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Death Among the Mangroves
Stephen Morrill

Chapter 1

Saturday, December 21

Lee Bell and Troy Adam were making love on an early Saturday evening when one of their three cell phones rang. Troy paused and then rolled over. “Oh for Heaven’s sake, Lee gasped, “Not now.”

“It’s the department phone.” Troy thumbed the answer button, “Yeah, there better be something on fire someplace.” He realized he was still breathing hard.

“Busy, are we?” Angel Watson said. Angel was a petite blonde who doubled as the department computer guru when not out on patrol.

“Well, I was. Not so much now. What is it?”

“Got a missing girl. A tourist. She’s been gone since yesterday afternoon. I’m at the Gulf View with the manager and two of the girl’s friends. Room 221. I think this needs the special chief of police touch.”

“All right. If you say so. Someone else was needing the special chief’s touch too.”

Angel laughed. “Tell Lee I said hello.”

Roy rolled over to look at Lee. “Officer Watson says hello.”

“I hate you, Angel!” Lee shouted at the phone.

“She says ... ”

“I heard her,” Angel said, laughing as she hung up.

The Gulf View was a two-story motel built on pilings with parking beneath, and seven blocks south of Troy’s beachfront rental condo at the Sea Grape Inn. He showered, dressed, walked and was there in twenty minutes. It was the shortest day of the year and at six p.m. the sun had set, though there was still light in the clear cloudless sky above the remote southwest Florida town of Mangrove Bayou.

Several hundred tourists milled along Beach Street and along the streets back of the beach that were lined with restaurants and shops. Some tourists were on the beach itself, and a few brave ones were in the water. It was chilly and Troy wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, and a windbreaker over that to keep his gun warm.

He smiled at the sight and recalled how, when he had first moved to Florida, he had braved Clearwater Beach in winter and thought nothing of it. Today, like most Floridians, Troy

wouldn't go into the water until June or July and by October the water was too cold for him. Northern tourists were made of hardier flesh. They seemed to like the cold water. At least, he thought, it didn't have ice floating in it like he had seen coming down the Hudson when he was a child in The Orphan's Home in Troy, New York.

Troy climbed the stairs to room 221 of the Gulf View Motel and found Angel Watson with two college-age women and Loren Fitch, the elderly motel manager. Angel was in uniform, the khaki long-sleeved shirt and matching trousers for colder weather and a matching safari hat with the *MBP* logo.

The two girls had long brown hair, almost identically combed back and down, and they wore shorts and tee shirts and running shoes that Troy assumed cost more than his weekly salary. One girl's tee shirt had *Cornell* with the university logo surrounding the shield on the chest. Troy smiled. *Go Big Reds*. He'd graduated from Cornell, probably when this girl was an infant. The other girl's tee shirt had a pocket but was otherwise blank, something almost unheard of in Mangrove Bayou. Troy doubted that it was even possible to buy a tee shirt in Mangrove Bayou without some sort of slogan on it.

Loren Fitch had a white short-sleeved shirt, open at the neck, and shapeless black trousers to go with his two-day growth of beard. The shirt had button-down collars that were not buttoned down and the tips curled up. Fitch often ran his fingers through his halo of white hair.

"What's all this, then?" Troy said to Angel.

"Who are you?" the girl with the Cornell shirt asked.

"I'm Troy Adam, the ... "

"He's the chief of police here," Angel said.

"Oh. That's good." Troy could see the girl rapidly adjusting to that. Troy was part black, part Asian and part Caucasian, with light brown skin, just a hint of the Orient in his jet black eyes, and short, straight black hair. He had been seeing that rapid reassessment in people's eyes for thirty-five years.

"Jodi and Brett, here," Angel indicated the two beside her, "Came down for a week after finals. They're at SUNY Albany. But the third girl, Barbara Gillispie, went out with some guy she met on the beach. Yesterday afternoon. She's not back yet. And the girls are about to leave to head up to Naples to catch their flights back north. They're worried. Barbara should be here by now."

"You don't go to Cornell?" Troy asked Brett, who was wearing the school shirt.

"No sir. My boyfriend does, though. I only get to see him on weekends now and he couldn't come down here with us. Why do you ask?"

“Just curious.” Troy looked at Loren Fitch. “You got this room booked for tomorrow?”

“ ‘Course. It’s the season. And these two are past checkout so I have to charge them another night.”

“We were going to check out earlier,” Jodi said. “But when Barbara didn’t show up we didn’t know what to do.”

“Did you have the room booked for tonight?” Troy asked Fitch.

“No. But got people tomorrow. Still gotta charge the extra night.”

“I think you can get by with a late checkout charge,” Troy told Jodi. He turned to Fitch. “I’ll stop by tomorrow to get a copy of the girl’s bill. Better not see a full day extra charge on the bill. Am I clear on that?”

Fitch combed his hair with his left fingers. “I suppose.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jodi said to Fitch. She smiled at Troy.

“So,” Troy said. “Jodi and Brett, you are assuming this is not just a situation where Barbara got what we might call a better offer.”

“Well, we thought that last night,” Brett said. “You know, when she never came back. But you would think she would call. We all have cell phones. But today? She would never miss her flight home, or Christmas with her parents.”

“We called her cell phone. Several times,” Jodi said. “No answer.”

Troy nodded. “She have a smart phone or a dumb phone?”

The girls looked puzzled. “What’s the difference?” Brett said.

“In an emergency, and in most places, the police can get the phone company to track any cell phone that’s turned on,” Troy said. “But basic tracking works by triangulating the phone’s position among a number of cell towers. We only have one cell tower here in Mangrove Bayou and all the others, farther north and one to the south, are out of range for that. We cannot track a dumb phone from a single point. But smart phones also have GPS, an entirely different system. That we can track, and quite accurately.”

Brett looked at Jodi. “She has an iPhone.”

Jodi nodded. “I saw her taking pictures with it. Is that a smart phone?”

“One of the smartest,” Troy said. “I’ll get on that. What’s her number?”

Jodi looked on her own cell phone and read off a number, which Troy jotted down in the notebook he always carried. Beside him, Angel typed the number into the notepad app on the department smartphone she was carrying.

“Someday you have to teach me how to do that,” Troy said. He was, of course, carrying the other department phone.

“Doubt that I can,” Angel muttered as she typed with her thumbs. She didn’t look up at Troy.

“Takes you longer to do that than for me to make a note on paper,” Troy said. Angel looked up then and gave him her *You are so Neanderthal* look. Troy turned back to the two girls. “How old is Barbara?”

Brett looked at Jodi. “Same as us, I think. Twenty. She goes to school with us.” Jodi nodded too.

“So not old enough to drink, at least not in a public bar, or at least not in a public bar that carded anyone which, around these parts, is a sometime thing.”

“We try,” Angel said. “Lord knows we try. I could write a book of excuses for bartenders not checking. Heard ’em all.”

“Do you have a picture of Barbara Gillispie?” Troy asked. “Better yet, that and also a picture of this guy she disappeared with?”

The two girls looked at each other. “We have some pictures of us, you know, on the beach,” Jodi said. “Or at dinner. We both have phone cameras. Never took a photo of the guy.”

“He was from here,” Brett said. “I heard him say so. Lives here in town.”

“He driving a car?” Troy asked.

“Probably,” Brett said. “Never saw it, though.”

Both department cell phones rang. Troy motioned for Angel to take it. She stepped outside the motel room door and onto the balcony overlooking Beach Street and the Gulf of Mexico.

“I’m going to want you two to download every photo in your phones,” Troy said. “Every one that you took here in Mangrove Bayou that is.”

“That would be a lot of pictures, at least for me.” Brett said.

“I know. But officer Watson can help you with that. She’s our expert in all things electronic. The police department is just a few blocks away. Give Watson all your contact

information at home, phone, address, and the same for Barbara, if you know. And I want as good a description as you can give her of the boy and of what each was wearing last time you saw them.” He looked at Fitch, “You get any look at this boy?”

The manager shook his head and held his arms out, palms up. “These kids. They come around in swarms. I can’t tell one from the other.”

“You got a car here?” Troy asked Brett.

“Yessir. A rental. But we have to leave in an hour to get it back to the Naples airport and turn it in before our flight.”

“That should be long enough. Pack up and follow officer Watson to the station. Let’s pack up Barbara’s things too. We’ll look after them.”

Angel came back into the room. “Got a customer down at the station front door. It’s not urgent. He can’t get in because I locked up. I told him to wait there and someone would be along.”

“I’ll go now,” Troy said. “You and the girls here pack up Barbara’s things and you bring her suitcase to the station. We’ll go through it there for any I.D. information.” Troy told her what to get from the girls in the way of information and photos, and left.

He walked from Beach Street around past the Sandy Shoes Café with its open-air dining. The staff at the restaurant had lowered the clear plastic curtains that would keep out the chill. The diners inside looked a little blurry through the plastic. *Like a Georges Seurat pointillist painting*, Troy thought. The tourist season was just getting into full swing and visitors were happy, business owners were happy, suppliers were happy, the mayor and town council were happy, and the police were resigned to it.

He crossed the Sunset Bay public boat ramps and parking, pausing to stay clear of a pickup truck hauling a big powerboat out of the water and off to the trailer parking area, and walked across the back parking lot of the town hall and police station. He had taken over in July from an incompetent police chief, this was his first tourist season in Mangrove Bayou, and he wondered if he and his staff were yet up to it. *Last thing I need right now is some major case like a kidnapping*, he thought.

Chapter 2

Saturday, December 21

Troy let himself into the police station by the unmarked metal door that led from the parking lot to the cells and walked through the empty station to the front door. The station was the short side of an L-shaped building that also housed the town hall offices, the medical clinic and a small office for the volunteer fire department. There was no one in the cells but it was early yet on an in-season Saturday night.

He opened the front door to find a man, white, brown hair, blue eyes, five-seven, 150 pounds, on his doorstep. The man wore black slacks, a black button-down-collar shirt that was open at the neck, and some kind of fancy sneakers. Troy, whose footgear was restricted to Topsiders boat shoes and running shoes he actually used, was often amused by the whole running-shoe phenomenon among people who wouldn't dream of walking from the far end of the parking lot to the grocery store to buy their fried chicken.

Behind the man there was a Ford Explorer, with a thirteen-foot aluminum jon boat on a trailer, parked crossways in the visitor parking spaces.

"Christ! If you were inside all this time why didn't you let me in?" the man said. He eyed Troy's shirt and jeans. "And who are you?"

"Troy Adam. I'm the police chief. Come on in." Troy led the man back to his office. "Have a seat. I'll be with you in a moment." The desk, chairs, a leather-covered sofa and a low table in front of that were new, or at least less-used than the original furniture. Troy had changed it all and had the station repainted inside when he first took over in July, as part of an effort to break the old habits of his employees.

Troy called the company that managed the microwave tower in the circle at the west end of Barron Road. The tower had several cell phone antennae, the town's internet access, and some other communication links. From the top, presumably, one could see the top of a similar tower near Naples to the north and also the one in Everglades City to the south. Troy wasn't about to climb the tower to find out if that was true. There were things one just took on faith. In a few moments he tracked down Barbara Gillispie's number and carrier and got them started on running a GPS trace.

"I'll stay on hold, if you don't mind," he told some person in an office in Naples. In Troy's experience, phone people didn't seem to like to use telephones to call you back.

He put the phone on speaker and muted the microphone. "Now, what can I do for you?" he asked the man sitting across from him.

"I wait outside for half an hour in the cold. Then you make phone calls first. What sort of customer service do you have here?"

“Sometimes we prioritize,” Troy said. “What can I do for you?”

“You been sitting back here all this time while I pounded on the front door?” The man looked to his left. “And what sort of office has a big red fire exit door in it?”

Troy took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He gave the man his best CopStare for a long moment. “I would say it was the office of a very safety-minded police chief,” Troy said. “We have two officers on duty at the moment. Plus me. They’re out on patrol as they should be. I wasn’t in here when you called. I came in the back door a few moments ago because Officer Watson had told me you were here. If you don’t like the staffing or the architecture, take it up with the town council. Until then, I’ll ask one more time, what can I do to help you?”

The man thought about that and then shook his head. “I did come on a little strong.”

Troy nodded. “For starters, what’s your name?” Troy pulled over a yellow legal pad and his fountain pen.

“Mark Johnson. I own a house up on 19th Street.” He paused and looked to Troy’s open office door. Angel Watson had come in through the back door with Jodi and Brett.

Angel stopped at Troy’s door. “I’ll be in my office, downloading photos,” she said. Jodi and Brett were staring at the glass upper half of the office door that Troy almost never closed. It said, in black lettering *Director of Public Safety*. Some wag had scraped off the “I” before Troy took the job and, until someone confessed, he refused to let them fix it.

Troy nodded to Angel and looked at Johnson. “You were saying?”

“Oh,” Johnson turned back to face Troy. “I live in Miami but I used to visit here more often. Fish the Ten Thousand Islands. A few months ago I put the house up for sale, as-is, furnished. Just had some basic furniture in there anyway, and some kitchen things, enough for me for a weekend retreat. It’s still for sale.”

He paused. Troy nodded helpfully. “Tight market right now.”

“Yeah. It is. I decided to come over here for the Christmas season, get out of Miami and away from my relatives. I have a boat and I brought it along too,” he pointed over Troy’s shoulder at the window behind Troy. “Thought I would maybe do some fishing. But when I get to my house, it’s locked up. I mean the locks had been changed. And there were people living in it.”

“People, I take it, who hadn’t bought the house.”

“No, they had not. I asked them who they were and they said they were renting and had been there several months. Spic family. I never authorized anyone to rent the house. Why would I do that when I’m trying to sell it? Now they’re in there tearing things up.”

“You know that they are tearing things up? Or you just assume spics all behave that way?”

“Oh, right. Listen, I’m from Miami. It’s not like I don’t get along with Hispanics.” He laughed. “Got no choice there. I’m sorry. Just a little angry about it, is all. And what are you, anyway, you look Seminole.”

“Got the location, sir,” the speaker phone announced.

“Talk to me,” Troy said.

There was a pause and then, “Hello? I have the location. Hello?”

Troy sighed and pushed the button to reactivate the outgoing mike. “I’m on. Talk to me.” Someone read off a latitude and longitude and Troy copied that down.

“It’s not moving?” he asked. He disconnected the phone. “Sorry,” he told Johnson. “Priorities again. Please wait a few.” He looked at his computer and called up the town of Mangrove Bayou on a mapping program and fed in the coordinates for Barbara Gillispie’s phone. He reached for the radio in its charger on his desk and called Jeremiah Brown who, along with Angel Watson, was on duty.

“Jeremiah, get over to the Publix strip mall. You’re looking for a girl whose cell phone is stationary at that location. Looks like it might be behind the stores in the access lane and lot. I know that doesn’t make sense to you. I’ll send Angel by in a little bit to explain things.”

“O.K. Boss,” Jeremiah’s rumbling low voice came. He was the only person to call Troy “Boss.”

“Right now, look around for a person. In all the Dumpsters and anywhere else. Her name is Barbara Gillispie. That grocery will have a cardboard box crusher too. See if anyone there can open it up for you to look. And don’t let them run that thing without my permission.”

Johnson was staring at the radio which Troy had laid on his desk. He looked up at Troy. “Jesus. I guess you *do* have to prioritize things. Missing girl?”

“I hope not. Just a precaution. By the way, watch the language in here. We have a no-cursing rule. Each word costs you a dollar.”

Johnson stared. “You’re shitting me. A police station with no swearing?”

Troy smiled. “We’ll put that one down to a bad try at irony.” He pulled out his wallet. “I’ll cover you. The rule is mostly for the staff. Some of us tend to be potty-mouthed. End of each month we use the money for a beer-and-pizza party. Now, have you called your real estate agent?”

“I did. One good thing about those people; you can get them on a Saturday afternoon. She had no idea what I was talking about. Oh, one other thing. The *For Sale* sign is gone from the front yard and that key-holder thing she had hung on the doorknob is gone too.”

“Someone could just pull up the sign,” Troy said. “But they’d have to use a hacksaw to get that lock box off the doorknob.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought. In fact, it’s not even the same doorknob. The whole thing’s been replaced.”

“Key went into the doorknob? Not a separate deadbolt?”

“Yeah. Doorknob had that thing on the inside you turn to lock it. Why?”

“Probably easier to cut off the knob, which is only cheap brass, and then punch out the lock, than it would be to cut through a case-hardened lockbox hasp.”

“Yeah. Whatever. Anyway, I want those people out of my house, and pronto. It’s my house and I want to sleep in it tonight. Without company.”

“Can’t say I blame you. Let’s do some research.” Troy turned to his computer and called up the property appraiser’s web site and checked the address. Mark Johnson was listed as the owner.

“Have you paid your taxes on the property?” Troy asked.

“Yeah, of course. What, you think I’m some sort of deadbeat?”

Troy looked up from his keyboard. “I have to gather information, Mr. Johnson, if I am to help you. Don’t take it personally.”

“Sorry. You’re right. But, in fact, the taxes was one reason I wanted to sell. Back when I bought it Mangrove Bayou was a no-place backwater. It still is, no offense.”

“None taken.” *Probably wouldn’t have hired me, even on a temporary basis, had this been a larger town and there were more applicants than a guy who was fired from his last job and who has nightmares about killing people.*

Johnson was looking out the west window at Sunset Bay and the lights in the condos beyond it. “Well, when the yuppies moved in, and when they built the place up for tourists, property values went through the roof. Place I bought for twenty thousand ten years ago is worth ten times that now. Mostly it’s the land, not the house, but that means the taxes are too rich for my blood just for an occasional weekend retreat. I’ll sell it, take the money, and run away, very fast. But, yes, I pay the damn taxes every year.”

Troy got out another dollar. “Oops. Sorry,” Johnson said.

“Next one’s on you,” Troy said. “About the taxes, good to know. Who’s your realtor?”

“Frieda Firestone. Firestone Properties.”

Troy made a note. “One of the few local realtors. Not much call for them here. Small town, low turnover. She’s known as Frieda the Flipper, I’m told.”

“Well, she sure better not have flipped my house without telling me.”

“It’s just an alliterative nickname. Far as I know she’s a straight arrow.”

“Alliterative?”

“Frieda. Firestone. Flipper. All start with the letter ‘F’.”

“Oh. I see. Funny.”

“Apparently not so much. Here’s what I can do,” Troy said. “I’ll go over there right now and talk to those people. I need to find out to whom they pay their rent and then I need to locate and talk to that person. I need to find out if a crime has been committed and, if so, what sort of crime. I can do something about crime. If no crime has been committed, it’s up to you and the civil courts. I don’t do civil, only criminal.”

“How long is all that going to take?”

“You tell me. I don’t see much chance of sorting it all out tonight, though. If you want to stay in town, go over to the Gulf View Motel and tell the manager, fellow named Loren Fitch, that I said to give you Room 221. Probably the only vacant room in town tonight.”

Johnson stared at Troy. “How the hell could you know something like that?”

“That’s a dollar. And I’m the police chief of Mangrove Bayou. I know everything. But, personally, I advise you to go back to Miami and let me take care of this as best I can.”

Johnson was shaking his head. He pulled out his wallet and took out a five and laid that on the desk. “Got change? This is sort of funny, having to pay to talk to a cop.” Troy looked in his own wallet and pulled out four singles and pushed those across. He added another to the two on his desk and put Johnson’s fiver into his wallet.

“That won’t do,” Johnson said. “I want those people evicted. Why can’t you kick them out right this minute?”

Troy shook his head. “Of course you’re angry. I would be too. But evictions are fairly complex legal matters and are handled by the sheriff’s office. I’ll get with them if that seems the way to go. But Christmas is next Wednesday and I suspect we’re looking at some delay.”

“But they’re just criminals squatting in my house.”

“Mr. Johnson, let’s get one thing straight right now. The renters are probably not the issue. They may be acting in good faith. The person to whom they are paying the rent *might* be a criminal. Let me find out. But you leave those people alone. They’re mine to deal with, not yours.”

“I suppose. How would you like it if this were your house?”

“I wouldn’t. I’d hate it. But I’d still obey the law. Leave them alone. Let me find out what’s what and update you.” He slid a notepad and his pen across his desk. “Give me your address and phones. Email too, if you have that.”

Johnson picked up the fountain pen and tried to write with the nib upside down. He looked at it, puzzled. “Sorry,” Troy said. “Here.” He handed Johnson a ball-point pen out of Troy’s middle desk drawer. Johnson wrote down all his contact information.

They shook hands. Troy let Johnson out the front door. Johnson got his Ford Explorer and boat trailer turned around and headed back to Barron Road. That would take him five miles east to U.S. 41 — the Tamiami Trail — and the long drive back to Miami. Troy put the money from his desktop into the Bad Words Jar behind the counter in the lobby. He checked his watch. At least Rudy Borden would still have his service station open. Johnson would need to gas up before that drive. Miami was one hundred miles and thirty years distant from Mangrove Bayou.

Chapter 3

Saturday, December 21

With Jeremiah looking for a girl or, worst-case, a cell phone, and in the dark, and Angel joining him, Troy decided he needed reinforcements. And he was it. He walked back to his rental condo at the Sea Grape Inn and took his own car and drove to the shopping mall. There were actually three malls in Mangrove Bayou and the strip-mall with the Publix grocery store was the smallest. Both department Suburban trucks were parked behind the mall buildings, lights flashing.

Troy pulled in with his Subaru Forester that he could probably have parked inside one of the Suburbans. His predecessor had wrecked the old chief's car and the town council had never bought a new one. Jeremiah was inside a Dumpster, digging around, holding a flashlight in one hand. Angel had climbed onto one of the side handles that the truck would use to hoist the Dumpster and was looking down and helping with a second flashlight.

"Many are the duties of the Mangrove Bayou police officer," Troy said, looking in. "Including Dumpster diving."

Jeremiah looked up and smiled. He was so large he took up half the Dumpster himself. There was a spot of something — Troy hoped it was only mayonnaise — on Jeremiah's jet-black forehead.

"No people in here, Boss. 'Less you count me, feeling around for a phone. Probably gonna need to toss all this out onto the pavement to go through it." Jeremiah sang bass in his church choir and when he spoke he rumbled like a level two Richter-scale earthquake.

"Tried dialing the number," Angel said. "It rang at my end but didn't hear it anywhere around here."

"The phone company said it was here," Troy said.

"Then it's here," Angel said. "Or within ten meters or so, at least. That's the accuracy for the GPS."

"I actually knew that," Troy said.

"Jeremiah, need me to spell you in there?" Angel asked. "I'm smaller."

Jeremiah shook his head. "You might sink out of sight, little lady. And one messed-up uniform is enough."

"Maybe Chief Adam can help you," Angel said. "He's tall."

“Sorry, Angel, that would be my cue to hit the streets and patrol while you fine officers Dumpster dive. Got an errand to run anyway. Official police chief work. Oh, and one more thing. Shut off those flashing lights on the trucks. We don’t need to be waking up half the town with them.”

It was a drive of only a few blocks south on 19th Street to pay a visit to some soon-to-be-unhappy renters. He rang the doorbell and a short, skinny Hispanic-looking man answered. Inside, Troy could see a living room and, through an archway, a woman and two kids sitting at a dining table. *Swell*, he thought.

“I’m Troy Adam, the Mangrove Bayou police chief.” He showed the man his badge since he wasn’t wearing a uniform. “You aren’t in trouble but I’d appreciate it if you could step outside with me a moment. No need for the kids to be hearing this.”

The man, looking puzzled, stepped outside and closed the door, and he and Troy stood on the porch. “Eduardo Martinez,” he said. “What’s going on?”

Troy explained the situation. Martinez, of course, protested. “I paid my rent. Broken no laws. Never broke in here.” He looked angry about it.

“I suspected as much,” Troy said. He actually had no idea at this point that the Martinez clan was innocent but he was a good judge of character and liked what he saw. “You didn’t create this mess. But you’re in it now. Fact is, the man who rented this place to you apparently did so illegally. The real owner wants you evicted so he can sell the house. I don’t have any choices here, and neither do you. Who rented this house to you?”

“The Reverend Heth Summerall. He’s a minister of some sort. Got to be some kind of mistake.”

“Not one that I can find,” Troy said. “But I only stopped by this evening to talk to you and give you a heads-up on this. Why don’t you come by the police station some time tomorrow and you and I can figure out what to do about it.”

“This is bullshit.”

“Yes, it is. I’ll try to buy you some time to look for another place to stay, do what I can for you. Seems to me the main thing is not to upset the kids. But the law is the law and the Reverend Heth Summerall appears to have violated it and you are the victim. Come by and see me tomorrow.”

Troy drove away and started patrolling the town. He didn’t mind arresting people for the big crimes, he thought as he drove. It was the little things that he sometimes had to do that bothered him. Kicking people out of their home at Christmas time had to be right near the top of horrible things to have to do. It was, he thought, almost Biblical.

Chapter 4

Sunday, December 22

Jeremiah found Barbara Gillispie's cell phone after several hours of searching and tossing out trash from the Dumpster. It had the ringer turned to vibrate-only. He brought that back to the station in an evidence bag and someone at the strip mall got the job of shoveling everything else back into the Dumpster. There was no sign of Barbara Gillispie and there were no useful phone calls listed on the phone.

Troy spent Sunday morning organizing a search for her. For a community dependent upon tourism, losing a visitor was bad for business and everyone knew it. With Mayor Lester Groud's help he divided up the inland bays and salt marsh into sections and some of Groud's fishing-guide friends went out in shallow-draft boats to look. Others headed out to pick through the nearby mangrove islands, a far harder task. They also covered the three larger islands making up the town itself, and the sheriff's department had a helicopter buzzing around the offshore mangroves too.

Cilla Dowling rang the station's front doorbell just after 11 a.m. Dowling was the local editor and reporter for the town online newspaper, the *Bayou Breeze*. Troy let her in and they went back to his office. She was about fifty, a thin, tough five feet, six inches with a tanned, weathered face, brown hair and eyes. She always wore her hair long in a single braid. She was wearing blue jeans and a matching denim blazer over a purple shirt with the collar out.

"No bulging chest today?" Troy said. Cilla was usually seen in too-tight tee-shirts with journalism slogans across her large breasts.

"Too cold for that. Besides, I already know I can't vamp you out of a story. Why waste them. You must know why I'm here."

Troy saw no reason not to tell Cilla everything he knew about Barbara Gillispie's disappearance, which, at this point, wasn't much. "And all the help, tips, anything at all that I can get, will be appreciated."

"You going to put up a reward for information?"

"I don't know. I don't even know where I'd get the money. If we do, I'll call you for sure."

"Who would make a decision on a reward?" Cilla asked. "Les, maybe?"

"He's the mayor. I guess so. I'll find out. We'll both find out. But with any luck, she will turn up soon."

"Do you really think so?"

“I’m hoping so.”

Dowling crossed her legs to give her something to write on in her reporter’s notebook. She had a barb-wire tattoo around one ankle. “If you don’t find this girl pronto,” she said, “the whole news business is going to drop down on you like the D-Day invasion. Don’t you forget little old me when that happens.”

Troy sighed. “I know. Wherever possible I’ll try to give you exclusives.”

“God help us all.”

“Yes, Cilla, God help us. And God help Barbara Gillispie if we don’t find her soon.”

Until someone found something, Troy could only wait. Eduardo Martinez showed up and Troy ran his I.D. through the system. Martinez was clean. He had even remembered to change his driver license address when he moved from Orlando to Mangrove Bayou. Troy hadn’t changed his own when he moved from Tampa and he made a note to do so. *Six months late and I’m the damn police chief. Do I owe a dollar? Guess not, didn’t say it out loud.*

The day shift was on and Troy told Juan Valdez to take the dispatch duties on the other department cell phone. He joined Lee Bell at the Osprey Yacht Club for the Sunday brunch. He took one each of everything that contained meat and cholesterol. Lee took some salad and a small slice of bloody roast beef.

He now had on his “longs” uniform, long-sleeve khaki shirt with shoulder straps and his name and “Chief” on the right pocket, and “Mangrove Bayou Police” on the left, and long trousers. He didn’t wear the full duty belt his officers used but he had his .45 pistol in a belt holster, and a radio clipped to his belt with a lapel microphone/speaker with a small earpiece clipped to the left shoulder strap. Lee Bell wore tight white jeans with a light green man’s shirt with long collar points worn out over a white sweater-vest. The shirt matched her eyes. She was as tall as Troy, thin and red-headed.

They were both yacht club members, Lee legitimately. She was wealthy enough but also owned her air cargo/passenger service. She flew a Cessna Grand Caravan around Florida and lived in a large home just up the road from the yacht club on Airfield Key.

Troy had been reluctantly admitted only because the director of public safety had always been an honorary member and even though the management wanted to toss him out once they saw what color he was. The Osprey Yacht Club was Caucasian, wealthy and conservative. Caligula would have been welcomed with open arms; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., not so much. In South Florida, with his slightly almond eyes and short, straight black hair and what Mayor Groud called his “beige” complexion, Troy was often mistaken for a local Native American, either Seminole or Miccosukee.

“Told you before,” Lee Bell said as they ate. “I can take the plane up. Lend me a some people to look out the side windows and I’m yours for as long as it takes.”

“Appreciate that. Might get back to you on it. Today at least we have a chopper from the sheriff’s office.”

Lee nodded. She cut off a tiny piece of roast beef and nibbled on it. Troy had already scarfed down almost everything on his plate. Several years as an Army officer had made him a fast eater. “It’s probably better for snooping around those mangroves anyway,” Lee said. “My stall speed is a little over 60 knots and I wouldn’t want to fly around at less than 100, just to feel comfortable. And you do know that you look silly with that thing in your ear.”

They had a nice view of the yacht club docks from their window table. Troy turned from the view to look at her. He never tired of looking at Lee Bell. They had met at this very club six months earlier.

“Why? I see people walking through the grocery store with earpieces and talking into phones and all they’re discussing is the price of tomatoes,” He said. “Me, I’m doing important police chief work.”

Wanda Frister was on duty and refilled Troy’s ice tea. Lee was drinking a mimosa. “How are you and Milo getting on,” Troy asked Wanda.

“Great. And I’m glad to be out of that trailer anyway. And away from that horrible Billy Poteet too.” She moved on with her ice tea pitcher.

“She didn’t have much choice about the trailer,” Troy said to Lee. “Hurricane Donald blew it into the bushes last July.”

“Billy Poteet was the boy you killed during that hurricane, wasn’t he?” Lee asked.

“Yep. Had to.” He nodded toward Wanda who was now at the next table. “Shoot him or he would shoot her.”

“Now she’s living with one of your officers? Milo Binder? Is shacking up with someone you’re not married to still against the law in Florida?”

Troy was focused on scraping together odd bits of leftover food for one last fork-full. “In fact, it is,” he said. “Florida, Michigan and Mississippi still outlaw men and women living together — cohabitation. The penalty is a \$500 fine and sixty days in the hoosegow. Nobody’s enforced it since 1868, far as I know, and the legislature tries to repeal that law every year. And every year one or two legislators kill the bill because of their religious beliefs. And, today, the funniest part is that it doesn’t apply at all to homosexual couples. Only to heteros. What’s your point? Want me to arrest the two of us?”

“We’re not ‘shacking up,’ exactly,” Lee said. “We each have our own shack.”

“Good point. Was about to call someone to handcuff me.”

Lee Bell laughed. “Leftover laws.” She ate a snip of lettuce and sipped her champagne. She didn’t normally drink much because of the rules about drinking and flying. Troy didn’t drink liquor at all.

“Things sometimes work out,” Troy said. “Wanda took up with Milo Binder and he has come around a little. He needed a woman in his life to knock off some of the sharp edges. He was such a pain when I took over the department that I considered firing him even if it offended the mayor, his uncle. I think Wanda has a good influence on him.”

“I think you’re a softie, Troy Adam.”

“Nonsense. Chiefs of police aren’t ‘softies.’ It’s the old ‘iron fist in the velvet glove’ thing.” He glanced over at the buffet line. Maybe he could get some more bacon and eggs.

“Aha. So, you’re usually all over any problem the moment it presents itself. You’re almost a one-man social service, always wanting to rearrange other people’s lives. Why aren’t you out there right now, evicting that family out of that poor man’s house? They’re just squatters.”

Troy looked back at Lee and sighed. “I know. I spoke to them and to the realtor, Frieda Firestone. She hadn’t a clue where those people came from or where her lock box and sign went. I talked to the man last night, when I was not in the sack with you — which would have been preferable — and again this morning.”

“I should hope so. You left me kind of... hanging, you know. And didn’t come home for hours.”

“I was busy with important chief things. And I made it up when I did come home.”

Lee grinned. “You came home at seven a.m. It was ‘wham, bam, thank you ma’am’ and you changed into uniform and left again.”

“Many are the duties of the Mangrove Bayou Director of Public Safety.”

“Right. At least I got a good night’s sleep before then.” Lee grinned and then forked another tiny bit of roast beef into her mouth. Troy especially liked her grin, which promised much, and her lithe body, which could cash the checks.

“Wish I had gotten a night’s sleep too,” Troy said. “The troops needed a little backup. I patrolled until the day shift came on. I met Eduardo Martinez. Married to Rosa. They have two kids, a boy, seven, and a daughter, eleven. Kids are in school, Eduardo works at Rudy Borden’s service station garage. He’s a mechanic. Rosa cleans people’s houses.”

Lee sipped some champagne and poked at a tiny bit of fruit. “Good blue-collar jobs, both. I have Denise cleaning my house every two weeks. She’s terrific. What about you?”

“Mrs. Mackenzie’s staff at the Sea Grape Inn hoses out my rental every week.” Troy took a sip of coffee. “Anyway, Eduardo and family just moved here from Orlando. Eduardo answered an ad online and they are paying rent to a Reverend Heth Summerall, who is a minister of some obscure faith with a church in a trailer on Snake Key. Cruised by the church last night. I haven’t met the good pastor yet.”

“Snake Key is a five minute drive from here. It’s Sunday; I bet he’s working.”

“It’s farther away than Christmas. You think I want to evict people on Christmas? Actually, I don’t do it. The sheriff’s office does it. But I have to be there too. Or send one of my people in my place, and I won’t do that.”

“Why not?”

Troy thought about it. “Good question. I suppose I think an eviction is something too horrible for my people to have to watch on my orders. And no child should have to see its parents and itself tossed out and made homeless. I won’t delegate it.”

“Squishy.”

“What?”

“You’re squishy.” The grin again. “Like a toasted marshmallow, you’re all crusty on the outside and soft and squishy inside.”

“Oh. Well, keep it to yourself,” Troy said. “I’m up for my job review, end of this month. Town council probably won’t hire a marshmallow.”

Chapter 5

Sunday, December 22

Troy was in the buffet line again, piling more scrambled eggs and bacon onto one plate and some melon cubes onto another when his radio called. “Chief,” his earpiece said. “Need some help.” It was Juan Valdez. He heard Milo Binder and then Dominique Reiss answer. Juan was the only officer on patrol; the others were off duty but out with several search parties.

Juan sounded out of breath. “Got a shooting. Guy running around shooting dogs, near as I can figure.”

“Where are you?” Troy said.

“Snake Key.” Juan gave a cross-street. He was obviously running as he talked. “I think the guy lives around here.”

“Be there in three minutes,” Milo said.

Troy keyed his lapel mike, awkwardly clutching two plates in the other hand. “Milo, Juan, I heard,” he said. “On my way. Five. Stay safe, both of you.” He put the plates down on a counter and walked quickly back to his table. “You’ll have to sign the tab and get home on your own,” he told Lee. “Got an emergency.”

“No problem, big guy. I can walk home, not that far. Let me know what’s what, when you can.”

Troy had no patrol car with lights and siren. He had to drive across the bridge from Airfield Key onto Barron Key, then loop around to cross the bridge onto Snake Key. Even speeding where he could do so, it took him six minutes to reach Juan and Milo. He pulled in at an address on Marshall Road on Snake Key. Milo’s car was parked in the front yard.

The lot was a small one and the house was a square concrete-block single-story with a hip roof and small porch with a shed roof overhang. What existed of a front lawn was weeds and sand. Most Snake Key lots were just weed and sand and the weeds were often sandspurs. Troy could see, from the side of the house where he had parked, that the back yard had a rusted car up on blocks and a barbecue grille on a tripod stand. There was no driveway but an old Chevrolet was in the yard next to Milo’s Ford. Troy felt the hood of the Chevy as he passed and it was warm.

Milo and Juan were talking to a handcuffed man who was sitting cross-legged in the front yard. Milo was twenty, five-eight and sturdy but not fat, with blue eyes that seemed to still look out at the world with some surprised innocence. He was the mayor’s nephew and had been an annoyance to Troy early on. Now, in Troy’s opinion, he was turning into a real cop. Milo’s brown hair was parted down the center and the only reason he cut it shorter was to keep Troy

happy. He was always trying to grow a moustache and always doing so poorly. He was also the one department 'lefty' and wore his Glock on the off side.

Juan Valdez was even shorter, at five-seven. He was thin, with black eyes and hair and he was, Troy knew, a lot stronger and quicker than he looked. Juan moved with a precision, without wasted motions, and always reminded Troy of an intricate piece of machinery. He was almost as good a shot as Troy, who practiced weekly on targets the size of coins. When the balloon went up, Troy knew, Juan was also probably the most lethal man in the department.

The handcuffed man was pale, short, skinny and unhappy-looking. Troy looked down at him. *Nobody's ever happy looking in handcuffs or mug shots.* The man wore black hair in a bowl cut like a Beatle, though he was too young to ever remember the Beatles. He had on gray sweatpants tied with a rope, and matching top, cheap black sneakers and a baseball cap with a Rays logo. It was a chilly day and Juan and Milo, like Troy, had opted for the 'longs', their long-trousers, long-sleeved uniforms.

"Tell me a story," Troy said, looking up at his officers.

"This is Gerry, with a 'G', Whyte. Whyte with a 'Y'," Juan said, handing across a driver license. "He shot some dogs a few blocks from here and we have his gun and he's been read his rights. He didn't resist when I ran him down. Laid the gun on the ground and backed off from it."

"Where's the gun?" Troy said. He knew it would be secured but cops always wanted to know where all the guns were in any situation. Force of habit. He handed Juan back the license.

Milo pointed. "In my car. I unloaded it. Semi-automatic. Cartridges are in my pocket."

"This his house?"

"Says it is."

"Gerry, is there anyone else inside your house?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm the chief of police." Troy pointed with a finger to his left breast pocket.

"We got a nigger cop? How did that happen?"

"We have several, Gerry. It's called progress. Is there anyone inside your house?"

"Shouldn't you have, like, a real police car?"

"Probably, Gerry. One last time, is there anyone else inside your house?"

"Um. No. Just me. I mean I'm the only one lives here."

Troy looked to Juan. “Where are the dogs?”

“Around the corner. Next block. One of them. The other ran off. But I think it was hit too.”

“I was only protecting myself, protecting the whole community ... ” Whyte started to say.

“Oh shut up,” Troy told him. Whyte looked up at him, startled, mouth half open. *Probably not accustomed to being ordered around by niggers*, Troy thought. *It’s a new world and the Gerry Whytes in it need to come up to speed.* “Juan, where’s your ride?”

Juan pointed. “Up the street, left and another block. Left it there while I ran this guy down.”

“Go get it. Milo and I will wait here.”

In a few moments Juan was back with one of the department Suburbans. “Milo, put Mr. Whyte into the truck,” Troy said. The Suburbans had prisoner cages across behind the front seat and between the rear seat and the back storage. The door locks and window controls for the back seat worked only from the driver’s side. “Then get an evidence bag from the locker there and put the cartridges, gun and magazine into that. Then stay here and keep anyone from entering or leaving this house. We’ll need a search warrant for the house and car both before we can go inside and look around. Juan, come with me.” Troy started walking up the street.

Around the corner they found a half-dozen women standing over a big yellow Labrador. The dog was dead in a pool of blood, its entire upper snout almost blown away. A second bullet had gone through its neck and probably severed the spine. There was more blood spattered in a trail that led off up the street.

“Big caliber,” Troy said, looking down at the dog. “At least it was quick.”

“Gun was a forty,” Juan said.

“Then the bullets probably were, too.”

“You think?”

They talked to the people there. One, a young woman in a red-and-white jogging suit, said she had been running up the street when two dogs, Labradors, one yellow and one black, came along to join her.

“But they were doing nothing. Just running with me. It was pretty cool, actually. They were just having fun. Then this guy — skinny, short guy — drives by in a car. He stops up the street, right here, and gets out. It was like he was waiting for us. When I run past him he just opens fire on the dogs with a gun. I took off as fast as I could. I heard a lot of shots and some

yelping. Then I heard his car start and I thought, ‘Lord, he’s coming for me now.’ But when I looked back he had U-turned and driven off the other way. I ran back to this dog. Poor thing.”

“Guy was just blazing away wildly,” A large woman in denim shirt and pants said. “I was in my kitchen and a bullet came through the window.” She pointed at the adjacent house. “Hit my fridge and made a hole right in the side. Could have hit me, or my kid. She was in the kitchen too.”

“Where’s the child?” Troy asked.

“Inside. Think I need her seeing this?” she pointed down at the dog.”

“Smart,” Troy said. “I’ll need someone to look at the window and fridge. And I want that bullet. Juan, call Tom VanDyke and tell him to bring the camera and kit and come down and do his evidence thing.” Tom VanDyke was the department’s evidence specialist.

“Tom’s out with one of the search parties you organized.”

“Oh yeah. I knew that. I was just checking to see if you were alert today.” Troy used his call phone to call Tom VanDyke and get him headed for the station to pick up the equipment.

“Where did these dogs come from? Anyone know?” he asked.

“Think they belong to a girl next street over,” Denim Woman said. “On Marshall Road. She just moved in. She’s ... um ... black.” The woman looked cautiously at Troy to see if it was all right to use the “b” word.

Troy nodded. “Anyone else know about these dogs or that woman?” The other four women looked at one another and at Troy and shook their heads.

“Juan, get names and all that. Wait here for Tom to show up and do his thing. When he gets here, take this dog to the vet’s office. I’ll go look for the other dog. Thank you, folks. I appreciate it. Sorry you had this scare. We have the guy who shot off the gun.”

Back on Marshall Road he turned the other way from Gerry with a ‘G’s house. He walked a block and heard yelping. There was another small block house — most houses on Snake Key were small block boxes or trailers — with a fenced back yard. A gate was open in the chain-link fence. It had been locked with a padlock but the padlock and the remains of the hasp were lying on the grass. In the back yard Troy found a black Lab lying on its side covered in blood. The dog was still alive. Troy beat on the back door but nobody answered.

“Christ!” Troy muttered. He got out his department cell phone and scrolled down the contact list to Manuel Gonzalez, the town veterinarian. He explained things to Gonzalez, who was at home but who said he’d head for his office right away. Troy then ran back down the road to his own car.

By the time he drove back there was a Prius stopped in the driveway and a sobbing dark-skinned woman in a blue medical-staff outfit in the back yard with the dog.

“It’s all right,” he said, hands out, as she leapt to her feet. “I’m the police chief. I’ve called the vet. I can take you and the dog ...”

“Martin,” the woman said.

“Martin, then, in my car.”

“Where’s Bobby?”

“Bobby your yellow lab?”

“Yes. How did they get out? A neighbor called me and said some people had shot my dogs. I came right home.”

“What’s your name?”

“Sasha Thompson.”

“Sasha, Bobby’s dead, I’m afraid. Let’s get Martin to the vet. We can talk then. Follow me in your car.”

Troy picked up the dog and laid it in the back of his Forester, thankful that he had paid for the rubber lining option for the storage area. He could sponge out the blood later. With Sasha following in her car, he drove Martin to the veterinarian’s office on Barron Key.

As it turned out there was not much they could do for Martin. He’d been shot several times and one bullet was still in his lung. “He’s torn up inside, intestines shredded,” Gonzalez said as he opened the dog up.

Troy was watching. “Shot in the ass, more or less,” he said. “Dog was shot running away.”

Manuel Gonzalez euthanized Martin just minutes later. While Sasha Thompson wept in the lobby of the tiny veterinary clinic, Gonzalez dug out the one bullet still in the dog. “Good shape,” Troy said, as he washed it off in a sink. “Can you keep him here on ice or something? My guys will bring in the other dog too.”

“Sure. Did you find the bastard who did this?”

“Yep. Got him in custody.”

“Can I have five minutes alone with him?”

“I’ll think on it.”

“Yeah,” Gonzalez said. “You do that. You think real hard.”

Chapter 6

Sunday, December 22

Back at his office, Troy called the duty clerk at the Naples state attorney's office and got someone working on asking a judge for a search warrant for Gerry Whyte's house, property and car. He called Lee Bell.

"Going to be in the office today, I'm afraid," he told her.

"I expected that anyway, what with the missing girl," Lee said. "Want me to stop by and keep you company?"

"No. Just had to deal with two dead dogs, shot by some loony guy, and also with the dog's owner. I'm feeling a little grumpy."

"Where's loony guy now?"

"Cell three. Manuel Gonzalez, our veterinarian, wants to have five minutes alone with him. I'm restraining myself."

He used his computer to look at some photos he had picked out earlier from more than one hundred that Angel Watson had downloaded from the cell phones belonging to Brett and Jodi. Troy was looking for someone matching the description he'd gotten from the two girls of the man with whom Barbara Gillispie had disappeared. The advantage of digital cameras over the old film cameras, he thought, as he paged through photo after photo, was that you could take a lot of pictures for free. But that didn't mean the pictures were any better.

He found a likely candidate in the background of three of those. He printed several copies of the best image. The photo Troy chose was fairly sharp and showed a tall, skinny man in his mid-twenties with a deep tan and blond hair and short but full blond beard. He was wearing dark jeans and a light blue long-sleeved denim shirt and what looked like red high-top sneakers. His hair stuck out in all directions, wildly. Troy decided the hair was probably spiked with hair gel and he looked, to Troy, like a sunflower with legs. Troy printed out several good photos of Barbara Gillispie too.

Because the girls had said the boy was a local, Troy telephoned high school principal Howard Parkland Duell.

"This is Doctor Howard Parkland Duell, town councilman of Mangrove Bayou, and principal of the Mangrove Bayou high and middle schools," an answering message told Troy. "If you are calling for any business reason whatsoever, call me at the school during normal business

hours. If you are soliciting, or selling anything, do not call back; we do not accept calls of that nature. All others, leave a brief message at the beep.”

At the beep, Troy asked Duell to call him at once on important police business. Dominique Reiss was finishing her workout in the small gym in back and Troy asked her to stop in his office before going out on patrol.

Reiss was nearly as tall as Troy and darker, a deep mocha color, and with the big shoulders of a swimmer, which she had excelled at in high school and college. She was the only officer besides Troy with a college diploma, hers in anthropology from Sarasota’s New College. Troy had only recently hired her to replace an officer who had not worked out. She had showered after exercising and was wearing her ‘longs’ too.

“Whatcha need, Chief,” she asked.

“Looking STRAC, Domino,” Troy said. “I need you to take some of these printed photos around to the beachfront businesses.”

“This the missing girl?”

“And also a man seen with her. I need to know if anyone saw them, singly or together, Saturday afternoon or night.”

He next called Barbara Gillispie’s parents in Albany, New York. That call went about as well as he had expected.

“Barbara’s friends came home already and told us about this,” Peter Gillispie said. He was barely controlled, Troy could tell. “Now my daughter’s missing in some southern redneck town and a bunch of ignorant local yahoos can’t find her!”

“Actually, I’m from Troy, New York,” Troy said. “About ten miles from you on the other side of the river.”

“I don’t give a damn where you’re from. What else are you doing to find my daughter?”

“Half the town is looking today. It’s a small town and that won’t take long. It’s possible that your daughter has been kidnapped. You may be getting a call for a ransom. I’m going to call the Albany police and have them set up with you to receive that, listen in, all that.”

“Doesn’t getting the police involved in a kidnapping just make the kidnapppers want to kill the victim? I have money. I can pay a ransom.”

“Your best bet, if she’s been kidnapped, which we don’t know yet, is to cooperate with the police. That is more likely to get your daughter, to get Barbara, home safe.”

“You’ll call the Albany police?”

“I’ll do that. They’ll be in touch to set things up. At that point I’m out of it so far as the Albany side goes. They will call me if they need anything here.”

“You’ll still look there for Barbara.”

“Peter, I will never stop looking for Barbara. If she can be found then I will find her. And you feel free to call me any time, day, night, whatever, any time you have a question or have more information for me.”

“I’ll do that. But then what?” Peter Gillispie had settled down a little when faced with definite actions to take.

“We have to wait and see,” Troy said. “If it is a kidnapping, it’s a little trickier than most because she would be somewhere in Florida and you and the money are in New York.”

“*If* it’s a kidnapping? You think it might not be?”

“Keeping all possibilities on the table,” Troy said.

“Are you going to find Barbara safe?”

“I’m going to try.”

Troy was about to say more but he heard Gillispie sobbing aloud and then the phone connection went dead. Troy put his phone down too and stared at it a moment. “Sometimes this job really sucks,” he said aloud.

He sighed and picked up his radio when it squawked at him. But it was just one of his officers reporting in, another sector searched, no results. Troy called the Albany police and explained things to them, then sent them an email with more details. He took more calls, some by radio, some by phone, from search parties, and reallocated people to new search areas.

Mayor Lester Groud walked into Troy’s office and sat in one of the two visitor chairs. Troy finished a radio call, put the radio back into its charger on his desk, and looked at Groud.

“You look tired,” Groud said.

“Up all night and now this.” Troy took a cell phone call and sent some volunteer firefighters out to Government Key to look there.

“And get the keys from someone in maintenance,” Troy said. “I want you to open and look inside of every shed out there.”

“She can’t possibly be out on Government Key,” Groud said when Troy had disconnected the call. “That’s a half-mile out of town and surrounded by a chain link fence, even where Barron Road runs along one side.”

“I agree. You want to not look and have some maintenance worker find her dead body in the town’s equipment shed next week?”

“No. Of course you’re right.” Groud looked out Troy’s west window at the boat ramp on Sunset Bay. “Are we going to find this girl? This is going to be so bad for business, you can’t imagine.”

“Bad for Barbara Gillispie, too,” Troy said, “If we don’t locate her and soon. Doing what I can, Les, with what I’ve got.”

“Maybe we can get you more manpower. Sheriff’s, national guard, I don’t know. Something.”

“I’ll keep in touch with the sheriff’s office,” Troy said. “But at the moment we are searching everywhere she could be, dead or alive. Town’s not that big. Putting more eyeballs out there isn’t going to help at this point. We need something more.”

“Like what?”

Troy looked at Lester Groud for a long moment. “Like a miracle. Or a clue. Working to locate the man Barbara Gillispie went off with the day before she came up missing.”

“You think she was kidnapped,” Groud said.

“I think maybe she was kidnapped. That would be the good news. At least there would be a small chance of getting her back alive.”

“How big a chance?”

“I don’t know. There are all sorts of kidnappings and reasons for them. But kidnappings of adults for ransom, the odds are around fifty-fifty if you can get to the victim, and the kidnappers, within a day or two. Three days out the odds go down pretty fast. A week and there’s almost no chance.”

“But if her parents paid a ransom?”

“Ransom doesn’t affect the outcome that much. The penalty is very severe, the kidnappers know that, and their victim is also their greatest danger. She can I.D. them. It’s only good sense to kill the eyewitness, whether you get any ransom or not. By the way, half of female victims are also raped. Just a side-benefit for the kidnappers.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Two bucks, Les,” Troy said. “But odds are she’s dead by now. I’m not going around saying that out loud to anyone else yet. Maybe there will be a ransom demand to her parents. A kidnapper might make a ransom demand even after killing the victim.”

“That’s just so . . . I don’t know what it is,” Groud said. “Have you talked to the parents?”

“I’ve already called them in New York. Also the Albany police.”

“Shit.” Groud, who knew the system, pulled out his wallet and took out three dollars. “I’ll put this in the jar on my way out.”

Troy nodded. “I’ll keep you in the loop all the way on this,” he said. “Best I can offer at the moment.”

Chapter 7

Sunday, December 22

When two hours had passed with no response from Howard Parkland Duell, he of the many titles, Troy got his car and drove to the principal's home. Duell was there and answered the doorbell wearing some sort of red velvet sport coat with a tie-belt in front in place of buttons. Duell looked annoyed. "What is it? I'm busy."

"Doing what?" Troy asked. "It's Sunday afternoon. Didn't you get my message?"

"Didn't you listen to my outgoing message," Duell snapped. He walked back into his living room and sat on a recliner. "No, knowing you, probably not. Business calls I take during business hours, at my office at the high school." On the television there was a movie playing, a western. Troy stood in front of the screen and Duell craned his neck to look around him at the movie.

"That would seem inappropriate were the call about town council business or even police business," Troy said. "At school you should be focused on school business." Duell always irritated him and, obviously, vice-versa. In fact Duell had opposed hiring Troy and hadn't changed his mind in the months since. Troy told himself to stay calm.

"I decide what's appropriate or not," Duell said. Troy had been staring at Duell's clothes and finally it occurred to him that Duell was wearing a smoking jacket. Troy wasn't sure if he had ever seen a smoking jacket before and Duell did not appear to smoke anyway. Maybe Duell just liked to dress up to watch old movies.

Behind his back Troy heard Clint Eastwood telling some bad men that it wasn't nice to insult his mule. A lot of shooting broke out and Duell's lips tightened. "Get out of my way," he said.

"I can't wait for tomorrow, Duell. Look at this photo. Do you recognize this man. He was probably one of your students, though he's clearly older now."

Duell glanced at the photo and back at the television. "I'm sure I don't recall past students," he said. "I have better things to do than amuse you this afternoon."

"The movie is only an Italian remake of Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*," Troy said. "Eastwood gets all the money and the two clans kill each other off. Walter Hill and Bruce Willis did it again in *Last Man Standing*."

"I don't need your critique of the damn movie. I just need to *watch* the movie. Now get out of my house."

Patience, Troy thought. “All right then. So who would be able to tell me if this was a former student? I bet he’s in your yearbooks.”

“The yearbooks are in the school library. Why don’t you go bother the school counselor. She keeps track of individual students. I’m much too busy running the entire operation.”

“Sure. What’s her name and home phone number?”

“Her name is Christine Daniels. I certainly don’t have her home number. Why don’t you call on her tomorrow, during business hours.”

“Jesus H. Christ,” Troy said. “A young woman is missing, probably in serious danger. Half the town is out looking for her. Her parents are sitting by the phone terrified, waiting for any word whatever. And you won’t shut off the television and get off your goddamn ass to so much as look at a photo of a suspect? What the hell sort of degenerate human being are you?”

Duell stood up. “This conversation is over. Get out of my house. You’re fired.”

“Duell, if you could fire me by yourself, you would have done it long ago,” Troy said. “I don’t understand people like you. It’s as if something is just ... missing.”

Outside, Troy sat in his car in front of Duell’s home, mostly because he knew Duell would be peeking out the window and that would annoy him.

That certainly went well, he thought. I’m a professional policeman, so why do I let jerks like that get to me?

He sighed, dug out his department cell phone, and called 411 to get Christine Daniels’ number. He called her. She lived a few blocks away and told him to come on over. In a few minutes he was in her kitchen, sitting at a table and drinking coffee with Christine and Toby Daniels.

Christine was a thin, tall woman wearing jeans and a loose-fitting white tee-shirt with a pocket. She pulled out a pair of glasses from the pocket and looked at the picture Troy laid on the table.

“That’s Mark Stider,” she said instantly.

“Are you sure? Take your time. Doctor Duell didn’t recognize the man at all.”

Toby Daniels snorted. He was an obese man wearing a plaid shirt and the largest pair of Dockers he could find. Troy felt that plaid was a poor choice; Toby looked like a quilt. But he seemed willing to talk.

“Duell couldn’t find his butt with both hands and a road map,” Toby Daniels said. “I teach at the school. Biology.”

“Mark Stider would have graduated from here five or six years ago,” Christine said. “But I can remember him because he was the son of Twentieth Circuit Court judge Hans Stider, and some other things. Last I heard he had graduated from the University of Florida but was still in law school.”

“A judge. That’s perfect. Just perfect,” Troy muttered.

“Why? What’s Mark done?”

“All he is now is someone in a photo,” Troy said. “What were the other reasons you remembered him?”

Christine looked at Toby. “I’m not sure if I should be talking out of school, so to speak.”

“First time I’ve heard that expression used literally,” Troy said. “What do you have to say, Toby?”

“That kid was bad news.”

“Toby!” Christine said sharply.

“He needs to know, Chris,” Toby said. He looked at Troy. “You can check your police records too. Mark Stider was broken, somehow, inside. He punched out anyone who looked crossways at him. Arrogant. Waved his dad’s judgeship around like a flag. Probably a sociopath, totally without feelings for others, maybe narcissist too, totally engrossed in his own self.”

“Sounds like Doctor Duell,” Troy said. “Just had a run-in with him. It ended ugly.”

“Duell and Mark Stider probably have some things in common,” Toby said. “Though I don’t think Duell abuses people physically. He’s more into psychological abuse of people under his control. Mark wasn’t smart enough to do that. Mark was attractive to some of the girls — jerks like that always seem to draw the dumb ones — but they always left him quickly, quietly, in tears and too often screwed up mentally. We teachers thought he was either molesting some of the girls or at least forcing them to agree to sex with him ... ”

“What’s the difference?” Troy asked.

“You got me. Less beating them up first, I guess. Anyway Chief Redmond ignored us. He ignored the girls who complained.”

“And Duell? He ignore them too?”

“Pretty much. Duell really doesn’t have time for teaching or running the schools. He’s too busy polishing the nameplate on his desk.” Troy, whose desk and office door had no names at all, smiled at the image.

“Chief Redmond was sort of a Judge Stider toady,” Christine said.

“Well, Redmond is sort of gone now,” Troy said. “I’m the chief and I guess Mark is on his own.”

“Not while his dad is around,” Toby said. “At least the kid left town. Good for us; bad for wherever he went.”

“Apparently he’s back, at least for the holidays,” Troy said.

“Is this about that missing girl?” Christine asked.

“Just doing some backgrounding,” Troy said.

“Yeah. Sure you are,” Toby said. “Girl is missing and the chief of police is out on a Sunday waving around a photo of a kid known for abusing young women. I’m guessing he’s not wanted for littering. Do the world a favor. Put a bullet into the little bastard. Improve the gene pool.”

Chapter 8

Sunday, December 22

By evening the search was winding down. Townspeople went home to their lives and their dinners. The Sunset Bay boat ramps by the police station were busy with people hauling the boats they had used to search the Gulf and back bay. Lester Groud's friends in the guide and crab community had taken their boats back to the boatyard on Snake Key where they kept them at docks. A few larger boats were nosing back into the Osprey Yacht Club docks across the Collier River. The sheriff's helicopter had long since gone away to refuel and then on to other duties.

Troy watched some volunteer firemen getting into their cars in the parking lot behind the town hall and driving away. He had a hollow feeling in his stomach. They had looked in every obvious place and all the non-obvious ones too and there was not a trace of Barbara Gillispie.

Troy had his officers resume their normal schedule. That evening Troy went to Lee Bell's house. Lee had set up a ten-foot-tall Christmas tree and she and Troy spent an hour stringing lights and decorations around it. Such domesticity was foreign to Troy, to whom holidays meant nothing much.

"Where did you get this enormous tree?" Troy asked. "And did you bring it home strapped onto your Corvette?"

"The nice man at the tree lot over on Barron Key delivered it," Lee said. "It *was* the largest one he had."

"Lee, men are always nice to you. You're gorgeous."

"Thank you." She grinned. "And isn't that ... *nice*."

Lee had a few wrapped presents for Troy and for some other people she knew in town and she spread those around beneath the tree. Troy had no present for Lee and apologized.

"I can't take time off right now to go shopping in Naples or Fort Myers," he said. "Or Miami."

"You ever hear of the Brown Elves?" Lee said.

"The what?"

"UPS, stupid. Santa's neighborhood elves in the big brown trucks. You shop online. They deliver. No problem."

“Oh. I guess I’m old-fashioned. I like to go look at things before I buy them. Feel them. Buying a personal gift online is almost as bad as simply handing someone you love a store gift card. Where’s the romance, the feeling, the personal attention?”

“Am I hearing that you love me?”

“Well, of course I do.”

“You never say it.”

“Lee Bell, I’m in love with you.” He grabbed her and they kissed.

“Good,” she said breaking off the kiss. “Now what are you going to do to show your love?”

“Probably have a UPS driver hand you a store gift card.”

Lee punched him in the arm. She was tall and strong and had a good punch, and it knocked him sideways slightly. “That’s it,” she said. “You go home and sleep in your cold, lonely bed.”

“Won’t that make your bed cold and lonely too?”

“Good point. I’ll let you stay. But only if you make mad love to me.”

“Sure thing, little lady,” Troy said. “Think of it as the gift that keeps on giving.”

“You wish.”

Chapter 9

Monday, December 23

The man clutched his ex-wife tightly, her back against his chest, his left arm around her under her breasts, his right hand holding the steak knife to her neck. He looked at the other officers and then sideways at Troy.

“Put down the knife,” Troy said. “Nothing is so bad we can’t work something out to help you. You don’t want to hurt her. You love her.”

“I can’t go on like this,” the man said. The woman was weeping silently, her eyes on Troy as if he were her salvation. “I can’t go on without her.”

“Please help me,” Wanda Frister cried out. Billy Poteet only pressed the barrel of his handgun tighter against her head.

The man shook his head. “You’ll just put me in jail. I’ve been to jail before. I’m never going back.”

Troy had his Glock lined up on the man’s right ear, about the only thing he could clearly see behind the terrified woman. “I came this far,” the man said. “I’ll take it all the way.” Billy Poteet’s right hand pressed the handgun harder against the woman’s throat.

“Don’t do it,” Troy said. “I can’t let you do it.”

Billy Poteet bent his head to look when Milo Binder fired off some shots to get his attention. Suddenly Troy was seeing the man’s right eye and part of his skull over the top of the sights on the Glock. Troy started to squeeze the trigger.

“You win,” the man said. “I don’t really want to do this.” He took away the knife. He let the woman go. And Troy’s Colt Commander went off and killed him.

As always, Troy woke at this point and leapt out of bed. He was in Lee Bell’s house and not his own condo but he knew the way to the bathroom. He’d made the run before. In the bathroom he got the toilet lid up and threw up at once, before even getting to his knees beside it. He waited and then threw up again. He heard a sound behind him and twisted to see Lee, in her knee-length tee-shirt she wore to bed, running the cold water tap in the sink. She had a washcloth.

“Rinse out and then put this on your face,” she said. Troy got to his feet and washed out his mouth. He took the cloth and wiped his face. It felt better.

“Thanks.” He laid the washcloth aside.

“Same dream as always?” Lee said.

“Sorry to wake you up.” Troy said.

“That doesn’t matter. You matter. How do you feel now?”

“Same dream. Well, no, not really. I now seem to have two dreams that get interchanged, back and forth. The guy in Tampa, years ago, and Billy Poteet six months ago.”

“You had no choice about Billy Poteet.”

“I had no choice about either of them. And how come I never dream about the gangbanger with the water pistol?”

“You didn’t know it was only a water pistol.”

“I know that now.”

“What does Doctor Groves say?”

“He rarely says much. He says I’m supposed to figure it out on my own.”

Lee smiled. “Well, that’s sort of how therapists work. Can you come back to bed now? I can hold you while you go to sleep.”

“You know I can’t. Never can. I’ll get dressed and do a little patrolling around town. I like to do that anyway, early mornings. And it keeps the night officer alert and not sleeping behind some store.”

Out on the road, Troy drove his Subaru Forester slowly down Airfield Road. He paused to let a raccoon cross in the light of his headlights and fog lights that he never turned off. *Probably get a phone call about the raccoon sometime later today*, he thought. Airfield Key people were not accustomed to wildlife. He reached the short concrete bridge and crossed over onto Barron Key and then left onto Barron Road. He drove slowly the five miles out to U.S. 41 — the Tamiami Trail — and then back again.

He parked in the lot behind the town hall. He still didn’t feel sleepy. *May as well go do something useful, catch up on paperwork*, he thought as he unlocked the back door to the police station and let himself in.

Chapter 10

Monday, December 23

Troy had Juan Valdez, on Sunday afternoon, and Dominique Reiss, in the evening, show Mark Stider's and Barbara Gillispie's photos around the Gulf View Motel and Beach Street area. They came up with two people who had seen Gillispie and Stider together.

By Monday morning Troy had lost most of his volunteer searchers as they went back to work or just got sick of it, but they had looked every place a person could be on the several islands that made up the town of Mangrove Bayou. He had Lee Bell and two men from the volunteer fire department up at first light to fly a larger circle than the sheriff's helicopter had done. It wasn't likely they would see anything among the mangroves but they could be effective over the inland marsh.

By eight a.m. there were three television trucks parked in front of the station door on Connecticut Avenue and a half-dozen reporters milling in the lobby, each demanding to speak to him one-on-one. The dispatcher and receptionist, June Dundee, didn't work Mondays so Troy had Bubba Johns keeping reporters herded together and not wandering around the station. Bubba was two inches shorter than Troy's six feet but thicker. He had taken over the station temporarily when the town council fired the previous chief and had been happy to hand the job over to Troy. When not patrolling in town he ran the town police boat and, though a white man, he was actually darker than Troy. And he was perfectly capable of herding a pack of wolves if Troy told him to do that.

Troy looked at the staffing schedule for the month and then called in Juan Valdez.

"I'm pulling you off patrols," he told Juan. "Until we find this missing girl. I want you working to find Barbara Gillispie, or anything related to that, full-time."

"I can use the spare office," Juan said.

"Yes. I need feet on the ground out there, on this alone, and I need a second brain and pair of eyes too."

"You're smart. You're the high-IQ guy," Juan said. "And you see things most people miss."

"No one is smart enough. No one sees everything. Make no assumptions here, Juan. Look at everything fresh. The Gillispie file is on the computer server. Read it all. Read it all half a dozen times. I have. Give it some thought."

“Does this make me a detective. With a big salary increase? I’m already the official diver for the department.”

“What did I pay you for that?”

“You gave me a free swear word per month. And you paid for my air refills on my tanks.”

Troy smiled. “There you go. Wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. I’ll toss in another free swear word. Use it wisely. Meantime, I have a job for you.”

“A detective-type job?”

“Absolutely. I want for you to track down any and all real estate the Stiders own.” He spelled the name.

“Judge Stider?” Juan said.

“None other.” Troy explained about the photo of Mark Stider.

“Holy ... um ... wow,” Juan said.

“Exactly. And keep this to yourself for the moment. I want to know about other homes, rentals, anything.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. But I need more information. Right now, knowing what time it was would be an improvement.”

Juan smiled. “Still, finding property owners isn’t hard. Property appraiser’s got that right on his web site.”

“This is true. Do that for every Florida county.”

“For God’s sake! There are sixty-seven counties in Florida.”

“Used up your free word already. Welcome to detective work. Full-time. Count yourself lucky, I believe Texas has nearly double that number of counties. The Department of Revenue web site has a full list of appraiser offices with URLs and phones.

“But that’s not all I want. I need for you to check with every rental storage place from Everglades City to Fort Myers. Collier and Lee counties. Use your own car and clothes, low key. Show photos of Judge Stider and Mark Stider. I want to know if they rented a storage unit recently, or ever.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why. Welcome to detective work.”

“You already said that.”

“Yes, I did. And it’s ninety-nine percent wasted effort on anything at all that might give you a thread to pull on.”

“How many of those storage things do you suppose there are?” Juan asked.

“No idea. Not all that many. Maybe three dozen in the area I specified. They’re easy to locate; they all advertise, national chains have web sites. The property appraisers in each of those counties could probably turn them up with a simple web search for zoning or whatever. I printed out the judge’s photo from the courts web site and the Mark Stider photo is the one we already had.”

“Is that all? What did you want me to do day after tomorrow?”

Troy smiled. “Cocky. I like that. And while you’re doing property searches, find out Mrs. Stider’s maiden name and check that against any properties too.”

“How would I know that?”

“I don’t know. You’re the detective. They must have gotten married someplace.”

“Well, that books me through Wednesday. What after that?”

“I’ll think of something. And there’s no law against your coming up with your own ideas and investigating those. Keep me informed if anything pans out. And good hunting.”

A few hours later Lester Groud came through the connecting door to the town hall offices and back to Troy’s office. Troy was sitting with one foot up on an open desk drawer, contemplating the boat ramp scene across Sunset Bay in back of the station.

Troy’s radio was in its charger on his desk. Groud picked it up and stared at it a moment, then put it back. “You got to say something to those reporters,” Groud said.

“Why?”

“Because this is bad enough without it turning into a them-against-us circus. Talk to them.”

“I don’t know anything yet.”

“Then tell them that.”

Troy nodded. He walked out to the lobby. “My name is Troy Adam. Adam with no S. I’m the director of public safety here in Mangrove Bayou, but you can call me the police chief. And let’s all go outside.” He walked through the crowd and out the front door. The reporters followed. He noticed that Cilla Dowling wasn’t there. She already knew he had nothing to say and would say that.

“New rules,” Troy said. “No reporters inside the station. It’s just too small for all of you, and I assume there will be more to come. No tying up our few phone lines with your questions. No following our officers around like a pack of hungry dogs. No harassing the townspeople.” He looked to his left down the side of the building. “And no trampling down the shrubbery trying to look into my office windows. That’s just creepy.” There was a general laugh. “Anyone breaking the rules, I’ll think of some way to blight your life and career.”

Troy looked around the street. “We may soon have to figure out some better way to park all these trucks and get you people some toilet facilities. I’ll work on that. You cannot all be using our one toilet in the station, not when there are more of you. As for why you’re here, I’ll give you guys an update every afternoon at seven p.m. for as long as this lasts. We do that right here, me in front of the door, you on the sidewalk and street in front of me.”

That caused a small rebellion. The television people wanted something no later than four so they could get it onto their five and six p.m. newscasts. Troy stuck to seven, which was the time he normally went home anyway. The few newspaper journalists who were there smiled happily.

“Now, here’s what I know so far,” he said, once the reporters had gotten themselves and all their equipment arranged to their satisfaction. “A young woman named Barbara Gillispie is missing. As is obvious, if you looked around town yesterday, we’re turning over every rock to find her. We’re still looking, just not in places you can easily see. We take the safety of our citizens and of our visitors very seriously.”

“What about state help?” one reporter asked. “Or the county. Is your tiny police force up to finding a missing girl?”

“We’ll find out. If I need help from FDLE or Highway Patrol or the sheriff’s office I will not hesitate to ask for it. But at the moment we’re handling it. The problem isn’t any shortage of manpower. The problem is a shortage of information, clues.”

A woman spoke up. “The helicopter you had yesterday has left. Does that mean you don’t think she is out in the swamp?”

“Actually, there’s no swamp,” Troy said. “We have a salt marsh between us and the mainland, and a mangrove forest, a lot of small islands, between us and the Gulf of

Mexico. And we have a private aircraft out right now, looking in a wider circle,” Troy said.

“Have you talked to the girl’s parents?” a man asked.

“First, let’s call her by her name. She is Barbara Gillispie. She’s a daughter, a schoolmate, a person. She’s not some anonymous girl. Yes, I spoke to her father. I will again, any time he wants or any time I have news.” Troy decided not to mention calling the Albany P.D. to ask them set up a kidnap investigation up there. Let them deal with their own media frenzy without him making it worse.

“That’s it for now,” Troy said. “I’ll talk to you again later today. Thank you.”

He turned and walked back in through the door and closed it to shut out the shouting. “Jesus,” he muttered. He locked the door. He took out a dollar and looked around. “Where’s the Bad Word Jar?”

Bubba was still standing in the lobby and he bent to reach behind the dispatcher’s counter. “Maybe, Chief, you should take this back to your office when nobody’s up front.”

“OK. Wouldn’t want to lose our pizza and beer money. Did I do good out there?”

“Perfect.”