

"What are you talking about?" The small muscles around Dolores's chin twitched as she spoke. This was not the conversation she'd expected.

"Dolores, there was only one person who could answer all my questions. You knew where Smith Hybill lived. You and Phil were Smith's best clients, and among the privileged few he invited into his home. You also knew that Melissa and I were going to the graveside service, because you were the one who invited us. And you were the one person Troy wouldn't have hesitated to jump into a car with after being released. Mom coming to rescue her son after his ordeal: he must have been thrilled to see you."

"That's nonsense."

"I couldn't believe it either," Robert said. "In fact, I never even considered it. But, then Phil told me that he hadn't called Smith Hybill the night Troy was arrested. At first I didn't believe him. You can imagine why. But as our investigation progressed, I took another look. The call definitely came from your house. But Smith took several other calls around the same time. Three are from your cell phone."

She said nothing.

"You're the one who told Smith to get Troy to plead out, put him away, and shut him up. You also told Smith to keep you apprised of everything Troy did or said. That was why he was so paranoid when he called me about a deal. Troy wanted Smith fired. But you weren't taking any chances. Troy had screwed up by getting nabbed. You couldn't risk him talking to me, the FBI, or anyone else. He had to go."

"This is absurd." She slapped the conference table.

"Maybe. But then you called Sonny Delacroix this morning. That was me that answered the phone, by the way. Sonny was already dead when you called."

She burned a gaze through Phil, and then turned her wrath back toward Robert. "I made a call this morning. Must have been a wrong number."

"I considered that," Robert said. "So I had our friends at the FBI check all incoming and outgoing calls on Sonny's phone. It seems that you and he have chatted quite a bit in

the last couple of weeks. One call lasted almost an hour. A little long for a wrong number, isn't it?"

Again, she sat silently.

Robert reopened the file and pulled a sheet from the top of the stack. "The Expedition stumped us for a while. None of Troy's friends had one. You, of course, drive an Escalade. But Phil has six Expeditions on his lot here in Charlotte. One of them is burgundy. Guess what the sales manager told us?"

"This is ridiculous," she snapped. "Phil, you know this is ridiculous."

Phil looked like he might bound over the table and strangle her.

"You took the Expedition off the lot last Sunday and returned it Tuesday morning," Robert said. "Agents are going over it as we speak."

"You did it," Phil growled at her. "You killed our boy."

"Phil, don't," she said.

"I still had trouble with motive," Robert said. "Then I went back through Phil's records. It seems that Phil Cheney Automotive has been pumping some heavy sponsorship dollars into your race team. Seems your licensing revenues have decreased. That makes sense. Junior Sr.'s old deals are running their course. Companies can't afford big bucks for the likeness of a man who's no longer alive to shoot commercials and show up at corporate outings. Jack Daniel's is in for the long haul, but you've got two Cup cars, and three Pabst cars to run. You needed Phil's money to balance your cash flow, but Phil's money was tied to Sonny Delacroix. You cooperated with Sonny to keep the money flowing. If Troy blew the chop-shop scam, everything would fall apart. That was unacceptable, wasn't it? You'd worked too hard to let another Slackherd male screw up your nice tidy life."

"Phil," she said, looking to her husband for support.

"You cunt," he said. Then he did something unexpected:

he leaned across the table and spat in Dolores's face. "You killed your own son. You killed my boy. God help you. Because I hope you get the fucking needle."

Those were the last words spoken between Dolores Diggs-Slackherd-Senior-Cheney and her third husband, Phil Cheney. She invoked her right to an attorney, and Special Agent Dumbrowski invoked his right to cuff her on the spot and parade her through the JSR offices with her wrists bound behind her back. She refused to give a statement, even after being booked, strip searched, and placed in an eight-by-eight concrete cell. No embarrassment was spared.

It took two days for the details of Troy's death to come to light. A convenience store worker in Albemarle saw press reports of Dolores Senior-Cheney's arrest. He phoned the local NBC affiliate with an offer to sell vital information concerning the case. The station manager called the FBI. After hashing out an agreement for an on-camera statement, agents from the Charlotte field office interrogated the store clerk for an hour and determined that Dolores Senior-Cheney had been in the store the Monday of Troy's disappearance.

Surveillance tapes showed her pull up in a burgundy Ford Expedition, enter the store, and purchase a Vanilla Coke, and a package of Slim Jims. The camera on the ATM outside showed a black Mercedes pull up while Dolores was in the store. Two men exited the car, and pulled a third man from the passenger seat of the Expedition, a haggard looking redhead who bore a remarkable resemblance to the racecar driver Junior Senior Jr. Photographic analysis confirmed that the man driving the Mercedes was now lying on a slab in the Spartanburg morgue.

The same tape showed Dolores exit the store and climb back into the Expedition with no concern for the whereabouts of her missing passenger. The final frame showed

her opening the Coke with her teeth as she pulled out of the parking lot.

Standing in front of the fountain outside the JSR building, Robert Redding watched with a growing crowd from the shop as Dolores was forced into the back of a black Crown Victoria and hauled off to jail. Ty and Withers took Phil. Johnny Pea stayed behind to ride with Redball.

“Ever run across anybody quite that cold?” Johnny Pea asked.

“Nope. Never want to again, either.”

“Killed her own son.”

After a couple of seconds of standing on the sidewalk, Robert said, “Excuse me a second. I need to make a call.” He walked onto the perfectly manicured lawn near the boxwoods pruned to look like racecars. The call went through in a matter of seconds.

“Hello,” the voice said.

“Michael, it’s me.”

“Hey, Dad. Mom’s not here right now. She took Katie to the market to get some kind of fruit.”

“That’s okay,” Robert said. “I called to talk to you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You know I love you, Michael.”

“Uuuuuuuggggghhh. Tell me that’s not why you called.”

“It is why I called.”

“Do you have cancer?”

“See you tomorrow, kiddo.”

Chapter 31

“You mind if I crash at your place, tonight? Embassy Suites is nice, but I could use the company.”

“As long as you stay on your side of the bed.” Robert had grown fond of Agent John Paul Westport. Ribbing him came naturally.

“Boxers or briefs?” Johnny Pea said.

“Boxers, black I think.”

Johnny Pea shuddered. “Sorry, that’s more information than I needed. Appreciate the lift and the bunk tonight, though.”

“North Carolina’s been good to you, Agent Westport.”

“It’s the water.”

“Or the beer.”

“Maybe the women.”

“We’ll have you singing Toby Keith songs and driving with your windows down before you know it.”

Johnny Pea hit the window button on the Vette, and hung his forearm along the outside of the door. Robert opened the sunroof and his window as well. They fought over the radio until they found the local country station. When Travis Tritt bellowed, “*Just tearing down that highway like a modern day Bonny and Clyde,*” Johnny Pea cranked the volume so loud neither man could hear himself sing.

This had been the most exhausting week of Robert Redding's life, and he was a professional athlete, for god's sake. The last time he'd been this tired was after Speed Week in Daytona when he'd wrecked his primary car in the final laps of practice after winning the pole. He stayed up most of the night helping Joe get the backup ready. Then he came out of nowhere to win the Florida 500 by the length of his hood. Junior Senior Sr. had finished second that day, one of many disappointments The Man had in Florida. After coming back to win that Sunday, Robert had been so drained he'd slept through the bumpiest flight of his life, and stayed in bed until two o'clock Monday afternoon. Compared to tonight, he'd been downright perky back then. As he walked through his front door, he couldn't remember the last time he'd looked forward to sleeping like this.

"Want a beer?" he asked Johnny Pea.

"You having one?"

"Taking one to bed with me," Robert said.

"Sure," Johnny Pea said. "I'll take it upstairs."

"If you stay up down here, you'll be alone."

"Don't wake me in the morning."

"Don't worry."

Robert opened the refrigerator and pulled out the vegetable drawer. "Hmm," he said.

"What is it?"

"I could have sworn I had three Miller Lites in here."

"Are you out?"

"Don't worry, Agent Westport," Robert said as he popped the top on a longneck. "One for you and one for me."

"Wouldn't want any to go to waste," Johnny Pea said. They clinked bottles in a silent toast to nothing in particular. Then the agent said, "I'm heading up."

"Good night."

"Thanks for letting me stay."

“Just sleep late.”

“You got it,” he yelled from the stairs.

Robert took a huge gulp of beer, and thumbed mindlessly through the day’s mail. According to one envelope, somebody was waiting on him to cash his million-dollar check. Another announced to the world that he was “pre-approved” for all sorts of goodies if only he would sign up now. There were a couple of bills, and what looked like an invitation to some bar association social function. He separated the mail into a “keeper” and a “pitch” pile, and took the keepers to his study. He’d put the mail on his desk so he wouldn’t forget to take it tomorrow. That was his last official act of the night, he told himself. Time for bed.

Jorge cracked the closet door and peered into the gym. He heard two male voices. One definitely belonged to Redball. The other had to be a *federale*. With one hand on his gun and the other around an eight-inch hunting knife, he slid out of the closet and crept across the room. The door from the home gym into the hallway was slightly ajar, giving him ample room to see and hear without being seen.

There were two. His target stayed in the kitchen while the young *federale*, who had been part of this from the beginning, marched up the stairs and closed the door of one of the bedrooms. Jorge felt his pulse quicken as Redball thumbed through his mail and drank his beer. Drink up, Jorge thought.

He would have to use the knife. The *federale* was probably armed. Even if he had brought another homemade silencer, which he hadn’t, the pop and echo of igniting gunfire inside this cavernous house would awaken the guy. A gunshot would lead to a shootout. Jorge didn’t need that. He would rather kill Redball under the nose of *federales*, thus bringing shame and disgrace to all of them. How

would the young one explain to his superiors that he had been upstairs, lying in a tall poster bed, falling asleep while the one they were there to protect bled to death on the floor just below. Jorge would slit Redball's throat. The procedure was quick, easy, painful, and, most importantly, silent. The victim fell to the ground immediately, and almost always grabbed at the gash beneath his jawbone. They always knew they were going to die. This one would know, too. And he would know who did it. Jorge would make sure of that.

Redball walked toward the study. Perfect. He could slip in through the side door and be on him in less than a second. Jorge tucked the gun into the waist of his jeans so that the barrel was just above the crack of his ass. The knife he kept firmly in his right hand.

Robert couldn't wait to get to St. Croix. He could almost smell the warm salt water as he closed his eyes and thought about running his toes in the sugar-white sand. Melissa should be good and tanned by now.

The rolltop was a mess. Files were stacked and strewn everywhere, leaving Robert no room to put the mail. He wanted to throw the files on the floor, but he would just have to clean up the mess.

He took the mail to his trophy counter, plopping it on a corner near one of the die-cast cars. It was a Trackside—they all were—painted in the colors of the Redball Redding Foundation, one of the more successful non-profits in racing. So far, the foundation had given six million to deaf children from needy families, providing hearing aids, cochlear implants, teaching and training aids, and simple items like phones and doorbells with lights instead of bells. They had made a big difference in the lives of a lot of families. He couldn't have been prouder of the work he'd done.

He picked up the die cast and held it for the first time in months, maybe years. It always surprised him how heavy the things were. It seemed so long ago that he'd been called downtown because Burley Hamrick thought he'd disrupted a major toy heist. He wondered if any of his cars were on that truck. It had never occurred to him to ask.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement, a shadow sliding up the wall quickly. He jerked to his right as a hand came down on his left shoulder. He felt another hand trying to reach around his neck on the right side.

All racecar drivers have lightning quick reflexes. When you're driving at a hundred ninety miles an hour closer to other cars than you would ever park at the mall, the ability to take in the entirety of a situation and react is critical to your success, and your survival. Redball Redding had better reflexes than most drivers. He was ten times quicker than the average citizen.

The glint of a knife caught his eye as he ducked and slid to his right. He tried to turn, but the assailant was on him. The knife was near his throat. Redball ducked, and made a quick move back to his left. Then he lunged toward his attacker and swung the die-cast car he was still holding as hard as he could at the man's nose.

A crunch and squeal told him he'd made solid contact. The man stumbled back a step, and Robert recognized him. It was Jorge Gonzalez, the man who'd tried to kill him. Rage boiled up in Robert unlike anything he'd ever experienced. All the instincts that were telling him to run shifted into attack mode. Being armed with only a toy car didn't seem to matter. He sprang toward Jorge and expelled a primal yell straight out of a National Geographic special.

Jorge recovered, and swung the knife at Robert. He blocked the knife with his left arm. It didn't break skin, in part because he rolled into Jorge and absorbed the blow,

and in part because Jorge's aim was a little skewed. Robert swung the car again, this time smashing it against Jorge's temple. He staggered backward and turned his back to Robert.

That's when Redball saw the gun. "You motherfucker," he screamed as he charged. Robert's hand touched the gun the same instant Jorge went for it. Because they were both moving in the same direction, they lost their balance. Robert fell forward and Jorge fell backward. Robert lost his grip on the gun. Jorge had the pistol in his hand. Robert was able to grab Jorge's arm.

The shot reverberated through the room. Robert screamed, but held on to Jorge's arm.

Then Robert saw another shadow moving quickly in his direction. He let go of Jorge, ducked, and rolled at the instant Johnny Pea swung one of Robert's replica Salem Cup trophies at Jorge's head. The base struck the assailant in the forehead, knocking him onto his back. But the weight of the trophy caused Johnny Pea to lose his balance. He was wearing a gray Quantico T-shirt and sea blue boxers with a pattern of swimming marlins. No gun. The agent made one ungraceful pirouette before crashing into the side of Robert's rolltop desk.

Jorge was wounded but not out. The gun was on the floor at his side. He grabbed it and tried to get to his feet. Robert had one chance. The knife had come loose and was beside him. He grabbed it and charged.

The gun went off as Jorge's arm came up toward Johnny Pea. At the same time, Redball dove at Jorge. Their heads collided. Both men tumbled backward. Robert felt his right hand stop for a moment, and then move forward as the knife entered Jorge's chest cavity just beneath his sternum. As they fell backward together, Robert thrust the knife upward. He had no idea what it was hitting, but he could tell it was tearing through something.

Another shot fired. Robert was momentarily deafened from the retort. Then he heard Johnny Pea cry out in pain.

He thrust the knife in deeper. The struggling weakened. He could feel Jorge's arm come up slightly, but the weight of the gun was becoming too much. Robert put his left elbow into Jorge's neck and pushed. If the stab wound didn't stop him, the lack of oxygen would.

Another five seconds passed before Jorge stopped struggling. The last motion the body made was a slight kick with the left leg, then a quiver, and a spasmodic jerk of the head. Jorge's last breath came out like steam venting from a sewer drain.

When all motion stopped. Robert relaxed his grip on the knife, and climbed to his feet. He ran over to the desk. Johnny Pea was still standing with his hand on the side of his head.

"What happened? You shot?" Robert ran his hands over Johnny Pea's torso and neck to make sure there were no injuries. "Are you hit?"

The agent pulled his hand away and Robert saw bright red blood. "The fucker shot my ear off," Johnny Pea said.

Robert looked closely. "Not completely," he said. "You look like Evander Holyfield."

Johnny Pea pointed at Jorge. "Looks like Mike Tyson there's had better days."

Robert didn't know what to say. He'd never killed a man, never come close. The last fight he'd gotten into was a sissified shoving match with a driver who'd run him into the wall at Darlington. This was a little more severe.

"You okay?" Johnny Pea asked.

Robert patted himself down as if he were looking for a lost cell phone. "I think so," he said. "Sweet Jesus."

The adrenaline was gone; the rush was over. A moment

ago, he had tackled an assassin who was holding a gun. Now, the room was still and quiet.

“Hope you weren’t counting on that good night’s sleep,” Johnny Pea said.

Robert shook his head and frowned. “I guess that’s out of the question.”

Chapter 32

The wind was unseasonably cool for the tropics, blowing in from the northeastern edge of what sailors had long called the Bermuda Triangle, causing the palms and palmettos to wave at the electric blue sea. Robert dug his toes into the beach and wriggled them down until they were cooled by the dampness of the packed sand. He'd been in this spot for almost two hours, and didn't want to move. For the last thirty minutes, he'd been closing one eye and using his thumb to cover the chugging speck of a cruise ship on the horizon. Before that, he's tried to skip shells into oncoming waves before they broke. If he had his way, he'd sit here until the tide washed up against his ankles.

Phil and Dolores Cheney seemed a million miles away. He'd gotten updates. Phil had dealed. He'd serve five years. Insurance companies would fight over the inventory at Phil Cheney Automotive for years. Of the forty-nine others arrested in connection with the car-laundering scandal, twenty-two were put away immediately for outstanding warrants. Ten were questioned and released. The remainder awaited trial. Dolores Diggs-Slackherd-Senior-Cheney hadn't uttered a peep to prosecutors. For a while at least, the battle would be over whether the Feds tried her first for

conspiracy, or the state got a shot at her for murder. At that moment, Robert couldn't have cared less.

A car horn blew behind him, and he hopped to his feet, shaking sand off his toes as he trotted past the sea oats and up the boards that separated the house from the Caribbean. When he rounded the corner, he saw Melissa bending over to take a grocery bag out of the back of the car. He snuck up behind her and grabbed her bottom as he pressed himself against her. "How 'bout I carry these in?" he said, squeezing his wife.

"How 'bout you fire up the grill. I got fresh pork chops."

She was wearing a halter and white Capris that accented her curves and exposed just the right amount of bronzed, toned skin. "You sure I can't talk you into an appetizer?"

Melissa slapped his hip. "Help me get these bags in and let's get these people fed."

"You don't know what you're missing."

"Oh, yes I do."

He carried the bags in, and put them on the counter in the kitchen. The television was blaring from the family room. "Is anybody watching that?" he yelled.

"Yeah, Dad, you need to come see this."

He put the bags down and walked through the butler's pantry separating the kitchen from the great room. "What are you doing inside?" he asked Michael and Katie, who were both perched on the couch, leaning in toward the television.

"Look, Dad," Katie signed.

"They're right," Johnny Pea, the Redding family's newly appointed federal security officer, said from the corner.

"I didn't see you there," Robert said. "How was fishing?"

"Spectacular."

"Struck out, did you?"

"Of course. But the beer was cold. You seriously need to watch this."

Robert walked over to the couch and sat between his kids in time to hear the announcer say, "*There's the white flag signaling one to go. It's going to be a final-lap shootout.*"

"I can't believe you guys."

"Shhh," Michael said. "Watch."

"Senior holds the lead through turn one, but Stackheus is trying to work him on the outside. Stackheus has had the fastest car for the last twenty laps, but he hasn't been able to complete the pass against Junior Senior. Senior holds the lead through the back straightaway. They're heading into three. This is the last chance for Piston Stackheus. He's faster on the entry. He might . . . No, he can't make the pass, there. Here they come. This one's going to be close. Stackheus to the outside . . . No! Junior Senior Jr. wins the United Airlines five hundred by half a car length.

"Another incredible finish as Junior Senior Jr., who has had one of the worst weeks off the track any driver could imagine, put the distractions behind him, and put together a great, great run today in Chicago. . . ."

Robert picked up the remote and hit the Off switch.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Michael said.

"That's enough TV for a while."

Katie signed, "Can't we watch the interviews?"

"No, you can go online later and read them. Now, I need you to help your mother unload the car while I fire up the grill."

"What's for dinner?" Johnny Pea asked.

"Pork chops and whatever you help me make."

"You like Funions?"

"Get in there and whip up some potatoes."

"Aye, aye Skipper."

“What are your plans for the evening?”

“Early night, I hope. Fishing took it out of me.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

Robert walked onto the back deck, lit the grill, and extracted several variations of a secret papaya, coconut, and habanera sauce from his outdoor cabinet along with the utensils needed for their nightly feast.

Melissa opened the door with her elbow and carried a bag full of pork chops to the deck table. “It’s getting chilly out here.”

“If you consider seventy degrees and sunny chilly.”

“Stay down here a while. You’ll see what I mean.”

Redball turned and grabbed his wife, kissing her earlobes as she fumbled with the bag of pork. “I intend to, Mrs. Redding. I plan to stay down here as long as I possibly can.”

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HOT LAPS

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