



**Larceny
of the
Heart**

By Mario Korman

WANTED



Jasmine

Age: *Almost 17*
Occupation: *Student, Model, Thief, Blackmailer*
Description: *Drop Dead Gorgeous*

Richard Beech, early 40's, Vietnam veteran, artist, photographer, flim flam man, world traveler and gourmet cook is on the run. Bad, bad people are looking for him and wouldn't you just know it . . . he meets the love of his life. Problem is, she's beautiful and she's jailbait.

What should he do? Not a problem. Got for it. Go for her and break all the rules. Love is having . . .

Larceny Of The *Heart*

LARCENY OF THE HEART

by **Mario Korman**

Exclusively distributed in the United States of America by Entrepreneur Business Associates.

Copyright © 1997-2002 Miranda Publications, Inc., 1100 Dutchman Lake Rd., Vienna, Illinois 62995

All rights reserved Worldwide.

Any extract or full or partial reproduction of this work by any means whatsoever is strictly forbidden without the written permission of Miranda Publications.

Any unauthorized extract or reproduction by any method whatsoever constitutes copyright infringement, pursuant to the applicable sections of federal and state civil codes.

Larceny of the Heart

*An enchanting story of betrayal, desire, gourmet meals and love.
A tale of a man and a girl that steal each other's heart
and still have time to go shopping.*

By Mario Korman

Chapter 1

Large groups of people walked through sliding glass doors at Colombia's Bogota International Airport. It was the middle of the week but today's heavy crowd activity indicated that the tourist season was either beginning or in full swing.

Flavio Lizardo walked slowly toward an area that had a sign posted which read "Internacional Arribos/Internacional Salidas". Flavio seemed to be walking stiffly, as if he had recently been the victim of an accident. He shuffled awkwardly wishing he could walk the way he once did as a teenager. He walked without the aid of a cane or crutches but looked as if he needed some type of help. The group of people walking through the International Departure doorway opening had a second person that also appeared to be walking with difficulty. The man appeared to be an American. He walked along with the aid of one crutch.

Flavio carried a flight bag over his left shoulder making his movement more difficult. He switched the bag to his other shoulder as he walked up to the counter to give the customs officer his passport and travel ticket. The absent minded customs official glanced up at Flavio and looked back down toward the customer's passport and stamped it. He quickly gazed at the ticket destination and handed the items back to the man in front of him. The customs man seemed to be thinking about something entirely different the whole time he was in the possession of the document.

"Gracias, senior," Flavio said to him. He took the passport and airline ticket and stuffed them into the inside pocket of his gray herringbone sport coat. He took his flight bag and placed the strap over his left shoulder. He walked away from the customs counter, back to the waiting area and sat down.

Within a short while all the seats around Flavio were filled with people waiting for their flights. Most of the people, like Flavio were waiting for a British Airways flight to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Some of the people read newspapers or books while others simply watched the people that sat around them or were walking by.

Two airline pilots wearing dark uniforms with gold piping around the cuffs of their jackets and golden scrambled eggs on the visor of their caps walked past the crowd to their flight assignment. Two stewardesses followed closely behind them. Both of the women were rolling small suitcases along behind them. They were flying to San Juan and then to New York City where they would spend the night and return the following day with passengers flying to Bogota.

Flavio figured it wouldn't be too long before he'd be boarding now that the crew was walking to the gate entrance. He buried his head in a Spanish newspaper, La Hacienda but was having a hard time concentrating. He didn't like to fly and always feared that he would crash. He looked around the room to see if he could see anyone else that had the look of anguish that he presently exhibited. He saw an old woman that looked worried. Her skin looked very pale. But, he noticed that most people seemed calm about their upcoming flight. Two young boys were punching at each other and yelling loudly. Their mother was trying to get them to settle down. He looked at the man with one crutch and saw that he too appeared nervous. The man looked back at him while he wiped the sweat from his brow with a tissue. He wished the man would lend him his crutch.

He stood up and painfully walked to the banio. He went to the urinal, squeezed out a few sparks and moved over to the sink. He turned the cold water handle and moved his hands under the flowing

water. He delicately splashed water on his face appreciating the refreshing sensation. He looked at the reflection in the mirror above the sink. He saw that his cheeks and forehead were wet and red. He took several deep breaths, leaned over the sink and splashed a little more cold water on his face. He took three paper towels from a dispenser attached to the wall and dried himself. He looked into the mirror one more time, moved his fingers through his black hair and walked out of the bathroom.

The seat he had been using was still empty so he sat down and lifted La Hacienda again. Airports were all about waiting and this time was no exception.

Forty five minutes had passed when he finally heard the announcement from the PA that Flight 1292 to San Juan would begin boarding immediately. The airline attendant behind the counter announced in Spanish that people with little children or disabilities and First Class tickets may enter the gate to the airplane. He repeated the message in English. Flavio stood up and walked slowly to the line that had begun to form at the boarding gate. He handed his cardboard seat assignment to the attendant at the gate. She ripped it in half and handed him his portion. He walked through the doorway and out to the airplane. He positioned himself behind the people climbing up the stairs to the airplane entrance and followed them. Eventually he found himself on board the plane in a cramped seat. He had been assigned a window seat. Only one person would be able to sit next to him. He hoped it would be a pretty woman.

A heavy set Spanish man sat down beside him and immediately lit a cigarette. Flavio looked around the plane and then out of the small rectangular window. He could see the small blue lights on the runway and the gentle rocky hills in the distance.

The lighted sign above him had been turned on and read; ***Fasten Seat Belts - No Smoking!*** The man next to him continued to smoke his cigarette anyway. The Captain of the flight turned on the airplanes PA and welcomed everyone while the stewardesses demonstrated how to use the red breathing apparatus that dangled down from over head. They indicated that the seat cushion could be used as a flotation device. Flavio thought, yeah . . . yeah but really, if we go down, we're dead.

"I heard our pilot on this airplane was the student ranked dead last in his graduating class. If anything goes wrong, I hope the method used to correct the problem wasn't taught on a day that this guy was absent due to his alcoholism," Flavio suddenly said to the man sitting next to him.

The man acting a little dazed took a puff from his cigarette and looked at Flavio, "What?" He crinkled his brow to show concern over what he thought he heard.

"Well, somebody has to be last in their class, don't they?"

Finally, the airplane headed down the runway, picked up speed and lifted off, up and away. The plane seemed to float up over the mountains into the blue sky with white clouds. After they had passed through the layers of clouds the lighted ***No Smoking*** sign was turned off. The Captain announced that the weather was clear and that the flight should be comfortable and smooth all the way to San Juan. He hoped that the passengers would have a pleasant flight.

Flavio leaned over to the man sitting next to him. "Excuse me sir, would you let me pass I need to go to the banio."

Flavio stood up having to hunch over because of the airplane's overhead baggage storage bins. The man grimaced but got up and allowed him to pass. He slid over the man and made his way to the lavatory. He closed the door quickly, bent over the toilet bowl and vomited into it. He retched several times before finishing. He took some toilet paper and wiped his face and eyes. He reached for the faucet over the sink and rinsed his face and mouth with water. After ten minutes had passed and he had regained his composure he left the bathroom for his seat. He slid over the man next to him and sat back down in his assigned seat. He closed his eyes and attempted to sleep.

He must have succeeded somewhat with his slumber because it seemed like virtually no time had passed when the PA announcement filled the air that they were ready to land at San Juan.

San Juan's airport used two separate buildings for customs. The first building had officers that checked passports or proper identification. The customs officers would indicate suspicion of illegal activity by folding the traveler's flight ticket front page, placing a paper clip on the page, or a rubber band around the passport if this particular person should have their luggage inspected with diligence. Sometimes the officers would select a truly deserving passenger but at other times they'd select people purely for their own entertainment. Their jobs were mostly boring and anything could entertain them. They would laugh about people's possessions and the inconvenience they could give someone by forcing them to repack their luggage. Most of the officers didn't care about their job at all, even though it was the only employment they could find in San Juan.

Flavio walked up to the glass enclosed counter and handed the customs officer his passport.

"What is your destination, sir?" asked the officer.

"New York City," he answered.

The officer punched the numbers from the passport into his computer. After a moment the monitor readout indicated; ***NO RECORDS MATCH YOUR REQUEST . . .*** He adjusted his black tie and punched the numbers again. The screen announced; ***NO RECORDS MATCH YOUR REQUEST . . .*** He looked up at the man and peered into his eyes, looked down and punched a few more numbers. Shortly, three additional customs officers arrived wearing pistols.

"Sir, there doesn't seem to be any record of your passport anywhere. I'm sure there's no problem. However, you'll have to come with us while we straighten everything out."

The rest of the passengers had been allowed to move over to the other building, have their baggage checked and within one standard hour were on their next flight. Some people flew to New York City, others to Detroit, and the rest of them to Chicago.

Five hours later the plane landed at O'Hare Airport. The American man with one crutch hurried off the plane. His hair looked disheveled, his skin was damp and his clothes were a wrinkled mess. International travelers are usually not a pretty sight. He hurried down the hallway to the exit. Fifteen minutes later he jumped into a cab and told the cabbie the destination address. He had decided to abandon his suitcase for now. He figured he could call the airline later and have them send it to him, at his expense. Thirty five minutes later he arrived at his residence. He paid the cabbie and hustled into the house.

He was breathing heavily and acting quickly. He tilted his crutch in to the corner of the room and with great difficulty hopped into his bedroom. He looked into the closet. He found his old green

Samsonite suitcase, opened it and threw it on the bed. He looked into his dressers, located some underwear, socks, T-shirts, and threw them into the suitcase. He looked in the closet again and took several shirts, jeans, one pair of slacks, one pair of shoes and then darted into the bathroom. He gathered his extra toothbrush, shaver, toothpaste, hair dryer, and whatever else he found necessary and tossed them all into his suitcase. Quickly, he closed his Samsonite and then walked out onto the porch. He locked the front door and hurried down the street to a telephone booth. He quickly pushed the buttons and asked for a taxi.

Ten minutes later the cab arrived.

“Where to, pal?” The hack asked.

“Union Station and step on it. I gotta catch a train!”

Chapter 2

Amtrak was not what Ayn Rand had in mind with her vision of efficient railroads in her book *Atlas Shrugged*. However, her theme of political interference, human error, inability to understand, and lack of competence as the Taggart Lines attempted business as usual seemed to describe Amtrak very well.

The Illinois prairies, empty and surreal, converted themselves, in what seemed the blink of an eye, or a New York minute, into what could loosely be described as an Amtrak train station. The silver bullet, an entourage of jostling cars, the wheels and brakes screeching and wrestling each other, slowly pulled into the small town.

Approximately fifty people disembarked from the train walking slowly on the cobblestone walkway that had been laid down forty years earlier. The former passengers hurried to their waiting friends, relatives, or business associates. The train had only been twelve minutes late.

A plain brown brick building served as Amtrak's terminal. Dark slate shingles covered the roof of the building. The soot and grease from the exhaust of too many trains for too many years covered much of the side of the structure. The edifice hadn't been cleaned for years and desperately yearned the caress of a pressure washer and the appropriate solvent.

Some of the passengers walked into the depot, rushing to make a telephone call, to let their people know that they'd finally arrived in town. The tallest passenger that walked into the building kept pushing his sun glasses up his nose with his finger which ordinarily wouldn't be a big deal except that this man was walking with the help of an aluminum crutch under his right arm. The suitcase in his left hand didn't help him seem graceful at all. Something about him suggested that this was a person that found most things laughable. His lips were smiling at an angle. The right side of his mouth was a little higher up on his face than the left side. A Sunday school teacher might describe his smile as a smirk. But, no, at present he was really smiling. His smirk actually made his face look a lot tighter and his eyes considerably more piercing. The demeanor he displayed as he walked made him appear to be someone that could not be pushed too far.

He wore baggy black jungle pants bought from a Banana Republic import store and a plain khaki short sleeved shirt. The clothing looked rumpled and very disheveled. He looked as if he had slept on his ride here.

His light green Samsonite suitcase had travel decals stuck all over it. He had bought the suitcase while stationed in Saigon from a friend. It had appeared to have seen better days even back then and now it looked like it had been used in a Samsonite television commercial, one where a gorilla throws a suitcase out of a train car that bounces on the pavement a couple of dozen times and takes an incredible beating. Due to the fact that his suitcase looked beat up, his clothing disheveled, and was walking with the assistance of a crutch he also kind of looked as if a gorilla had thrown him off the train too.

The room's atmosphere was thick with cigarette smoke and body odor. The terminal was very busy for this time of day. There were over one hundred people present in the room. Some were sitting and others were sleeping. Two thirds of the group were smoking tobacco. They were sucking on cigarettes, cigars, and pipes as if they believed that the fountain of youth had somehow magically been connected onto the lit end.

There was a cluttered concession stand on one side of the room that sold newspapers, magazines, candy, snacks, and, over one hundred varieties of tobacco. Next to the concession stand stood five pin ball machines one of which was being played by a boy of about ten years old. The machine's lights flashed on and off, while the jingle jangle sounds of the machine celebrated the lad's attempt at winning a free game.

One wall was covered with small gray individual lockers where passengers could store their belongings and wander off without fear of their possessions being stolen. The northern wall was covered with age worn travel posters from exotic, faraway places like Hawaii, Mexico and Italy.

As the people pulled on their cigarettes he was reminded of the glowing chimneys of Gary, Indiana and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, of the steel factories that had at one time employed so many people as they produced all of the steel for America's manufacturers. He thought of how the greed of both the manufacturers themselves and the unions had created an opportunity for other countries that could provide steel at lower prices and better quality.

It seems the American consumer had had enough of rusty Fords and the planned obsolescence from General Motors. Oddly, the unions hadn't grasped the reality of the situation and had continued to make demands for higher salaries and more benefits. The unions had felt that their factory floor sweepers or janitors deserved \$30,000 annually, costly medical benefits, including dental, optical, and what the heck, thirteen weeks paid vacation at a time when college educated teachers were making way less salary and way less benefits.

He found it interesting that as time had gone by and the factories had modernized using computerized equipment and state of the art forging techniques that they had bounced back and found themselves making as much steel as in the old days but without the hassle and interference of the thousands of unskilled employees that had thought they were irreplaceable.

He sat down next to an old woman that wasn't smoking anything at the moment. While he looked around the room he started thinking about the string of events that had brought him to this town. It all had begun two months earlier. He had been selling cocaine and marijuana for the previous three years. Unfortunately, he had been losing customers regularly due to the fact that they were either being busted or becoming hooked on the cocaine thereby not being able to pay for the products they had ordered. He had become accustomed to making a certain amount of cash monthly but with the loss of his customers he found himself giving the products to them anyway, fronting the stuff, hoping to be paid shortly. It was as if he was offering a 30 day net but if they didn't pay, or couldn't pay because they consumed the products, what would he do. Should he play gunfight at the OK Corral or something, hire some goons to put them in the hospital or an early grave?

His money was way down due to all the products he had fronted when he had met somebody that would do something that surprised even him. He had met a guy named Flavio Lizardo, a native of Bogota, Colombia. This guy had done it before and was willing to do it again. He would surgically implant one kilo of 97% pure cocaine in his thighs. Apparently he had done this three times before and was looking for someone that would pay him to do it again. His fee for this unique form of smuggling was \$25,000 up front. The cost of the kilo would be \$13,000 also up front. The product was grown and processed by the man's relatives somewhere in the hills of Colombia, he had told him.

"Excuse me, is anyone using this chair," asked a woman. Robert Beech looked up at the woman and then at the empty chair next to him. Apparently, the old woman had left while he was thinking about his situation.

"It looks empty to me madam, have a seat," he smiled at her and continued his thoughts.

He had checked into the guy's background a little and concluded that it was a good risk to have Flavio smuggle the stuff for him. His major problem had been that all his money was on the street. He needed \$38,000 for a deal that would bring him a gross of \$140,800 based on whacking the powder 100% and selling it for \$2000 per ounce. He could probably turn the whole thing over in two to three weeks.

But he needed to raise the money. He knew a few juice loan characters that would give him the money. So, he borrowed \$50,000 with the agreement that he would repay \$75,000 within twenty one days later. He decided to go with Lizardo to Colombia to make sure that the money didn't simply disappear.

The guy had appeared to be legitimate. He had the relatives, and the cocaine, and the doctor that implanted 1.1 lbs into each thigh. And off they flew back to the USA and the dreaded customs.

Beech had watched with horror as Lizardo had been taken away. Apparently, the Customs agents had become suspicious about this man walking so stiffly. The newspaper story indicated that the Customs

people had thought that he had something under his clothing and had been astonished to find surgically implanted cocaine.

Although Beech hadn't been busted he did have a major problem. He had just lost \$38,000, and had only five days to repay his \$75,000 debt. His unreliable customers owed him about \$32,000. He was way short of the 75K. He didn't have any other choice. He had to disappear quickly.

He had gone home and thrown some essentials into a suitcase, cursing the fact that he hadn't recovered from his recent skiing accident. He had hobbled off to Chicago's Union station and bought a ticket for the next train. He hadn't really cared about the train's destination. He had just needed to go.

He looked around the room and noticed a very pretty girl of about sixteen tender years of age lighting a filtered cigarette with a traditional silver Zippo lighter the kind many of his pals in *The Nam* had engraved with their names or some dirty slogan.

"Jasmine, put that cigarette out and behave yourself," cried a rumpled, uncombed man with a two day old beard.

As she turned her eyes met Beech's. Her mouth formed an "O" and she blew a perfect smoke ring that soared in his general direction. She continued to look at him for a moment then twisted to drop her cigarette into an ashtray that stood next to her chair.

All the blond bombshells of the cinema and rock-n-roll swept through his mind instantly. He thought of Marilyn Monroe, Kim Basinger, Madonna, Dale Bozzio, and even that sexy Ellen Barkin. He visualized this girl named Jasmine walking with Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon in the old movie "*Some Like It Hot*".

Her vibrations and presence made him briefly fantasize that he was the Dennis Quaid character in "*The Big Easy*", the movie in which he starred with Ellen Barkin. And, the Ellen Barkin character was this incredible young thang. This Jasmine girl was a twelve car pileup beauty as far as he was concerned. She stood up and walked past him with the grace of an angel. He looked at her thinking that she was beautiful but she was so young. And, what the hell, he was on the run. It wasn't exactly the best time to socialize. He didn't even know where he was let alone whether he would stay in this town at all.

He was having a problem with the extreme vibrations he received from her, after all she looked very sweet, very inviting and totally magnetic. He wanted her badly. He shook his head from side to side, attempting to rid himself of his intense attraction. He stood up, picked up his crutch and suitcase and shuffled through the crowd toward the exit.

The hot air felt particularly comfortable outside compared to the weird scene inside. Just coming outside was an incredible relief compared to the planet Jupiter atmospheric conditions he had just left behind. He walked to the sidewalk and scanned what was in front of him. The park in front of him would probably be considered large in a small town like this one. He saw two statues of men wearing military uniforms from the 19th Century, one cannon (*Oh, the glory of war*), one gazebo, one orange, rectangular sign that read **WATT PARK**-Picnics by Permit only, and about twenty people playing frisbee, sitting on blankets or benches, or simply walking.

Many of the people residing in this town lovingly called their community the nickname, "Fats" due to the fact most everyone was very overweight or obese. One of the Amtrak conductors had told him about this nickname and the idea behind it. Like the statues in the park from the 19th Century many of the residents still admired values from another time. Most everyone felt that girth was translated to mean wealth. So the people were constantly snacking on high caloric snacks like pork rinds, potato chips, soft Dairy Queen ice cream, ribs, pizza (extra sausage and cheese, please), and plenty of beer. The road map to "Fats" indicated the technical name of the town was Bearsville, Illinois - population 22,351. The town also had another 16,000 or so college students because Fats was home to Illinois Agriculture & Marketing University, (Illinois A&M).

Fats was a quiet lovely little town with a quaint square surrounded by 45 stores, 10 taverns, 2 nice

night clubs, 12 restaurants, 6 carry out restaurants, 4 hotels, 3 banks, 1 cat house, 3 gay bars (two of them very small and discreet and one larger one that was kind of a anything goes type of orientation bar), 6 churches of various denominations, 0 synagogues or mosques, 2 newspapers, and one publishing house printer.

Beech stroked his dark hair off his forehead, slid his sunglasses up, and with great difficulty traipsed toward the town. He walked so awkwardly that he appeared as if he were walking over hot coals at a spiritual meeting somewhere in the African jungle. He would be the first Anglo to walk on top of glowing coals, with the assistance of an aluminum crutch and beat up green suitcase.

He felt hot but it wasn't from spiritual coals or the fierce June sun. Not too far down the street stood a hotel with a sidewalk cafe that had chairs, tables and huge white umbrellas protecting the tables from the intense rays of the sun. The umbrellas had *CINZANO* written in green script in two different areas.

He sat down at an empty table and looked down the street. He noticed a large building directly in the middle of the square. A sign in front proclaimed it to be Bearsville's City Hall and the Mead County Seat. The building was in the process of being restored. There were scaffold's and support equipment along the side and front of the building. The men that had been working on the building were sitting on one of the scaffolds taking a break, smoking cigarettes and drinking from Igloo thermos bottles.

A fat waitress waddled over to take his order. Her jeans were so tight that Beech wondered if there had ever been a time that she could properly fit in them.

"I'll have two bottles of regular Miller, please," Beech asked politely. These days one had to use the word regular, since there were now so many different Miller products. People from the city might say, "I'll have a blond!" and most bartenders would know exactly what to serve. He figured the rubes in this town wouldn't know street slang at all. So he saved himself the hassle and simply ordered a regular Miller.

The waitress wagged her way back to Beech's table, she appeared to be walking around herself with her pidgeon toe walk and very thick thighs. A patch sewn on her jeans read "Kiss me here".

She was pleasant enough though, "That'll be \$2.00, please," she said with a huge smile showing even teeth. He thought she might be pretty but it was hard to tell with all the extra weight.

"Could you wait just one small moment, please?" Beech asked. He picked up one of the beers and quickly downed the whole bottle. He had been that thirsty and it was that hot. He gave her \$3.00. "Keep the change and would you bring me another Miller in about ten minutes, please?"

The girl was delighted to receive a quick dollar tip. It didn't usually happen in this town that much. It didn't happen on the first round hardly ever.

"Sure, honey, I'll be back in about ten minutes. Will there be anything else?"

"Yeah, how about a funnel for the beer and two tickets to Paris," he joked. They both laughed a little and she walked away.

Beech had been used to paying anywhere from \$1.75 to \$3.00 for American beer in the city. He was pleasantly surprised at how cheap the beer was at this cafe. He sipped at his beer and looked through an open window that allowed him to peer into the inside of the hotel's cafe.

He could see and hear a noisey group of students drinking and playing eight ball on a small pool table the kind where a metal slot accepted money by pushing it into the table and pulling it back out to release the balls for the game. The juke box kicked out an old J. Geils Band song, "Whammer Jammer".

A pretty blond, thin and smiling was leaning over the pool table preparing to take a shot. Behind her two young men talked softly and giggled while eyeballing the way she leaned over.

Beech finished his second beer as the waitress returned with his third beer.

"That'll be a buck," she said.

"Here you go," he said. He paid her \$2.00. She was totally delighted with her customer and was ready to give him the best service she was able to.

Beech leaned back on his chair and took a swallow from his beer enjoying the feeling of slight intoxication. He started thinking about his train ride, the Amtrak terminal and its smokey aura. He was beginning to feel a little intoxicated by the beer but he also felt the powerful aphrodisiac named Jasmine.

The town's new mall had become the talk of the town. A major retailer actually anchored the plaza. Yes, Sears had come to town finally giving K-Mart and Wall Mart some competition. Most all of the other retail businesses in town were Ma and Pa size stores. Some were rather large when considering square feet but only one of the retailers had more than one location and it was in a town fifty miles away. The people of Fats considered twenty miles too far to travel with any regularity. Beech's hometown Chicago was over 350 miles away. The townies felt fortunate if they visited anywhere that far away twice in a lifetime.

The girl flipped her cigarette towards the curb as she entered the mall. Even though she looked calm she felt as if she was visibly shaking. It required great effort to enter the Sears store. She scoped out the whole store within ten minutes. She flicked her soft blond hair with her fingers as if her intention was to attract as many boys as possible. Yet, the purpose was to somehow calm her adrenalin, her paranoia. The fact that she hadn't spotted any store detectives made her feel a whole lot better.

As she walked to the cosmetic and beauty aids department sunlight came through the window to bathe the counter with a warm radiant light. The sales clerk looked up at her customer and was momentarily startled at the girl's beauty especially with the sunlight glowing behind her head like a nimbus. Jasmine looked over the merchandise deciding what she should steal first.

"Do you carry '**JOY**' parfum from France?" she asked twinkling her eyes attempting to look as innocent as a new born babe.

"I'm not sure Miss, but I'll go look. Excuse me."

As the clerk slid doors back and forth behind the counter, moving merchandise this way and that way, sliding boxes to the side, Jasmine cuffed a bottle of Opium and Heroin, liberating them from their display area, and quickly but gently placed them into her newly stolen Pierre Cardin handbag. Lately, she had been very, very fashion conscious and only stole the best.

The sales lady returned to her customer and explained, "I'm sorry but we don't seem to carry '**JOY**'. I didn't know that before because I just started working here today."

Upon hearing this information Jasmine politely thanked her for looking and walked away from the department.

Her spiffy tan Pierre Cardin handbag was accented with a thin brown leather border and still had plenty of room for more emancipated loot. She thought about her newly stolen compact disc player and decided to wander on down to the record and CD department.

The clerk behind the counter was wildly devouring a greasy, meaty beef sandwich on french bread. Juice was dribbling from his mouth onto his dark beard. He appeared to weigh close to 300 lbs and wore a shirt with a small black name tag that read, **TINY**. Upon seeing Jasmine enter the department he quickly picked up the brown paper sack in which the sandwich had arrived and used it as a napkin. He wanted to be more presentable cause his new customer was one fine lady dressed in a plain white blouse and new tight Gap jeans.

"Can I help you with something, Miss?" he asked. Red sauce was splattered on his beard. He moved his hand through the hair on his head attempting to be more presentable. Jasmine giggled, "Gosh, I don't know if I should say it, but you've got red sauce all over your beard," she said as if embarrassed.

"God, you're kidding," he answered feeling very uncomfortable. "Well, then excuse me, I'll go wash it off, I'll be right back if you need some help, OK?"

As soon as he was out of sight Jasmine opened her fashionable handbag and slid ‘*Meet the Beatles*, *Hard Day’s Night*, and *Help*’ into the black hole.

She saw Tiny walking quickly back to his department. He stopped at a mirror on the way and repositioned his wavy brown hair. He couldn’t wait to get back to this hot young thing and flirt. However, she had other things on her mind namely lingerie.

She floated out of the record department her steps light as air and strolled to the other side of the store. When Tiny noticed that the young blond had left he went behind the counter and jammed the rest of the sandwich into his mouth. ‘*Damn bitch*’, he thought.

Racks holding various color bras, camisoles, girdles, and panties comprised the “**Fine Undies**” department. One thin mannequin had been dressed in an attractive cream colored slip. A fat country woman was fingering the fabric between her index finger and thumb trying to determine if the cloth had good quality. Some of the mannequins had been dressed in a sexy manner while one was wearing a large white girdle, in a sexless mode.

Having already been successful with her shoplifting her nerves had calmed considerably. She had become steady and cool. So, she pinched a couple pairs of white silk underpants (bikini style), a matching white bra, size 34 C, and two pairs of black seamed silk stockings. She thought for a moment, realized she was missing something walked over to the garter belts and deposited a black one into her handbag.

Tired from her shop lifting binge she wandered out of the Sears store into the hallway of the mall. She walked to a refreshment concession and ordered a medium coke. As she sipped from the straw in her cup she noticed two security guards wearing street clothes that walked into Sears. She figured the two yoyo’s had probably finished their donut and coffee break and were back on the clock. She wondered if anyone was fooled by store detectives. They were as obvious to her as an adult nurse is when standing in a maternity ward surrounded by dozens of screaming newborn babies.

Beech watched the workers scrape, pound, drill and sand blast the facade of the Mead County Seat building.

“It’s been around since the Civil War,” offered a balding man that sat at the table next to Beech. “This is the first time they’ve ever cleaned or attempted any renovation since then too. It’s considered an architectural wonder of it’s time.”

“Yeah? But isn’t it true that the brick shingles that are on the roof have only been manufactured since sometime in the early 1900’s? And you know what? It seems to be too wide for it’s height.”

“Are you sure? Say, now that you mention it you may be right about the dimensions. You’ve got a good eye.”

“Yeah, well I spent some time taking classes at the University of Chicago’s Architecture School. I had become very well versed in Greek Ionic, Byzantine, English Gothic, and Mayan types of architecture.”

“Well, I was right. I said to myself, this man’s looking at this building as if he knew what he’s doing.”

“Your call was right too. Your abilities of observation seem to be pretty good too.”

“Yeah. . .I hope so. It should be. I’m one of the owners of The Journal.”

“Sorry, I don’t know what The Journal is. Sounds like a newspaper or something.”

“Bingo. You hit it on the head. Say, since I interrupted your thoughts, may I offer you another cocktail?”

“Sure. I’ll just have another beer.”

When a waitress came within yelling distance the newspaper man called out, “Waitress!”

The girl turned to his direction, “Yeah?”

“Another round,” he called out making a rapid back and forth movement with his hand, pointing at Beech’s beer and his own cocktail glass.

“So, you’re not from around here, huh?”

“No, I just arrived a few hours ago. It seems like a nice little town. I just found out that there is a university here, you know? I needed to go somewhere, take a little vacation, do a little painting, maybe some photography, maybe even work on my novel.”

“Oh, you write?”

“Yeah, I’ve been working on a novel for a couple of years. But it still needs a lot of work, a lot of re-writing.”

“Geez, and you paint, and you’re a photographer too?”

“Well, yeah. What a guy, huh?”

“How wonderful. I wish I could find the time to work on a book.”

“Listen, I need somewhere to stay for the night. It’s obvious that I don’t want to stay here at the Reynold’s Hotel. Much too noisy with all the college students and bar crowd and all. You got any suggestions?”

“A friend of mine owns some rental cabins on the edge of town. You’ll have to drive there though . . . it’s a little too far to walk. Did you drive to Bearsville?”

“Nah, I came on the train. Actually, I just got tired of riding the train and the guy I was sitting next to was coming here. He told me it was a nice town and everything. So, here I am.”

“Well, this place has a swimming pool. The place is very secluded and people have been known to skinny dip there. My friend tells me a lot of racey stories about his place. The restaurant there is one of the best in the area. The chef used to work at the Drake Hotel in Chicago and I heard he was trained at some culinary school in Paris. He has the gift of turning ordinary ingredients into gourmet delights. He does a superb job on seafood items. Incidentally, my name is George Orlandello.” He offered his hand to Beech.

Beech took his hand and shook it appreciating his firm grip. “Nice to meet you, George. My name is Richard Beech.” He decided to alter his name a little just in case anybody was looking for somebody named Robert Beech.

“Where you from, Richard?”

“Everywhere, actually too many places. I was born in B.C.”

“B.C.?”

“Yeah, British Columbia, Canada. I’ve lived in Guatemala, nice place, cheap prices. On that particular trip I flew into Merida, Mexico and ended up taking a bus to Chetumal on the Belizian border. When I ended up in Belize I heard about Tikal, Guatemala and ended up renting a jeep and driving there. I’ve spent a little time in Morocco, Japan, New Zealand, and a couple of places here in the states. Hell, I even spent a year in Vietnam. I’m also happy to admit that I’ve enjoyed driving 120 mph in Germany on the autobahn. I had flown into Amsterdam from Chicago and rented a car and drove to Berlin. People there couldn’t believe I was such an adventurer. They made me feel as if I had come there from another planet. All I did was drive about 350 miles but that type of driving is common here in the states but has been unusual over there. I still have a residence in Chicago.”

“Maaan, you’re really something. What in the world are you doing in this town?” Orlandello took a drink.

“Well, you gotta be somewhere, right? And, why not here? Aren’t there a lot of fine people in this town . . . what, with it being a college town and all?” Beech tried to down play his back ground quickly realizing that he wouldn’t make the mistake of being too worldly again to anybody in this town. He really hadn’t been bragging just talking, answering the question. He had forgotten that he was no longer in Chicago and that he had come to a very small town where people knew each other and ran into each other all the time. He figured he’d have to stick to daydreaming about these foreign locations instead of talking about

them.

The waitress walked over to the table carrying a tray with a lone bottle of Miller.

“Sorry, George we’re fresh outta Johnny Walker Red. You killed the bottle with your last drink. How about some Johnny Walker Black, or something else?”

“Sure, I’ll have Dewar’s White Label . . . cause, it never varies.” Orlandello scratched his head and wrinkled his brow, “What the hell does that mean anyway. I mean this advertisement, ‘It Never Varies’. Does that mean its always underage, or over age, or never good, or what. . .?”

The waitress, an intelligent college senior looked at her customer, “It means, you always get drunk!” She grinned, turned and left.

“She’s a bright girl, you know? You look a little flustered, why don’t you drink something cold?” Beech said. “It’s so hot out.”

“I gotta tell you. Although I’m the owner of The Journal, that is *co-owner*, my partner has another function. He recently was elected by the people to be their County Supervisor. I think he won because of all the free publicity our newspaper gave him. The stories were all good too. But it’s been me doing all the work while he poses and rubs elbows with the politicians and local celebrities,” George said seeming frustrated by it all. “I do it all at my newspaper. I write stories, proofread, pasteup, a little graphic design with computer software, I even canvas around town selling advertising. Oh, there’s a couple of other people that work there, doing paste up too, and one other writer. The only problem with him is he’s only capable of writing very short stories, usually only about baseball or football, the American opiate.”

“You’re not a baseball fan?”

“Well, its OK but I can’t think of any reason to be overly obsessed by a professional business that charges way too much for tickets. You know, it used to be a game way back when and now it’s a business and I detect that the fans don’t realize that as much as they should. I think if you like the actual sport of baseball why not go to more local games at high schools or colleges. Yeah, yeah I know, the level of play is better in the pro’s but I totally disagree about paying these farm boy boobs a million dollars a year. Sorry, that’s just how I feel about it.”

“Well, I can understand you’re feelings. Personally, I really don’t care what the players make. I watch it for free on TV now and then. So, I’m not one of the guys that helps pay for their salaries anyway.”

“Good for you!”

“Let me ask you something about what we were talking about a minute ago before you started talking about baseball. What’s your partners name? Has he ever wanted to run for a higher office?”

“Yeah, he announced that he was thinking about running for Governor a a while back, but as his campaign was building some steam, he had to drop out. It seems that somebody was blackmailing him. Somebody produced photographs of him with a variety of girls of the night. I guess he should have been smarter and gone to the Big City for his cheap thrills but, noooo, he went to the local cat house . . . which . . . in case you’re interested is on the other side of town. The place is a nice turn of the century victorian house actually. But you know what . . . he surprised the blackmailer by actually buying the cat house and simply dropped out of the race. Nobody in Fats really cares about this type of behavior except for the puritans but the rest of the state doesn’t like these types of indiscretions by small town politicians very much. His name is James Hart. He’s got a relative in Colorado that had too high a libido too. Remember Monkey Business?”

“Wow, he’s related to him? I love it.” They both chuckled at that one.

The waitress finally brought the drinks back to them. She placed the White Label in front of Orlandello and the beer in front of Beech all the while looking at the stranger sitting with one of the cafe’s regular customers. Orlandello, lifted his drink, threw his head back and shot it down the hatch. He stood up and reached into his pocket. He pulled several one dollar bills out and tossed four of them on the table.

“Well, it’s been nice talking to you Richard. I hope your stay in Fats is pleasant. I need to go back

to my office. And . . . listen, if you're ever on the other side of the square, feel free to stop in at the Journal," he said. They shook hands and Orlandello left Beech sitting at the table alone.

Beech reached into his bag and pulled out a small Casio tape recorder. He pushed the on button and said, "George Orlandello, age 55 or so, runs the local newspaper The Journal, he's also an owner, and get this . . . with some guy named James Hart apparently a relative of Senator Gary Hart, both Hart boys have strong libidos, George seems to be nice enough, but he feels under appreciated and isn't compensated enough, drinks like an alcoholic, knows a lot about the town and it's people, he seems like a perfect guy to know in this town, he wears a pinkie ring on both hands, and has a Boston type of accent. No problema seniore." He pushed the stop button on the tape player.

The taxi drove down the rather long drive way. Had it not been the entrance to Tulip Tree Cabins it could have passed for a short road. Gravel stones flew in all directions from the tires of the taxi as they barreled to the office. The taxi driver helped Beech unload his suitcase and stood there waiting for a tip. Beech gave him a \$2 tip.

The office had a wooden counter with a bell on it. The sign next to it read '*Ring bell for Service*'. He rang the bell and from behind a dark curtain came a fat man about 5'7" at about 235 lbs with permed brown hair and a full beard. He was smiling but his attitude was so-whatish. When Beech dropped George Orlandello's name the innkeeper changed his attitude and became very friendly.

"So, you know George? George and me go back a long time. My name is Tom Postema," he said and extended his hand over the counter.

Beech shook his hand, "Nice to meet you Tom, I'm Richard Beech." He knew he had to be essentially truthful about his name because he had just used George's name as a point of reference. He was in the habit of staying in motels under totally false names. He figured you just didn't know what you might encounter and nobody needs to know you're real name when you're on the road.

"Mr. Beech would you please fill out a registration form and how long will you be staying?"

"I'm not a hundred percent sure but I'll probably stay a couple of weeks, maybe even a month."

"Wonderful!" cried the owner. He felt terrific any time a guest announced the length of their stay and it was longer than over night. "Mr. Beech, we only have one cabin left today. You can change to another as the vacancies pop up, but the one we have left is very nice. It faces our swimming pool, which you may use as often as you like, of course. Incidentally, our daily rate is \$35. Your cabin number is 14," he explained.

"Ok, thanks. Do you have a bell hop to carry my suitcase? As you can see it's a little rough with this crutch"

"I'm afraid we don't have a bell hop but I'll be happy to carry your suitcase down to the cabin."

"Great. Thanks a lot Tom."

They walked out of the office with Tom carrying the beatup green suitcase.

"Where are you from Richard?" asked the now puffing fatso.

* * * *

Beech entered cabin #14 and noticed a closet type area directly to his right. Inside the closet was a wooden pole on which ten hangers were suspended. The room's walls were covered entirely with pine paneling that had been stained a light brown color and protected with varnish. A double bed adorned with a faded blue bed spread, two end tables one of which had a telephone and a radio setting on it, and a color television furnished the room. To his left he saw the bathroom complete with a thin paper wrapper around

the toilet seat. The maid had left her signature.

After hanging some of his clothes and putting the others into the room's only dresser he walked back outside. He scanned the Tulip Tree Cabin's property enjoying the view and aroma of the magnificent green trees. A pretty good variety of trees were standing all around the property. He recognized a red oak, a bur oak, a white pine, and a lot of tulip trees. There were so many tulip trees and white pines in front of him he had the thought that they all looked like they may have come from the same cookie cutter. God is one fine baker, he thought.

About seventy yards from his cabin he saw the swimming pool. Three people were sitting on lounge chairs, talking, laughing and drinking beverages. He fixed his gaze on two of the people, the two women . . . wow, they were topless. So was the lone man. Equal rights. I like this place, he thought to himself. After a short while watching the bouncing boobs his thoughts changed to food.

He looked at his watch realizing that he hadn't eaten since he'd left Chicago. He hobbled to the motel office to ask Tom about his restaurant. Tom was behind the counter looking at the evening news on the TV.

"Hello, Mr. Beech," he said.

"Tom, please call me Richard, what the heck. George told me you have a very good restaurant here at the motel. What do you have to say about it?"

"Best meal in town about sums it up!" he said proudly with conviction.

"Great. What type of food?"

"Well, we specialize in American food, but cooked in a gourmet fashion. In other words our menu offers meat loaf but its made in a way that could be called nouvelle American. We put granola in it instead of bread crumbs or just bread."

"Hmmm, sounds interesting. I happen to like food and cook a little myself."

"Yeah? No kidding. We also feature a different extra menu nightly. Sometimes we prepare French food and on a different night Italian. Tonight we are featuring seafood. We've got six different types of fresh fish including orange roughy, red snapper, salmon and Lake Michigan perch. We have a purveyor that comes through and supplies us with live seafood which we simply drop in a tank of water until needed."

Beech was impressed. "Sounds terrific Tom, where's the restaurant?"

"Just walk out of this office and to your right. It's two buildings down."

"Thanks, again."

"That's why I'm here Richard. Bon Appetite!"

The restaurant was decorated simply with photographs of people that had eaten there, and beer mugs from Europe. The tables had white table cloths on them. After being seated he was handed a menu.

"Our specials tonight are indicated on the black board on this wall and the wall back there," said the hostess pointing to the back wall. "Your waitress will be Karen. Thank you for dining at the Tulip Tree Restaurant, Sir."

He looked over the menu but was more interested in a meal on the blackboard menu. Shortly, Karen the waitress arrived.

A smiling woman of about thirty-two walked up to his table. He was impressed with how gracefully she was able to negotiate the dining room aisle. She stood only 5'2" and weighed an easy 200 pounds. She wore a blue dress with a white peasant blouse. A canary yellow apron was loosely tied around her waist.

"Hello, sir, my name is Karen, I'll be your wait person tonight. May I get you a cocktail?"

"Hi, Karen. Yeah, I'll have a bottle of Heineken please."

When she returned with the beer she set a beer glass in front of him and took the beer and poured it into the glass and set the bottle next to the glass. "Are you ready to order, sir?"

"Yeah, I'll try the orange roughy wrapped in the cheesecloth. What type of sauce is it prepared in?"

“You picked a delicious one sir. I’ve tried everything on the menu and many of the specials myself.”

“Really? You don’t look like it at all,” he told her.

She smiled, “You don’t think so, thank you sir. Any way, the sauce is a curry sauce with lemon grass, tamarind, and coconut milk.”

“Sounds terrific Karen. Give me the buttered asparagus on the side, and for an appetizer I’ll have the escargot on puff pastry. I can’t wait for this because I rarely see it prepared this way in this country, anyway.” Again, he realized he was saying something simple but to someone in this small town it was too much of a braggadoccio comment. ‘Control yourself,’ he thought.

“Will there be anything else while I’m here?” asked the woman.

“No, thanks Karen. Oh, wait, bring me another beer in about ten minutes or so. I might like something for dessert later. Is there anything you might suggest?”

“We always have several different cakes or desserts available. I noticed a good looking fruit tart a little while ago. I think you’d probably like that,” she answered.

“Great, that’s sounds perfect,” he said as he moved the menu towards her.

She took the menu from him. “Thank you sir.” She turned and walked toward the kitchen to place her order.

Beech was pleasantly surprised by the restaurant and the waitress. She handled the order properly like a restaurant pro not some back country hayseed. He looked around the room, at the other diners but his thoughts were on his financial problems and the plan that he had started forming on the train ride. Could he pull it off? Or would he be on the run for a long time?

Chapter 3

His leg was feeling much better so after dinner he decided to walk down the long gravel driveway to the street. While walking he realized how pure and clean the air in the country was compared to the vehicle fumes he constantly inhaled in the city. The dark, black night surrounding him was topped with thousands of tiny sugar sprinkles twinkeling overhead. He felt wonderful realizing the beauty of the night. He thought about all the people living in cities that never saw the stars or sunsets because of too much electrical light or buildings in the way. He continued to walk toward downtown Bearsville. It was time to get a feel for the situation. He walked slowly looking at everything.

Bearsville appeared to be dancing with activity. Cars sped back and forth, sometimes stopping rapidly for somebody jay walking. People were jay walking all over the square. Cars would angle into parking spots along the curb occasionally without using a turn signal while cars with young people would yell out of their windows at friends or strangers.

After walking about forty five minutes into town, resting while standing on the corner felt good. He continued to watch the drivers moving in and out of the square. Most of them didn't use their turn signals. He could never understand why most people were not willing to use their turn signals. After all they're paid for. He figured people usually had the 'I don't care at all' attitude, not realizing that blinkers actually made their own life a little safer. It was funny he thought, that these would also be the first people to blame the other guy for their own stupid mistake.

His throat felt a little parched so he decided to walk down the street of the square to find something to drink. As he walked he was thinking about a concert he had recently attended in suburban Chicago. The legendary Emerson, Lake and Palmer had performed. Yeah, ELP had also been Emerson, Lake and Powell. Palmer had been with Asia. But ELP had reformed because they wanted some rock-n-roll touring money. He couldn't blame them at all. It was still ELP. Emerson was the major part of the act anyway and he did show up. Greg Lake was the original voice behind the band. So, as brilliant as Palmer was as a drummer many other drummers could fill in. The really important members of ELP or any old revival type band have always been the singers, and probably the lead guitar players or in this case the keyboard fanatic. Emerson had been brilliant as usual, using his various keyboards, mellotrons, and synthesizers as effortlessly as a homemaker washes dishes. He was delighted that they played several selections from Brain Salad Surgery and one of his favorites "*Still, You Turn Me On.*"

As he walked he noticed a Greyhound Bus Station on the street just outside the square. He walked up to the window and looked into the depot. He saw a dining counter with an Old Milwaukee Beer clock behind the counter. He saw a large variety of magazines and newspapers across from the counter. There was only one customer in the place and he was drinking an Old Milwaukee Beer.

He walked in and over to the newspapers that were placed on the floor next to the counter. He bent down to pick up Bearsville's newspaper, The Journal. He noticed a stairway near the far end of the counter about fifteen feet away. He walked to the lone clerk standing next to the cash register. The fat teenage employee was reading a newspaper totally unaware of the notion that somebody wanted to give him money. The kid appeared to be completely absorbed by whatever he was reading. Beech could see the kid saying some of the words to himself as he read.

"Excuse me pal, gimme an Old Mill, will ya? Oh, and were do those stairs lead?" Beech asked.

"Those stairs go to the second floor balconey. And, I'm not supposed to serve beer cause I'm not old enough!" said the fat kid crunching his forehead while talking and breathing through an open mouth.

"Tell you what kid, there's only one other person in the room and by the looks of that man, he's no

cop. So, tell you what, gimme a beer and I'll give you a buck tip, now what do ya say?"

"Ok, mister," the kid said while reaching into the cooler for the beer. "That'll be \$1.00!"

Beech took the beer from the kid, "Thanks, pal, here's two bucks, one for you and one for the house, ok?"

"Yeah, ok."

Beech slowly walked up the stairs. He decided to try walking without the crutch in a day or two. He walked through the second floor room onto the balcony. He could see the activity of the square from one of the tables next to the railing. He watched the people walking around and the cars zipping about. After a while he started to read his newspaper.

He had been in town for a short while but recognized the name under a photograph of a man on page two. The name was the Honorable James L. Hart and his wife. It was their twenty fifth wedding anniversary. He ripped the picture neatly from the paper and placed it into his pocket.

He continued to flip the pages reading the headlines of the various stories. The entertainment page had advertisements for restaurants, lounge acts, and theater. The Ebony Theater was presenting "*The Graduate*" starring Dustin Hoffman at 7:00 P.M. and 9:00 P.M. The Fine Arts Theater featured "*Vampire Virgins from Hell*", starring the beautiful and immortal Edy Williams.

He clipped an article about the owner of a small, local chemical manufacturing company. He laughed at the photo of the firm's owner standing in front of his building while holding a gallon of his newest and improved floor wax. He also ripped out a story about a local doctor that was anti-abortion. And, finally he looked at the classified ads section. He was in the market for a used car.

He folded all the articles together and stuck them into the pocket that already held the story about Hart. He picked up his Old Mill and took a sip while looking down the street. About a block down stood a street vendor selling what appeared to be hot dogs or taco's or something. The blond customer was reaching into her designer purse and handed him \$1.25 for one hot dog. Jasmine walked over to a bench, sat and started eating her food. She hadn't notice Beech and why would she since he was a whole block away, on a balcony, drinking warm beer.

Beech watched her eat then stand up and walk off around the corner. The bench appeared to be illuminated on the area where Jasmine had sat. Beech smiled happily.

* * * *

Farther down the street stood the Fine Arts Theater where the Edy Williams masterpiece was being showcased. He saw a group of dirty, scruffy and vulgar motorcycle gang types arrive in front of the theatre. Their clean and shiney bikes made their presence known. Loud cars or bikes always made Beech think that the machine must be broken or something. The delinquents got off their bikes and walked hard, looking tough, over to the show. Their jackets had their organization's name sewn on the back. They were called Hell's Enforcers. The Hell's Enforcer's were going to watch "*Vampire Virgins from Hell*" starring Edy Williams. 'Very romantic', he thought.

Most of the men in the group had long, dirty, stringy hair and beards. They all wore beat up blue jeans and scuffed heavy leather engineer boots. Most of them were smoking cigarettes while trying to be intimidating to the people walking by them.

Meanwhile inside the theater, the movie began. It was a version of Hell that took place in in something that looked like ancient Greece. Naked bodies swam in pools of blue water while old, old men sat naked in steam rooms their sagging chests covered by matted gray hair. Across the marble room sat our heroine, Edy and another woman. They giggled and started kissing each other as the camera panned up into the tree tops.

"Hey baby, stick that tongue in her!" screamed one Hell's Enforcer. He and his brothers laughed and called out more dirty comments. Some of the guys were drooling while some of the others were watching the movie intently, trying to memorize Edy's face and body. They would use this memory when

they would make love to their own women later.

The other members of the audience looked at the low life ruffians with anger and annoyance. But what could they do. The Enforcers were happy to disturb everyone because nobody mattered but them.

Beech had seen enough activity. He called a cab and went back to the cabins. He took out his hand held tape recorder, entered a few comments and decided to go to sleep. He laid down on the sometimes comfortable bed and listened to the night. He could hear the wind blowing lightly but then he heard it. He couldn't believe his ears. One of the cabins had a song playing that Beech recognized very well, it was "*Down at Circe's Place*" by a group called Touch. It was odd to hear it because it had been recorded in 1969 and never received much air play. The only people that new about it were hippie types, people that dropped Orange Sunshine Acid, and KAAAY radio from Little Rock Arkansas. He wished he could hear it more clearly. Beech was the owner of a resonably large record collection and always appreciated someone that knew music as more than just something to dance to.

Beech had come to Fats to reconsider his life and his life's direction. He had made money on occassion painting oils but couldn't handle working for a boss. He couldn't manage to paint something if it was simply a person or customer telling him how to paint their own portrait. He had dabbled in the field of porno, still photography porno and made a little cash but was forced out of this unsavory field when some mobster type told him, "We'll breaka you legs, punk!"

And then there was the drug running. He knew he had to do something soon or his life would be wasted. He had enough money to tie him over for maybe six months. He had some time to think. He would be patient and use the time.

Chapter 4

By 7 AM Beech had already been working on Harold Washington Blvd. for twenty minutes sketching houses, trees and the street. Occasionally he drew a passerby using a piece of charcoal for the person while he used a #2 pencil for the rest of the setting. He enjoyed sketching people quite a lot. Drawing the various details of a person's face made him feel accomplished and artistic. Several years ago he had worked as a cartoonist for his high school newspaper which finally led him to working for "Chicago" magazine, sketching political cartoons or showbiz silliness.

One of the people he had worked with during his high school years had created the cartoon character Ronald McDonald of the hamburger chain later in life. As the McDonald's chain evolved their cartoon character he eventually became a clown that wore white face and a red wig, looking suspiciously like Bozo the Clown. This real life clown could make personal appearances unlike a cartoon character. Ronald's creator unfortunately came to a bad ending. Beech heard the fellow's name on the news one day. It seems that he died by being struck 147 times with a hammer in a near northside Chicago suspected homosexual slaying.

His purpose in drawing the houses, trees and the people of Fats was to set the stage for the drama he would soon write, direct and produce. He needed to sketch the important places in town as well as the prominent citizens. His drama would hopefully expose the various skeletons in the closet and the secret desires of the people in this laid back community named Bearsville.

A maroon Honda Prelude parked at the curb near him. A man that appeared to be somewhere in his forties got out of the car. He was dressed to kill, wearing a bright yellow suit, crisp white shirt, yellow tie and a black rose on his lapel. He walked down the street and entered the Belladonna Beauty Salon.

Beech had quickly drawn the faces of all the female employees as they had arrived. He quickly and expertly drew the flashy man that entered the salon and added it to the female pudding he had already whipped up.

Across the street stood a rather noisy store. For some reason the store had classical music blaring out of a loudspeaker. Beech recognized the piece to be Johann Sebastian Bach, Brandenburg Concertos, Concerto No. 4 in G Major, BWV 1049. The display windows of the store featured a large variety of cameras, lenses, tripods, and camera cases. Beech figured the purpose of the music was to attract attention to the store.

A man wearing a dark suit, dark glasses and neatly combed hair with a part on the right side of his head walked out of the store, crossed the street and entered the Belladonna salon. Ten minutes later two men walked out of the beauty salon and high stepped their way down the sidewalk. Beech zipped and zapped and presto, he had another face for his tablet. He was enjoying himself immensely.

A couple of guys wearing matching jean jackets with cut off sleeves and a large insignia on the back of their jackets were loitering, hanging out, leaning on their shiny motorcycles, looking at Beech and sneering. They appeared to have been up all night. Beech looked at them briefly, which was all the time he needed to record these two goons on his pad. The top of their insignia announced them to be "Quad City Gentlemen". Below the name was a skull and cross bones. Two more words beneath the bones proclaimed "Hell's Enforcers".

"Say, Man, what the hell you doin'?"

Beech looked at them momentarily with a total lack of interest.

The two Quad City Gentlemen jump kicked their motorcycles, their machines loudly farting to consciousness. As they rode past Beech one of them whacked his sketch pad out of his hands. It went flying onto the sidewalk as the two goons quickly flew down the street laughing loudly. Mildly bothered

but not too annoyed he picked up the pad.

As the morning progressed the activity on the street became more lively. Some people hustled in and out of stores. Some of the shoppers didn't rush at all preferring to casually and very slowly window shop. Beech walked into a store called Cady's Smoke Shop. The store sold a large variety of tobacco, magazines and soft drinks. Beech ordered a large Coca Cola, to go. He paid the unshaven old man behind the counter and walked down the street sipping from the straw in the coke.

Twenty minutes later he walked into a storefront office down from the Smoke Shop. The rotund receptionist reminded Beech of Diana Ross and the Supremes by the way she spoke through her nose and suddenly raised her hand as if to sing "Stop, in the name of love". However, the gesture had a different significance.

"What's your name, sir," she said with an obvious snotty attitude.

"My name's Richard Beech, what's your's?"

"What time's your appointment, siiirr?"

"Actually, I don't have an appointment. But if you kindly announce that I'm here perhaps he'll see me anyway."

Being the incredible, efficient model of office management she said, "Without an appointment, sir, I'm afraid he won't be able to see"

Minutes later, Orlandello and Beech walked together out of the doorway of the Journal. Beech winked at the secretary with one eye as they left. They walked down the sidewalk to the Reynold's Cafe. They decided to sit outside at a table next to two cute college coed's. The two men from the Belladonna Beauty Salon were leaving as they arrived. Orlandello said, "Hello Gentlemen!" The two men nodded their heads and continued talking as they walked past him.

The blond girl was standing on the corner near the Reynold's Cafe. She was dressed casually wearing a pink "T-top", white shorts and sandals. She was looking to her right, then left, then right as if she was waiting for somebody. She raised her right hand and took a puff from her cigarette. Beech considered reaching for his sketch pad then realized he didn't have any need to sketch the girl. He had already memorized her face for all eternity.

"Did you decide to stay at the Tulip Tree Cabins?" asked Orlandello.

"Yes, I did." Beech answered continuing to look at the blond named Jasmine.

"How do you like your cabin?"

"I like it fine. I couldn't have fallen into better accomodations."

The waitress arrived and asked, "Can I get you gentlemen something from the bar?"

"Yeah, I'll have a glass of rose, straight up, what do you want Richard?" Orlandello always started his drinking day with one or two glasses of rose. Afterward, he'd switch to a manhattan of some sort, either whiskey or scotch. Then he'd order whiskey and water. Into the evening he'd be drinking whiskey with a splash and finally whiskey on the rocks. He enjoyed his alcoholic ritual but his heart didn't.

"I'll have a bottle of Heineken's, please." Beech didn't really want to drink alcohol at the moment but felt the peer group pressure from his companion. He liked Orlandello and didn't want to appear to be a wimp.

"Want anything from the menu?" asked the waitress.

"Sure, I'll have a turkey club sandwich deluxe," replied Orlandello.

"And, I'll have the quarter pound burger with blue cheese."

"Do you want lettuce and tomato with the burger?"

"Yeah, and gimme an order of fries with that too, ok?"

The waitress took their menu's. "I'll be right back with your drinks." She smiled and rushed off to the bar.

“Geez, what time did you come into town this morning? I saw you drawing when I came to work this morning. Mind if I see what you’ve been working on?”

“Not at all.” Beech gave him the doodling pad.

“Hey, you’re really very talented. I betcha I can tell you who all these drawings are.” Orlandello offered.

“Yeah, well I used to do this for a living working for Chicago Magazine.” Beech watched Jasmine cross the street and disappear around the corner.

“Oh yeah? Well, this first sketch appears to be John Sycamore. He’s a local attorney here in town. He had been elected to local office twice but decided against running a third time. You know how it is; one’s privacy is destroyed. I understand that many women like him. But you know what? I heard that he’s married with a couple of children in Canada. However, here in Fats, he’s single, available and building a house just outside of town. He hired a local architect to design and build it. This architect had become noteworthy because he had built a round house. This house didn’t have one straight wall. He had to have specially constructed windows and everything. Too much, huh?”

“Yeah, but the house sounds interesting.”

“Anyway, Sycamore buys a new Mercedes each year. And, I hear he’s chasing this particular woman here in town. I hear it’s a pretty widow he met while arranging the details surrounding her late husband’s estate. She’s apparently become wealthy since his untimely death earlier this year. He owned a lot of property, had some cash and I hear there’s a very large insurance policy involved. I’ve heard,” he cupped his mouth with one hand, “through the grapevine, that he hasn’t scored with her yet. Let’s see, Sycamore has his hair trimmed every two weeks down at Michael Wells’ place Belladonna. I see you have a drawing of Wells too. Sharp dresser ain’t he? Sycamore always has Joanna fix his hair. You’ve got a drawing of her too. She’s pretty and very efficient.

“Can you tell me a little about this guy Wells?”

“Sure, like I said, he’s into clothes. He buys clothes all the time. Perhaps its because of the visibility of his business or maybe to cover up for his lack of confidence, I dunno. He’s got about ten girls working as operators for him at the Belladonna and man, a couple of them are lookers, you know what I mean?”

Orlandello took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He offered the pack to Beech, who shook his head indicating that he didn’t want one. He stuffed the pack back into his pocket and continued, “But guess what, I hear *he’s* into boys. He’s close to a couple of fairies around town. Ha, Ha, I heard about this party they all had a few months ago. One of the guests, some college kid, that apparently was a minor was there and his parents heard about it. The kid’s parents hit the ceiling but agreed to forget about it if he paid them \$10,000. I think they’re still blackmailing him. Wells hangs out with the photographer from across the street from his salon. You know, those were the two men that were leaving his place as we arrived. . . you know, that guy with the bright yellow suit.”

“Oh yeah, the two guys I sketched, right?”

“Right! I’d swear the photographers straight, but who knows. Guilt by association as some people might say. He’s got two children, still married and all, but who knows? I heard he dabbles in still photography for magazines. I know he’s sold his stuff to photography magazines and some porno mag’s too. I heard he stocks his store with cameras and accessories that were stolen and smuggled into this country via Mexico. Some guy in Merida, Yucatan at that large outdoor market is his connection. Who knows where that guy gets the stuff from? He may have a small shop in the square but he sells his stuff all over the country by mail order. He’s a sharp operator.”

“George, do you know all the girls that work in Belladonna?”

“Why, you got your eye on one of ‘em?”

“No, just curious.”

"I'm afraid I really only know Joanna cause she's been there for a while. She has a definite and regular clientele. She's busy all the time and only takes new customers when they're recommended by one of her current customers. People that walk in without an appointment are assigned one of the other operators."

"Do you get your hair cut there?"

"Nah, I go down to the Andy's Barber Shop who only charges \$3.50 for a cut. Belladonna is too expensive for me. The way my hair is thinning I'd be crazy to pay \$18.00 for a cut. Sure, they also shampoo and blow dry but big deal, I'm not a catalog model. A manicure and sculptured nails costs about \$45 but I bite my nails now and then."

"Do you know any of the people that are Joanna's customers?"

"Well, there's Jack Seville. He's probably the richest guy in this county. He's a real estate developer which he's parlayed into several manufacturing concerns. One of his factories makes paper gowns for hospitals and industry. Another of his factories packages fragrances for the cosmetic industry. The guy's into a lot of stuff."

The waitress, a big girl came back to them carrying their drinks on a small cocktail tray. She set the wine in front of Orlandello and placed the Heineken in the middle of the table.

"Miss, would you bring me a glass for the beer, when you get a chance?" Beech laughed as he talked.

"Sure, I'll be right back," she said. She turned and walked away from them.

Orlandello continued, "Anyway, another guy is Gordon Barkham. This guy's also into real estate. He use to own that large mansion in town that somebody from the Big City just bought. But I hear he's a slum lord in St Louis. He also fences stolen paintings and jewelry. Some of his real estate here in town has been rehabilitated and resold or leased to college students. Barkham likes to buy old, old paintings in Europe and bring them here. He puts a new expensive frame on them and sells them at obscene high prices to snobs and galleries. Of course the galleries double that amount and sell them to the unsuspecting public. What price art? Art for art's sake. Money for god's sake."

"Interesting," Beech said. "I wouldn't have believed all this hustling was possible in a place like Fats."

"Oh yeah, everything and anything is possible here," Orlandello replied as the waitress returned. She carried a lone beer glass on her tray and set it in front of Beech.

"Thank you Miss," Beech said.

"You're welcome. Your food will be here shortly." She turned and walked toward the kitchen.

Waiting for the waitresses interruption to end Orlandello continued, "Oh yeah, lemme bring up Aldous Conrad. This guy has a pharmaceutical manufacturing company in nearby Leander. A few years back they closed him down for a little while, court action and all that, because some of his raw ingredients, I guess when they mixed the chemicals in their drums the stuff could be inhaled by the workers, well two of the men working there at the plant grew breasts and they actually had to have a masectomy."

"You're kidding, aren't you?" laughed Beech.

"True stories I'm not even joking," but he joined Beech's laughter. "Yeah, the problem made the Chicago Sun Times front page."

"So where's the guy now?"

"After a while they allowed him to reopen his plant and its business as usual. I think they forced him to use some safer chemicals but he's back in business. But, what I don't like about the guy is the other business he operates. He owns this terrific building in New Hope, about seven miles from Fats, the building has three stories, downstairs he runs a fabulous French restaurant. The other two floors have rooms and parties for business buddies and their girl friends. These people come and go, they're not from Fats or the area, but strangers wander in here and create moral problems for the town's people. You know, they're

using drugs, making sexual videos, S&M and B & D, but then who knows what's really going on there.”

The blubbery waitress arrived and set the club sandwich in front of Beech and the burger in front of Orlandello. The two men looked at each other, smiled and exchanged their plates.

“Enjoy your food, guys,” she said. “Can I get you another round from the bar?”

“Yeah, another round!” George cried as he stuffed a few fries into his mouth.

“Ok, be right back.”

“So, this guy, Conrad, I know he's had problems with the IRS too. But then I guess I like this slimey pig Conrad a whole lot better than the IRS. He's a regular customer of Joanna's too. Obviously, there are way more regular customers than these guys but these are the guys that stick out in my mind.”

“So, what's Joanna like?” Beech said before taking a large bite from his blue cheeseburger. As his teeth sank into the sandwich the saucy blue cheese dripped from the burger down his fingers. He set the burger on the plate and wiped his hand with a paper napkin.

Orlandello apparently wasn't concerned with etiquette at all as he continued to talk with a full mouth. Beech could see food changing shapes in his mouth as he talked and chewed.

“Well, beside her terrific looks, it's probably her talents and abilities that make the Belladonna the financial success that it is. She likes to crack the whip, keep the girls in line. She doesn't tolerate absenteeism for the girls that work for her. Some of the operators lease their stations so they can do what they want. She's money hungry and works long hours standing all day. Word has it that if one doesn't leave her a minimum \$5 dollar tip she won't touch your head again.” Orlandello finished his second rose wine. “If you see that waitress, grab her, I need a real drink now.

“Sounds like my kind of girl,” Beech said pushing his plate toward the side of the table. He had cleaned his plate and enjoyed doing it.

“Joanna lives right behind the Tulip Tree Cabins where you're staying. She lives in the Gibran Woods Condominium complex. Her current boy friend developed the property and was the primary owner of it all. The complex has five buildings with ten condo's in each building. I hear he's sold about forty of the units. Her boyfriend is a back stabber. His name's Bill Simak, avoid him if you can.”

“George, who's this?” Beech asked, pointing at a drawing of a porky, balding man that Beech instinctly disliked.

The waitress walked by and George signaled for her to come to their table. “I'll have a VO Manhattan please. How about you Richard?”

“No, I don't want any more alcohol now. But you can bring me a coffee, cream and sugar, ok?”

The waitress left, “That guy you were asking about is Paul Grady. You're drawing hit him on the head. He's a pig. Back in the late '50's - early '60's he'd impregnate women and kindly offer to pay 50% of the price of an abortion. The catch was the abortion would cost \$250. He'd tell the poor girl that it cost \$700 though. Hench he made \$450 on this transaction. Back then \$450 was a pretty good amount of dough. This guy's been in and out of court for years. It's been quite some time since I've had any faith in the legal system but this guy should have had his nuts snipped long ago.”

“Geez, what a guy,” Beech said fascinated.

Orlandello threw his hands up over his head, shook his head and continued, “Ready for this one, this guy finally managed to get a job with the FBI. Now he talkes about justice, law and order. And he attends church regularly.

“No kidding?” Beech answered. He thought to himself that he too, from time to time, didn't mind taking the law into his own hands.

Chapter 5

The shrill of the door buzzer cut through the air as the girl entered the hardware store. Old Mister Winward, sixty-seven years old, was pricing some new merchandise that had arrived earlier in the week. Nearly deaf, he hadn't realized that someone had entered the store when she placed her hand in front of his face and waved.

"Something must be wrong with the customer alarm buzzer again, for crissakes," The old man yelled, "Gonna have to call the repairman. Can I help you with something honey?"

"My dad wants to know if the new remote control gizmo he ordered has come in yet. The name is Edwards," she lied. Her dad hadn't ordered anything.

"Honey, I think it has, let me go in the back to check, Ok?"

Winward's hardware store was the kind of store that had rows and rows of nails, screws, plumbing materials, paint, electrical accessories, and blister pack after blister pack with individually wrapped items from Taiwan. His *Coast to Coast* store cut glass, fixed aluminum storm windows and also repaired some electrical items. He featured every convenience imaginable. That is, everything except the item that one actually needed on the day the repair was to be tackled.

Meanwhile, in the back stock room, The fragile old man pulled out a Gerber pocket knife with which to open a box that might contain the remote control device. Jasmine, always the opportunist leaned over the counter, opened the cash register and pulled out three twenty dollar bills, and calmly shut the cash door.

Mr. Winward came back into the room, "I'm sorry honey, I can't find it. I guess it just hasn't come in yet. Please ask your father to call here tomorrow or the next day."

Looking disappointed she walked toward the exit.

Orlandello and Beech had decided to have lunch together at the Hotel Fremont French restaurant the following day. They both decided to try the special for the day, Poularde Farci Aux Truffes (Roast chicken with pork, veal-truffle stuffing). Orlandello liked the idea of this meal because of the cognac in the ingredients. He also insisted that they order a bottle of Pouilly Fouissee 1984. "My treat," he declared.

Orlandello was beside himself with pleasure. He was acting as if the most important moment of his life had just begun. He had the energy of an olympic track star and the self confidence of E. Clement Stone. He couldn't remember the last time someone had talked with him and didn't excuse themselves from his company due to his monotonous speaking style.

Beech had brought a great deal of pleasure and even adventure to Orlandello's quiet, quiet life. Beech had studied architecture. Beech had led the exciting life of an artist. Beech seemed to have a brain. Most people in Fats were lucky to have been toilet trained or found the capacity to tie their shoes.

Although Orlandello may not have accomplished as much as he preferred with his life, he had nothing to be ashamed of. He efficiently managed all the day to day details at The Journal from start to finish which is not something for a lesser talent. Orlandello, Editor of The Journal, had a brain in his head too. He just preferred to dull his thoughts and feelings with too much booze, too much of the time. Orlandello felt that Beech listened to him with a look on his face that suggested an unexhausted and gratified expression.

The pudgy waiter had brought the wine and poured it into their glasses. They had drank half the bottle when their lunch arrived on a single platter. The platter held the chicken with three slices of stuffing leaning on each side of the bird. He cut the chicken in half with large sharp poultry shears and placed each

half on separate plates. He scooped wild rice on to the plate next to the bird and then put three slices of stuffing on top of the rice. He took a gravy boat and poured the strained juices from the chicken over both their lunches.

“Is there anything else I can do for you gentlemen?”

“That will be fine for now, thanks,” Orlandello said.

“We’re in a little bit of a hurry today, we’d like to order desert now. But, don’t bring it until we’re finished here.” Beech said.

“Certainly sir, what would you like?”

“We’d like the Mousse De Pommes Au Grand Marnier, ok?” Beech said. He had ordered the apple mousse with custard sauce. “And bring us two coffees and two snifters of Tia Maria as well.”

“Yes sir. Bon Appetite.” The waiter left.

Beech couldn’t believe his good fortune. By talking with this man, George Orlandello he had managed to get a good jump on his research describing the people and the town of Fats. His rouge’s gallery of cartoon faces depicting people around town had grown considerably. His understanding of how the movers and shakers of Fats appeared to run things and keep everything moving along smoothly was becoming more and more clear. By spreading a rumour here and putting some sugar in a gas tank there one could disturb the rose colored way of life in Fats. One could possibly break the fragile components of this machine.

The waiter came and took their finished plates. He brought the desert, the coffee and the Tia Maria. George lit a cigarette after finishing his desert.

“Did you hear about the couple in New York City that had starred in a segment of “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” that Robin Leach TV show?” asked George.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, these two, I can’t remember their names were locked out of their Manhattan mini mansion by Bank Leumi which claims they owe it more than \$1 million in outstanding loans. Yeah, these two got locked out of their mansion and have been living in their Cadillac sedan with their toy poodle. These two high rollers-turned homeless overnight managed to get themselves into headlines and a full page picture on the front page of the New York Post. It’s really something, here’s this huge picture of them in their car and the headline screams, “Caddyshack!”

“Wow, that’s really something.”

“Yeah, I guess they lived in a house that was something like five stories and about 6,000 square feet and the bank snatched it from them. Now they live in a luxury car with more head room and plenty of trunk space,” laughed Orlandello.

“You’re making that up George,” Beech said wondering.

“No, true story. You know, at The Journal I receive all these wacky news releases. I have many stories I can entertain you with.” He looked at his watch. “Unfortunately, I need to get back to the office now though. I’ll tell you some more another time, Ok?”

“Ok. I’ll hold you to that.”

They stood up and exchanged some money with which to pay the their bill. They left \$7 dollars on the table for a tip. Orlandello drove Beech back to the Tulip Tree Cabins and departed.

Feeling the delectable food and liquor he had consumed Beech found himself in a jovial mood. He went to his room and decided to compile and arrange all the information he had learned this afternoon. He had over twenty pages of notes in his manilla folder. His sketch pad included cartoon faces and caricatures of buildings, streets, hotels, and alleys of Fats. He slid a page out of his manilla folder and decided to create an index that would enable him to place the appropriate information with the respective cartoon drawing.

Forty five minutes later, he realized how tired he had become and decided to take a short nap. As

he slept cartoon faces and grotesque gargoyles ran through the doors of his brain. He woke up, rolled over and repositioned his head on the pillow enjoying the cool feeling of the cloth on the other side. Shortly, he was asleep. He started dreaming of his deceased father. His vision saw the funeral parlor, a two story beige brick building with a double glass door for an entrance. He could hear sobbing as he entered the room which held the casket. When he walked up to view his father's body he saw a man with a full head of hair, fashionable Christian Dior glasses, a dark suit he recognized to be his father's favorite but the person in the casket was not his father. He turned, wanting to complain but somehow was swept off his feet and started to float toward the exit. The doors opened as he approached them and he flew out into the daylight.

He awakened, looked at the clock on the night stand, saw that he had been sleeping for a little over two hours and reached for the telephone. He called room service for a pot of coffee. He stepped out of the bed and walked into the bathroom. He turned the shower water on, adjusting the temperature. When the temperature was to his liking he stepped in and pulled the shower curtain to the wall. He lathered a loufah brush and scrubbed his body enjoying the tingling sensation. He poured some Rapunzel Shampoo on his head, scrubbed lightly, rinsed and added some Rapunzel Hair Rejuvenator. After two minutes he rinsed his head clean and stepped out of the tub.

Refreshed he walked back into the room wearing a bright, white terry cloth robe. He answered the knock on the door and allowed the bell hop to enter the room.

"Just put the coffee on the table, pal," he said. "And, here's a tip for you." He handed the kid a single dollar bill.

"Thank you sir," the kid said.

After pouring a cup of coffee and taking a couple of sips he set the cup back on the table. He sat down on the bed and started to think about his last dream. He wondered why he dreamt about his father. He thought of his wonderful and supportive parents. They had been dead for well over two years. He smiled when he thought of his old neighborhood in a now decaying area in Vancouver. And then there were his violin lessons with old Mr. Adler, a failed businessman who was forced to give lessons even though he wasn't too accomplished at the violin or any instrument for that matter. Mr. Adler had always greeted him by saying, "Hello Maestro!"

His love affair with the violin had lasted only until his early teens. He thought of all the stupid little jobs he had worked in order to maintain his habits and earn a living. He remembered the first real money he made. Somewhere he had acquired two new interests, young ladies and cartooning. He loved young girls in their teens and frequently tried to lure them into his studio for photo sessions. He hadn't realized that this activity was seriously frowned upon by the culture he was living in and in fact was against the law too.

The semi-nude photo sessions of these young females was not an activity that would nominate him as the Rotary's Young Adult of the Year. Beside the girl's parents this interest was not to be tolerated by gangster types that preferred to control this particular corner of the market. He didn't have any thoughts of selling the photo's but probably would have if the price had been right. He wondered about all the girls he had worked with and what they were doing with their lives now.

Cartooning had become an interest while he photographed the young ladies in his studio. Sometimes he posed as a photographer and at other times he was an artist. Either occupation was reason enough for most of the young ladies to come to his studio and take off their clothes. He wasn't sure when it happened, but at one point or another, both the photography and the sketching became more important to him than the young girls.

Luigi Esposito, an up and coming hood and gangster had offered Beech a wonderful career opportunity. Limousine driver. Beech would simply drive Esposito around the streets. Esposito was a bag man. He would go around the neighborhoods collecting money for various reasons like loan sharking, gambling, and extortion.

He was also a small time movie producer. He produced black and white 8 mm stag movies with titles like “Anxious Maiden Gets Relief”, “Sandwich”, and “Bandaid Man”. Because of the movies Beech met and became involved with a 25 year old hooker/actress who earned a good living dressing like a cheerleader or catholic school student, knee socks, uniform and all.

When Esposito went into various buildings to collect his money Beech took up sketching passerbys. Joyce, the 25 year old actress posed for him in the back seat one day. His rendition so impressed her that she threw herself on him in the front of the Cadillac. They were an item for almost five months, that is, except for seven short loops she made for Luigi.

Beech always knew he had more on the ball than being a hood’s driver. A month after he and Joyce split up he quit. He applied for a job at Chicago Magazine and was hired to be a clerk in the mail room. His mail route took only about three hours to complete allowing him plenty of time to doodle, sketch, and think. An office manager noticed his drawings and promoted Beech. For the next couple of years Beech drew caricatures of all notable celebrities, politicians, athletes, and rock stars.

The party had been going on for several hours now. The Quad City Gentlemen, Hell’s Enforcers Chapter were partying as if it were 1999. With these guys, there was never any need to come up for a reason to party but this occasion had a very good purpose. The social club was initiating a new member. Earl Baker was frantically chugging Jack Daniels out of a bottle proving to everyone that they had indeed made the right decision to allow him into their organization. As he pulled the bottle from his lips, whiskey dribbled down his face, beard and finally onto his stained tie dyed T-shirt.

The party mood had been created with candles stuck in old wine bottles spread around the floor. An old paint splattered cassette recorder played loud Greatful Dead music. *Shake it, Shake it, Sugereee* sang the song. Thirteen Enforcers and nine girls lounged around on several uncovered, stained mattresses. They were passing joints and bongos around the crowd.

Baker had a surprise for everyone. He brought out an oxygen mask, the type that pilots use, which had a tube attached to the bottom and was also connected to a bowl. The bowl contained some gold colored reefer. He showed them how it worked. He covered his face with the mask, lit the reefer in the bowl and sucked in as much smoke as possible. He yanked the mask from his face coughing and allowing a tremendous amount of smoke to escape from the device while a large cloud of smoke shot out of his face. There was as much smoke in the room as some modern rock bands use in their live acts, or so it seemed. The party crowd was delighted with the mask and everyone yelled and pushed towards the mask so they could experience it themselves.

The doorway to the bedroom was covered with an upside down American flag. Above the door trim was a sign that had been stolen from an old Fred Astaire dance studio. It read “Ball Room”. Behind the flag in the bedroom were three more stained mattresses lying on the floor. The room and the mattress would be used plenty as the party continued.

Earl Baker had suffered beatings, ridicule and the entire Enforcers urination ritual. All 35 of them had pissed on Baker the night before. Now he was an official member and was using this honor wisely. He had selected two of the girls and would later pull them in the “Ball Room” for a session of true love.

It wasn’t all that difficult to qualify for membership in Hell’s Enforcers. One only needed a Righteous Harley Davidson monster cycle and a girl friend that would have sex with everyone in the gang. Old Earl wouldn’t have time for his girl friend anyway. The Enforcers constantly had been ordering Earl to either muscle somebody or to steal something. Earl was very good at theft but wasn’t too good at fighting, although he tried. He was good at sneaking up on somebody and hitting them with a board, baseball bat, hammer, pipe but rarely his fist. Anything he stole he turned over to the Enforcers.

The Enforcers didn’t accept everyone that wanted to get in. It usually wasn’t the guy’s fault though.

The girl also had to prove herself worthy of the gang. She had to ball anyone that wanted her, either male or female. She was expected to follow all orders regarding shoplifting, or whatever. She had to allow the gang to tattoo her buttocks with their club logo. If she didn't agree with any of these qualifications both she and her guy were out. However, the gang was fair minded because they allowed the guy to come up with a different girl, one that could cut the mustard, if he hadn't been allowed in.

Earl and his darling, Yolanda had taken all the beatings, ridicule, sex and filth for the entire initiation period. They were being initiated tonight. As of tonight they could do whatever they liked as they had become full-fledged members. The impressionable high school kids of Fats were aware of the party tonight and whispered about all the action going on. The Enforcers were admired, and feared by the whole town.

An Enforcer named Animal finished the short roach by flipping it back into his mouth and swallowing it. It had still been lit as it shifted its way down his throat. "Hey, maaaaaan, what's the story about that new dude in town?"

"Who you talkin' about, man?"

"You know, man, that dude in the square doin' the drawin' or whatever."

"Who gives a shit about the square, man."

"But I be hearing around town that they be talkin' about the dude. They're wonderin' what the hell he's up to."

"This guy ain't worth a rat's ass, man."

"Yeah, but I've been thinkin'. Maybe we can use dis sonovabitch for somethin'."

"Yeah? In wat way, man?"

"I dunno. Maybe we could rob something or kill somebody. If we're cool, we could put the blame on him, you know what I mean?"

"Oh yeah? Not a bad idea."

"We gotta do somethin', am I right?"

"Yeah, what you got in mind."

"Look I was thinkin'. If we do this right we won't have to worry about money for a long time, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah? Tell us more."

"Hey, you know. We case the joint, put some people inside, have a driver, put some people outside, and have some other people doin' somethin' to confuse the people, like an explosion or somethin'"

After eating dinner at the Tulip Tree Cabins, Beech wandered down to the Reynold's Cafe, ordered Bailey's Irish Cream straight up and black coffee on the side. He decided to sit around and eavesdrop. Actually, he wanted to run into Jasmine, at least see her again. He knew that he could find her if he really wanted to. Afterall, he could stroll down to the school yard and find her anytime he wanted. While he sat there a couple of sloppy single coeds looked at him with that hungry look that suggested availability. He thought they looked like toe suckers. He spotted the photographer from across the Belladonna Salon driving past the Cafe in a white Cadillac.

This was one night he didn't want to think about his plan. Tonight he would relax, take it easy. He left Reynold's Cafe and casually, walked around the square. His leg felt a little stiff but he was glad he had decided to stop using the crutch. It appeared that some of the square's businesses thrived at this time of night. It was only 8:30 P.M. but most of the stores had already closed. The liquor store and the drug store, were constantly ringing their cash registers. But no sight of Jasmine.

He went into a telephone booth and made a call. After getting some advice from George he had

made arrangements to talk with some ladies that probably knew more about people in town than anyone else. If anyone knew more than good old George Orlandello about the past scandals in Fats, he would find out tonight.

At midnight Beech walked into the lobby of the Fountain Blue Condominium complex. The common description everyone liked to use when summarizing these condo's was; luxury. Luxury usually meant slightly larger rooms for much more money. The lobby's interior was covered with marble floors and walls. Lush green plants covered an entire wall. A small water fountain was running clear water into what looked like a small pond. He could see different types of fish swimming around.

A security guard sat watching a small screen television and chewing on a small dark cigar butt. The six security monitors behind him that set below the counter that surrounded him showed images of various empty hallways, and the back and front of the building.

Beech walked over to the electronic intercom and telephone, pressed several numbers, talked for a moment, heard the door buzzer and let himself in. He walked to the elevator and pushed the up button.

The ladies looked absolutely beautiful. Both of them were blond and claimed to be sisters. They seemed to be out of place in a town like Bearsville. First, they weren't fat. Second, they seemed to be too sophisticated.

"My name is Richard." Since this wasn't his real name anyway he couldn't think of any reason to use something different.

"Hi, I'm Debbie and my sister is Terri. Can we get you something to drink?"

"Sure, I'll have a beer. It's such a hot night. I'll have a cold beer, please."

"Is Heineken alright?" asked Debbie.

"Perfect!"

Both girls wore white silk robes that opened constantly showing him their tanned and toned legs.

"So, what's the story ladies? Give me the run down on what's going on, please."

"In short, \$300 for an hour. We'll talk with you, dance with you or anything you want. Wanna take a bath first?"

After a warm bubble bath for all three of them, a little conversation and a few drinks Terri said, "Richard, you know, we've only been in town for about three weeks. It's a pleasure talking with someone that uses complete sentences. Most of the people we've dated here were drones that had no thought or worse, were old men."

"Thank you Terri, I'm enjoying you're company too. How long do you think you'll be in town this time around?"

"Well, we really don't know that answer, ya know? People visit us from all over the place here and we also move around to several other places around the midwest. Gotta keep the man guessin', right?"

The living room featured a large king size bed covered with light blue satin sheets instead of a couch. The girls were in town for business. When they didn't entertain they simply slept in the king size bed together. The coffee table over by the lazy boy recliner had family magazines scattered on it with names like "*Lezbo*," *Cream Puff*", and "*Daddy's Little Girl*." It was apparent to Beech that except for business the two girls preferred each other.

They led him to the bed after his bath and excused themselves. They wanted to slip into something more comfortable. They came back into the room wearing only perfume.

The mirror behind the living room bed reflected the flushed faces and caresses they gave each other. The movement on the bed started slowly, but as the heat rose, the breathing rate increased and the bodies whirled around faster and faster. Beech momentarily thought of Jasmine, sweet Angel. Terri's kisses made him forget her for the moment. He looked into the mirror seeing their reflection, enjoying the sensation of two fleshy ladies that completely and slowly surrounded him like quicksand overcoming its victim.

“I gotta tell you about this date I had here in Fats my second night. This guy wore brown, iron-toed shoes, elephant bells, and a polyester shirt about two sizes too small. This guy slithered all over the kitchen here trying to make useful suggestions about how to decorate. He wanted to go out on a date, as if we’re lovers or something. In the car, he told me that his mother had made him some terrific, hot barbecue ribs. He wasn’t kidding. He was experiencing severe gas and felt at ease to continuously relieve himself without a flinch. Luckily, the window was down, I hung my head outside pretending to observe the houses and traffic. During dinner he felt so at ease with me that he belched, drooled and dribbled. When he removed his dentures and started picking at it with a toothpick I knew the night was over.”

“God, sounds terrible, so what did you do about it?” asked Beech.

“I told the jerk that I’d pay for my half of the meal, and I did. I blew him off and took a taxi back to the condo. I make ok money, but sometimes it’s more aggravating than being married. If I want to be with a guy like that, I would get married,” she added.

Chapter 6

The days melted into weeks as Beech continued his investigation of the town, attempting to uncover the camouflaged lifestyles, his meticulous perception revealing disguised arenas of competition and veiled anxiety. Quiet Bearsville, laid-back Fats had secrets and jealousies that could erupt like a geyser at Yellowstone National Park at any time.

It was time to make a decision. Should he do more investigating or did he have enough information to go onto the second step of his plan? The second step would make the animosities, hostilities, ill blood, and finally hatred rise to the surface like Cheerios bobbing up in a bowl of milk. Completion of this step would allow him time to relax, become an observer, while waiting for the explosion he knew would happen. He simply needed to detonate the fireworks.

Beech had gone on many walks and drives while passing time in Bearsville. The town was surrounded by a lot of farm land with crops and a few gentle hills that nobody would confuse as mountains. About ten miles outside of town was a small state park named Lake Venus. Although the lake was small, it was large enough to allow boating, fishing and swimming.

There was nothing elaborate about the house except for the fact that it was on the lake. He would end up spending about \$200 less monthly than at the Cabins even after paying for gas and electric utilities. He also had figured he could view Fats better from a distance than being in the middle of controversy.

The cottage was probably the smallest dwelling on Lake Venus. The place appeared to be about seventy years old but recently had new plumbing installed. He didn't really care what kind of shape the house was in since he was in the area for a specific purpose, not to impress everyone with a luxurious lifestyle. Although small, it was huge compared to his tiny cabin in town. Upon entering his new house there was a living room and dining room, to the right was one bedroom and another room that had been remodeled and made into a kitchen. He walked into the bathroom, lifted the toilet seat and took a leak. After finishing he went to the sink, rinsed his hands, looked into the mirror and realized he didn't have a towel handy so he wiped his hands on his blue jeans.

Beech walked over to the window in the living room and pulled the drawstring allowing the curtains to slide open. The sun briefly blinded him and exposed the plain reality of this house on beautiful Lake Venus.

The classified ad in the newspaper had read: FOR RENT: Beautiful cottage on Lake Venus, furn, 1 br, dr, lr. The cottage wasn't beautiful but at least it was somewhat furnished. Of course, the word furnished totally glamorized the beat up coffee table, sofa, and futons in the one bedroom. The rebuilt kitchen was equipped with a few plates, some silverware, two pots, one fry pan, and eight water glasses. There was an old refrigerator and stove on opposite ends of the small kitchen.

Virtually all the houses on Lake Venus had fireplaces and Beech's house was no exception. About Half a cord of firewood had been stacked neatly behind the house. Since it was an unusually cool summer day, he took three logs and some kindling, walked back into the living room and expertly prepared the kindling and logs in the fireplace. A short while later flames danced on top of the logs radiating heat.

He decided to make a list of items he would need to make himself comfortable. He needed sheets and pillows for the bedroom. He also needed soap, food, spices, toilet paper, coffee, coffee pot, milk, honey and something for dinner. He was pleased that he would be cooking for himself. He had eaten too many restaurant meals lately. Although eating at the Tulip Tree Restaurant wasn't the problem, it was all the greasy hamburgers, bacon and eggs, and taco's that he wanted to get away from.

The fire cackled noisily thereby signaling Beech that it wanted his attention. Beech pushed and poked the logs, repositioning them with an iron poker that had been lying next to the fireplace opening.

Beech decided to go shopping while it was still morning. After the taxi that he had called dropped

him off in the square a group of children started following him from one store to the next. It kind of made him feel like the Pied Piper. Beech had become somewhat of a celebrity since his old buddy Orlandello had published a story in *The Journal* featuring Beech, entitled “*Art for Art’s Sake.*”

The Quad City Gentlemen may once have had an accurate description about the town’s feelings for Beech. But that was then and this is now. Orlandello’s article changed the mind’s and attitudes of the shop keepers and town’s residents about Beech.

As he walked from store to store, with his parade of youth, people said their hello’s and store owners were happy to see him. They enjoyed having a celebrity in their presence. They offered to deliver his groceries to his new house at no charge.

When sitting at his favorite Reynold’s Cafe, sketching and drinking cappuccino or espresso, children watched him work. Beech always enjoyed the company of the town’s children and not just the little girls. He greatly valued their knowledge of the town and pumped them for as much information as possible. Sometimes he paid them off by giving them a quick sketch of their own face and perhaps one of the buildings of the square in the background. Orlandello’s story had portrayed Beech as an “Artistic Genius”. Although he certainly had artistic talent, his true genius was in the field of larceny.

He had bought a case of white German wine, Spatlese-Qualitateswein mit Pradikat, and set it on the counter in the kitchen. The rube that owned the liquor store had priced the Spatlese for only \$2.88 each for a dozen. Beech figured the wine would have easily sold for \$7.95 a bottle in the big city. He took the spices he had bought from the brown paper bag. He thought it cute, quaint, and regional that people in Fats would call the bag a “sack”. He set the lemon-pepper, basil, oregano, sage, parsley, thyme, and Spike in a cabinet above the stove. The cabinet also held the other food staples like flour, coffee, and sugar. The warmth and scent of burning wood provided a rustic, homey atmosphere. A typewriter, one dictionary and his sketches were placed on the dining room table. He wished he had a computer handy but decided the typewriter would have to do.

Beech reclined on the futons in the bedroom. He had assembled detailed information and caricatures on nine-three of Fats leading citizens. His information included the secrets, shame, long forgotten disgraces, and enemies of each of the ninety-three files. He had worked hard and long at finding the dirt on all these people. He had sat up and drank with many, many people he normally wouldn’t give the time of day. After a few cocktails the people just talked and talked. They loved talking about their friends and their unusual wild times.

By predicting the actions of the “Fats Ninety-Three”, Beech would be able to project the effects of his plan. If person number one did something to person number five the result would be? If person number thirty verbally stabbed person number eight in the back, the outcome might be? After juggling the possibilities of the ninety-three (93) back and forth, to all positions of hatred or betrayal, Beech was able to reasonably predict the person that would be the suspect in virtually every case.

Beech had removed stationary from a variety of hotels and motels in the big City. He felt this letterhead stationary would not be able to be traced to him. He would type letters using a typewriter that was located at the university library. He would type letters to the people on his list exposing all the dark, dark secrets of everyone. The secrets and disgraces everyone thought were long forgotten would once again resurface and live.

Beech smiled and whistled the music from a dusty Barbara Streisand song. Suddenly, he burst into song, “*People. . .who need people. . .are the luckiest. . .People, in the world!*”

Chapter 7

Jasmine took a drag from her cigarette and dropped it into her ashtray allowing the fag to continue its glow. Smoke trailed upward from the ashtray that advertised the name Ritz Barbecue Ribs printed across the interior of the salver. She reached over to the coffee table and picked up her silver Seiko watch that had been left behind one day on the seat of a sleek BMW sedan parked in the lot of the DoubleSpeak National Bank. Her snazzy watch indicated the time was 2:30 A.M.

She silently cursed her father for not having the money to buy an air conditioner. It was so hot she hadn't had the desire to even attempt to sleep. She also knew it was useless to voice her opinion about the need for an air conditioner to her worthless father. Her father was a high school graduate that had the reading level of a seventh grader. Consequently, he had a job that paid peanuts. She knew that because he was always screaming about his lack of funds and that she should find a job.

Even though her window was wide open the heat had an over bearing effect. Her skin had a moist layer of sweat and her hair felt thick and matted.

The moon beamed into her bedroom like a Hollywood movie set light. Jasmine lay naked on her bed imagining herself to be in a black and white movie. She made facial gestures of surprise and then happiness as she pretended to be awakened by her handsome lover.

Jasmine was alone in her room but there were other people in the house. Her father and his, what he called a nurse, were downstairs. Her father was frequently ill. Sometimes he was sick from too much drink. Other times it was from an imagined ulcer. Some woman named Donna would arrive, wearing a white nurses uniform with white headress and all.

"I'm here to make your daddy feel better," she would say through brightly painted lips.

Jasmine would ask her father what mommy thought about this unhealthy situation. Alas, mommy had taken ill herself.

"We had to take her to a country hospital to get better. I don't know when she'll return." her daddy would explain.

Jasmine couldn't be bull-shitted. Her mother couldn't stand her father or his nurse and she had moved into another man's house. One time she caught her father crying on the telephone, trying to apologize to her mommy, begging for forgiveness, asking her to please come home.

Once the telephone conversation was concluded her father didn't feel too well again. So, he would go to the cupboard and toke out a bottle of his special medicine called Beefeater's Gin and started his treatments. During one of these occasions Jasmine wanted some help on her homework. She knew her father wasn't the best person to ask in the first place but she felt she wanted to talk with him anyway.

"Daddy, can you come here and help me with my math problem?" she called into the kitchen.

"Shut up kid, can't you see I'm drinkin'," answered her concerned daddy.

Jasmine was able to get away from it all in her sacred place, her bedroom. She could do whatever she wanted in her room, dress up, dress down, or undress entirely and pretend she was actually somewhere else. All she had to do is lock the door.

She decided to smoke another cigarette. She got up and walked over to her dresser which she called "Fort Knox". She picked up her Marlboro pack, took one cigarette out and scanned the top of the dresser for her Zippo. She didn't see her favorite lighter so she pulled open the second drawer from the top.

There were several lighters visible. Some were plated with silver, others with gold, all had been bought by someone else. She had a variety of other items in "Fort Knox" too. She could see a thick stack of paper money, jewelry, (rings, bracelets, necklaces, anklets, even a Vietnam MIA bracelet), expensive bottles of perfume, many from Paris, a bunch of designer sun glasses, all sorts of credit cards that originally

belonged to someone else, passports, and drivers licenses. The delight she felt while looking into her dresser was comparable to the joy a cripple feels after being healed by a shaman like Jim Bakker, Oral Roberts or Billy Graham. She would become so incredibly happy she almost seemed to glow like a star in the heavens.

She lit her cigarette from a candle that was set in a black ashtray. The silhouette of her naked body wiggled and serpented against the bedroom wall as the candle found life. She puffed on her cigarette and glanced at the mirror above the dresser. She reached into the third drawer of her dresser and pulled out a pair of white silk stockings. She sat on the bed and slowly, slowly rolled them onto her legs. She looked into the mirror again and realized something was missing. She looked into the dresser once more and pulled out a black garter belt. She made a mental note that she should pick up a white one and what they hell, some other colors too. She swung it around her waist and fastened the snaps. She then attached the garters to her stockings.

A police siren could be heard a few blocks away. After a few seconds the night became silent once more. She decided to see what she looked like in her mirror again. She could see her developing breasts and moist skin in the dark reflection of the mirror. The candle flickered and danced to it's own music as Jasmine posed, slowly looking up and down at herself. She thought the stockings and garter belt made her look like a model in a men's skin magazine. She made a mental note that she should organize some sort of photo session for herself. She knew several excellent amateur photographers including herself and figured she could create a portfolio reasonably quick. She concluded that she was exceptionally beautiful. She knew she was sexy, but after looking at her reflection again and again she knew, for sure, that she was beautiful.

She went to the closet and pulled out a volleyball. She carried it to a spot where she could see herself holding the ball in the mirror. She set the ball on the floor and sat down on top of it. She looked at the mirror as she rocked back and forth, gyrating her body, closing her eyes momentarily, opening them and glancing at the mirror.

She closed her eyes, started rocking on the ball, and thought about the handsome Hollywood movie star of her dreams.

Chapter 8

“Hey, Bird, I got an idea. Lets walk instead of riding tonight,” said Toad.

“Yeah, you just might be right, man,” answered the surprised Bird. He slid his fingers through his long, greasy, dirty, snarly, hair attempting to keep it out of his face.

Toad rarely gave good suggestions but he was “right on” with this one. These two Quad City Gentlemen loved their assignment. They knew if they worked diligently with percision they could advance in the ranks of their club and even obtain the admiration of the women in their group.

Both of them were carrying red battered gas cans they had the girls fill earlier at the Skelly gas station. Tonight, Bird and Toad would show their compatriots and the town what pyromania was all about.

They knew the celebrity painter had moved out of town some where. They didn’t know exactly where and they sure didn’t care at the moment. They only knew they had a job to do and that ‘clown’ the painter should have known better than to mess with them.

They figured the gang would spread a few rumours around town afterward. The plan was simple. They would create fear into the people of the town and blame the painter from the Big City.

Toad pulled a cigarette out of a Camel pack, non-filtered, and started searching his pockets for his Bic lighter. Bird, the smarter of the two, noticed what Toad was looking for and suddenly slapped Toad across the face. Toad showed a wild alarmed look on his face as the cigarette flew several feet from him and landed on the pavement.

“You stupid piece of shit. What the hell do you think you’re doin’? Do you know what we got in our hands, you asshole!” His face was bright red and spit flew out of his mouth as he screamed at his partner.

“Aawwww Maannnn, I forgot,” realizing that they were actually carrying gas cans that definately smelled like gas cans.

Bird calming down somewhat said, “Man, I’m flying with excitement. I’m really hopped up. I feel like I’m doin’ crystal-meth.”

“Yeah, me too, man.”

“Well, c’mon, man, let’s go do it,” commanded Bird being the Vietnam veteran he was. In Vietnam he hadn’t done any commanding. He had been stationed in a support group and mostly smoked opiated reefer or skag. He had been so high that his year there seemed like one long party. There had been some action, some mortar, Tet, and tracers but all and all it had been fun.

The Antioch Baptist Church Elders were having a meeting in their building’s basement. The seven men present would decide how to spend their tax free dollars.

“I say we should finally add the addition to the building. Our Sunday School classes are overly crowded, we need more space for our children,” suggested Peter Cleghorn.

A balding man, wearing glasses, moustache, and a gray suit stood up, “Yes, Peter has the right idea. But, we also need to have our parking lot improved. I’ve called some asphalt companies and have some estimates.”

A third man, also stood up and insisted, “No, No, we’re doing the lord’s work here, I say we offer some money to the orphanage. Or we could buy some food for the truly needy in our town.”

These types of suggestions were talked about for about an hour but nobody could agree on anything like this. So, after a while they decided to buy themselves new luxury cars, restock their wine cellar, and offer a \$500 scholarship to somebody’s child in their congregation.

“The lord work’s in mysterious ways,” Peter announced.

Outside, in the parking lot stood the Elders luxury cars that had been bought by the church only two

years earlier. There was a Cadillac, Volvo, BMW, and two Mercedes sedans.

The two shadow figures checked the doors of the automobiles finding one car with an unlocked door. It was the silver Mercedes. They opened the doors of the car and merrily poured gasoline all over the seats and floor. Bird took his can and poured gasoline under the car and around the tires. He continued to pour a trail across the pavement to the volvo parked next to the Mercedes. He poured the gasoline all over the hood, window, and top of the car.

Toad was laughing quietly, to himself like Peter Lorre might have if he had been a Hell's Enforcer that was pouring unleaded gasoline on a beautiful silver Mercedes sedan. Toad continued pouring as he walked around the car to catch up to the Bird man who was walking toward the alley. When Toad caught up with Bird he was handed a cigarette and a lighted match which he happily accepted.

"Hey, sorry, man, about knockin' that square off your lip," said Bird as he lit Toad's cigarette. He then flipped the match down into the trail of petrol, starting a chain reaction of fire that raced toward the Mercedes. They both started running like crazy, back into the alley and the shadow world they were so familiar with. They were well hidden when they heard the intensely loud explosion. BOOM, BOOM, CRASH, CRASH! The garbage cans they were hiding behind shook from the tremor of the explosion.

The flames from the blast shot up over fifty feet. The large stained glass window in the front of the church burst from the detonation and sent little fragments of glass in all directions at once. The pieces looked like shooting stars flashing and shimmering across the universe of the parking lot. The drizzle of glass landed on the cars and parking lot the way rice had landed on dozens of newly weds over the years.

The Elders came darting out of the basement to see what was happening to their world. They ran around the lot looking at the damaged cars and the opening where the beautiful hand crafted stained glass window had been.

Surprisingly, the Fire Department reacted quickly and arrived only minutes after the explosion had taken place. Within fifteen minutes they had doused the blazing fire which had entirely engulfed the beautiful silver Mercedes.

One of the Elders volunteered, "Perhaps it's a message from the lord."

Chapter 9

Taking a break from a hard day's night Beech sat back, clasped his hands behind his head and leaned the chair backward against the wall of the porch. The beautiful calm surrounding the cabin was welcome to his ears. The Simon and Garfunkel song "*Sounds of Silence*" occurred to him. Every now and then he could hear a cricket or some other forest inhabitant chirp or walk.

The light of dawn had a quality the rest of the day couldn't experience. The light baby blue of the morning slowly dissipated the black of the night. The aroma of coffee came through the opened front door. Beech's morning luxury had come to life. He had bought an automatic coffee maker with a timer for one of his favorite beverages. He could smell the delightful French Roast coffee clearly. He had set the time for 6 AM several hours ago. He went in, poured himself a cup and came back out to the porch. Although it was very early in the morning the summer heat had already awakened too. It would be a cooker today.

He sat down on the lone chair and started smiling. He was beside himself with the satisfaction of a job well done. His fine effort would be concluded as soon as he stamped the letters and dropped them off into various mail boxes.

Beech wandered into good ole Fats casually dropping letters into mail boxes along the way. He imagined himself to be a flower child at a wedding dropping pretty flower petals to his right, then to his left, back to his right. It entertained him that he was actually dropping important letters into the dark opening of the government mail boxes. They were letters that couldn't possibly be traced back to him. He had smashed the keys of his typewriter with a hammer and deposited it into a garbage can in an alley he had chosen by chance. He'd buy another one soon.

He was walking toward the Reynold's Cafe when he came across Orlandello. George was talking to people with a yellow legal note pad in hand, his right hand occasionally scribbling notes. Orlandello's hired photographer was taking pictures of the destroyed automobiles that stood in front of the Baptist church. Orlandello noticed Beech walking toward him.

"C'mon, let's go get a cup of coffee at the cafe," he suggested.

"Sure. I was on my way there anyway," Beech replied.

"Can you believe these goddamn cars?" asked Orlandello. "I can't remember this type of thing every happening here in Fats!"

"Geez, what the hell happened? These cars look like shit."

"The cops apparently found a gas can that freshly smelled of gas in the alley over there." He pointed across the parking lot. "And you know what? They found the residue of what looks like a fuse that apparently was used to ignite this explosion. Hey, this explosion was incredibly loud, I almost fell out of bed when I was awakened by the blast. You mean you didn't hear it?"

Beech didn't want to explain that he had moved out of town.

"What time did the accident happen?"

"Must have been after midnight, I guess. Loud as World War II."

"I was sleeping then, I dunno, I guess I sleep pretty sound," he replied.

They arrived at the Reynold's Cafe and decided to sit outside, so they could watch the people walk by, especially the girls. "Ready for a good one Richard?"

"Yeah, what."

Orlandello seemed particularly amused. "I received a phone call earlier today from a woman, she wouldn't give her name naturally. She said the guy, that artist from the Big City, you know, that guy that

sketches people in the square, yeah, well, she said, she saw this guy walking toward the church with a red gasoline can about 1:30 in the morning.”

“I see you’re rather entertained by this nonsense. I’ll tell you candidly this doesn’t make me happy. Why would anybody say something like that about me? What do you know about this woman, anything?” Beech was furious.

“Richard, I really don’t know anything about her. She told me she called the police station too. The police chief knows you and I are friends, so he let me know she called too. He thinks that she’s full of shit and probably is with the guilty party right now. Can you think of anyone here in town that doesn’t like you?”

“I really don’t know anyone here well enough to have given them a reason to finger me for something like this,” Beech answered shaking his head.

Orlandello changed the subject. “Say, you still looking for a car?”

“Well, yeah, why, what did you find?”

“Oh, I saw a clean, white 1978 Oldsmobile Delta 88 with a For Sale sign down at the Clark station. The sign taped on the window of the car says \$1200.”

“How many miles on it?”

“I dunno.”

Aldous Conrad should have been delighted with himself. He had just performed the horizontal bop and a variety of other bedroom gymnastics with a local college girl. She had insisted on using his steam room with him before The Act. The steam and the heat had loosened their joints allowing their bodies to become pliable, flexible, smooth, slippery and limber.

She had showed him some tricks while they literally spun around on their heads like a top. The two of them twirled about until they landed evenly in The Position. Oh, the glorious sensation of wet skin, sweet opened mouth moist kisses, probing tongues, and groping hands. They had slipped and slid on each other as if this would be their last time together in life.

However, this physical activity was not what was bothering him. Conrad, being in pharmaceuticals, or chemicals in general as a means of income had a variety of perfume samples setting on a glass tray on his bedroom dresser. They were actually oil essence samples from which perfume or cologne was then made. The strength of the undiluted oils was surprising. One tenth of the oil mixed simply with 90% denatured alcohol made fine perfume. By mixing 5% oil with 95% alcohol one made cologne.

The moronic girl had knocked over a bottle on him which also splashed onto his beautiful white carpet. He stunk and the carpet stunk. It would take several days before he’d be rid of the scent. The carpet needed immediate attention, meaning a good shampooing or the whole place would smell like the French style whorehouse Conrad’s building had become.

Oh well, what the hell, he had told himself. Forget it. There was still the desire and need to pay attention to the pretty young coed and the night was still young.

Conrad knew how to handle people in general especially young, naive women. He looked over to Natalie and saw her putting on one of his white silk robes imported from the orient.

“You look lovely in that robe, honey,” he said. “Would you please bring me my black silk robe hanging in the closet?” He liked the contrast between her white innocent color and his black perspective. Occasionally, Natalie’s robe would open slightly allowing the curve of her breast to be visible.

Conrad pressed a button on the intercom. Shortly there after, a maid, dressed in a gray maids uniform, white apron and all knocked and entered the room. Conrad order breakfast.

“Would you like coffee or juice, sweetheart?”

The girl, very impressed answered, “Just coffee is fine, cream and sugar.”

As the maid walked away from them Natalie noticed that the seam on the back of the maid's dark stockings was perfectly in line. The only place she had ever seen seams on stockings was in the movies. She had thought them old fashioned.

Twenty minutes later the maid came back into the bedroom carrying a shiny silver tray upon which there was a silver coffee pot, dark blue bone china cups with gold trim around the lip of the cup and matching saucers, expensive looking tableware, "confetti" hand blown crystal carafe with papaya juice, sliced fresh mango and pineapple, scrambled eggs mixed with leeks and smoked salmon, rye toast and english muffins, butter and honey. The maid set the tray on a table, bowed to them and backed out of the room as if she was leaving royalty, closing the double doors simultaneously as she left the lovers to do what they will.

Aldous Conrad had worldly taste and refinement. His talent for food, drink and atmosphere were put to good use at his French Retreat downstairs. He had made thousands of dollars from happy satisfied customers that hired his French style entertainment and all that came with it from time to time.

Conrad paid his staff handsomely for their services and their agreement to keep their mouths shut about the activities at The Retreat. Loud mouthed employees didn't work there long and in fact sometimes were found beaten or dead. This knowledge kept the present staff over paid, happy and really all they had to do was keep their heresay to themselves. If well known celebrities, politicians, or clergy from the Big City came here and decided to hook up with two, three, four or more other noteworthies in a private room, it was their privelege and, of course, they paid for it, knowing everything was private and discreet.

The tantalizing aroma of Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee filled the bedroom. The girl, Natalie only smelled strong coffee but Conrad's keen nose was able to distinguish between various coffee bean scents. He was wondering if this girl might be available for a party or two in the future with his clients. Of course, he'd have to take her down to the Belladonna Beauty Salon and make her over. She was very pretty, but her hair and clothing were of the style of a college coed. His clients generally preferred something a little more sophisticated. The nice thing about the Belladonna was that Michael Wells appreciated being over paid and Joanna, the beautician he normally worked with would show a girl how to keep the look that had been created for her.

Natalie's robe opened again as she smiled at him. He smiled back noticing for the first time that her eyes showed no intelligence and scooped up some of the scrambled eggs with a silver fork and put them into his mouth. As beautiful as she was, with a shapely, strong, lovely figure and as sweet as she was she just didn't have a brain. Can't have everything, he thought.

Yes, there had been moments during their earlier love making that he thought her perfect and wonderful. Was it possible that his strength and sexual stamina had knocked all sense out of her? Nah, she was just a pretty moron. Hence, she was a perfect candidate for The Retreat.

"Would you like some sugar for your coffee, Natalie?" he asked. He held an opened sugar bowl and moved it toward her.

She took a spoon and scooped five spoonfuls into her coffee.

"I wanna do it again," she purred between sips of coffee.

Conrad was feeling impatient, and noticed that dawn was about ready to come out of hiding. The light through the atrium window appeared to be light gray-blue. "Natalie, I've got some things to take care of. Why don't you take a nice bubble bath or something, take a nap, and maybe go into town later and go shopping. Here's \$200 to go shopping with later, ok? Take the sports car, the keys are downstairs hanging on a hook next to the door in the restaurant's kitchen. Why don't we get together later, say, maybe around 2 or 3 in the afternoon, we can have some fun again then, ok," he offered.

Natalie was happy to take the \$200 to go shopping. She was glad he offered the opportunity to come back later. She liked older men much more than boys her own age. Older men had more money and appreciated everything so much more.

“Ok, Aldous, thanks and I’ll see you later, ok,” she replied.

He got up and walked over to the telephone table. Next to the phone lay yesterday’s mail and today’s newspaper fresh and untouched. As he glanced at the mail he noticed a postcard from Hawaii that read, Wish you were here daddy. It was signed, Love and wet kisses, Anna.

He fanned through the other letters and noticed one from the Whitehall Hotel in Chicago. He didn’t know anyone at the Whitehall and wasn’t aware that anyone he knew was visiting Chicago just now. He opened it figuring it was an advertisement or something.

Conrad had received threats of all kinds over the years many of them were simply crank threats. But this letter had words written about him that knew too much. Who wrote this letter and where did they get this accurate information? He looked at the envelope’s cancellation stamp to see where the letter had been mailed from. What the hell, it was right here, Bearsville. Somebody in town wanted to create a problem? And what did they want? Money?

It was obvious to even the blind that Conrad had a sizable bank roll. What, with the French Retreat, restaurant and all, it was quite difficult to hide his financial status in a town the size of Bearsville. This was no crank letter he sensed.

What else could it be but a letter for money, a blackmail letter? Who wrote it? Was it a friend or acquaintance from his past? He’d put his investigator on this problem and once he found the perpetrator a proper ending would be applied. He hadn’t accomplished his worldly material gains by being a gentleman.

This would be the last night of James Hunter’s trip to Florida. He had to go to Miami on business and called an old friend that had recently been elected Mayor of Key West. Mayor Barry Denuto and James went back a long way. They had many rough memories during their gunrunning days. They had smuggled guns and alcohol in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s.

James had moved up to Chicago after World War II looking for legal work. He found a job driving a delivery truck that took him around the state of Illinois. One day he had to deliver goods in the town of Bearsville where his truck broke down.

While waiting for the repairs to be made he had met a woman named Christina, fell in love, and started coming back to Bearsville, to date her. Eventually, he bought a gas station in Fats and moved to town. He married her right after he opened his second station.

Christina had wanted to open a restaurant for the longest time. She had organized many, many benefit dinners and lunches. She had felt she could make a go of it. The gas stations were making good money back in middle 1950’s and James was able to open a small 36 seat restaurant that served ‘*home cookin*’. The restaurant eventually needed building additions due to the popularity.

In 1968 Christina and James had bought a lot and had a beautiful hotel built there with restaurant, gift shop, and lounge. The whole town would come to their restaurant almost weekly for dinner, and stay a few more hours drinking in their lounge while they listened to live country music.

To this day their hotel was generally full with people visiting their college student relatives. The restaurant still did good business and their lounge also was financially healthy although the live music wasn’t always country these days. Their daughter managed the hotel and gift shop while their oldest son ran the restaurant and lounge.

James and Christina had flown down to Miami to relax and buy some inexpensive gift items for their gift shop. They always found good prices down in Florida for items like shells, stuffed alligators, gold chains, and driftwood.

Christina had elected to stay in Miami instead of going with James to visit his old friend. She didn’t want to go on the required eight hour round trip drive to Key West. James didn’t mind since he had never told her about his past with Barry.

Later that day the two old friends sat around two beat up old tables eating fried chicken, barbecued grouper, baked potatoes and drinking cold beer. Mayor Barry owned a bar in town called Captain Barry's. The only way James could see his old friend was to visit him during bar hours. They decided to have KongKu, their Belizian cook prepare the food.

"You remember the time we got almost caught by the Cubans?" asked Mayor Barry. He was squinty eyed with large bags under both eyes. A slight paunch accentuated by a tight T-shirt made him look his 74 years.

James not much younger, he had turned 70 two months earlier said, "Yeah, I remember that but you know what still makes me nervous. . .the time the Castillo gang almost blew us out of the water. If it wasn't for you blasting that guy with your shotgun I don't think we would have made it."

They both laughed. "So what ever happened to you Jim. One day I woke up and you were gone."

"Yeah, I guess I just couldn't handle it anymore. Hell, If I wouldn't have seen you're picture and story in the paper last week I probably wouldn't have known you were still alive. And here you are, still in Key West all these years, and the Mayor, I can't believe it."

"And you tell me you got a Hotel and Lounge up in Illinois somewhere?"

"Yeah, Bearsville. It's a little country town with a college, but I like it. It's been good to me, I've made a good living there and raised a family."

"Well, looks like we both did ok. Hey, you remember the night that guy swam toward our boat in a hail of bullets. I still remember his name, Alvin, you pulled him into the boat to find that the Cubans had blown almost everything below his belly button to kingdom come." Mayor Barry lifted his beer bottle and took a slug from it.

"Yeah, what a memory. Say, you ever get married?"

"Me? Yeah, sure. . .three times. Hell I lived with nine women too. And I got me , ready for this. . 13 kids." He rolled off a machine gun like laughter.

"No kiddin', that's great."

"There ain't a woman in the world I've ever gone to bed with that it wasn't a privelege."

"I'll drink to that!" Jim said. He raised his bottle to the Mayor. They clinked their bottles together.

"So, what the hell made you run for mayor at 74? Ain't you a little old for this type of thing?"

"When a beautiful woman struts by, and I don't give her the eye, that's when I'm too old!"

They clinked bottles again.

"So what got you to run for office?"

"I just got sick of all them money people comin' down here from New York, and buying property to put up more Condo's and pave the streets with gold Visa cards. I wanna keep the place like it is, insane. I'd like to put up a fence around the key but nobody was gonna let me do it. I wanna keep the lunatics inside the fence and the money pimps from New York out. There was a time when most everyone that came down here had character. Now the kids come down here on vacation, they all look the same, same hair styles, same K-Mart clothes, same manner of conversation. They all look like they're gonna be on a TV dance show or something."

"Hey, Barry what happened to that tatoo on your forearm. I remember when you got it."

"Yeah, when I realized I was a family man, I decided to put a bikini on the nude," his eyes twinkled as he spoke. "C'mon, how about another beer?"

"Ok. You know where I can spend the night?"

"As if you need to ask. You'll spend it at my place, that's where. When do you need to get back?"

"Well, our plane leaves Miami tomorrow night. I can leave here tomorrow morning and have plenty of time to get back."

"Alright!" Mayor Barry pulled a Lucky Strike out of his pocket, placed it on his lip, lit it and continued, "God, you know, sometimes I wonder if I got the energy to be the Mayor. But you know what,

Jim I'm gonna give it my best shot."

"Hey, you want another piece of chicken?"

After a long flight from Miami to St Louis the Hunters caught a Trailways bus for a tedious three hour drive back to Bearsville. They arrived at their house at 10:35 PM and were happy to be home. Their bodies couldn't handle all day traveling anymore.

They entered the house, flipped the light switch in the veranda and set their luggage down. Christina walked into the living room, dining room, kitchen and all the upstairs bedrooms turning on the lights of each room as she toured the house. She wanted to make sure everything was in order, that nobody was squatting in their place.

Their daughter had come by daily to bring the mail and newspapers inside. She had also watered the plants and fed their dog a Great Dane named Lady Allison. The mail and papers were lying on a table near the front door.

James looked through the nearly 100 letters, bills, cards and junk advertisements. He opened a letter from a friend staying at the Conrad Hilton in Chicago. His face changed colors and he felt a little faint.

He had thought it was his friend Robert McCann that he knew was staying at the Hilton for a convention at Chicago's McCormick Place. The letter brought up facts about his checkered past, suggesting, extortion, armed robbery, and murder.

He couldn't believe his eyes. Who could have written this to him? How could anybody have known these things about him. He sat down and looked blindly at the letter he held in his hand. A tear rolled down his cheek.

Beech took a taxi over to the Clark gas station to look at the beautiful used 1978 Oldsmobile Delta 88 white coupe. The station clerk was overly pleased to see him. This showed Beech that he was in a good position to deal with him.

"The car was driven by a 65 year old woman, a retired kindergarden teacher. She only drove this car to her school and to the mall once a week," announced the inexperienced salesman.

"How many miles on the odometer?" asked Beech.

"Only 62,000 original miles, look how clean the car is. And it's loaded. It has electric seats and windows, FM cassette player, cruise control and tilt wheel. She washed it every week!"

"Well, give me the key and I'll take a drive with it."

Beech came back about ten minutes later and said, "How much?"

"\$1200! Firm!"

"I'll give you \$600 for it, cash, right now."

The kid looked shook as if he had been caught with his pants down. "Aw. . .c'mon. . . \$600, I can't let it go for less than \$1100."

"Nah, I'll give you \$650 for it but not a penny more."

"Look let's cut through all the shit, Ok? I owe somebody \$900 and I just can't let it go for less than that." The kid was sweating and talking excitedly.

"I sympathize with your problem but that's no reason for me to buy this car. My last offer is \$700 take it or leave it."

"Geez, mister, this guy's gonna cut my throat if I don't come up with the \$900 this week."

"Look's like you've got yourself a pretty big problem pal. I like the car but I think the odometer has gone around at least once. Yeah, it's clean and everything but frankly, I don't need this car that badly."

The kid's forehead was dripping with sweat as if he had just played a pickup basketball game.

“Mister, please give me \$800 for it and it’s your’s. I gotta give this guy something for sure.”

“You’ll sell it for \$800?” Beach walked around the car looking at the paint job and the interior. “Oh, alright, you got yourself a deal. I’ve got the cash in my pocket.”

The kid seemed somewhat relieved, he started smiling again. “You sure know how to buy a car, mister.”

“How about taking it across the street to the Holiday Car wash and get it cleaned up real nice for me before we close the deal, ok? Beech enjoyed the kid’s discomfort.