

Fuckin' Lie Down Already

by Tom Piccirilli, 1965-2015

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Clay was an honest New York City cop driven to bring down the mob and make his city a little safer, even when it seemed like nothing he did made any difference. He always played by the rules until a two-bit junkie hit man destroyed his family and left him for dead. But Clay won't let himself lie down until he gets one last thing: revenge.

Introduction

I've only met Piccirilli in the flesh on one occasion, which we'll get to and deal with in a minute. We were introduced, digitally, by Don Eduardo Gorman, head of the Cedar Rapids combine and much-loved padrone to a whole pack of upstart noir scribes, all of us dreaming about the good old days when Dick Carroll would cut you a check on the strength of a sample chapter and an outline full of automats and small town banks and a dark haired woman who held your doom somewhere beneath her gauzy babydoll.

Within the first couple of e-mails, I knew that Pic and I were long lost tribesmen. My first clue was his easy comprehension of mildly obscure pop references. We were raised on the same gutter cuisine—had mooned over the same forgotten songs, movies, TV shows and, of course, most of all, books. The guy couldn't be stumped. I'd close out a missive with some throwaway query regarding the whereabouts of Zooey Hall. Pic'd retort—He's still on Bomano, pining for Tiffany Bolling. I'd sign off with a line from an obscure Thin Lizzy tune; he'd counter with one from Sweet. I'd recount the joys of finding my first Silverberg paperback in a spin rack at the corner Rexall; he'd reminisce about his initial encounter with a Matheson or Philip K. Dick collection. Stuff like that.

So a few years back, we both end up in Los Angeles at the same time and conspire to get together for dinner. He was meeting people about a possible film deal—I can't recall which book was under option. (And at this point I want to publicly confer to Pic the right to add footnotes to correct the historical record.) I was there for much less romantic and profitable reasons, on which I will not dwell beyond mentioning that they involved attorneys and depositions and the kind of bad blood that can turn the marrow forever septic.

I was bunking at the airport Hilton, honestly, swear to God, under an assumed name. Not to worry—all this was a while ago and much of this particular hash has been settled. Pic and I arranged to meet and he picked me up in a rented navy blue Crown Victoria, a cushy tank for off-duty cops and old-time leg-breakers, which, I know, is often one in the same. I was impressed and as I hopped into shotgun position and extended a hand to shake, I felt an easy camaraderie, as if we'd known each other since Sharon Stone was a virgin.

For two guys who belonged to the Church of the Gold Medal Paperback, there was little question as to where we'd dine that night. Pic jumped onto the 405 headed north and made his way, like a native, to 6667 Hollywood Boulevard and the Musso & Frank Grill.

Now, for the average tourist, Musso & Frank is a shrine that glows with the light of old Hollywood. Chaplain and Bogart and Douglas Fairbanks all hung out there. For the tourist with a literary bent, this is where Fitzgerald and Faulkner and Dorothy Parker all got hammered when in the city of angels. For the hardboiled junkie, this is, according to legend, where Raymond Chandler scribbled bits of *The Big Sleep*. But for two shmucks who'd give a year off the back-end of their lives for a mint copy of *Black Wings Has My Angel*, this old-time chop house was only the place where Jim Thompson spent many a long and boozy afternoon brooding over lost children, lost fathers, lost opportunities.

We settled ourselves into one of those red leather booths and made introductory small talk as we studied our menus and wondered silently if our particular table was where Thompson – allegedly, allegedly—had been screwed badly on the South of Heaven film deal by a slick young actor-turned-producer.

A side note: I once heard a writer-friend tell of attending a reading by a revered novelist. Throughout the event, the revered novelist sipped at a glass of water and, upon finishing the reading, left the glass on the podium, where, when the crowd thinned out, the writer claimed the glass and swilled the remaining fluid. This friend told me: I knew there was nothing in the water that made him a great writer, but I figured, just in case...

I am not too proud to admit that, in this same spirit, I ordered the zucchini Florentine that night at Musso & Frank. In fact, I don't much like zucchini, but I had read, in Robert Polito's wonderful biography of the writer, that Thompson often would select the zucchini Florentine when dining at M & F, and so, when the waiter arrived, that's what I requested. Along with a bourbon. Which did and did not have much to do with Thompson. Piccirilli ordered a sirloin and what sounded like a nice Cabernet. And it was only after the waiter had left that Pic reminded me: Thompson also favored the pot roast special.

Anyway, at some point early in what proved to be a long evening, our discussion of Thompson segued into a discussion of David Goodis. Goodis is, I learned that night, Pic's favorite noir scribe. Whether or not Goodis ever dined at Musso & Frank, I don't know. I can't even determine if Goodis ever met Thompson. Because, unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be a lot known—or at least written—about the novelist from Philadelphia. Pic and I had both been through Jim Sallis' fine essay a dozen times or more. But in the end, our sense of the man derived from the haunted, anguished vibe that emanated from his books. As if, in simply holding *Down There* or *Nightfall* in your hands, you got a tactile education in the many agonizing ways that one's life can detonate in an instant.

What I recall Pic saying about Goodis that night was, "He goes to his dark places more often and more honestly than anybody else, I think. He was fucked up worse than the other GM writers... which is why I love him."

That comment told me a lot about Piccirilli as both writer and man. It said that he knew where stories come from and that he understood what was at stake every time he cobbled words into myth. And it said that he realized the depths of the connections that can be made between writer and reader.

Near the end of the evening, but sometime before my last bourbon, we decided, suddenly and enthusiastically, to light out on a quest. Initially, the object of the quest was to discover the identity of Goodis' mysterious and, by most accounts,

tormenting wife, known only as “Elaine”—a primary source, it seemed to both of us, of much of his anguished vision. (I’m betting that Goodis knew—and found a perverse irony in the fact—that the name “Elaine” is derived from the Old French for “light.”)

But by the time the check came, the quest had evolved, thankfully and somewhat more rationally, into a desire to light a votive candle in memory of poor old David Goodis and the noir world he bequeathed to us. Somehow, it didn’t seem such an odd idea at the time—two erstwhile Catholics lighting a candle for our lost Jewish idol.

Now, I’m a little bleary on the details of what happened next, but I know that it involved some bad directions from a surly 7-Eleven clerk and a series of wrong turns that put us, eventually, somewhere in East L.A. Which was where we spotted St. Lucy’s. (I had hoped to find a St. Elaine’s, but Pic suggested this would be a long shot at best.)

It was a little mission-style church on a busy street full of clubs that were spilling music and light out onto the sidewalks. Unable to find a parking spot, Pic dropped me off and began to circle around the block. I made my way inside and found a classic alcove in the nave, filled with a black, wrought-iron table upon which rested, in tiers, dozens, perhaps hundreds, of flickering candles, all of them set in small, red glass holders. That the church was wide open and deserted at this hour did not at all surprise or concern me at the time. And as I selected a taper and ignited it, I felt as if I were inside a noir novel, some old, battered paperback from my childhood Rexall. As if I were moving through the penultimate chapter of a book, bringing my mind into line with my fate just before the bottom fell out of the world.

And so, as if I were a character moving at the behest of some anonymous writer, smoking Camels and sipping from a bottle of Four Roses, I did what was expected of me. I lit a candle for David Goodis. And for Jim Thompson and Gil Brewer and Peter Rabe and Harry Whittington and Bruno Fisher. And for Ed Gorman and Bill Pronzini, who had initiated Pic and me into the tribe. And, yeah, I lit it for Pic and me, too. I lit it in the hope that we’d always remember where the stories come from and what’s at stake when we string the words together into the tale and send it on its way to the reader.

Then I pushed the glowing taper into a little vase full of sand and, suddenly lightheaded, exited the church... and promptly stumbled on the last step to the sidewalk, bumping straight into a pack of Latino teens in full colors, hopped up on testosterone and the noise of something like gangster-salsa that was following them out of a nearby club.

I mumbled an apology, which I knew, as it emerged from my throat, would only make matters worse. And it did. They pushed me like a party toy from one thug to the next, got right in my face and yelled things that, very likely, had to do with my mother. I tried to run but one of them grabbed my jacket. I shirked out of the coat and kind of lurched forward—just as that wonderful Crown Vic pulled up onto the sidewalk, throwing a big, hulking block of Detroit steel between me and the St. Lucy’s Boys’ Choir.

I believe that Pic saved my undeserving ass that night. It should be noted that he feels my memory of the evening is, shall we say, skewed, and, beyond this, that

I've surrendered, in the recounting, to my bone-deep tendency toward melodrama. As it often does, the truth may reside somewhere in the middle.

Which brings us, the hard way, to Fuckin' Lie Down Already. Because only a guy who would drive a sketchy acquaintance on a nonsensical mission to honor an almost-forgotten, morbidly depressive paperback novelist could write the story you're about to read.

I'm guessing that the majority of his fans know Pic primarily as a horror writer—appropriately enough, as I'm convinced that *A Choir of Ill Children* will come to be regarded as a classic of the genre. But while I'm a lover and proponent of the terror story, raised on Matheson and still drawn to Lovecraft, sometimes in spite of myself, I think Pic is, at heart, a stone noir scribe.

For me, *FLDA* starts out as homage to Goodis and Thompson and McCoy and Brewer and Willeford and that whole cadre of 1950s paperback noir-ists. That it ends as something else is the source of its startling and upsetting power.

Up front, the story feels like a Lion/Gold Medal fable crossed with a slew of those wonderfully gritty, blue-tinged cop flicks of the '70s —*The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, *Mean Streets*, *The Outfit*, *Serpico*, *The Taking of Pelham One, Two, Three* (with just a dollop of southern-fried cornpone like *Walking Tall* and *Macon County Line* thrown in). It feels like *The Getaway* as reinterpreted by Cronenberg—the road, the guns, the plummet toward an inevitable and bloody doom plus the leaking bodily fluids. *Death Wish* as reinvented by the young Kathryn Bigelow treating a bout of the old bipolar with some Michigan street crank.

But if our story begins as homage to the originators of pb noir, it takes a turn into territories toward which those guys usually only pointed. (With a few significant exceptions: Think of the finales of Thompson's *Savage Night* and *A Hell of a Woman*).

Piccirilli isn't content merely to hint. He isn't willing to save the horror, the horror for his exit line. He moves into hell immediately, colonizes the country and then begins to mine the land, digging ever deeper toward its molten core. About three pages into this tale, we speed right through—and then past—the boundaries of traditional mid-century noir and into a land adjacent to Kafka and de Sade and the legend of snuff films.

Our hero, Clay, starts out as the Grim Reaper and turns into a devouring angel powered by a gearworks that runs on a relentless and insatiable need for vengeance. A kind of demon of mindless regret and fury behind the wheel of an '89 Caprice.

There are images in this story that I'm never going to get out of my head. I won't cite them here for a number of reasons, the least of which is that you need to trip over them in your own time and respond in your own way. But midway through my first reading, I was reminded, suddenly and violently, of a moment in 1976: I was 16 years old and feasting on my first course of those '70s crime films that I referenced above. Friday, Saturday nights, my buddies and I would tramp the three miles downtown, cans of Narragansett smuggled in our pants, to the Paris Cinema to gorge on double-feature reruns of Peckinpah and Don Siegel, Sam Fuller and Robert Aldrich. *Straw Dogs*, *Vanishing Point*, *Across 110th St.*, *The Seven-Ups*. You're holding this book, you probably know the canon.

One night we wandered, unaware, into John Carpenter's Assault on Precinct 13. Five minutes in, I was confident and happy that I'd purchased two hours of gunplay and hard-guy dialogue. But shortly after that, I witnessed a moment in American film so brutal, so nihilistic, that it brought me up short and silenced the giddy, wiseass bullshit from my little gang and me. You know the film, you know the scene—the little girl and the ice cream truck: "I wanted vanilla twist."

Here on the plains of middle age, I've seen and read and, yes, lived enough that it's hard to nail me with that kind of Rinzai slap. It's not so much that I'm entirely calloused as it is that, like the washed up pugilist of any number of bus station paperbacks, I've refined the flinch and the cover-up to deep reflex. But the fact is that, with this story, Piccirilli led me down that fabled dark alley and did to me what those East L.A. gangbangers did not.

I've written elsewhere about my sense that the very act of writing, of making words into story, is an act of faith and a sign of hope. But what does it mean when the writer chooses to make a story about a universe void of faith and hope? Void, in fact, of logic, of joy, of even the smallest scrap of redemption?

That question is at the heart of why I'm drawn to the noir scribes. Because in the face of all good sense, they repeatedly climb down into the gutter and wrestle with the oldest and meanest bear of them all—the elusiveness of meaning.

Some years back, my brother-in-law came into possession of a parcel of letters handwritten by Charles Manson. These were sick, ugly, occasionally nonsensical texts. The kinds of things you scan, cringe over and drop. And afterwards, you wash the hands with Lava and walk around nervously humming saccharine pop tunes for a week. FLDA has little in common with the Manson letters. Pic, of course, is a thoughtful and talented writer and Manson is a babbling sociopath. But both those letters and this story have that same kind of power. Both leave you with a primal sense that words are dangerous, which is to say, a sense that words can change consciousness. In all sorts of ways.

Make no mistake, FLDA is a bleak and brutal little journey. And you know you've got no choice but to take it. So brace yourself, reader, and then hit the gas. I promise, one of these nights, I'll light a candle for you.

Jack O'Connell

Chapter 1

Coincidence only carries so far, and then you've just got to figure the universe wants to fuck you up as much as possible.

Clay had been on the road for two days straight when he got pulled over for failing to signal. He was in upstate New York someplace, a few miles outside of Winnoroneck, a small town where everybody had a half acre of yard, picket fence, and an enormous bird bath you could set a helicopter down in.

Still had a while to go before he hit Saratoga. Nothing out here but fields, orchards, meadows, and bumpkin cops laying in wait behind billboards.

The air conditioner roared against his knees, the constant thrum of the fan cooling his fever some, but the thick fluids leaking from his stomach had begun to ice up. Clay kept chewing his tongue, wondering why he'd never bothered to try and leave Brooklyn and make a run for a better life. What it was that kept him rooted in the Heights when he could've just as easily moved Kath and Edward up here, gone for hay rides in wagons every Saturday afternoon. Raked his lawn and trimmed the hedges and gone cherry picking in summer.

It sounded like it might've been all right, so long as he didn't go shit-smearing insane from boredom.

Clay didn't wait in his seat for the cop to come right up.

With a groan, he shifted sideways, grabbed his service revolver from under the seat, and pocketed it. The obscenely colorful frost on his torn shirt and exposed stomach cracked loose and disintegrated. He zipped up his jacket knowing he had to make some kind of play before the cop ran his plates.

There was still a little time left, maybe just enough for him to finish the job. He patted Kathy's hand, rubbing at the small rosebud tattoo on her wrist and upsetting the flies. "Nice place up this way. You can smell them cooking cider in the valley. This could've worked for us, I think. Christ, Kath, they got oak trees all lined up and down the roads like an estate."

It was tough leaning over into the passenger seat, but he had to snatch another wad of paper towels before he did anything else. Clay wiped his sweaty face down with them, and then jammed a handful up under his jacket against his rotting belly. The stink of his own shit oozing over his belt buckles gave him the dry heaves again but there was nothing left to bring up. Straining, he managed to clamber out of the car without letting loose a scream.

The cop couldn't have been more than twenty-one at the outside, rail-thin but trying to puff his chest out, showing off the badge with pride. Bet he polished it every night before his bedtime prayers. Tremendous shoulders that proved he did plenty of military presses in the gym, spent at least four days a week on the machines. The kid was new enough on the job that he still chased after every small street infraction he found on the road. It was a pretty good way to buoy your manhood, Clay remembered, until you saw your first shotgun victim. You quit worrying about writing up tickets for loose mufflers right around then.

Crew cut, blonde hair, but with a touch of Asian in his features. He had no radio on his belt, and Clay had watched him park and get out. He hadn't called in the stop. The hell kind of county was this? What sort of training program did they give the rookies up here before sending them into the sheriff's department or the state patrol? The kid didn't even unsnap his holster, didn't place his hand on his gun.

They were five hours out of Brooklyn, and it was a whole other world.

"Please get back into your car, sir. I need to see your license and registration."

"Sure, Officer," Clay said. "Gotta make the streets safe." He couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice—amazing how the old habits could bubble up even now, with Edward eyeing him from the back seat.

"Excuse me?"

"Never know when those produce smugglers might come through and try to filch a few apples."

“Sir, there’s no need to take that tone with me.”

“You’re right. Sorry.”

“License and registration please, sir.”

“Just take a second.”

Only a slight breeze stirred the treetops, and the grass of the meadows gently rippled as if some unnamable sorrow or beauty were slowly shrugging closer. The kid hadn’t even looked inside Clay’s car yet. These people up here weren’t prepared for anything.

Clay’s wallet had been soaked through with blood and digestive juice, and the contents had dried together into a filthy lump. If he could just work the leather flaps open and get his badge out, maybe the ignorant cop would get back into his cruiser and go home and mow his lawn for the third time this week.

But the flies started coming after Clay, and the wind shifted enough so that the kid finally glanced up and furrowed his brow.

“What’s that smell?”

“I don’t smell anything.” Clay tried pulling his wallet open again but flakes and chunks of his own shit fell to the ground. The flies kept after him—he hadn’t shut the car door all the way and the heat had roused the insects inside. They congregated now on the window, crawling over the glass. The buzzing grew louder.

“Jesus... what...?” The kid said the name “Jesus” the same way that Clay’s mother and grandmother used to, with reverence and a hint of very real fear.

“Okay, I lied,” Clay said. “That would be me. Peritonitis.” His fist was crusted with black blood from his seeping intestines.

The young cop started to pick up on the fact that something bad was going on here that he’d never run into before. He took his ticket book and held it out in front of him as if it might help him to figure out exactly what was happening. He still thought all the answers were in the manual. The kid’s mother probably had a pumpkin pie waiting for him on the kitchen table, fresh out of the oven.

A rush of rage and jealousy burst inside Clay. His mouth began to frame his son’s name but he couldn’t speak it aloud.

“Jesus God,” the kid whispered as he started to choke, trying to hold down his puke. “The flies. Your car.”

“Yeah, it’s getting pretty rank in there.”

The kid spotted Kath in the passenger seat, her ashen face slack but inflexible, still beautiful in its own way. Clay watched the cop turning now, looking through the back window at Edward strapped into the car seat, lips black, and his once tiny face now bloated to three times its normal size. The crushed Chihuahua was lying near his lap, almost bent in two, with its muzzle frozen into a snarl. Edward’s eyes were half-open and somehow sharply focused into a bitter glare.

“They’re...”

“I’m a New York City Homicide Detective,” Clay said. He’d never sounded more ridiculous in his entire life.

The young cop drew his gun and pointed it with a trembling hand at Clay’s chest. Finally a reaction that Clay could understand. It instantly relaxed and comforted him. Maybe he’d brought a little of Brooklyn along with him.

“Why don’t you do your job, kid?” Clay said, holding his wet and slithery stomach, surprised at the frenzy in his own voice. He thought he’d been holding up pretty good until then, considering. “There’s a killer on the loose.”

“What? Who?”

The young cop tried to keep it together but he started to gag, lips quivering, eyes damn near popping out of his head. He covered his mouth with one palm and turned his face aside, trying to keep the gun steady, but his mother must’ve fed him a greasy breakfast with lots of bacon and juice, and it all came up in roaring waves.

While the kid was barfing, Clay took three steps over, smacked him to get his attention, and took the gun away. Clay wasn’t moving too well, and he was weak as hell, but the last few days had given him a new resolve.

Hey, you did what you had to do.

“What’s your name?”

The cop wiped roopy strands off his chin and said, “Officer Yahmi.”

“What kind of name is that?”

“My father’s from Indochina. You need medical attention. You’re going to keel over any second.”

“I’ll make it long enough.”

“To do what?”

“What’s your first name?”

“Thomas.”

It stopped Clay. “Tommy?” he said. Then the laughter boiled up in him, a squealing acid that felt like it was tearing him in half, but still he couldn’t stop. “Tommy Yahmi?”

It hurt the kid’s feelings, laughing at him like that. He chewed his lower lip, trying to get tough inside, deal with everything the way he knew he should’ve been able to, but he came up short. Could bench press 350 easily but this took his breath away.

Clay kept guffawing for another ten seconds and then the reality of the situation came pouring back in, and his laughter stopped as if someone had cut his throat.

Tommy Yahmi was doing a few things right at least. He hadn’t panicked yet and he was trying to keep Clay talking. “You really with the NYPD?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing this for?”

“There’s no way to make this sound hip, really, but you just wouldn’t understand. You would’ve had to be there, and you’d better thank Christ that you weren’t.”

“Thank you, Jesus,” he said, and he meant it too.

“Do that later.” Clay checked the kid’s service .38. “I need your extra ammo.”

“Please, mister... I haven’t done anything to you... *please* ...”

“Relax, only scumbags kill a man with his own gun.” Clay grabbed the cop’s extra clip, stunned to see it was a speed-loader. Something else that made the rookies feel slick. “I don’t suppose you have a throwaway or a back-up piece.”

“A what?”

“Forget it. Give me your cuffs.”

“In the cruiser.”

“You dumbass. Always keep them on your belt.”

Clay used his pocket knife to cut the radio cord in the cruiser and snatched up the cuffs. He jammed Tommy Yahmi’s night stick through the steering wheel and braced it against the column, threw the car into drive and let it slowly arc to the right and roll down the embankment.

The police car hit the end of the slope, went over into a ravine and was out of sight among the brush in two seconds. He couldn’t help wondering how many bodies might be hidden there as well. You never knew where Chuckie Fariente’s crew might be burying them.

So far, he and the young cop had been out here for fifteen minutes already and not another vehicle had passed. Clay looked up and down the highway and saw nothing.

“Is that your family?” Tommy Yahmi asked, still hoping to get the conversation moving a little.

“Yeah.”

“What happened to them?”

“It’s a little too long for me to get into right now.”

“What are you doing?”

“Finishing what somebody else started.”

“You need—”

“Get lost Tommy Yahmi,” Clay said, waving him away with the two pistols. The kid just kept staring. “Start walking. Go home and eat your pie and ice cream. Tell Mom I said hello.”

“Let me help you.”

“Got a man I need to see first.”

A wave of dizziness washed over Clay as he climbed back into his ’89 Caprice and got behind the wheel. He’d always hated the cramped space before, but now he welcomed it, feeling closer to Kath and Edward than he had in months. Protected on all sides.

He drove for about three miles before he saw a pile of roadkill on the shoulder. Clay had no idea what the animal had been, but he pulled over, pried its smashed furry body up with the toe of his shoe, grabbed the thing and tossed it onto the floor of the back seat.

There now. He got back in and started hunting for Rocco Tucci again, while his liver slid another inch to the left.

Chapter 2

Sometimes you can surprise the hell out of yourself, stepping into a scene like this and still not losing all your cool.

So he’d walked in the door to see Kath lying there on the couch with a pink scrunchie tied tightly around her arm, the syringe on the floor but the broken needle still jabbed in a vein.

Her chest was covered in vomit, one thickly encrusted breast exposed. Legs wide open, knees bent and propped with her feet wedged into the corner cushions. The

torn panties had been thrown across the room and hung off one of her high school cheerleading trophies on the mantel. Clay could tell she was dead by the effortless, smooth look of serenity and release in her slumped body.

A blur of motion broke to his left. He turned, reaching for his gun, and recognized the face-pissant hustler from the neighborhood name of Rocco Tucci. Chuckie Fariante must've hired him, paid him off with a few grams of skag. God damn it, nobody took care of their own business anymore.

Rocco was holding one of Clay's throwaway .32s. He must've been in the house for a while, tearing the place apart, to have found it inside the cutaway panel behind the night stand. If he'd kept digging he would've discovered two others, all with their serial numbers filed off, untraceable. Rocco gave a quick smirk of triumph, aimed from his hip, and pulled the trigger.

Lunging forward, Clay let out a bark of fury even before the agony exploded in his belly. The force drove him back against the wall and he almost went through the cheap plaster before he dropped to the carpet. The smell of his own cooking flesh filled Clay's nostrils and nearly made him go into a fit of sneezing. Rocco grinned and Clay could guess why. There was a man-shaped hole in the stucco. Must've looked pretty damn funny from where the bastard was standing.

Rocco fired twice more but he was coming down off his high and the fear had started to get hold of him. Both shots went wild, striking the floor on either side of Clay's head. The screen door banged shut, and Rocco's terrified footsteps receded down the sidewalk to where he'd parked his car in the shopping center at the end of the block.

As Clay lay there, still trying hard not to sneeze, he heard Mrs. Fusilli's yapping Chihuahua, Cuddles, barking its little ass off next door. The thing didn't stop for ten seconds all day long. It was no wonder the neighborhood was filling up with addicts-listening to that mutt would drive you out of your head if you weren't on your way already.

"Cuddles," he whispered into the rug, tasting fuzz, "give it a rest."

Clay heard the sound of gushing and couldn't believe he was still alive with that much blood running out. The worst he'd ever seen was a guy who'd had his throat slit by his teenage son in an argument over the best wide receiver in the league. You never knew what could do it to you.

Guy was lying in a two-inch deep pool, vocal cords sliced through, but still flailing and trying to talk. Clay was the first on the scene and just kneeled there with his fingers stuck in the man's carotid and jugular veins, doing his best to plug the holes, arterial pressure blasting blood all over the place. But the guy just wouldn't die.

Maybe it was like that here.

Clay looked down shocked to see that there was hardly any blood at all. The wound was nearly cauterized by the bullet. His flesh sizzled but the rip was there, opening wider. He'd never been shot before, not even nicked, in his fifteen years on the force, but he'd heard about this kind of thing happening on occasion. You heard it all eventually. After being shot you joined a different kind of club, stuck behind a desk usually, and had nothing to do but tell stories.

Clay's shirt smoldered and threads of smoke twined into his face. He gasped and managed to shift and turn over to smother the sparks. He thought about just going to sleep right then, but the water was running.

"Oh Christ," he begged, "no..."

He'd heard the bath.

Overflowing.

You do what you have to do, there's nothing else. He tried to make it to his feet but wasn't quite there yet.

So he crawled to his son.

Edward bobbed face-down in the water, with his blonde hair floating above like a golden lily-pad, wreathing his crown. Fingers of his left hand were touching the side of the tub the way a swimmer would reach for the edge of a pool. His other hand lay beneath him, bent awkwardly under his chest. The red and blue toy boats had drifted out of the flooding tub and now lay sideways, trapped under a steady stream of soapy water sluicing onto the floor.

His boy's naked back had broken the surface and was dry and warm to the touch. Clay placed his palm there and wanted to leave it for a while, but he realized he still had motions he had to go through.

In his career he'd saved perhaps a half dozen people through CPR. He worked on his son for fifteen minutes-mouth to mouth, thumping and massaging his chest, pounding at his boy's heart. He thought he might be crying but wasn't sure and didn't want to check.

Every now and then a whine slid deep within him but it wasn't like any sound he'd heard before. It could be a different kind of death rattling around, hungry and mewling and wanting out, but Clay kept a tight hold. He wasn't going to go yet, and he continued working at his boy until he couldn't take the frozen, insane glare in Edward's eyes anymore.

Clay kneeled with his forehead to his son's face, the fiery pain in his belly growing and the flames clawing up through him to settle in his brain. Something in his chest throbbed for a moment and then a sob broke. Clay threw his head back and thought he might howl like a dying dog, but all that came out was a guttural snarl.

Taking the towel from the rack, Clay dried his boy carefully. He was beginning to move a little better now—the vicious twinges of pain made him grunt and gnash his teeth, but at least he could stand. He headed back to the living room, stumbling and shouldering his way along the walls, seeing clues everywhere and knowing exactly what had happened.

It was a wicked way to go through the world. Always capable of putting the pieces together quickly, in the correct order. A hell of a talent when he needed it, and something much uglier the rest of the time.

He could picture how it happened, all right, that'd always been the easy part—walking through the crime scene, adding one fact on top of the other. The angle of blood spatter, heaving arc of the knife.

His father had been the same way—the man would wander in and glance into your face, and he'd know everything you'd been doing, everything you might be trying to hide. On the job thirty years until he'd retired to Fort Lauderdale, started

planting flowers and tending fruit trees. He was dead six months later with a head full of tumor.

Clay nearly went down. His own brain was stuffed with rot now. He twisted sideways, came to a rest against the edge of the couch, and felt the blackness welling up behind his eyes. His mostly digested breakfast trickled out of his torn guts and between his fingers.

The urge to sit beside Kathy grew overwhelming. Another moment to play house, just fade off into the night and pretend it was all going to work out on the other side of hell. He tugged her feet free from under the cushion, sat, and laid her legs across his stinking lap.

“Just need a minute to rest,” he said. “But I swear, it isn’t over. Trust me. This isn’t how it’s going to end, baby.”

He hadn’t called her that in a while. Things had begun creeping downhill again the past couple of months, and he still wasn’t certain why. His fault probably a better than fair chance at that. He had fallen into cliché, which was something he’d been hoping to avoid all his life, but failing at most of the time. At thirty-seven, his middle age crisis had sprung out at him from behind a fucking bush and sent him sprawling. He tumbled into the predictably routine dismay of having more of his life behind him now than out in front. Where was the grace and wisdom you were supposed to find as your gray patches started to fill in? He didn’t know.

Kath had been even more fidgety the past few weeks as well—snappish, moody, quickly depressed and really pining for the good life that had somehow eluded them. He couldn’t get over the feeling that he just hadn’t tried hard enough.

Maybe if he’d pushed just one extra inch along the way they could’ve made it over the line to whatever they’d been missing. The slightest brushing against the larger dream.

She’d gone through the same sort of thing a couple of years earlier, after a cervical cancer scare. He’d seen that kind of thing jolt people into becoming wheat germ and Yoga nuts. For others, it swung them around in the other direction. Kathy wound up screwing around with H for a couple of months, but she fooled with it the same way he’d had a brief period of binge drinking. Trying to find other ways to deal with the burden of high school hopes that kept tugging at your ankles after all these years.

Being a drunk and an addict didn’t help either, so they stopped after a while, quick and easy as that. Then the baby came and the world began to have straight angles and clear-cut corners again. A texture, direction, and simplicity that mattered.

With a gentleness he didn’t know he still possessed, Clay touched Kathy’s face, nudged her chin back and forth feeling how the jaw was broken. Rocco had to knock her down first, tear the scrunchie from her hair, tie her arm off while she struggled weakly.

So Chuckie Fariante knew more about them than Clay had figured. That prick put the word on the street until some dealer came forward and gave him details about the dark corners of Clay’s and Kathy’s life. All right, that was fair. Clay had spent the last few years crawling through Chuckie’s garbage bags and listening to the most goddamn boring wiretaps in all of mobster history.

Chuckie sends Rocco out to do the deed, thinks it's a nice gag to make it look like a drug deal gone bad. Cop's wife with a needle in her arm. Tends to muddle the situation, brings the past into play, casts doubts on Clay's character. Makes him look like a dirty cop who's into Christ knows what. His own department squelches the investigation in case there's more to be found and it leads to other officers. Nobody needs the bad publicity nowadays. Just goes to show how easy it is to cause total chaos in the NYPD.

Good move, Chuckie.

There it was.

Clay slid Kathy's feet off of his lap and saw they were now streaked with his blood. He got up with a growl, made his way back to the bathroom, carried Edward to the bedroom and dressed him in a new outfit that Kathy's mother had bought. Blue shorts, little black suspenders, white collared shirt. Kathy didn't like it for some reason, but Clay did. It made his boy look a little older, as if there'd been more time for him.

He brought Edward out to the car. It took a few minutes but he got the car-seat working, strapped his son in. Cuddles was still going at it, barking with such a frantic high-pitched whining that Clay was beginning to enjoy the noise. The tiny dog dug feverishly at the chicken-wire fence separating the driveways.

Back in the house, he dressed Kath in something comfortable—a white sweater and jeans, a light blue jacket, so that she looked, somehow, the way she did back on the cheer squad while he watched from the stands. She didn't feel like dead weight. He could almost believe that she was helping him—because she knew they were all in this together now.

He said, "You finally got the vacation you wanted, baby. We're going to take a little road trip. A family outing." He wasn't quite so far over the edge yet not to realize how crazy he sounded. It was all right though, he didn't mind much.

Whatever it took.

He grabbed a handful of paper towels and stuffed them against his belly, holding in a shriek. If he let it out he'd never stop. Took the roll and a can of potpourri out to the car, then looked around the place, wondering what else he might need. He slung Kath over his shoulder and hauled her out to the Caprice, feeling her hands swaying back and forth over his ass, the way she used to fool around with him on the dance floor. He went down to one knee twice but finally managed to get her into the passenger seat.

Another wave of pain flared beneath his heart but it was only a sliver of sorrow. Clay forced it back down, checked the rearview mirror and saw Edward's eyes were still half-open. He wanted to tell his son that he wasn't missing as much as the boy might think, that life was uglier than wherever he was at now.

Backing out, Clay felt a slight thump under the rear left wheel and knew instantly that Cuddles had dug his way under the fence and gotten loose. The hell was going on? He got out and looked down at the crushed dog. The sudden and intense silence on the block brought Mrs. Fusilli rushing to her front door. She spotted Cuddles lying there, bloody with tire tracks over his snapped back, and started screeching.

Clay picked the Chihuahua up and tossed him into the back seat next to Edward. The boy's eyes seemed to light a bit so maybe it was the right thing to do.

If he packed enough death around him maybe it would insulate him from his own murder for just long enough.

Mrs. Fusilli really had a set of pipes on her. Tits down to her girdle and lungs to match. He looked over his shoulder at her and said, "Sorry, lady, but that little bastard has been driving me fuckin' nuts for two years. Go buy a nice goldfish."

The expression on her deranged face actually made him grin. He beeped the horn and gave a quick fluttering wave before stomping the pedal and tearing down the street towards seething damnation.

Chapter 3

The Feds had been onto Chuckie Fariante and the Merullo family since the beginning of time, but they'd screwed up every indictment they'd ever thrown down. Chuckie had personally killed four men that Clay knew of-two with a shotgun and two with a straight razor. Unlike most of the capos, Chuckie liked to get his hands dirty some of the time, get out there with the other soldiers and have some fun. Clay was still sort of surprised that Chuckie had hired a piece of shit like Rocco Tucci instead of coming dead-on himself.

But he'd learned not to take too much for granted when dealing with the wiseguys. Anything could come out of left field-these pricks whacked their own brothers, their kids, one capo even killed his six-year-old daughter's hamster with a hammer because the spinning wheel squeaked too loudly. You could never be too sure what might be going on inside the head of a guy like that.

They were a slick lot though. Clay nearly had Chuckie pinned down a year ago, directly tying a couple of dealers in the South Bronx to the Merullo family. But eleven kilos of heroin did the Brooklyn bounce and vanished from the evidence room by the end of the day. Clay pretty much knew it would happen, but he figured he had a little more time on his hands. The fact that the bounce happened so quickly proved that Chuckie not only had men in the precinct, but on Clay's team as well.

How could you ever beat a guy who could do that?

You simply had to roll with it as best as you could. You watched your brother officers and kept an eye on who bought a new car every eight months, who kept two mistresses in tenth floor apartments on the upper west side. You made a decision on who might actually watch your back when you finally brought it to the Merullo's doorstep.

Nobody.

He took the exit for Saratoga too fast. The Caprice's shocks didn't have much left to them and the car jostled crazily as he jumped the median. Clay tugged the wheel hard and brought the front tire back down onto the road. He was clenching his jaws so tightly that his back teeth had begun to buckle, mouth flooding with a metallic taste that reminded him of when he wore braces.

The air conditioner was still cranked full-throttle. That thin film of ice on the inside of the windows gave the world a pleasing blue glaze, but the cold didn't help

with the stench. He stopped into a strip mall for more potpourri and a few deodorizers, tossed them all around the car.

Clay's father used to bring him up here when he was eighteen or nineteen, and they bonded at the race track over beer and talk about the force. His Dad had tried to lay it on the line and offer all the insight he'd gained in his career, compact everything into a short but meaningful course that would matter when it counted. In retrospect, Clay thought they were both probably too drunk and pissed off about slow horses to ever really get down to it. Pity.

The Merullos had a motel a couple miles away where they did some business on occasion. They held the big card games there, hid the guys who were on the run, and set the old timers up with teenage whores after they'd done their eight-count in Sing-Sing. Some of those ancient fucks bounced back pretty good after a week in Saratoga.

The place was called The Ten-Spot Motel and the red neon "No Vacancy" light was always lit. Only a few cars in the parking lot, most at the other end of the building. The Feds had quit tapping the rooms after spending about a million bucks in tax money to plant wires in sixteen rooms. All they ever got on tape were giggling girls and, once, Don Carlo Gasticalli going into seizures when somebody fucked up and brought in a pre-op tranny hooker named Juan Munez. Clay heard Juan had double D tits and a nine inch schlong that had sent the Don into conniption fits.

Two thug soldiers were behind the counter doing a really bad job of keeping up appearances. They were watching a porno DVD on a seventeen inch television and listening to the commentary track. The director droned on about camera angles and how he inspired the best performances from his actresses.

Jesus frickin' Christ, these were some bored wiseguy sons of bitches.

Clay walked in trying to stand straight enough to appear normal without his entrails slipping out beneath his belt.

The thugs could've been brothers straight off the boat from Naples. Stony, round but small faces squeezed out of dark flesh, smeared onto the heavy skull, with the thick black hair this close to being a pompadour. Five o'clock shadow at eleven a.m. On occasion, when Clay had to testify in a trial, he'd take the stand and have to point out some mobster. He'd lift his hand and get confused for a second, looking around the courtroom and seeing that same guinea face staring back at him from fifty seats.

One guy paused the DVD—didn't want to miss any of the remarks on the best way to light sweaty asses—came up to the counter with both hands clenching his pot belly. "We ain't got no vacancies."

"Hey, Jo Jo," Clay said.

"Jo Jo? My name's Mel."

"Mel, that's what I meant. You seen Chuckie around today?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm looking for Chuckie Fariente."

"He ain't here."

"You sure?"

"course I'm sure."

"So where is he?"

“You got a beef about somethin’, pal?”

“Where’s Chuckie?”

“I told you.”

“You haven’t told me anything.”

“You startin’ somethin’?”

“I want to see Chuckie.”

“Go on, get outta here, if you—”

“You’re irking the shit out of me, Mel.” Clay raised the .38 and shot him twice in the face. Mel’s occipital ridge bounced off the far wall but his eyebrows clung there about chest high, body wheeling backwards into the television set.

Clay spun on the other one. “Hey, how’re you doing?”

“Listen—I’m Frank Merullo.”

“Seen Chuckie today?” He motioned the bastard forward, stepped up and placed the barrel against the middle of the guy’s upper lip. “Careful how you answer. I pride myself on my natural repose, but I gotta admit, Frank, the last few days have left me a little irritable.”

“He’s in the city!”

“Which city?”

“The city, man. New York. Manhattan.”

“You gotta be kiddin’ me.”

“No, it’s true. He was here, had a party with a few whores, but he left this morning. I swear!”

“I believe you. Where in the city?”

“His club.”

That stopped Clay and took him back a bit. He thought he knew just about everything there was to know about the Merullo business. “Chuckie’s got a club?”

“A new place he opened on the upper west side. 73rd, I think. 72nd, something like that. I’m not sure, I ain’t never been there. Restaurant, club, whatever. Called... uh... the Experience, you know, but in Italian.”

“I’ll find it. How about Rocco?”

“Who?”

“Rocco Tucci. Junkie dealer Chuckie uses from time to time.”

Frank’s chest tightened and he damn near sneered. “Don’t know him.” The mutt was starting to get used to his fear, trying to toughen it out some.

“So you’re gonna lie now and cover for a filthy scumbag like that just to show me what a fierce prick you are?”

“You know who I am? I’m Frankie Merullo! I’m Big Frankie’s second cousin!”

“And you’re both assholes. What room is Rocco in?”

Clay shoved the barrel harder, mashed Frankie’s lip against his teeth. He knew the guy was going to make a move, but he hoped he’d get an answer first. “Come on, Frankie, help me out here. I’ve had a rough couple of days.”

“At the far end! Room 16!”

“Key. Hand it to me carefully.”

Frank slowly reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a plastic card. “It’s the master, gets into every room.”

“Now you’re being helpful.”

Frankie tensed up again, knowing what was coming. He opened his arms wide and flung himself boldly forward as if he was throwing a tackle, maybe scared or stupid enough to forget there was a gun in his face. Clay fired once and Frankie did a complete backwards somersault, landed on his feet again and then flopped over Mel's corpse, just as dead.

Clay didn't worry about the noise. Rocco was in the back of the Ten-Spot and probably still on the nod with Chuckie's money.

The hallways were cleaner than he expected. Maybe Mel had taken some pride in the place and had the maids come in and clean after the party broke up. A sweet flowery aroma wafted all around.

The surge of relief in finally finding Rocco nearly dropped Clay to his knees before he could get the key into the lock.

In the two and a half days he'd been on the road he'd started to lose hope. Rocco hadn't been at his apartment in Flatbush, or at Chuckie's casino in Atlantic City, or at the Merullo complex in eastern Connecticut.

No, because he was here sleeping on the bed in a T-shirt and sagging shorts, with his arm tied off with a loop of rubber. Needle conscientiously cleaned and set on the night stand next to the throwaway.³² he'd stolen from Clay.

A naked teenage whore sat on the floor cross-legged, smoking a joint. Her chest was tattooed with a giant raven, and when she snapped up at Clay's entrance her tits went jiggling, and the wings of the bird seemed to be flapping. It was a sharp effect, she probably made some money on stage with that trick.

Clay trained the pistol on Rocco's heart, fighting down the furious urge to retch. It would kill him if he did.

Just seeing that face again nearly snuffed out Clay's brain with scorching rage and poison.

Nobody had enough cool to handle it all, but Christ, he was trying.

The girl said, "Hey, man, you can ass-fuck me, all right? Just don't shoot."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"Okay. You wanna see me dance?"

Teenybopper next door looks: cobalt eyes, blonde hair done in a pony tail, pouty lips and a dimpled chin. She reminded him of Kathy back in high school, when beauty and youth overrode everything else. He couldn't decide if it was already too late for her. Probably.

"Not at the moment," he said. "Got something else on my mind. What's your name?"

"Lula. You don't look so good, man. You're leaking. And your skin—"

"Shh."

Rocco had been on the nod for a couple of days and wasn't ever going to come out of it. He opened his bleary eyes, lost in the back of his own head, about ten seconds behind the rest of the world. He was just picking up on the fact that Clay had busted in. Idly rolled over on the bed and tried to go for the gun in slow motion.

Clay stepped over and pocketed the pistol. He checked the drawer and came up with a couple of grams of skag and \$450 in fifties. The money must've been left over from whatever pocket cash Chuckie had paid him.

Something inside was moving on its own, maybe his pancreas, maybe an animal that had crawled up for warmth.

That's okay, we're getting there.

Rocco's gaze almost focused on him. Clay had trouble catching his breath, air hissing over his teeth, but finally he bit down a groan and said, "Hey, how's it hanging?"

It took a while to get an answer. Lengthy pause... one... two... three... with Rocco's eyes going to half-mast, then widening again, until finally his mouth moved. "Shit, man... you're... dead...!"

"Pretty much. You and me both."

Clay's sweat wasn't sweat anymore, he could taste the infection as the drops ran into the corners of his mouth. He gestured with the piece.

"Come along, Rocco."

"What?"

"Come along."

"What?"

"Come on."

"Where we going?" That pallid face fell in on itself and his vacant eyes started to water. "The heck is that smell?"

"New after shave."

Lula was breathing hard too, the raven really flapping. She gave Clay a nervous smile, those blue eyes burning with fear and spirit, pink tits upturned and her pubic thatch shaved down into a thin line so light that it was almost transparent. Despite everything, he suddenly found himself becoming aroused, and the aching misery of it made him want to yelp.

A man was a man no matter what the fuck you did to him.

He said, "Lula."

"Yes."

"What's your real name?"

"That is."

"Really? Do me a favor."

A vicious smirk nicked her lips. She could sense his need and came at him like she was going to undo his pants. "Okay."

Clay handed her all the money, four packs of heroin, the spoon, the lighter, and the syringe. "Make up a nice fix for him."

"I thought you might be a cop."

She took everything from him, cooked the H and filled the needle. Rocco had fallen asleep again and a syrupy green drool trickled down his neck. Lula was about to hand the fixings back when Clay said, "More than that."

"More will probably kill him."

"And you think I want to take him home with me and introduce him to my grandmother?"

"No."

"You love him?"

"Fuck no."

"Then do it."

She grimaced and started to sulk. “I was sort of hoping I could go for a ride too. He’s going to use it all.”

“You don’t want to take a ride to where he’s going.”

The reality of the moment hit her as if she’d been backhanded, but even that didn’t quite rattle her.

“I believe you,” Lula said. “But—”

Rocco began to softly snore. In a way, Clay envied somebody who could take a nap with a gun pointed at him. The dynamics of murder vibrated in every atom of the room.

“My faith in mankind has been shaken a tad, girl. How about if you just do what I say.”

“Sure.” She drew another five cc’s into the needle.

Clay said, “Make it ten.”

“You really don’t like him, do you?”

“Not a whole lot.”

“He doesn’t have many veins left.”

“All he needs is one more.”

She found the same bloody pinprick track that Rocco had last used and eased the needle in. Rocco showed the whites of his eyes and offered up a hideous smirk big as an ass crack on his face. He sat straight up in bed and went, “Ooooggaaa—”

Stroking the center of her chest, gently petting the top of the raven’s head, Lula sashayed over to Clay, throwing all 95 pounds into her hips. “Are you gonna screw me now?”

“Don’t get insulted,” Clay said, “but no.”

“I didn’t think you could handle it. Suck your dick?”

“No.”

“Can I leave then?”

“Sure, but don’t tell anybody about this.”

“Who would believe me?”

“Good point.”

Glass rattled in the window frames, breeze beginning to kick up. Clay yanked at Rocco’s arm and he came along like a kite string being pulled on. He had no weight or solidity to him.

They wandered back down the corridors towards the main office.

“Wait there like a good boy. I gotta get something first.”

Clay moved behind the counter and searched the area for a minute. Mel’s eyebrows were still on the wall but had slid about six inches—cocked as if wondering where the hell the rest of the body had gone. Clay found a door that opened into a closet with cleaning supplies, rummaged around on the shelves checking labels. There it was. Apple cinnamon natural fragrance freshener. He took five canisters.

Rocco stood in the same spot with his eyes rolled up into his head and a smile so wide that the hinges of his jaw had separated.

“Let’s go.”

Rocco blissfully followed him into the parking lot, trailing like smoke.

Clay opened the back door and said, “Okay, squeeze in.”

Rocco started to vomit and Clay took him by the shoulder and aimed him towards the curb. He patted and rubbed Rocco's back with his free hand, kept the gun pressed into his ear with the other. Finally, Rocco climbed in next to Edward's baby seat, sat on the Chihuahua and made a small noise of discomfort. Clay said, "Get up for a second." Rocco eased himself off the seat and Clay reached in and pulled Cuddles out from under Rocco's ass, tossed the dead dog onto his lap. "There, that better?"

Rocco sighed contentedly.

Clay sprayed the car down with the air freshener and got in, took Kathy's hand again. "You still with me on this, baby?" he asked. "I know it's ugly, but it's the way it has to be for a little while longer."

Rocco made a noise in the back of his throat and went, "Ooooggaaa—"

Chapter 4

Getting back onto the highway he hit the other side of that same goddamn ramp's curbing, and this time he couldn't hold back a shriek as the car jostled savagely. Cuddles and the road kill bounced around into each other sending tufts of fur into the air. The sluggish flies buzzed angrily and crawled into Rocco's ears.

Swallowing blood, Clay cleared frost from the windshield and kept waiting for Kath to start talking to him. He knew he was feverish enough to be hallucinating, and he actually wanted it to happen. Anything to help him along. He figured he'd look over at her sitting there next to him, and she'd grin and start giving him hints on what he should be doing.

Edward would be murmuring, "Daaa? Daaaa?" the way he did after Clay read the storybooks to him and drew the blankets up to his chin. He might place one of his tiny hands on the back of Clay's neck and give him a touch more strength, just enough to finish this.

Wasn't that how it went? Kath would chuckle and swirl her fingers over his knee, and he'd be blunt enough around the borders to get through with it.

That's what this sort of burning insanity was supposed to be all about. What good was it letting your fucking mind go if it didn't go far enough?

"Kathy," he said. "For Christ's sake—" He couldn't manage to put his hand against her skin. "Kath, you listening?"

"Ooooggaaa—"

Not even a ghost of the Chihuahua prancing around, yapping. Nothing. No relief, he wasn't getting anything from his own dying.

He touched Kathy's hair and gave it a couple of feeble strokes, trying to feel what she might have now become under the crushing weight of complete release.

She grew that much more ashen beside him, hushed and yet, perhaps, sitting in judgment, her determination unshaken. Did she still hate him for all his mistakes?

"Jesus, baby, were things really that bad?"

"Ooooggaaa—"

He could never tell. She'd always been an inch or two away from him. He'd be over here with the things he could never talk about, and she'd be there with her own secrets. It made life dicey at times but kept it interesting. He never completely knew what to expect from her, and she liked having that little extra edge.

A couple of times he'd come home and found her wearing the cheerleader outfit. Once she was laughing and horny and they'd gone at it on the floor, rough and angry and having a hell of a good bout. Another time she was sitting in the center of the bed with the pom poms at her feet, both of their high school yearbooks torn to shreds and flung all over the mattress. She was crying so hard that he had to get a paper bag from the kitchen and shove it over her face before she hyperventilated.

"Rocco, you prick, you still hanging in?"

"..."

"You still alive?"

"...aah..."

Leaning down, Clay had to spit another mouthful of blood onto the floor mat. He went into a coughing fit for a minute while his vision filled with streamers of gold and orange. He tightened his fists on the wheel until his knuckles cracked and the massive knot in his chest eased up. "Good, I got a question to ask-"

"Yaaah?"

"Did you screw my wife before or after she was dead?"

"Aww..."

Suddenly, it became important to know. "Come on, level with me, I'm trying to work through this as best I can."

"...it..."

"Say again?"

"..."

"Hey, you can tell me."

"I liked it..."

"What?"

Even with the H boiling his few remaining brain cells, Rocco nodded back into the world for a few seconds. "I really dug..."

"What'd you dig?"

"...her ass."

"Yeah?"

"...and I had fun... fucking her and..."

"And?"

"...shooting you... killing you, man."

"Fair enough."

Clay had to wait five minutes before there was enough room on the shoulder for him to pull over. He took another two packets of heroin and tore them open, reached into Rocco's mouth, got hold of his bloated tongue, pulled, and poured the skag down his throat. "Here, enjoy."

Rocco immediately began convulsing and choking and pissing himself, kicking the passenger seat so hard that Kathy flopped wildly and her chin wagged back and forth the way she sometimes did during sex.

The wailing traffic tore by. He counted two police cruisers but neither cop so much as turned his head to look at the side of the road. Sometimes apathy was its own reward.

Clay got back into his car. He sprayed the apple cinnamon freshener all over the inside of the Caprice, and the flies buzzed and spun in the fragrant mist.

Chapter 5

It took six hours to get to the Tri-borough Bridge and back into Manhattan. Lights of the city seared into his eyes. Clay had blacked out twice at the wheel for a couple of seconds each time. Now it was 7 PM, right around the time Chuckie liked to start his antipasto. Clay had about twenty hours of video of Chuckie chomping calamari, stuffed artichoke leaves, prosciutto, and thinly sliced Capicola sausage. He made soft humming noises of delight while he ate.

Clay drove over to 73rd Street and circled the neighborhood a few times until he found the Experience—L'Esperienza Bella—right off Central Park West. He double-parked out front and left the engine running.

The agony had become so total now that he had somehow gone beyond it, detached but still hurting, making peace with his own slaughter. Clay could feel himself winding down, the heavy fist tightening around him even as his heart slammed in his chest, lungs struggling to keep his nearly dead, poisoned body going.

Not much time left, and none to waste on subtlety. He had his .38, the throwaway .32, and the service revolver he took off Tommy Yahmi. Plus the two sets of handcuffs. Clay didn't much like the feel of Tommy Yahmi's piece so he stuffed it into the glove compartment, carefully maneuvered the guns in his jacket pockets and kept his finger on the triggers, hands out of sight.

Clay walked into the restaurant and immediately spotted Chuckie Fariante in the back at the VIP table with Big Frankie Merullo, Roma Bartone, Fabrizio Allegante—the main players in the Merullo crew. Sure enough, they were all forking the shit out of a plate of calamari and red peppers.

Did he know his boys or what?

Smug Chuckie Fariante, with his ferret-face drawn into a perpetual sneer, was browbeating Bartone over the east side construction unions. Clay was still a little surprised that nobody had put a hit on Chuckie yet just for the way he looked. Always grinning and self-satisfied, ready to toss his wine on someone's shirt.

All those stony, round, small dark faces looked up at the same time, four black pompadours frozen thickly in place with oil and mousse, even big Frank who was pushing seventy.

Snorting blood, Clay drew both guns and casually pointed them at the crew, covering everybody. He said, "All I want is Chuckie. He comes along and the rest of you fat fucks get to finish your dinner. We clear?"

Big Frankie turned to Chuckie and said, "I thought you told me this cop was dead."

"Look at him, he is."

“Not enough.”

“Give him a few minutes to keel over.”

“I don’t think he’s gonna wait.”

Clay braced himself against the table with his hip. Fabrizio had been inching his left hand under his jacket, where he kept his knife upside down in a holster. You had to give it to some of these Sicilians, they sure had style. Clay put the barrel of the .32 in the wiseguy’s ear and said, “How about if we just remain respected adversaries, eh, Fabi?”

Now it was Roma’s turn to start acting up. “Don’t we pay your goddamn precinct enough? What, you didn’t get your cut from the bag man this week?”

Fabi’s hand strayed another half-inch under his arm. Clay sighed, wishing there’d been another way to handle this, but still not too bothered by it. He pulled the trigger and a small piece of Fabi’s head flew laterally down the room. It landed with a wet slap on the lady sitting over there, her gray Prada strapless suddenly mired in blood and bone chips. The screeching started and people ran around the restaurant yelling in Italian, the kitchen help going at it in Spanish.

Boss Merullo went, “Ah, motherless—”

Clay pursed his lips, met Big Frankie’s gaze, drew down and shot him and Roma Bartone twice in their chests.

“Come along, Chuckie. We’re going for a drive. You like dogs?”

Man, the cool on the guy. Chuckie continued to sip his wine, unwilling to move a second faster than he wanted. You had to admire somebody with that much poise and calm who wasn’t pumped full of heroin.

“You’re in charge, at least for the moment.”

“Ain’t it the truth?”

“What do you want?” Chuckie asked. “It’s easy enough to pull the trigger.”

“I’d have nothing to do with the rest of my life then.”

“How long’s that gonna be? Five minutes?”

A spasm whipped through Clay’s abdomen and he almost went over. Another burst of blood worked up his throat and leaked out of the corners of his mouth. “Give or take.”

“You got any idea what you look like?”

“Let’s go.”

Chuckie hadn’t gotten a speck of dust on his suit. He slowly finished his wine, wiped his lips with the cloth napkin, buttoned his coat and walked past Clay. Like they might be heading off to take in a Knicks game at Madison Square Garden.

They got outside where the horrified faces clustered in the shadows and the sirens screamed over the city, coming at them. The guy he’d blocked in by double-parking was huddled in his front seat with his hands on top of his head.

Chuckie peered into the Caprice. “The junkie dead?”

“Consider my state of mind, then ask again.”

“He was just supposed to warn you off. The rest of this... it had nothing to do with me.”

Clay grinned at him, feeling the infection on his own teeth. He opened the back door. “Climb in.”

“You’re crazy!”

“I only wish. Now, inside.”

“Forget that nonsense, you psycho son of a bitch!”

“There’s just enough room. Everybody’s been waiting.”

“Fuckin’ lie down already!” Chuckie cried, his voice cracking. “You’re dead!”

“Not just yet.”

“You’re leaking shit like you just had twelve enemas.”

“You sure talk pretty, Chuckie.”

“Fuck off, dead man!”

“You’re going to start hurting my feelings soon.” Clay pointed both guns at Chuckie’s eyes. “Get in.”

Chuckie Fariente, worth about six million or so, wearing fourteen hundred dollars of silk suit and another eight grand in gold jewelry, with the ruby ring, Rolex watch, and diamond stick pin, went gray and threw up all over himself.

“That goddamn smell!”

“You get used to it. Move.”

Finally Chuckie started to clamber in. Clay slashed down with the barrel of the .32 and sent him for a little loop. It would make things easier. Chuckie flopped backwards, moaning but awake, and the flies gusted into a lazy black cloud. Frost sprinkled down from overhead like snow flurries. Clay got the air freshener and sprayed Chuckie’s dripping coat, hitting all the undigested calamari and bits of salami. They didn’t need a new stench.

He handcuffed Chuckie’s right ankle to Rocco’s left one, and used Tommy Yahmi’s set to cuff Chuckie’s left wrist to Edward’s strapped-in baby seat. The prick wasn’t going anywhere.

“Let me out!” he groaned, the beautiful panic contorting his features. “This is a charnel house!”

Clay started the car and eased out past the stunned folks lining the street. “It’s the fruits of your labor.”

“It’s a meat locker in here! I told you, none of this was my fault. This stupid cocksucker here was only supposed to scare you off.”

“How?”

Lips crawling, Chuckie remained quiet.

“I’ve been living in your garbage for four years now, taping every move you made, Chuckie, and I could never make anything stick. So why the sudden need for such an extreme move?”

“It’s not so sudden. You’ve been getting on my nerves. Between the attorney fees and the payoffs and the all the bribery, you know how much money you’ve been costing me?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, you rotten bastard.”

It wasn’t much but it made Clay feel a bit better, like maybe it hadn’t all been a complete waste. He’d done the best he could at his job, and even if he didn’t win out in the end, at least he’d pissed these people off. That was something to cling to now, when he needed it most.

He slid into traffic on Central Park West just as the ambulances descended on the restaurant.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Not much farther to go.”

“Why didn’t you just firebomb my house like a normal person?”

“Ask my son.”

They drove uptown and took the transverse road at 86th street into the park. Traffic was heavy, as always, but Clay waited until there was a break between taxis and stomped the pedal, yanked the wheel hard to the right, hit the curb and jumped it.

“Stop this car!”

They drove across the park, tearing up the fields where Clay’s father used to take him to play ball on Saturday mornings, when nothing mattered but his hopes of being a cop like his old man. He’d done that much right.

The Caprice was skidding like crazy, Clay starting to laugh some. At last, Chuckie began whining, then begging, then really letting out these agonized sobs from deep in his body. Clay grinned and closed his eyes, took his hands off the wheel and just rolled with it.

They clipped a tree at the top of the hill and the Caprice became airborne. Clay couldn’t see anything and snuggled in his seat, enjoying the feel of lift-off. He counted three seconds and knew it would be bad when they came down. The explosive impact became a storm of anguish in his belly as his organs tore and rattled. Glass shattered and the shriek of twisting metal filled his head along. The diamond spear point of agony thrust into his brain, but it wasn’t enough to drown out Chuckie Fariente’s cries scattering across the tattered field as the Caprice came to an abruptly insane stop.

Smoke rose and the air conditioner kicked out.

The deluge of silence immersed the city.

Flies crept over Clay’s throat and zipped off when his Adam’s apple bobbed.

He heard the handcuffs rattling as Chuckie tried to free himself. Clay looked at his lap and saw nothing but a gaping black hole where his stomach had been, all of it ripped wide and emptied.

He opened the door and crawled out, pieces of himself slipping to one side and then the other. Blood gushed from his nose and mouth but he still wasn’t down. Not until Chuckie went first.

He leaned into the busted back window and saw Chuckie’s battered face.

“Still with me, Chuckie?”

“Just die, you bastard. Look at you! Just die!”

“In a minute.”

Clay gathered up the canisters of apple cinnamon air freshener and put them in Chuckie’s lap. He tilted down and kissed Edward on his black forehead and said, “Goodbye, my boy.”

Clay backed up a few steps dragging viscera in a lengthy line. He pulled out the .38, aimed at Chuckie’s seat, and pulled the trigger. Chuckie howled and the high-pressure canisters detonated and ignited the interior of the car. Clay watched as slick Chuckie Fariente’s face flamed up, the fire eating all that goddamn mousse in his hair, the double Windsor knot of his tie, and those uncool, petrified eyes.

The front of the Caprice had been completely buried in the crash, three tons of dirt splashing up like an colossal wave to encompass the hood and windshield. It was as good a grave as he was going to be able to offer them.

The overwhelming moonlight gave the park a beautiful silver glaze which only brightened the harder he stared.

Clay wandered down a hill a few steps, shuddering violently, maybe chuckling.

There, in the shimmering luster of night, Kathy did a cheer in her high school outfit. Smiling, welcoming the opportunity to help him set free his failures and grant him another chance to get it right. But first—first, she said, with a glint of love in her eyes, hand swaying over his ass as if they were about to embrace in a wonderfully slow dance, first he had to take a little rest.

So he laid down.

