

The Outside Lomcovak Club presents:

Lady Caine

by
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For the original Delicious Tricia

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Somewhere in the Americas ...

... some time around 1995

1:

Unplanned ground encounter

Maybe it's concussion, thought Walkaway. He touched the bruise on his forehead, fell to his knees and threw up. He spat out the last chunks of his lunch and thought, Does concussion feel like this?

He sat on the ground, his back to a palm tree, his eyes narrowed against the glare of his burning aircraft. He wiped vomit from his chin and used his sleeve to sponge the sweat from his brow. He was very pleased with himself.

The wrecked plane crackled and spat but no longer roared the way it had when Walkaway had first stumbled from the broken fuselage. The flames waved lazily now, and the shadows they cast around the darkening airstrip seemed to lack enthusiasm. He watched the smoke lift into the air, rising straight at first, in the shelter of the trees. Then it twisted in the breeze that blew it west.

Apart from the shadows, he was alone. The short dark strip had no buildings, nothing man-made other than the reddish gash of the runway cut through the palms, the sea glittering at one end, the beckoning darkness of the trees at the other.

The horizon also burned red where the sun had gone down. Its glow was feeble now and quickly yielded to ink blue and then the cool black of the arriving night.

Walkaway noticed a rip in his America West captain's jacket and wondered how long it had been there. His pants were from a Delta uniform and appeared to be fine, as were the Nikes. These he'd found in a locker that he believed to be his but which, on later reflection, he realized had been merely unlocked. He was wearing odd socks and spent a moment trying to work out which one was correct.

Walkaway stroked the briefcase on the ground next to him. A charge ran through his fingertips from the stippled texture of the case. He knew it contained answers if he could only formulate the right questions. He hadn't

opened it yet: he was sure that its contents wouldn't make any sense to him now, and he couldn't bear to look at a puzzle until all the pieces were in place. And for that to happen he needed help.

The Piper Seneca blazing on the runway was his first step in summoning that help. As far as his employers were concerned, it was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But they wouldn't be worrying about the plane. They'd be thinking of the briefcase too.

Something moved to his right. He turned and stared and could just discern the outline of a small animal — maybe a chipmunk, he thought, or a rabbit, or perhaps something previously undiscovered or something thought extinct. He wanted to touch it, but it was too far away. The breeze caught the edges of the shape and lifted it gently, and Walkaway saw that it was a collection of leaves and litter. He spoke to it anyway.

"I've never done anything," he confessed to the litter creature, "nothing that meant a damned thing because how do you know what you should do? I push at the world and it pushes back harder. But maybe," and here he tapped the briefcase, "maybe because of me, something will happen now." He stroked the case, and examined the numbers set in the combination locks, trying to read them as a code. This is my lever, he thought. I guess it could have been a bomb or a play or an assassination or two terms as president, but this is it.

Walkaway wasn't sure if he'd spoken aloud. He nodded to the litter creature. "I guess it doesn't make much difference to you, does it? Thoughts or words. Pretty much the same."

He sighed and his head swam. He leaned back, rested his head against the tree, basked in the heat of the fire.

Something made his forehead tickle. He removed his TWA crew cap and rubbed the skin. When he pulled his hand away he found his fingertips covered with what he thought might be blood. It looked, smelled, tasted and felt like blood. He put his hand to his ear and rubbed his fingers together. There was no noise, but then he wasn't sure what sound blood should make. Ah well, four out of five ain't bad, he thought. I must be bleeding.

Walkaway worried for a few moments about the possibility of a scar. He had lasted for forty years without picking up a single distinguishing feature. He liked to describe himself as average. Medium height, medium build, brown hair and a characterless face were part of his professional equipment. In a job where descriptions are dangerous, Walkaway had mastered the art of being forgettable.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, clearing his mind. As he relaxed he felt himself washed by warm air, the crackle of the fire and the distant sound of the surf. In the dying minutes of daylight, as he'd made his final approach, he'd got a good view of this tiny island, with its dirt strip on one side and fishing hamlet on the other. Walkway didn't know its name and wasn't even sure of its exact location. But he was certain it was far enough away from where he was meant to be.

He was sticky with drying sweat and felt the urge to wash. He looked up at the sky to see if it might rain, but it was cloudless.

To kill time, he flipped open his logbook and began to record the details of the flight. He hesitated over the 'Number of Landings' column and then wrote *1*. In the 'Remarks' section he put *Unplanned ground encounter. Non-fatal*. Looking at the completed entry, he had a twinge of unease. Filling in the log always felt like a confession.

It was a large logbook and contained the dates, times, hows and wheres of every flight Walkaway had made as a pilot, at least in the nineties. Other logbooks covered previous decades, but they were lost now. Most of the entries meant nothing to him anyway. Some evoked flashbacks of varying degrees of detail, though he was unwilling to make any connection between the images in his head and the data on the page. The entries were in his own spidery, haphazard hand and so he accepted the information as fact. The images, however, were spontaneous and uncontrollable, and he was reluctant to grant them anything more than circumstantial status.

He put the logbook away and relaxed, gazing up at the sky which was filled with stars now that the sun was down and the light from the wreck was ebbing. Walkaway tried to put together some of the pieces of the past few weeks, but it just made the dizziness worse. There was no clear path to this moment, to his being lost in the Caribbean. Even Walkaway's flight planning had contained an element of chance. Deliberately, he had failed to account for winds aloft, so that he had drifted where the breeze took him. He thought that would give him a big enough margin of error. If I don't know where I am, he thought, how can they?

He always drew comfort from being lost. He knew it was a problem he could fix if the need arose. This time, he knew the shape of the island, and with a good map and a few hours' effort he could probably pin down the location precisely: at least as precisely as the map would allow, if the map's information was good and not just the hallucinatory doodlings of a demented cartographer, or liar, or someone labouring under a misplaced trust in the

categorical precision of geography, or a madman. Or he could ask someone, perhaps. Someone in the nearby village. If they said the same thing as the map, perhaps they could be trusted. Or he could use what they said as a working proposition until he encountered some contradictory information.

Walkaway smiled. It was a plan, of sorts.

Still confused, but a little rested, he rose and went looking for a boat to steal.

2: *You want him dead, right?*

José shifted the Uzi to a more comfortable position. He rested the folded-out stock on his hip. He had to place it carefully so as not to put a crimp in his suit. With his other hand he ran a finger around the sodden collar of his shirt. Fuck this jungle, he thought.

For the past couple of minutes he'd watched a strange, long-nosed animal that had emerged from the jungle and now snuffled around the edges of the clearing. The sun was still low and the clearing a place of dank, simmering shadows. José had trouble following the movements of the animal.

"Hey, man," he yelled to Jesus. "Take a look at the bear."

Jesus ignored him and pretty soon José went back to brooding about his suit. It hadn't made him nearly as happy as he'd thought it would.

Jesus had got his first, in Nassau, on their latest run to the Keys. They had stopped in the Bahamas to pick up gas for the boats before making the tricky part of the trip into US territory. While José pumped fuel, he saw Jesus make off towards the port exit.

"What the fuck you think you doin'?"

"Going shopping."

As soon as the tank was full, José went after him. He found Jesus coming out of an outlet store. He wore a dark blue, double-breasted suit with a chalk stripe, high-buttoned with lapels that reached almost to his shoulders. The pants were baggy and had large cuffs.

"You look like a fucking gangster," said José. Jesus flushed with pride.

Then they hit Miami, offloaded the consignment and laid low, waiting to get paid. The boss took them to a part of the city José had never seen before. "No-one knows us here," the boss explained. José knew better than to ask why that was important.

Their hide-out was a flea-bitten motel attached to a half-derelict strip mall. One of the few remaining stores was Fancy Joe's Designer Boutique

and Sporting Goods and in the window, next to the shotguns, pup tents and survival gear were several suits of a lustre José had never previously experienced. He knew at once that he must have the blue one. Jesus would covet the blue one.

He was in the store for no more than twenty minutes. He came out with a box of .44 magnum shells, a clasp knife with a built-in flashlight, an overdue change of underwear . . . and the suit. The next day he went back for a set of Armani labels. He was planning to sew them into the jacket as soon as he worked out how.

It was the best suit he'd ever owned, though it sometimes threw off sparks. Now it was ruined, creased beyond repair and spattered with mud.

Fuck this fucking jungle, he thought.

His hand moved to his throat to loosen his tie, but then he noticed that Jesus still had his knotted tight. He let his hand drop. Jesus stood under a tree near the river's edge, staring morosely into the dark, sluggish water, his own Uzi hanging limp by his side. His suit was uncreased. In the dappled light filtering through the overhead camouflage netting, the fabric shimmered as though shot through with silver, or maybe chrome, and hundreds of tiny points of light flared and glittered from the silver jewellery around his wrists and neck.

Fuck Jesus, thought José. He looked back at the clearing that ran fifty yards inland from the river. It had been dynamited out of the jungle and was now occupied mostly by four large huts, several piles of oil drums and assorted construction litter. There was a faint chemical smell that had given José a sore throat on his first day and a weird hum that got on his nerves. Stripped tree trunks held up the camouflage netting that made the clearing relatively cool. Occasionally a person would walk from hut to hut, and every few days a floatplane used the river to land or take off. But the clearing was many miles further upstream than any tourist was likely to venture, and most of the time it gave every impression of desertion.

José had no idea where they were. Jesus said he reckoned they were still in South America, maybe still in Colombia. Neither one of them was sure if Colombia even had jungles like this, as they'd spent their entire adult lives commuting directly between Bogotá and Miami. But Jesus felt sure that if the country did have a jungle, this was it.

José disagreed. Their journey to the clearing had been a seemingly endless nightmare of boats, planes and helicopters that had left José in a near-coma for several hours. He hated the jungle more than anything, but

flying ran it a close second. He couldn't bear to think that he'd gone through all that and still not got out of the country.

Jesus turned towards José and spat. "I tell ya man," he said, "when I get the money from this deal, I'm setting up on my own."

"You said that last time. You always say that. I can't remember a time you didn't say that."

"I —"

"— Don't say you mean it this time."

"Well I do."

José mulled this over. "Can I come with you?"

Jesus scowled. "Fuck, I'm bored," he said.

"How about playing a game?" said José.

"Game? What sort of game?"

José looked at his gun, stroked its stubby barrel and pouted. "I don't know. Don't you know any games?"

A huge butterfly staggered past a couple of yards away. José made a pretend pistol out of his fingers and jabbed it at the creature. "Pah! Pah! Pah!" he puffed. As he tracked the butterfly his attention was caught by a movement in the undergrowth. He brought the Uzi to a firing position, but then realized it was the same animal he'd seen before.

"That bear's still there, man," he shouted to Jesus. "Weird."

Jesus turned round slowly and focused on the animal.

"No way, asshole. Ain't no bears 'round here. That's a wolf, man."

"A what?"

"Wolf. Baby wolf."

"Baby nothing. That's a full-grown animal."

"Bullshit."

"Bullshit yourself."

José scowled at Jesus and took an inventory of all the things he hated about the man — his thick curly hair, the body hair peeking from collar and cuffs, the chronic beard stubble, above all his height. José was stocky and just made five foot seven — "average height," he'd boast, "in Colombia". His own hair was thinning: what was left he'd grown long and tied back in an unconvincing pony tail. It took him a week to grow a five o'clock shadow.

Hating Jesus gave José a sense of purpose, and had done for many years. They had grown up together in Florida, among Colombians and Cubans, and their one notable achievement in childhood was that, in spite of their

environment and pronounced Latino accents, they both spoke lousy Spanish, pretty much limited to the words for gun, drink, money, drugs and VD clinic. It had built a strong bond between them.

José searched for something to say. His free hand patted his pockets and pulled a book out of his jacket. It was *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. "You wanna read something?" he said.

"You showed me that already," scowled Jesus.

"It's a war book."

"You said that." Jesus stared off at the jungle.

"It's good shit," said José. "Real literature an' all."

"It'll be bullshit like all the others. What was that gangster book?"

"Crime and Punishment."

"Right. Full o' fucking commies. And that porno book?"

"Lady Chatterley's Lover."

"Did it have any sex in it?"

"I don't know."

"Right. Man, that woman really fucked with your head."

José's love of literature was new. It had started at a party a few weeks before. He was watching his boss's back when a woman he didn't know walked up to him and started talking. That had never happened to José before and, momentarily stunned, he found himself simply listening to her. She kept calling him André, which was okay. She was saying something about literature. About how great writing turned her on. Later, she slipped away without him noticing. But that night left him with a desire to know more. He managed to find a bookstore in Miami and said to the clerk, "I need those books that turn on chicks. What are the good books? I want the best."

The *French Lieutenant's Woman* fell from his hand. Its pages fluttered and a small piece of card was carried a few feet by a rare and sudden breeze. "Dammit!" spat José. "Now I've lost my place." He made no move to retrieve the book.

"Now this is good shit," said Jesus. He pulled a magazine from his pocket and held it aloft. It was *Truck Pull Babes*. "It's the swimsuit issue," he beamed.

José edged closer, but Jesus stuffed the magazine back into his jacket, patted his pockets, pulled out a cigarette pack and put a cigarette to his lips. He patted his pockets again then turned to José. "You got a light?"

José felt a tiny tingle of pleasure, as he always did when Jesus needed

him. He sensed the cool weight of the Zippo in his trouser pocket against his hot thigh. “No,” he said. “Given up.”

Suddenly Jesus tilted his head back, his features alert. “You hear that?” he asked.

“What?”

“Someone’s coming.”

José listened hard. Then his eyebrows rose in recognition. “It’s a boat,” he said.

“Boat bullshit,” said Jesus. “It’s a plane.”

“Bullshit yourself, that’s a boat.”

“Plane.”

“Boat.”

They both listened in silence for a while, until the noise resolved itself unmistakably as a boat.

“Plane,” said Jesus.

José gave him what he hoped was a pitying look. At that moment, at the edge of the clearing, the tamandua had finally found what it was looking for — a nice juicy termite mound. Its strong furry tail wrapped around a nearby bush to keep it stable while its forelegs ripped open the nest and its long snout sucked up the insects.

The sound caught José’s attention. “It’s that fucking bear,” he said.

“Wolf.”

“For fuck’s sake, it’s a bear.”

“Go screw yourself. It’s a wolf.”

José levelled his Uzi, pulled the trigger and blew the tamandua into small pieces. “Now it’s a nuthin’.”

Rotsky picked a piece of tobacco from his blonde moustache and spent a few happy seconds speculating how long it had been there. His supply of Cubans had run out two days before. Or was it a week? Anyway, he’d definitely been out of cigars for a while. He made a note to look for a moustache brush.

He was in the flying school office, resting on a steamer chair, his feet hanging over the end. Laid out straight, he ran to six foot three. He was wearing mirror shades, and a tie-dyed flying suit, now faded but whose colours retained the ability to dazzle given the right light. As protection against the chill of the air conditioning, he wore a leather A2 flying jacket.

In his right hand was a half-full bottle of rum, capped, which he'd been holding on to since the previous evening, unable to pick a moment when he was sure he wouldn't need it anymore. In his left hand was a bill from an aircraft maintenance company. Rotsky kept staring at the numbers but couldn't make any sense of them.

The bill was for work carried out on Rotsky's P-51 Mustang, a World War Two fighter that was being slowly overhauled up at Stead Airfield, north of Reno. It was slow work because Rotsky had an idiosyncratic approach to paying bills.

They can't need this much money, he thought. No-one needs this much money all at once. Rotsky looked at the top of the bill. Sure enough, there was his name and the address of his post office box in Las Vegas. He flipped it over. The other side was blank and Rotsky found this vaguely disturbing, as though something was being kept from him. He flipped it back again and rechecked the figures. They hadn't changed. He examined the arrangement of the words, rather than the words themselves, to see if there might be some meaning in the form of the bill, some message he had missed. There was nothing. He scanned the columns of figures as though reading instruments, as though they might rise and fall as they registered his dissatisfaction with them. The numbers remained resolutely insensitive. Hell then, he thought, that's the way it is.

Rotsky had been getting a lot of bills lately, bills from people he knew had more money than him, had thriving businesses and places to live. It had been many years since Rotsky had lived anywhere, though he stayed lots of places. Mostly he just threw the bills away. Without the money to pay them, holding on to the bills would have been pointless.

There was a rattle as someone opened the main door and let the screen door clap shut behind him. It was the flying school owner, a small, crumpled man in oil-stained overalls, oil-stained baseball cap and a dark, permanent scowl.

"You got visitors," he said. "Men in suits. I hope you're sober, gaddammit."

Rotsky raised an eyebrow. He noticed the owner's blackened hands and smeared face.

"You get that oil filter changed?" he asked.

The owner growled.

"There's a lot needs doing to that plane," said Rotsky. "At least, there's a lot that could be done. We need a proper mechanic around here."

“Oh sure. And are you gonna pay him? I sure as shit can’t.”

“Did you say ‘suits’?”

The owner looked disoriented for a second.

“Oh . . . yeah, yeah. They’re right outside. Don’t look much like customers. Are you in trouble?”

“Do they have dogs?”

“Dogs? Why the fuck would they have dogs? I didn’t see no gaddamned dogs.”

Rotsky smiled. It might have been disarming if it hadn’t been for the previous night’s rum still in his veins. It made the left side of his face collapse and his smile twist into a sneer. He stood and immediately realized he needed to piss. But the restroom was a shack the other side of the airfield. He figured he’d better talk to the suits first.

He walked outside into the scorching Nevada sun. It was still early, but already hot and bright. Even with his shades he was dazzled for a second. Rotsky stopped and waited for his eyes to accommodate to the light, though there was little to see. The featureless airfield eventually gave way to barely undulating scrub. There were no trees, and only a couple of buildings, including the one Rotsky had just left. Rotsky loved this landscape — its lack of complication, where nothing was hidden and nothing had to be guessed or assumed.

When his eyes recovered he spotted the two men, dressed in identical dark suits and carrying leather briefcases. They stood in the shade of a Cessna 150’s wing.

From a distance, both men were well-built and square-jawed, with cropped hair and new, pink tans. Out-of-towners who had been around for a few days looking for him, Rotsky assumed. If the suits hadn’t been so cheap he would have said they were gangsters. As it was, his best guess was feds, maybe FAA.

There was a cough to Rotsky’s left. An Elvis impersonator sat under a sun umbrella, sipping an iced tea. Maybe I’ve forgotten a lesson, thought Rotsky. I’ll check later.

Rotsky walked to the aircraft and joined the two men under the wing. It was just high enough for the men to stand beneath it, but too low to be comfortable. They stood facing each other, their heads bowed and their knees slightly bent.

For Rotsky it was a doubly-strange sensation. As he’d approached the men he had found their suits exerting a peculiar effect on him. There was a

nervous current in his gut and by the time he joined them he felt three feet tall and six years old. When he tried to look at the men his vision blurred. It was like in his dreams when there would be something of immense significance before him but he couldn't turn his eyes to look at it.

He stared at the men's feet. One of them wore new black Oxfords so shiny that Rotsky could have shaved in them. The other man wore old All Star sneakers, one blue the other green.

"Are you Rotsky?" asked Shiny Shoes with a two-packs-a-day voice.

"Yessir," mumbled Rotsky.

"Excuse me?"

Rotsky tried to look directly at Shiny Shoes, but his head swam, so he peered at the ground again.

"It's possible," he said. "Depends. Who's asking?"

Rotsky realized he was pouting and pulled his lips back in.

Shiny Shoes cleared his throat. "We believe —"

"—believe," interrupted Sneakers. Shiny Shoes rose slightly on the balls of his feet and Rotsky thought he heard him sigh.

"We believe —"

"— just a minute," interrupted Rotsky. "You haven't told me who you are." He made a quick survey of the local area, just to be sure the old man had been right about the dogs. He didn't see any.

"Is that important?" asked Shiny Shoes.

"Well it would help," said Rotsky. He was more confident now that he had something definite to discuss. "Names matter, don't you think? They do to me. Sometimes. Depends on the names, I guess, but anyway it would help me decide if I want my lawyer present."

This was a bluff. Rotsky hadn't had access to a regular lawyer for years. He managed to look up and found Shiny Shoes smiling indulgently. "There's no need for that, really. We are simply working on behalf of our employer who is trying to recover some mislaid property."

"— property," said Sneakers.

"Haven't got it."

"What?"

"— what?" muttered Sneakers.

"Whatever it is that —" started Rotsky, then turned to look at Sneakers. The man's face was blank and his eyes dull. Rotsky turned back to Shiny Shoes. "What's wrong with *him*?" he asked.

"He's on beta blockers," said Shiny Shoes, then seeing the

incomprehension on Rotsky's face, added: "They inhibit the effects of adrenaline, help with the stress —"

"— stress," said Sneakers.

Shiny Shoes frowned and pulled a file from his briefcase. He leafed idly through the pages, not really looking at them.

"What do you do?" asked Shiny Shoes.

"When?"

"Well . . . you know . . . most of the time."

"Whatever needs doing."

Shiny Shoes frowned and bit his lower lip. "What do you do for a living?"

"For a living? Fly, mostly. Eat. Drink. Dance when I'm drunk. Sleep. Breathe. Look, listen and smell. Taste and touch whatever needs tasting and touching. Drive or walk. Read and write. Fuck, if I can and it seems the right thing to do. And when it doesn't. But mostly I fly. That's how I live."

"I mean, what exactly is it you do here?" he asked.

"Chief flying instructor."

Shiny Shoes looked around. It was a small airfield — a hut for the office, a small hangar, a gas pump and one other Cessna 150.

"Bit of a come-down, isn't it?" asked Shiny Shoes. "I mean, for a smuggling legend like you?"

"—come down," said Sneakers.

"Smuggling?" said Rotsky. "Who said anything about smuggling?" He felt the ground slip beneath him. Rotsky relied on inertia to keep his world stable, and he sensed these men were a dangerous force.

"I just did."

Rotsky paused. "Yes," he said. "That's right." He noticed how, each time he said something, Shiny Shoes glanced at the documents in his hand, as if to verify what had been said. Yet it was obvious he wasn't reading anything written there. The pointlessness of this act worried Rotsky. He felt that he should have something to do himself. Rotsky flipped open the door of the Cessna, leaned inside and flicked on the master switch. He checked the fuel gauges. One read zero but had an 'INOP' sticker across it, so that meant nothing.

"There's no need to be modest," said Shiny Shoes. "We've done a lot of research into you. You're an interesting guy. No criminal record to speak of. According to our sources at the FBI, CIA and DEA, there isn't a single file with your name on it, though you sure do turn up in a lot of footnotes.

You've led a charmed life.”

“I get by,” said Rotsky over his shoulder. He hit the beacon switch and peered through the rear window to check that the red light atop the tail fin was flashing. It wasn't. Rotsky pulled an INOP sticker from a map pocket and slapped it on the switch. It joined similar stickers on the VOR, ADF, second radio and cigarette lighter. Rotsky turned off the master switch. He removed the control lock and backed out leaving the door open. “All in order,” he muttered to himself.

“Maybe so,” said Shiny Shoes. “But I've seen your Air Force record, too. You were promising there for a while. Your fitness report says you're well above average intelligence but with a tendency to . . . ah . . .” Shiny Shoes glanced down and shuffled some papers, “. . . ‘see the world in an oblique way’. How'd you get so fucked up?”

“Attitude problem, I guess.” Rotsky moved towards the tail, running his hand along the skin of the empennage. Shiny Shoes followed him and Sneakers shuffled along behind. They both winced as they moved from the shade of the wing.

“You were busted out for ‘incompatibility’,” said Shiny Shoes. “What does that mean?”

“I was a pacifist.” Rotsky rocked the elevator up and down. He noticed that the hinges were a little rusty and the ground wire was frayed. He walked around to the right side of the aircraft.

“You were a fighter pilot,” insisted Shiny Shoes.

“I was a pilot who flew fighters. Does that make me a fighter pilot?”

“Well . . . yes.”

“Well, maybe.” Rotsky was at the wing now. He peered at the aileron hinges and ran his eye along the underside skin of the wing. It undulated gently, but nothing that might suggest a damaged spar. “You sure do know a lot about me. That means you're feds, right?”

“Anyone can get that stuff if they want it bad enough.” Shiny Shoes paused for a moment. “You know, the information we have on you makes for interesting reading. I think there are some connections that the authorities haven't noticed. If they ever put it all together, you could be in real trouble.”

“— trouble,” said Sneakers.

“Wow, that's scary.” Rotsky kicked the right tyre, moved to the nose, unhooked the Dzus fasteners and opened the engine cover. He checked for loose or worn wires, cracked engine mounts and bird nests, then unscrewed and lifted the dip stick. Four quarts. “Is that a threat?”

“No sir. Merely apprising you of the situation. My friend here has the threat, but before that, let me ask you a question. We understand you know a certain Guy Renouf.”

“Maybe.” Rotsky was a little unnerved. There were names that, when introduced into a conversation by a man in a suit, probably meant trouble, maybe even a long prison sentence.

There was a silence during which Rotsky felt the power of the suits reassert their hold. To break it, he turned back to the aircraft. He kicked the nosewheel tyre and ran his hand along the leading edges of the prop. There were several small nicks that might have to be filed out soon. Rotsky counted four screws missing from the engine cowlings.

“Walkaway Renouf? Yeah I know him. Well I knew *a* Walkaway Renouf, if it’s the same guy. Haven’t seen him in a while, though. Not since . . . well, not in a while.”

“That’s a shame. The organization we represent —”

“So you’re not feds?”

“We never said we were.”

Rotsky checked the static port and kicked the left wheel. He moved out to the left wingtip. He pulled a dead wasp from the pitot tube and the aileron hinges showed signs of rust. “She’s a beaut,” he pronounced.

Shiny Shoes cocked his head to one side and gave Rotsky a quizzical look.

“Can you tell me why you’re hopping around like that?”

Rotsky realized he was rocking from foot to foot.

“I need to piss,” he said.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Some kind of medical problem, yes?”

“Shrapnel,” said Rotsky. “Caught a SAM over Vietnam. Lost half my bladder.”

Shiny Shoes shuffled some of the papers in the file.

“Well, that’s weird,” he said. “According to your medical insurance claim you had an entire bladder up until a year ago, when the doctors took that varicose vein out of it.”

“— varicose,” muttered Sneakers.

Rotsky glared in reply.

“Let’s get down to business,” said Shiny Shoes. “We know that—”

“Did you say ‘organization’?”

Shiny Shoes mentally backtracked.

“Yes, that’s right. Mr Renouf worked for us for a while as a . . . company

pilot. We thought you might know where we could find him.”

In spite of his dizziness, Rotsky smiled. “Walkaway? Your company pilot? You still got any aircraft?”

Neither of the suits smiled.

“So what’d he do? Heist the company Lear?”

“We didn’t say that Mr Renouf had taken anything, simply that we wished to talk to him.”

“Can’t help you.”

“Oh we think you can. Maybe you don’t know where he is right now, but we think you can find him. And when you do, I want you to call us.”

Shiny Shoes handed Rotsky a business card. It was blank except for a hand-written, out-of-town phone number. Rotsky glanced at it then stuck it in one of the pockets of his flying suit.

“Any reason why I should?” he asked.

“You may remember I mentioned a threat,” said Shiny Shoes. “I’ll hand you over to my colleague.”

Sneakers now looked directly at Rotsky. His face cleared slightly, as though he’d just remembered something pleasant. He stepped forward, pulled some papers from his briefcase and smiled like a man who enjoys his job.

Another tiny wave rolled across the river and slapped gently against the small boat. Enrico Díaz tightened his grip on the sides and closed his eyes. Behind him, a stinking peasant fiddled with the stalled outboard motor.

Díaz was aware of the pitted aluminium under his fingers. He hated boats — any boats. He especially hated metal boats because he couldn’t see how anything made of metal could float. The fact that they did just terrified him all the more. He had almost turned back when he first stepped into it and felt it give beneath his weight. But it was the only transport to where he needed to go. That’s why he was travelling upstream in, what seemed to him, a foolishly small vessel, not much more than a row boat with an asthmatic engine, driven by a half-mad *pastuso* up a . . . well, *something*-infested river.

It was early morning, the sun not fully risen, and the jungle squatted ragged black along the edges of the river, swaddled in mist, harbouring god knows what malevolent beasts. Díaz cautiously opened his eyes and glowered at it accusingly, head turning from side to side as if in unwilling disbelief at the jungle’s treachery in offering no refuge from the boat. The

tormented screech of unseen animals wafted unceasingly from the darkness.

The peasant noticed Díaz's discomfort. "Never get out of the boat," he cackled.

Díaz had tried to hire a floatplane and found that his credit was no longer good. The pilot threw copies of unpaid bills at Díaz and screamed about how hauling his huge ass around the skies had played hell with the plane's fuel consumption. "If my men were here, you would not be so disrespectful," Díaz had yelled as he retreated through the door.

Díaz thought he detected the work of other, faceless agents at work in the matter of his cancelled credit. Any other time he would have brooded over this. Right now he couldn't get the words "huge ass" out of his mind.

Bearing Díaz's two hundred and seventy pounds left the boat with only a few inches of freeboard. Now and then the cold water splashed his fingers, carrying with it, he imagined, vile prehistoric diseases from the jungle.

"*Jodido!*" cursed the peasant. Díaz heard bangs and rattles and then a tubercular grumble as the engine came back to life. The boat eased forward and Díaz couldn't resist a sigh of relief. The river terrified him, but it was better than what he'd just left.

It had started out as an ordinary Corporation board meeting, a chance for the tough guys to hang out and admire the size of each other's egos. All the big shots were there, from the Medellín, Cali and Bogotá cartels and the major Miami distributors. Díaz was feeling pleased with himself. This was his first major Corporation convention. He'd earned his place at the table with a daring, large-scale smuggling scam involving dolphins, condoms and a travelling aquatic animal show. It had ended in disaster, like most of his schemes, but he knew that his colleagues appreciated the genius of the concept. It felt like he was finally starting to move up in the world.

Only a day into the convention, the boss had called the meeting to order. He slapped his fat hand on a table and bellowed, "Let's get down to business."

As the conventioners settled themselves into armchairs and bean bags, the boss surveyed the room with an air of patrician menace. Finally, as silence fell, he started.

"You all know me."

This was a bad start for Díaz. No-one knew the boss's name. Most of the men just called him *El Jefe*. But Díaz, who was from Polk County, had always called him Jeff.

"This is a time of war," beamed Jeff. "We are the generals in the War on

Drugs. And as you all know, when there's a war, people get rich.” He patted the stomach that was threatening to burst from his Tommy Hilfiger jacket. “Many of you have done great things.” He scanned the room without his gaze ever alighting on Díaz. “Some of you have performed less well.” Now he looked straight at Díaz. “But we forgive those whose heart is in the right place.” The smile he now adopted made Díaz wonder in which place his heart would end up.

The smile disappeared. “But not all is well. Remember our history. When Nixon talked about the War on Drugs, more than twenty years ago, we all smiled. We knew how strong we were. We knew we had a popular product. We were not afraid of the DEA or the CIA.”

Some among the audience chuckled at the memory.

“Then came Ford and Carter and we heard little more about it. Until . . .” Jeff paused for effect. “Reagan.”

A low murmur of dissatisfaction rumbled around the room.

“Now our drugs were not just for fun anymore. Now they were political. They were currency. Yes, yes, the *Americanos* became our best customers. But it was like feeding a beast. Even our language was debased. *Contra* no longer meant *contrabandista*. And as the CIA cornered the market, our faithful customers, our distribution networks, withered on the vine. Even while we made friends with those who had once been our enemies, we were being suckered, weakened, our values were being compromised. Under Bush it was no better. And what do we have now?”

The audience shrugged their shoulders. They had no idea.

“Clinton.”

Another round of chuckles, less certain this time.

“A pussy-whipped president who plays sax and wants to be liked. And while he is being everybody's friend, the agents of his government are helping themselves to our business. You all know how our planes stand idle while the US Air Force ships the product to America. You know how much the CIA controls distribution and marketing. And while they squeeze us at the delivery end, guerillas in our own country, our own compatriots, are taking charge of production and cornering the market on hostages.”

He turned and took a few paces, head bowed, then turned to face them with an expression that had darkened.

“As if that isn't enough, we must contend with ineptitude among our own number.” Once more his gaze settled on Díaz. “Tell me, Enrico. When may we expect the return of the two tonnes of product we loaned you?”

Díaz wiped his forehead. “I . . .” The word came out as a squeak. How could he tell him? What was left of the drugs, as well as small traces of rubber, were now thinly distributed among thousands of cans euphemistically labelled ‘tuna’. Díaz briefly considered telling them to take a trip to the canned fish section of their local supermarket, but he thought better of it. “Soon,” he said. He fought for breath. “Very soon.”

Jeff approached and stopped before Díaz, who sank further into his dangerously flattened bean bag. The looming bulk of the boss appeared to vibrate with some interior turmoil. Díaz thought he might erupt in a very literal way.

“Tell me about your little factory in the jungle,” rumbled Jeff. Before Díaz could answer, the boss continued. “You know we don’t like junior executives running their own operations.”

The room was silent. Díaz searched for support in the faces of the other Board members. They were cautiously sombre. The room now had the atmosphere of an unpopular relative’s funeral.

The door burst open. Two gangsters with red eyes, loosened ties and machine-pistols slung casually across their backs carried between them a huge silver platter piled high with white powder. “The new vintage has arrived!” they announced. Behind them, came a procession of near-beautiful women, cheaply but enthusiastically dressed, chattering with excitement. These, Díaz knew, would be the town’s finest whores. The meeting was over.

Only two days later, Díaz managed to slip away unnoticed. But the Board would remember his factory soon enough. They would make all kinds of assumptions, none of them healthy for Díaz. Sooner or later the Board would pay him a visit. The question was whether he’d be alive to greet them.

Díaz caught the edge of a strange smell. He wanted to blame it on the peasant at the back of the boat, but he’d been catching hints of it for days. He looked morosely at his feet. His new shoes were still glossy, as he expected. He’d paid a fortune for them the week before, and the salesman in Cali had insisted they were top of the range. But now the leather looked suspiciously like plastic. He thought his feet might be rotting.

Díaz looked nervously over his shoulder, as if expecting to see the Board members hurrying after him. Instead, all he saw was the creased face and blackened teeth of the idiot at the tiller.

“Nice morning, huh?” said the peasant.

Normally Díaz wouldn’t even have acknowledged the existence of such a low-life. The emaciated body, shabby oil-stained clothes and bare feet were

common enough in this part of the world, and Díaz couldn't explain the expensive Breitling chronometer on the man's wrist, but even in such a poor region the man managed to exude an air of extreme deprivation. And he was short, something the six-foot Díaz could never tolerate. So it was a measure of Díaz's discomfort that he engaged the man in conversation.

"Yes," he said.

Rotsky pushed in the cigarette lighter and looked around the aircraft. Gah! he thought, a spam can. He leaned forward and tapped the air speed indicator. The needle remained doggedly at the 100 knot mark, the plane's maximum cruise speed. Rotsky frowned and tapped again. The needle didn't move. He sighed.

His hand went to the control yoke, fingers tracing lightly along the smooth plastic, unconsciously seeking a weapons selector switch or a fire button. They halted instead at the strap-on press-to-talk button.

Rotsky frowned. He drummed his fingers on the yoke and then reached into one of the pockets of his flying suit. The fingers returned empty of the Havana they'd been seeking. Rotsky's frown turned to a scowl as the cigarette lighter popped.

For a Cessna 150, the aircraft was especially well-equipped. Rotsky had done a lot of work on it himself, installing an autopilot, cassette/radio system, racing seats and sun roof, and taking out unnecessary items like duplicated navigation instruments: if what you have goes wrong, you weren't meant to get there was his philosophy. But even after all that, it was still just a Cessna 150.

Something else was bothering him too, something he didn't want to think about right now but which he knew would soon claim his complete attention.

"You okay, dude?"

Rotsky realized he was squirming in his seat and somehow his companion had picked up on it. He was sharing the cockpit with a skinny, five-foot-five teenager called Vinnie.

"You okay, man?" repeated Vinnie. "You seem kinda restless." He lifted a video camera and aimed it just above Rotsky's head, as though he somehow wanted to record his thoughts.

"War wound," snapped Rotsky, shifting in his seat. "Got it that time in Venezuela. Shot up by a SWAT team, or something. Anyway, whoever they

were, those vicious bastards followed me right into the goddamn jungle.”

“I heard it was the booze,” said Vinnie.

“Well you heard wrong, dammit!” snapped Rotsky. He sucked in a deep breath. Don’t blame the kid, he thought. It’s not his fault I’m stuck with this weekend-pilot’s plane. “Sorry, man. Bad day.”

“What’s wrong.” Vinnie switched off the camera and dropped it in his lap. “What did those guys want?”

“They’ve got Tricia,” said Rotsky. “They’re gonna tear her apart unless I find someone for them.”

“Shit,” said Vinnie. “Sorry.” A blank expression came over his face. “Who’s Tricia?”

“My P-51 Mustang. The one I rent out to movie companies and airshows and stuff. Those sons of bitches have foreclosed, or factored the debt or some kind of shit. And they said they’re gonna lift my ticket—“

“—Ticket?”

“Pilot’s licence. And the weird one said something about an unfortunate accident, though I couldn’t work out if he meant something that *might* happen to me or something that *has* happened to him.”

“So where are we going?” asked Vinnie.

“Reno. I need to make some phone calls.”

“Couldn’t we have done that back at the field?”

“That old bastard would’ve made me pay for the calls.”

Vinnie thought that over for a second.

“Isn’t this his plane?”

“Sure. Why do you ask?”

“Won’t he make you pay for the flying time?”

Rotsky considered this. “Not if we don’t take it back,” he said.

“Isn’t that stealing?”

“Hell no. Rule one-ninety-nine. Airplanes want to be free. All airplanes belong to all pilots. We’re not going to keep it. Whoever takes it next, they’ll be stealing.” He waited a moment. “Unless they don’t keep it either.”

Vinnie ran his fingers around the camcorder, as though reaffirming the positions of its controls. “Who are you going to call?”

Rotsky knew the answer to this, but seeing as Vinnie had asked the question he thought it over again.

“Friends,” he said. “People who might have an idea why two guys in suits want to find Walkaway. It’s a question of uncertainty, Vinnie. Dangerous gaps in your knowledge. At times like this, it’s important to be

with people you trust, people with whom you have no gaps.”

“Does that mean we’re moving on again?”

“I guess so.”

“You didn’t really think this through, did you Rotsky?”

“Sure I did. Lots of times.” He was silent for a second. “Never came out this way though.”

Rotsky already had other things on his mind. The lower part of his body was sending out urgent signals. He needed something to take his mind off the discomfort. Maybe some instructing will do it, he thought.

“Hey Vinnie, you wanna fly?”

Being blind, Vinnie didn’t get many breaks. Being called Vinnie in a town like Las Vegas is hard enough, thought Rotsky. But he loved flying and Rotsky took him up whenever he could. He liked to take the controls and there was no way he could notice that the autopilot was on.

“No sweat dude,” chimed Vinnie. The boy’s English upper-class accent was smooth and naturally patronizing, but he was trying hard to fit in and Rotsky was doing his best not to notice.

Vinnie lightly gripped the control yoke with his left hand: the right one fluttered around indecisively while he figured out what to do with it. In the end, he let it fall on to his knee. The Cessna droned on regardless.

Rotsky scanned the instruments, and as usual found himself puzzling over their significance. He could read what they said with no trouble, and he knew how to act on what they told him. But he couldn’t help feeling that their meaning must go deeper than just his current speed, height, climb rate and fuel state. The juxtaposition of the needles and figures had to be a kind of semaphore broadcasting a more vital and profound message about his predicament. He’d once found himself discussing this subject with his wingman, back in the Air Force. “For instance,” he’d asked, “what does it mean when all the needles point at zero?”

“It means you’re *parked*, Rotsky,” scoffed the pilot.

“Well okay, what about when all the needles are at maximum?”

“That means you’re *dead*, any second now.”

Rotsky wasn’t sure the guy was getting his point, and had let it drop, but it was an idea that had never gone away and wherever Rotsky went, he would sound people out, testing them with the idea, gauging their reactions, hoping to pick up some clues or a different angle on the problem.

Rotsky noticed that Vinnie was holding back the yoke. The pressure he was exerting was slight but noticeable to someone of Rotsky’s experience.

“Hey, Vinnie, trim it out a little, will ya?”

Vinnie had no idea what Rotsky meant by trimming it out and the best he could do was to adopt a purposeful expression and tighten his hold on the yoke. Rotsky leaned forward and nudged the trim wheel up a fraction to counter Vinnie’s grip.

This kind of point-to-point flying bored Rotsky, but he was soon busy selecting frequencies, talking with air traffic control, setting squawk codes and maintaining heading. When they were close to the airport, Rotsky took control back from Vinnie, snapped off the autopilot and ran through the pre-landing checklist. Brakes off, gear down, mixture rich, pitch fine, fuel on, harness tight, weapon safeties on, cocktails secured, evidence stashed. Only three of the items were relevant to this aircraft and flight but the practice was useful.

Rotsky turned on to base leg, but made no move to reduce power or select flaps.

“What’s happening, dude?” asked Vinnie. He always knew when the flight entered a new phase.

“Turning finals,” said Rotsky.

“Cool. Height?”

“One thousand.”

“Isn’t that a little high?”

“You bet. OLC rule . . . I told you about the OLC, right?”

“OLC?”

“Outside Lomcovak Club.”

“No, I don’t —”

“—OLC rule nine-thirty-two. Always maintain height until the last moment. Never know when you’re gonna take ground fire. A shoulder-launched SAM can really fuck up your approach.”

“This is Nevada, Rotsky.”

“Exactly.” Rotsky threw Vinnie a triumphant beam. Then he noticed the boy’s confused expression and dark glasses. He carried on grinning anyway.

“*Cessna Two Five Zero, do you intend to land?*” said the voice on the radio.

Rotsky picked up the mic and hit the talk button. “I guess I’m gonna have to, sometime,” he said.

“*Is that Rotsky?*”

“Yup.”

“*Okay, Rotsky, you’re number one for landing.*”

By now he was over the runway threshold, still at a thousand feet. He chopped the power, trimmed, selected full flaps, trimmed again and put the Cessna into a side slip. The aircraft went downhill like a wounded duck until at the last moment Rotsky kicked off the yaw, hauled back on the yoke and put the tyres on the runway with a kiss that brought a smile to his lips.

Raúl Escobar had also slipped unnoticed from the Corporation convention. He had seen an opportunity and didn't want to waste time. As he stepped from the borrowed Corporation Learjet at Bogotá airport he was met by a huge man whose expensive couture suit and hundred-dollar haircut failed to disguise his dangerous physique. This was the only man that Escobar trusted and he needed him now more than ever.

The big man took Escobar's bag and stood expressionless, awaiting an order. Escobar frowned at him unhappily, then raised an eyebrow. The big man appeared to remember something, scanned the area to check there were no witnesses and executed a tiny bow.

Nothing was said until they were safely inside the rented limo and heading for Escobar's ranch. The excitement that had driven Escobar home had ebbed into frustration and fatigue, and he needed a moment to calm down and gather his thoughts. He gazed out of the window and noticed how the warm morning light painted a thin veneer of charm on the city's sprawling slums. They should put darker tinted glass in these cars, he thought.

Escobar caressed the leather of the limo's seats and then pressed a button to raise the bullet-proof window between them and the chauffeur. He picked a remote control unit from the seat and aimed it at a small TV set. He wanted to check the news programme for coverage of his return. He pressed a button. Nothing happened. He pressed all the buttons. The TV set remained blank and mute. Escobar wound down a window and threw out the remote.

His right-hand man, Hipólito, gazed out of the window. He was a man of great natural menace and profound ugliness, tall, wide and built like a tank, his face heavily scarred, who prided himself on being able to handle just about every weapon ever built, though his preference was for the bolas. Escobar was glad they were sitting now. Out on the airport tarmac Hipólito had towered over him. Escobar was just five foot seven, on a good day.

As befitted his station, Escobar was the first to break the silence.

"Give me a fucking drink," he said.

Hipólito popped open the drinks cabinet, pulled out a chilled bottle of Dom Perignon and half-filled a crystal glass. He handed it to his boss. Escobar drained it. A hint of a smile appeared on his lips.

“We’ve got work to do,” he said. “Did you bring my appointments diary?”

“No, boss.”

“Why not?” As soon as he’d asked the question, Escobar knew the answer. He wanted to put his fingers in his ears, but knew it wouldn’t look appropriately dignified.

“Because you don’t have any appointments.”

Escobar watched the adobe slums turn into ragged shanty shacks. “What about the pool hall project?”

“Cancelled.”

“The basketball team?”

“Disbanded. Half of them were killed last week in a freak machine-gunning accident.”

“Shit!” Escobar thought ruefully about the new team shirts, now wasted. “What about the interview with the newspaper?”

“Which one?”

“Whaddya mean, ‘which one’? *Del Mundo Escobar*, for fucksakes.”

Hipólito refilled Escobar’s glass, then very carefully replaced the bottle in the drinks cabinet. “It’s kind of on hold. The printer won’t print any more issues until we pay his bill.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“I had a real good talk to him.”

“And?”

“Too soon to tell. He hasn’t regained consciousness.” Hipólito let loose an encouraging smile. “What’s the work?”

Escobar nearly missed the question. His head was crowded with fragmented dreams. “What?”

“You said we have work to do.”

“Ah yes.” Escobar brightened at the prospect of the new project. “That fuckwit Díaz is being stupid again. But this time I think it could be to our advantage.”

“You want him dead, right?” asked Hipólito. He enjoyed his work and hadn’t much liked Díaz.

“I want what he’s got. If he gets hurt in the process . . . well, that’s a tragedy.”

Hipólito looked puzzled. “So . . . dead or not dead?”

“Dead is fine.”

The two men smiled and the car swished on in contented silence for a few miles, its suspension at first making light of the progressively deteriorating road surface. Escobar’s ranch was hidden away in the Cordillera mountains, partly for security, partly because he loved the isolation. Up there he could forget about the Corporation and about what he did for a living. The price he paid was convenience. There was not enough flat ground for a proper airfield and he hated the small, noisy prop planes that used the short dirt strip at the edge of the ranch. So Escobar was forced to tolerate the rough roads, though he got through a lot of cars that way. He was thinking of buying a helicopter.

About five miles out of town, where the shanty-like suburbs finally succumbed to jungle, they passed a construction site. A twelve-foot high portrait of Escobar stared back at the passing men. He was smiling, gazing beatifically across a green and sunny landscape, his head ringed by a sunburst halo. Behind him a crowd of clean peasants with joyous expressions were engaged in a variety of pursuits — playing basketball, typing on computers, talking into mobile phones. Behind the portrait, rusting bars poked untidily from dissolving grey concrete. The Raúl Escobar Leisure and Careers Complex had looked that way for the best part of two years. Escobar himself had put it down to union trouble and had got his staff to bust a few heads, but the truth was that he’d run out of money. Escobar’s funds were always limited and he’d been dismayed to discover that the bill for the poster, the promotional video and the inaugural press party had soaked up three-quarters of the total budget. The DEA took up the slack for a while. From time to time they delivered a packet of cash so long as Escobar used it for social projects unrelated to drugs. “Sure,” said Escobar each time, and meant it when he said it. The packets stopped coming anyway. Hipólito had paid a visit to the PR company in charge of the project and two days later the firm’s owner had sent a letter from his hospital bed offering a five per cent discount. Escobar took it.

The car hit a bad rut with a spine-jangling bump. Escobar lowered the partition window.

“Hey! Slow down,” he told the driver. “You’re using too much gas. Fifty-five is the best speed. Am I made of money?”

Hipólito topped up Escobar’s glass, which he’d drained several times. Escobar’s mellowed mind turned to more pleasant things, to those he loved

and cherished. Suddenly his eyes flashed open as he remembered something important.

“Hey! Did you get my present?”

Hipólito smiled indulgently and nodded to a pile of coats on the seat next to Escobar.

“I wanted to surprise you,” he beamed.

Escobar rummaged in the coats and pulled out a large, shallow package. He dropped it on his lap, enjoying the weight and savouring the moment. In a flash he’d ripped off the covering paper and had flipped open the lid. From the box he pulled one of the crudest looking guns he’d ever seen, seemingly little more than a pipe with a wooden stock. Reaching into the box again he brought out a long, straight clip for the gun.

“It’s full,” warned Hipólito.

Escobar’s face was lit up like a child at Christmas. “It’s perfect,” he gasped. “It’s just what I wanted.”

He fondled the gun for a while, itching to insert the magazine, though his respect for weapons wouldn’t let him.

“A Sten Mark 2(S),” Escobar breathed. “Integral silencer, nine millimetre parabellum, thirty-two round box magazine, cyclic rate of four hundred and fifty rounds per minute, muzzle velocity one thousand feet per second. It still has the leather sleeve around the silencer casing. Perfect.”

“I checked out the suppressor,” said Hipólito. “It’s in good condition. Doesn’t seem to have been used much. I think it’s Korean war vintage.”

“Yes, yes, almost certainly. Thank you.”

It was Escobar’s dream to own the world’s finest collection of machine guns. This one completed his collection of Stens and he couldn’t have been happier. Of course, he’d paid for it and had told Hipólito where to look for it, but he liked to think of the gun as a present.

Escobar’s face reappeared at the window. They passed a long row of faded election posters, all identical, showing a younger Escobar, smiling but with a hint of seriousness as befits a potential leader of his country.

It had been a couple of years since Escobar had last sought office — any office. The job didn’t matter, it was the fact of being elected that was important to him. He refused to buy a position: he needed to put himself above the wholesale corruption of his opponents. Escobar knew that if he was elected fairly, that would make him a true man of the people, while putting him in his rightful place above them.

Escobar had some major drawbacks as a politician, though. The first was

his hatred of children. His decision to delegate the job of kissing babies to Hipólito wasn't popular with the children or their mothers. Escobar's other problem was that he never won a single vote. It took him years to realize that even his own men were voting against him, not out of hatred but out of honour. They had accepted the bribes of his opponents — a process that was older than democracy itself — and felt duty-bound to vote for them.

Like many politically ambitious but thwarted men before him, Escobar abandoned democracy for terrorism. He created his own band of freedom fighters. The *Escobaristas* were raised from his own men, some local villagers with nothing better to do and a rag-bag of down-on-their-luck *contrabandistas*, *banditos* and bums. They blew up a few minor government buildings, robbed a bank and kidnapped a group of American tourists who thought it was part of their *Colombia Experience* package tour. One of them threatened to sue when the *Escobaristas* had let them go without having first bound and gagged them. Seeing that it was leading nowhere, Escobar cut off the terrorists' supply of drink and drugs and they soon drifted away.

The bumpiness of the road intruded into Escobar's reverie. The suspension was now having trouble coping and that meant they were getting near the ranch. Escobar wanted to get his plan into action before they arrived. This needed to stay confidential and he wasn't happy about discussing something so sensitive in a house infested with servants. As drug barons went, Escobar felt he wasn't especially paranoid, but he did like to be careful. He raised the partition window again.

"Okay, let's get down to business. Díaz has a factory and I want it. I want it working for us or I want it destroyed, but either way we need to find out what he's doing there, how long he's been doing it and who his clients are."

"Do you know where this place is?" asked Hipólito.

"Not yet, but I have someone working on that. We should know in a day or two. I want to move fast, hit him before he knows we're coming."

Vinnie realized the family fortune was disappearing when he stopped bumping into it. He'd been blind just a short while and hadn't quite got used to it. Even in the vast spaces of the family mansion, deep in the spoiled luxury of the English countryside, Vinnie had trouble moving more than a few feet without hitting something old and valuable. Then it suddenly got easier and the rooms began to echo in a cold, penurious way.

There was tension in the air, too. Vinnie's parents never spoke much about their work but it was obvious things weren't going well. Vinnie's father, Lord Haversack, described himself as a 'financial consultant and agent for overseas business concerns'. His mother called herself his 'personal assistant', which meant hiring a secretary to do most of the work. They didn't like to answer the phone.

They had taken Vinnie out of school as soon as his eyesight failed, and he wanted for little and had little to do. He mostly just hung around the house, trying to map its ever-changing geography. He got to overhear a lot of conversations in the echoing chambers, which was how he knew the house was mortgaged to the hilt and in danger of being lost. It would be the first time in fourteen generations that a Haversack hadn't owned the estate.

One day, his father tapped Vinnie on the shoulder to get his attention.

"You listening, boy?"

"Sure pop." Vinnie had been listening to a lot of US TV programmes. He liked the way the language sounded.

"We're thinking of making a business trip to America," his father said. There was an odd, distant tone in his voice, as though his mind was on something else. "Thought you might like to come along. Make a nice break for you and so forth. Add a family atmosphere to the proceedings, so to speak. Does that sound agreeable?"

"Sure, dude," Vinnie said. His parents took this to mean yes.

They flew to Chicago where Vinnie's father had arranged a meeting with a business associate to "discuss financing". The meeting took place in a night club: at least, Vinnie thought it probably was a night club, judging by the noise and atmosphere. He was overwhelmed by the racket and the density of the atmosphere.

He slumped in a seat, and from time to time an anonymous benefactor pressed a drink into his hands. Vinnie thought it might have been a woman, judging from the hands holding the glass.

Vinnie would never forget Rotsky's first words to him.

"Who are you staring at, *dogface*?" he'd asked.

It hadn't occurred to Vinnie that he might be staring at anyone. In his tired state he found the idea mildly amusing, and his only reply was a lopsided grin.

"You okay bud?" asked the voice.

"It's my birthday," said Vinnie. It had only just occurred to him. He wasn't precisely sure of the date, but it had to be roughly right. "Eighteen

today.”

“Oh man, that’s a crying shame. Alone on your birthday.”

Vinnie found this funny. When he’d finished laughing he said loudly: “I’m not alone, am I pop? Pop?” As he listened to the thumping music and tinkling glasses, an icy wave rolled up his spine. “Father?”

All hell broke loose. Vinnie tried to stay calm, concentrated hard to filter and identify the individual noises in the cacophony. There were voices, lots of them, distorted by drink, volume and physical deformity. There was the din of everything breaking — glass, wood, metal and bones. There was a strange animal screeching noise that Vinnie never did work out, but hoped he’d never hear again. And there was the stranger’s voice close to his ear saying: “Time to leave, I think.”

It took a few days for Vinnie to calm down and sober up, during which Rotsky quizzed him about his parents.

“What line of business were they in?”

“Insurance, I think. Financial investments.” Vinnie thought hard about it. “I don’t know, really.”

Vinnie described his parents, and Rotsky had a vague recollection of seeing them in the night club, talking to a huge man with a deep tan. Vinnie explained that his father was supposed to meet someone who called himself ‘King Zipa’.

“Either it’s a code name or the guy’s a wrestler,” said Rotsky. “Could be, from the size of him.”

“I don’t think the king himself turned up,” said Vinnie. “Not from what my father said.”

“Oh yeah? What was that?”

“It was ‘oh shit, it’s that bastard’. Wasn’t so much what he said as how he said it. I wonder if it was the big guy who stole my video camera.”

“Video camera?”

“Yeah, You know, my loss of sight was pretty sudden. It could come back the same way. I want a record of everything I might’ve seen. I want to know what I’ve been through.”

Rotsky asked around, talked to the people he knew who conducted financial business in night clubs, but he came up with nothing.

“Don’t worry, man,” he said, “we’ll find them.” Neither one of them thought that going to the police would be a good idea.

Rotsky bought Vinnie a new camcorder, “Top model,” he said. “Autofocus, all that shit. I got you ten spare batteries and the Deluxe Turbo

charger. Takes five batteries at a time.”

“Tapes?”

“What tapes?”

“Blank tapes. For the camcorder.”

“Uh, next week, I promise.”

Vinnie stayed at Rotsky’s office, in reality not much more than a pre-fabricated shack alongside a hangar at a small suburban airfield, but it had a bunk, a bathroom and an endless supply of fascinating sounds. It was during this time that he developed his love of aero engines. He had never heard anything so raw, so powerful, so utterly *erotic*.

Several times Vinnie heard voices discussing the riot at the club in tones of awe and wonder, and he realized what a favour Rotsky had done him, pulling him out of there when he had. When Rotsky went away for a while, to make some enquiries, Vinnie was happy to guard the office. For three weeks the linemen at the airfield brought him food and kept him company. Vinnie learned to navigate his way around the airfield; his acute hearing helped him avoid whirling propellers better than most sighted people. And for the first time in his life Vinnie felt he belonged somewhere.

Then Rotsky returned, harried and unhappy. For two hours he railed against the horrors of a strange dark world that Vinnie didn’t know, a world populated by spooks, feds, junkies, pimps, whores, niggers, spics, greaseballs, wasps, wops, kikes, Catholics, dogs and — Vinnie wasn’t sure he’d heard this correctly — varicose veins.

“People are scum, Vinnie, even people you don't know and haven't met. Even people you *will* never meet.”

From the way his voice kept fading back and forth it sounded to Vinnie like Rotsky was constantly looking over his shoulder. Then, at last, there came a break in the torrent. Vinnie listened to the sound of an AT-6 taking off, and as the radial engine blared he felt a slight tingling in his groin. Then Rotsky’s voice came back, subdued and eerily distant.

“Hey Vinnie. How’d ya like to live in Las Vegas?”

Vinnie thought about it.

“Rotsky, I need money,” he said. “If I can’t put some serious cash together, someone is going to get my home. I don’t know who, but I do know the only way to hold on to my home is to have enough money to pay off the family debts. I want my home, Rotsky.”

“And your folks?”

“Folks? Oh, my parents. We can’t rely on them.”

“But you want to find them, right?”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll turn up.”

“Okay, son. We’ll find this King Zipa and get your money. We’ll make a start in Vegas.”

“What the fuck did you do that for?” Jesus whined. He dragged himself from the river.

José’s rapid dispatch of the tamandua had caught Jesus off-guard and off-balance. José was actually quite impressed by how far Jesus had jumped into the river. Now he was back on the bank, pulling weeds and unnameable bits of river detritus from his clothes and not looking happy.

“Holy mother! Look at this. Damn suit’s ruined, man. It’s my best fucking Zegna. That’s fifty bucks you owe me.”

“Hey, Jesus. It ain’t my fault. I forgot, okay? It’s tough to work with a guy who’s scared of guns.”

“I ain’t scared of guns,” Jesus snapped. “I just don’ like loud noises, that’s all.”

They were seconds away from a major squabble, but just then the faint putt-putt of the approaching boat became suddenly louder. The two men knew it was either Díaz or trouble. José wasn’t about to take chances and loaded a new clip into the Uzi, while Jesus eyed the gun malevolently.

Within a few minutes they could make out the shape of the boat, and when it got close enough to recognize its occupants, José relaxed his guard. No sooner had the boat bumped the river bank than Díaz was ashore, palpably relieved.

“Four hours! Four goddamn hours I’ve been in that fuckin’ thing,” he explained to his unimpressed colleagues.

“What happened to the cruiser, man? You lose it?” asked José.

“Sunk.”

“Sunk?”

“What did I just say?”

“But you can’t *mean* ‘sunk’,” insisted José, his voice a little higher. He’d liked the cruiser. Boats were the only form of transport he could really tolerate, apart from Porsches. “You’ve gotta made a mistake.”

“Hey!” Díaz was red-faced. “Who’s the fucking boss here?”

José and Jesus looked at each other and shrugged.

“How?” asked José.

Díaz sighed. “It was a party, okay? At parties . . . well, shit happens. Now listen, we got more important things to worry about than sunk cruisers. Unless we get a few things sorted out around here, and I mean like right now, we’re all dog meat.”

“Sorted out?” José didn’t like this kind of talk. It usually meant work. “Whaddya mean, sorted out?”

Díaz turned to the boatman. “You can leave now.”

The boatman arched his eyebrows and held out his hand, flat and palm upwards. Díaz grumbled and fished out his wallet. He dropped a few bank notes into the waiting hand. It didn’t move. He dropped a few more and within seconds the boatman had restarted the engine and was pulling away.

“You in some kind of hurry?” yelled Díaz.

“Got a plane to catch,” shouted the boatman over his shoulder. “I like to check in early, make sure I get a window seat.”

Díaz watched the boat putter down the river for a while, then turned to his accomplices.

“Whaddya mean, sorted out?” asked José.

“We’ve got to get out of here. Get the stuff moved down to Santa Marta. Pay off everyone and start packing.”

“Most of them have gone already,” said Jesus.

“Why the rush?” asked José.

Díaz looked at José with an expression he’d developed that was meant to look stern and authoritative. José thought he looked constipated.

“I think we’re going to have trouble with Escobar,” said Díaz. “I didn’t like the way he was looking at me at the meeting. That sonofabitch is going to give us trouble.”

“Pablo Escobar?” gasped José. “Cool!”

“Not Pablo, you dipshit,” scoffed Jesus. “He’s dead.”

“Bullshit he’s dead. He’s the boss man. The chief.”

“The fucking stiff,” snorted Jesus. He turned to Díaz. “He’s dead, am I right?”

Díaz sighed loudly. “Pablo Escobar *is* dead,” he said. “Long time. I’m talking about Raúl Escobar, and he’s alive. Too fucking alive.”

For Vinnie, the first few days in Las Vegas had been a dizzying cacophony of machine noise. He was submerged by it, totally lost. Rotsky had

reacquainted himself with people who didn't always sound happy to see him, and he asked around about King Zipa. No-one had heard of him.

Vinnie didn't pay much attention though. As they went from casino to bar to casino, he moved in a captivated daze, drunk on the constant crashing din of coins. Within hours he'd learned to distinguish one type of slot machine from another, and could gauge the size of a person's win to within a couple of dollars.

Once he'd acquired the basic grammar of the crashes, taps and rattles, he found himself enjoying the strange disharmonies and stuttering rhythms. There was an oiled erotic charge to the sound of money moving.

"When someone gets a big win, I see these weird, amazing images," he confessed to Rotsky one day in Circus Circus.

"Oh yeah? What kind of images?"

Vinnie shifted on his bar stool. "Well, at school, I used to have these magazines under my bed . . ."

Just then bells rang and lights flashed and a slot machine poured hundreds of quarters into the lifted skirt of a crying, middle-aged woman.

"Rotsky," gasped Vinnie. "Where's the nearest men's room?"

The next day, Rotsky relocated them to the small airfield outside the city that was to become their home. He was reluctant to venture downtown but he could see that Vinnie was missing the sound of small change. As compensation, Rotsky frequently took him to bars, sometimes in Vegas, sometimes as far as Reno. Rotsky's favourite haunt was the Green Parrot, a topless, bottomless, godless bar lost in one of Reno's industrial zones. That's where they'd gone after the visit from the Feds.

It was known unofficially as the Walking Clusterfuck Bar. It was so far off the beaten tourist track, so far down the back alley of civilization, that any holidaymaker or conventioneer walking into the place had to be lost beyond redemption already. Inevitably, the Clusterfuck became the focus for a weird and unsavoury band of no-hopers, the ones who were banned from every other bar in town, the ones who were walking the ragged edge of physical and nervous breakdown, the ones who were wanted in every state except Nevada.

For the dancers it was the last stop before hell or jail. The occasional lucky one would find god and get shipped out to the local asylum. The unlucky ones were there every night, bumping and grinding to music so loud and distorted that you couldn't tell which era it was from. The girls didn't have any clothes on but nobody minded very much.

“Believe me, Vinnie,” said Rotsky, “you’re better off not seeing this shit.”

For Vinnie, the main attraction was the inevitable row of slot machines beside the bar. Sometimes Rotsky would give him a handful of quarters which Vinnie would make last all night. Most of the time, though, he simply waited nearby for someone else to play. He would amble up to the machine and lean intimately against the side, ear to the metal, a smile on his face. Anywhere else, this might have been regarded as eccentric. In the Green Parrot, it seemed oddly innocent.

The bar opened at ten in the morning and closed at six the next morning. The intervening four hours were for the owner to repair the previous night’s damage and find new staff.

It was an hour past opening time and Rotsky was having trouble getting credit.

“No fucking way, man. Do I look like Santa Claus?”

“Well . . .” said Rotsky. He was talking to Doug Sauv , the barkeeper. He was a big guy, not quite as tall as Rotsky but twice as wide, with a florid complexion, long straggly grey hair and a white beard.

Vinnie groped his way to a chair. He sat, then felt for the table. It was a stretch so he tried to shuffle the chair forwards. It wouldn’t budge. Like all the furniture in the Green Parrot, the chair was nailed to the floor.

They were in a relatively peaceful section of the establishment, which meant that Rotsky and Doug could hear each other talking at distances of almost two feet.

Rotsky leaned on the bar. He noticed for the first time that it was made of Kevlar. Pressed into the surface at regular intervals was the manufacturer’s name, BarArmor. “Look. Doug. What’s the big deal? All I want is a tab. You’ll get paid. I’m just a tad short of cash today, that’s all.”

An old man sitting next to Rotsky cackled loudly. He seemed to be doing a bad Walter Brennan impression. “Hee hee. Short of cash. That’s rich.”

Doug stared coldly at the old man. “Why the fuck don’t you go home?”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Elvis is there.”

“Elvis is at your house? What’s Elvis doing at your house?”

Walter Brennan leaned back and gave Doug a pitying look. “What the hell you *think* he’s doing there? Fumigating it, of course.”

“Fumigating?”

“Yeah. Place is full of bees. They dead now, but I still ain’t going back.” Doug grinned and handed him a beer. “Thanks,” said Walter Brennan. “Don’t mind if I do.” He shuffled away into the darkness of the bar.

Doug turned his attention back to Rotsky and the grin disappeared.

“So. Short of cash, huh? I hear you’ve got your P-51 up at Stead. What’s it called?”

“*Delicious Tricia*,” said Rotsky, sullenly.

“Yeah, that’s right. That’s, what . . . a half-million dollar airplane? Must be costing you a packet to get it overhauled.”

“I get a special deal,” Rotsky mumbled. “Besides—”

“Hell, when didn’t you get a special deal? You can afford to run that airplane but you can’t afford a round of drinks. When was the last time you used money in this place?”

“I like to barter. You look after me, I look after you.”

“And how do you do that exactly?”

“I cut you a piece of the action.”

“Action!” Doug was nearly apoplectic. “Oh yeah. Like that Mexican scam?”

“Hey, that was just a routine import/export operation. It’s not my fault people have suspicious minds.”

“Those people were paid to have suspicious minds, Rotsky. They were immigration officials. When they’re faced with two hundred half-crazed Mexicans jogging up to the border claiming to be part of a charity marathon race, they’re entitled to ask a few questions. Like how come none of them are wearing running shoes? Or any shoes? And how come most of them are in boxer shorts? And the speed was not a wise move.”

“Are you kidding? They were the laziest sons of bitches I ever met. OLC rule two four nine — you gotta have a reason. If it hadn’t’ve been for the speed I’d never have got the bastards running.”

A small, wiry man wobbled to the bar. His long thin hair was sweat-pasted to his head in wild swirls that showed plenty of piebald scalp. The top three buttons of his cheap pink shirt were undone, and it had worked its way loose of his mauve trousers. “Did Jerry come through here?” he asked. “You seen my jacket? Has Marge called?” He raised his left hand and stared at his bare wrist. “I gotta get home,” he said and tottered out of the bar.

Doug turned his attention back to Rotsky. “Yeah, well maybe a little less speed would have done the trick. Some of those poor motherfuckers were still running round their cells a week later. And one other thing —”

“What?”

“You should have taken their money *before* you aimed them at the border.”

“Yeah, well, maybe —”

There was an explosion from the dark interior of the bar that didn’t sound like it was part of the stage act.

“Probably the owner,” yelled Doug. “Don’t worry, it’s just a thunderflash. If things were really getting out of hand he’d let off a grenade.”

Rotsky walked into the darkness. It was filled with a pungent smoke. When his eyes had adapted to the dark, he saw a smoking hole at the edge of a small patch of floor that had no furniture nailed to it. In the centre was a small, cross-eyed, grey-haired man, who swayed wildly and yelled unintelligible epithets in a thick accent that Rotsky couldn’t identify. These outbursts were aimed directly at customers, most of whom were slumped senseless over their tables. Rotsky walked back to the bar.

“That the owner?”

Doug nodded.

“Where the hell’s he from? New Jersey?”

“He’s Bucharest-Glaswegian,” said Doug. “His mother was Rumanian and his father was Scottish. No-one can understand a fucking word he says. That’s what he does most of the time — stands in the middle of the dance floor insulting people. Most people think he’s some kind of deranged floor show. Some days he gets better tips than me.”

“You work for a guy like that but you won’t give me a tab?”

Doug closed his eyes, inhaled slowly, then opened his eyes with a sigh. He reached under the bar and pulled out two cold Buds and handed them to Rotsky.

“On the house,” he said. “Now go away.”

Rotsky took hold of the bottles. At exactly the same time, cutting through the din of the music, he heard what sounded like a fire bell. The coincidence confused him, and he spent a few seconds trying to work out if the two could be connected.

“What the fuck’s that?” he yelled to Doug.

“It’s the fire bell,” Doug yelled back. “I’ve got it rigged to the phone. Never hear it otherwise. Back in a moment. Don’t steal anything.”

Rotsky did his best to look hurt and made a point of having his hands in plain view, harmlessly resting on the bar when Doug came back a few seconds later.

“It’s for you,” he said.

Billy Cook rolled over in his bunk, fell out, hit the floor hard and bounced. He sprang back onto his hands and knees then reared up holding his hands in front of his face as though to ward off an attacker. Nothing happened. There was silence. “Shit,” muttered Billy. He eased himself to his feet and stretched his bruised limbs, then looked around the room afraid he might find an audience. Billy’s situation was precarious enough without people seeing him do stupid things like this.

He was alone, which Billy celebrated with a more ebullient “Shit!” before looking for his clothes. It took him about a minute to realize he was wearing them.

Dappled light on his window told him it was daytime, though he had no way of telling what time of day. Billy had never been able to grasp whether the sun rose in the west or the east. And he had no idea which way his window faced. He contemplated this double jeopardy, as he did most times he woke. His lack of conclusions was a comfort to him. It also allowed him to put off, for a minute or two, the next big decision: whether to leave the room. If he waited long enough, if he simply refused to go out, they would come and get him eventually. But by that time they’d be mad as hell, and the abuse would start again. On the other hand, if Billy went out of his own accord, that would simply remind them of his existence, and might goad them into abuse. Worse, they might make him . . .

An engine spluttered into anger nearby. An outboard, Billy thought, and then realized he’d been hearing such engines during the past few hours of fitful sleep. Something must be happening, he thought, and tried to think what that might be. It was difficult because Billy had no idea what had happened during the past few weeks, hadn’t a clue as to the nature of the activity around him, and so had little information on which to base an informed judgment.

The engine noise dropped and receded. Soon it was quiet — as quiet as it ever gets in the jungle. Billy cast a cautious glance out of the window. He saw trees and leaves. That was all he ever saw. Trees and leaves. It was the best view he’d ever owned. Through the thin wood and glass, Billy could now make out the constant chattering sounds of the jungle and nothing else. The absence of evidence of his fellow jungle-dwellers brought him a moment’s comfort, but he couldn’t shake the faint unease at the thought that

the situation was changing in ways unknown to him.

Billy had a drifter's instinct about when to move on. A signal would fire inside him and he would pack his things, ready to take the first opportunity to get out. He'd been packed for two weeks now. It was getting to the point where he was thinking of unpacking again. He decided to check his things, just in case.

There was a faded and worn ex-army backpack hanging from the foot of his bunk. Billy emptied it on to the bed and ran a fast inventory: lucky bear, mess tin and utensils, change of clothes, lucky wombat, spare sneakers, rain cape, tin of spam, lucky elephant, compass (broken), Swiss Army knife, prophylactics, half a bar of chocolate, personal stereo, five cassette tapes in boxes, an empty tape box and a Rolling Stones tape without its box. Billy looked around for his lucky panda and found it under the pillow with a Mini-Maglite and a copy of *The Dharma Bums*. The flashlight was switched on, its batteries flat.

Billy packed carefully. That took two or three minutes. He looked around the room for something else to do. It was bare, nothing even for his eye to settle on. Nothing except the door. Billy fiddled with a strap of the pack and tried not to look at the door, but it drew his gaze. Billy shuffled alongside the bed, picked up the pack again and read the badges sewn to it, several of them now hanging loose. Mexico, Nicaragua, India, Sri Lanka, London, Paris, Brazil, Peru, Disneyland they read. There was another, Colombia, in a side pocket that Billy had resolved to sew on as soon as he came across a needle and thread.

Billy sighed. There was nothing for it. He dropped the pack on the floor, kicked it under the bed for safety and left the room. A short, bare corridor took him to the other end of the pre-fabricated building. The wood beneath his feet was springy, already rotten.

He made it to the kitchen without meeting anyone, which wasn't uncommon. He looked around in dismay at the machines and utensils. He still hadn't worked out what most of them were for. When he'd taken the job, Billy had been dizzy with the *soroche*, the Andean altitude sickness, and faint with hunger, and he wasn't too sure where the confusion arose, but he soon found himself installed as the camp cook. "My *name's* Cook," he told them many times. "We know," they'd said slowly.

The fact that he couldn't cook wasn't discovered until they were deep in the jungle. Billy was still sick. He'd tried treating the *soroche* with the Indians' traditional method of chewing coca leaves, but it didn't work for

him. He tried cocaine which still left him sick, though he didn't mind so much and found he could get a lot more work done. Finally he found the solution was just to up the dose. He was lucky that his new boss was happy to pay him in coke.

His new boss was less happy with the food Billy prepared. When the tinned food ran out, fresh produce started arriving from downriver and Billy had little idea what to do with it. There were things that Billy had never seen before. Sometimes he would be presented with a frond-covered artefact and not know if it was vegetable or fruit or part of the strange chemical processes that seemed to be going on all around him.

He saw little of the other workers: they mostly stayed inside their own huts, from which came unnerving hums and acrid smells. Even when he met the people delegated to collect the food from him they wouldn't talk. They would stare glumly at the food then turn a look of hatred and loathing on to Billy. When he'd finished, Billy would go to his room and drink himself into an *aguardiente* coma. When the drink ran out, he just stayed in his room.

Billy picked up a plate and thought about washing it. There was definitely something wrong. From the kitchen window he could see two of the other huts. Nothing moved. Absolutely, noth—

“Oh shit!” gasped Billy. His chest tightened and he couldn't breathe, but when he did finally force a deep gasp, it was clean jungle air that ran into his lungs. The smell's gone, he thought. No humming. It's too damn quiet.

Billy burst from the hut and ran into the next one. It was a jumble of pipes and glass tubes and bottles, but no people. The next hut was the same. He ran to a third which was bare. “They've left me behind,” he cursed. “The rotten bastards have left me here to . . . um, rot.” Billy suddenly felt very small and alone, as though the jungle was already closing over him. “The sons of . . .”

A noise filtered through Billy's anger. The sound of an outboard engine, maybe two engines, maybe more. Billy smiled. They're coming back for me, he thought. Then the smile disappeared. Oh shit. Oh sweet fucking Jesus. They're coming back for me!

Billy ran deeper into the hut as though to hide, before realizing that it was empty. He ran to the door, but stopped before going outside. The engines were close now, and throttling down as the boats approached the riverbank. What if they see me leave? he thought. He looked back at the bare room to see if there was a place he'd missed. There wasn't. Fuck! He bolted from the hut, head down, not looking toward the sound of the engines. There were

shouts now, and gun shots. He speeded up, crashed through the kitchen door and stopped. His head spun back and forth looking for a hiding place, his gaze too frantic to focus. Shit shit shit! The shouts and gun shots were closer. A bullet smashed the window, shattered plates and ripped away the door jamb. The fridge, thought Billy. It was a big fridge, big enough to store enough food for the whole team for a month. And he knew it was empty. Billy yanked open the door, yanked out shelves and climbed inside. He grabbed the egg tray and pulled. The door banged shut and the light clicked out. Billy was in total darkness. Safe at last, he thought.

Vinnie was nervous. Rotsky had been gone for a little while, and the crashing din of the Walking Clusterfuck bar made him feel unusually isolated. He fondled the video camera, but denied his normal sound clues he had no idea where to point it. He was glad when the bartender spoke.

“So, what’s your story kid?” asked Doug.

“Say what?”

“What?”

“Did you say story?”

“Yeah, story. How’d you end up in a sorry place like this? You’re from England, right?”

“Yeah, right on dude.” Vinnie sensed Doug’s unease but was unsure what to say next. Rotsky had warned him about the need to keep everything on a need-to-know basis. Of course, Vinnie had no way of telling who needed to know what, and Doug was his sole point of reference at the moment. “I came over here with my parents,” he said. “They were on a business trip, but I’m beginning to think that the business wasn’t something my forebears would have approved of.”

“How so?”

“I think it was something illegal.”

“Your family rich?”

“They used to be. But the family house is mortgaged now and we’re heavily in debt.”

“But your family used to be wealthy?”

“Fabulously.”

“Then your forebears would understand. How’d you think they got their money? Where are your parents now?”

“They disappeared. In Chicago. In a bar. They were meeting with this

huge man — Rotsky tells me he was huge — then there was a fight and . . . that was that.”

“Rotsky was there?”

“That’s how we met.”

“Uh-huh.”

Above the cacophony of the music system, Vinnie thought he could make out the squeak of someone cleaning a glass. “How long have you known Rotsky?” he asked the barman.

There was a pause. Vinnie thought he heard Doug sigh, but it was hard to tell.

“Jeez, I don’t know. On and off I think I’ve had the pleasure of Philip Z Rotsky’s acquaintance for fifteen years, give or take. And you know, I don’t think there’s been a single minute of that time that the sonofabitch hasn’t owed me money.”

“Zee? Oh, you mean zed. What’s the zee stand for?”

Doug chuckled. “Why don’t you ask him? No, no, just kidding. It’s safer not to.” Doug paused for a second. Vinnie got the impression he was checking they were alone. “He doesn’t like to talk about it much, says it brings back bad memories.”

“Of what?”

“Well, the way I heard it was this. Rotsky was down in Louisiana, in a major league poker game on Lulu’s flying whorehouse —”

“— Lulu?”

“Look, if you keep asking questions you ain’t gonna get to hear this. Anyway, seems Rotsky was winning and the other guys weren’t too happy about it. There was a judge and a couple of big shots from the Chamber of Commerce and they were used to winning. Rotsky was a wild child then. He was just drunk at the game but he wasn’t in what you’d call a stable state of mind. There were some accusations and an argument and it all got out of hand. Then Rotsky snapped, started howling and stomping around the airplane yelling all kinds of weird stuff the big shots couldn’t understand. The judge said Rotsky sounded like some kind of blood-crazed Zulu, and that was just too much.”

“How so?”

“Well Rotsky took it to be some kind of redneck racist crap. Don’t get me wrong: Rotsky’s no saint, but a racist he ain’t. He went for the judge. Tried to strangle him with one of Lulu’s garter belts. Would have done it too, if he hadn’t had to take it off her first. Then he set Benny loose.”

“Benny?”

“Lulu’s pet gator. The judge saw him coming and left — pretty damn fast. Escaping with his life wasn’t enough, though. When he sobered up the next day he got to thinking about all the money he’d left on that plane, so he had Rotsky arrested on a charge of alligator molestation. They got laws like that down there. He couldn’t make it stick, of course, but it meant they could hold him for a few days. The judge made sure Rotsky was locked up with the perverts and the loony toons. It wasn’t the best few days of his life. They hauled him up in court but had to let him go because of lack of evidence.”

“So the Z stands for Zulu?”

“That’s right. The name stuck. Rotsky didn’t like it much and people who use it around him don’t tend to stay healthy for too long, but Rotsky never did have a middle name, so he’s always used Z as his initial ever since.”

“Sheeit!” mused Vinnie. “I hope I never run into that judge.”

“Not very likely,” said Doug. “A few days later he woke up to find himself surrounded by DEA agents. They’d had a tip-off that he was dealing smack and sure enough there was a kilo of the stuff in his refrigerator which he said he’d never seen before. Not that the cops needed the drugs bust. You see, they found him in bed with an alligator. And what’s worse, the alligator was drugged. That’s a mandatory life sentence in those parts.”

Vinnie was impressed and was about to ask a few more questions when Rotsky’s voice boomed from somewhere nearby.

“Looks like these people are serious about finding Walkaway,” he said.

“Oh yeah?”

“Uh-huh. That was my friend in Florida calling back. She’s just had a visit from some guys in suits.”

“Her too, huh?”

“Yep. Rounding up the usual suspects, I guess. Thing is, she thought they were feds at first, like I did, but they didn’t show her any ID. She thought there was something weird about them. They didn’t say anything about any company, though.”

“So are they good guys or bad guys?”

Rotsky grinned. “I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

Quinn wasn’t getting any prettier. The face staring back at him from the rear view mirror was like a tree trunk, he decided, with a line for every one of his sixty-three years. Except that one of them wasn’t from age.

Quinn traced the long scar with a fingertip. He resented the way it was disappearing among the wrinkles. He thought of it as a kind of decoration, a badge, if not of honour then at least of dedication to his trade. Now it was fading behind these other lines that were just as hard-earned, but unwanted. Quinn's stomach gave an uneasy flip. He wondered what it might mean if the scar vanished completely. What then?

Deep behind his eyes, Quinn felt the warning shot of a headache. He rubbed his eyes, collapsed back in the seat and glared dolefully out of the side window of his rental car. For several hours he'd been doing exactly that, staring at a DC-3 parked on the edge of Tico airport. Quinn's car was on a back road that ran outside the perimeter fence, parked inconspicuously alongside some trailers. Next to him, on the passenger seat, was a camera with a 300mm lens, loaded and ready to take snaps of anybody who got into or out of the aircraft. But all the time he'd been there nobody had been near the plane, and Quinn was starting to think it was empty, maybe even abandoned. It was certainly decrepit enough for him to believe that it hadn't been touched in years. Once a bordello red, the paintwork was now so scuffed, chipped and covered in oil that it was hard to make out the markings. Only the nose art remained clearly visible — a scantily-clad woman with angel's wings holding a thick wad of dollar bills in one hand, a large calibre pistol in the other and surrounded by the words '*Divine Providence*'. Quinn never considered himself a religious man, but he thought there might be some blasphemy involved and that caused a faint squirming sensation deep inside what he imagined was his soul.

Along the road he saw two young men with long hair, earrings in ears and noses, tattered t-shirts and cut-off jeans, gliding on rollerblades, arms held out like children emulating aircraft. They were laughing. "Fucking low-lifes," Quinn muttered. Briefly he considered starting the engine, putting the pedal to the metal and running them down. After all, he had full collision damage waiver. But in the end he had to concede that it might compromise the stake-out. "Namby-pamby fucking faggots," mumbled Quinn. One skater executed a graceful pirouette. "Hippie-fucking-dippies. Uh" Quinn struggled for another deprecating epithet, but his list came up short.

"Goddamn this job," Quinn muttered. He flipped open the glove compartment and rummaged around the assorted litter with increasing agitation until finally he slammed the door shut. "Goddamn!"

It had been just eighteen hours since Quinn had picked up the Buick from the Miami airport car rental pound, but already the floor and seats were

covered in sweet wrappers, pizza boxes, empty beer and Dr Pepper cans, the rental documents and — somewhere — Quinn's last pack of cigarettes. Last, because he was under orders to give up, or else. He wasn't taking it well.

"*Goddamn!*" he yelled, and smacked the steering wheel with his fists.

Age wasn't being kind to Quinn. Every time he looked at the pizza boxes he could feel the weight of his stomach. Once, he'd had the body of an athlete which, coupled with a rifle, had proved an awesome killing machine. Born in Australia, Quinn had always considered himself a patriot, but he'd still felt compelled to leave the army. After Vietnam, Australia just wasn't getting into any decent wars. After years of aimlessly trekking from one petty skirmish to the next, Quinn set himself up in the US as a freelance personal security consultant, and for a while he had done well. But he found it difficult to maintain the necessary discipline and had turned to food for comfort. Soon the high-paying personal protection jobs drifted away. People with a thousand dollars a day to spend tend to have high standards about presentation.

In a few years Quinn was going to have to think about retirement, and what did he have to take him into his twilight years? His own hair and most of his own teeth and that was about it. Pension plans had never been part of any job Quinn had ever had: indeed, in his line of work, planning for the future had always seemed a tad optimistic.

Sitting all day at the edge of an airfield watching a piece of aerial junk wasn't his idea of a good time. It wasn't even his idea of a good job, but it was the only one he'd had in the past six months. He took a deep breath, held it and let it out slowly. Unconsciously, his hand moved into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and drew out the flip-top pack of Marlboros.

"Yeah! Fucking-A," he beamed. He opened the pack. It was empty.

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